

# **The Challenges of Women Empowerment in Pakistan: A Retrospective Analysis**

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## **Abstract**

*Since ages the social rights and social wrongs have been pointed out, but have always lagged behind private ethics, slavery, racism, colonial exploitation and genocide have been known to be tolerated until fairly recently, and in some parts of the world, even today. Inequity has been prevalent in societies, although for their own survival. Civilizations have had to raise some voices against it, even if half-heartedly. At the centre of these inequalities lies the most common, most prevalent, most obvious and yet most ignored of all discriminations-the gender based ones. This discrimination for a very long time was seen as something that resulted from the natural differences and was, therefore, tolerated. Even the Enlightenment philosopher Amanual Kant did not intend to include women in the ranks of people capable of attaining freedom from traditional forms of authority. Although the motto of Enlightenment was “Have courage to use your own reason”, it somehow did not extend to women probably because women weren’t seen as capable of having any reason at first place. They have usually been seen as a weak link and incapable of handling even their own personal issues what to talk of society’s issues at large, this was a general myth far from reality. Unfortunately, this mind-set has been prevailing from the historical to contemporary times, mostly in developing countries and especially in Pakistan. While a lot has been done in the recent times towards women empowerment in Pakistan, yet rural areas seem to be lagging behind. This research article unveils the issues related to women empowerment in Pakistan aimed at enhancing gender equality and proposing rightful place for the women as enshrined in the teachings of Islam and the constitution of Pakistan. This is intellectual discourse; therefore, views expressed are author’s own views.*

**Keywords:** Women Discrimination, Women Empowerment, Gender Equality.

## **Introduction**

Over the last 400 years, women have been increasingly disempowered, degraded and subjugated across all societies in the world. Men believe that they are naturally superior to women because they are rational and logical while women deserved to be controlled because they are emotionally erratic (Kishwar Naheed, 2008). Gender issues have been assumed to be the relations of dominance where the woman is seen as a question, as another, while the man has been seen as universal and inherently superior. Even if women are able to pursue their interests to the upper levels of any hierarchy, they are naturally seen as voices demanding the interests of a small group, rather than 51% of the world’s population. Moreover, the fact that women are usually economically dependent on men compounds the problem manifolds. Most societies see man as the primary provider for households, therefore, regarded as the backbone for survival, which elevates the status of man. The most obvious and rigid form of inequality is the traditional, sex based division of work across most societies in the world. The women across most societies carry the responsibility of being the home makers and the care givers, and these tasks have never been given rightful recognition. Therefore, the providers of these services, i.e. women, have never been accorded the status that they deserve, despite the fact

that these jobs require special skills and professional acumen. They are branded as feminine jobs, which receive no recognition, and carry no tangible value for the society. As Maithri Krishna Raj said in her paper on Political Economy of Housework, “Home work is a necessary condition of human existence, but with the advent of capitalism, what began to be counted as valuable was only what was marketed”. In contemporary society, man’s status is high because he earns, sells his labor for a salary or a wage and commands economic resources (Latika Menon, 2004). Since women provide services at home and do not charge for them, their status is low as compared to men. The question of women’s status and equality is essentially linked to two things; recognition and status for feminine tasks and recognition for regenerative functions or services rendered by the family unit (Latika Menon, 2004). This research article is constructed in a logical sequence touching historical construct, theoretical aspects and prevailing state of affairs in Pakistan with suggested course of action for women empowerment and gender based equality.

### **Historical Construct**

The women empowerment movement that started in the mid 1800s and primarily was championed by middle class women. Feminism demands that women be treated as human beings with rights- to keep their own wages, to own property, to education, to be paid for work at a wage sufficient to support independent living, to a voice in public decisions, marriage at their choice and to their bodily integrity (Kishwar Naheed, 2008). All policies made towards women fall prey to these elements of inequality because at the end of the day, economic power dictates political power and hence a vicious cycle is formed, where economically deprived women are no longer in control of decision-making and policy formulation regarding core issues of their existence. Most policies that dominate women are made under the garb of either protecting the religious values by holding women responsible for human sexual morals or of protecting the family unit because it is believed that if women are allowed their rights, and were left out of the control of men, it would threaten the cultural identity. All the social processes, beginning from the time we are born, including names, clothes, toys, beliefs, behaviors, values- basically are propelled towards making certain that we conform to the beliefs that society attaches to our gender and what it considers appropriate for us in terms of acceptability. In all patriarchal societies, including ours, the family structures, the socialization processes and the economic and political powers accorded to males, all combine to lead to a continuous and unquestioned subjugation of its women folk. In Pakistan also, women face considerable pressure to conform to the domestic roles of wife and mother, and also to an orthodox religious ideology, which places a heavy emphasis on female inferiority. The new woman hood is challenging this status quo- it does not require sexual passivity, submission, absence of ambition and the dominance of domesticity.

### **Theoretical Dimensions of Women Empowerment**

The word “Empowerment” is used in many different contexts. It arose in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century with the legalistic meaning of “to invest with authority, authorize.” Soon after it began to be used in a more general meaning, “to enable or permit.” (Sadaf Ahmed, 2010). Its relatively modern usage originated in the civil rights movement, which sought to provide political empowerment for its followers. In contemporary times, it has migrated out of the political arena into other fields. The Oxford Dictionary defines Empowerment as to “give (someone) the authority or power to do something”; to “make (someone) stronger and more confident, especially in controlling their life and claiming their rights” (Oxford Dictionary, 2017) and it has been defined as “to invest with power, especially legal power or official authority; to equip with an ability; enable” (Dictionary. Com, 2017). Another view is that

empowerment is “the process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over sources of power” (Muhammad Farooq,2003).A definition taken from the United Nations Population Information Network (POPIN) captures key elements of this complex concept:

*Women’s empowerment has five components: women’s sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally. (POPIN n.d.) (Samina Malik & Kathy Courtney, 2010)*

At the level of development bodies, the concept of empowerment was adopted after the Beijing Conference 1995. The Beijing Declaration (section 13), presents women’s empowerment as a key strategy for development:

*“Women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace”.*

Unfortunately, the approach as used by development bodies and the offered quantitative indicators tend to reduce its scope to women’s ability to take individual responsibility by their own. The indicators do not consider changes in economic and social structures, those that refer to collective empowerment linked to social change (Quratul Ain Haider, 2010).The Feminist Movements stress that woman empowerment should not only address the superficial issues of society but also a major mind shift from the false value systems and ideologies of oppression that usually exist. The fundamental purpose of the Feminist theory is to analyze how we think, or do not think, or avoid thinking about gender (Latika Menon, 2004). It should seek to create a situation where the question of gender becomes irrelevant and all people in a society regardless of their gender are afforded opportunities of self-discovery and self-actualization and use their full potential to develop a society based on common values, humanity, tolerance and mutual respect. Empowerment is sometimes described as having the ability to make choices but it must also involve the right to shape the choices that are available to us. Women Empowerment, particularly, corresponds to women challenging existing power structures with an inbuilt mechanism that subordinate women. Hence, empowerment carries a multi-faceted context. The Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development stresses that the empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status is both a highly important end in itself and necessary for the achievement of sustainable human development. It states further that "Advancing gender equality and equity and the empowerment of women, and the elimination of all kinds of violence against women and ensuring women's ability to control their own fertility ...are priority objectives of the international community" (Principle 4 of the ICPD Program of Action) (ICPD Programme of Action, 2013). In this context, the framework presented by Naila Kabeer can be referred to, which basically states that for empowerment to take place, we need to strategically incorporate three components in any program- the *material* component, the *critical consciousness* component, and the *presence of an enabling environment*. The material component refers to strategies that are put in place to empower women in the material or economic sense. It looks to enabling them to overcome their

subordinate status by having access, control and their say in the use of resources and increasing their capacity to make strategic choices, which is essential in their quest for independence. However, only the material component would be insufficient in achieving this task. It would have to be combined with the critical consciousness component, which implies self-confidence, self-worth and pride in oneself to bring about a transformative impact in the lives of women, not only at an individual level, but also at a collective level in groups and societies. The enabling environment component would facilitate changes in the wider environment of society, which would in turn affect the changes in the empowerment of women. These would include societal attitudes about women's rights, roles and status in the legal and regulatory framework. Any attempt to bring about an empowerment program without combining all three components would only help to address the issue at a superficial level, and would always be relatively short-lived in terms of its life and affects (Gender and Empowerment, 1999). From the above discussion, it comes to light that empowerment is not only an end but also encompasses the processes through which such ends need to be met.

## **Major Challenges Faced by Women in Pakistani Society**

### **Safety and Security**

The history of violence against women is not new. It goes back to the Stone Age where women were violated against because of their physical weakness, child bearing function and economic dependence on man. It is, even today, a global issue. Millions of women across the world suffer from violence both inside and outside of their homes. Women and girls face terror from physical, psychological, sexual and economic abuse...Studies estimate that between 20 to 60 % of women worldwide have experienced physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner or family member...It cuts across boundaries of culture, class, education, income. Ethnicity, age (Rashida Patel, 2010). Gender violence is a daily- and often deadly- fact of life for women and girls around the world. It not only devastates the lives and destroys their potential but also undermines the development and progress of all nations, especially towards equality and the possibility of women to exercise full citizenship. Gender violence involves incalculable and irreversible costs, both human and financial (Rashida Patel, 2010). Domestic violence leaves more than just the physical scars-it is emotionally disturbing and depressing. When the same man who is supposedly the life companion, provider, lover and protector turns against the woman, it inflicts more than just the visible wounds. In this scenario, the case of Pakistan is not much different. Domestic violence in Pakistan ranges from abuse to torture, physical, mental, sexual, psychological and emotional in nature. Violence against women has reached alarming levels in Pakistan and is a deterrent to development. Moreover, the problem of social taboo lack of family support, absence of sustainable income and shelter leaves women with no alternative but to bear it and not report it.

### **Economic Interdependence**

The status of women in any society is closely linked to her economic position in that society. Women have been seen as economically and emotionally dependent on their male counterparts, which basically accords them a subjugated position in the social hierarchy. In order to improve this standing, it is imperative that women be provided economic autonomy and independence, at least where their own work is concerned. This basically means that she should be able to acquire enough education to work respectably, and also be given the right to keep and spend her own money. Unfortunately, this is far from the actual practice. In the developed world, the demand for this right ultimately hit the women in a negative way, because now she is also the career of the family unit, and has to contribute to the family

income also, whereas the male still keeps the role of only the money-bringer, as it was the woman's demand to be given the right to work and not the male's desire anyways. So in that case, the males of those societies have had it better by allowing women to work than the women themselves. Even then, the salaries of the two genders hardly match, even when the job descriptions and job specifications are the same. Women receive 20-50% less pay than men for the same amount and the same type of work, throughout the capitalist world (Kishwar Naheed, 2008). The ideology of the man as protector and provider prevails despite the fact that the women are contributing in more than one ways towards complimenting the family income. The invisibility of women's contributions towards the family income remains dismally underreported throughout the world, and also in Pakistan. Estimates show that women here receive almost 70% less pay than men for the same kind of work. Sadaf Ahmed has gone to the extent of saying that "One of the best kept secrets in Pakistan has been the contribution of Pakistani women to the economy" (Sadaf Ahmed, 2010). This economic deprivation of women has multiple consequences. Because of the social circumstances, both men and women experience poverty in a different way, and derive different conclusions from their *poor* experiences. And poverty does not only relate to the household income, but also to the educational and livelihood opportunities, access to services, public spaces, and opportunities to change. For instance, in our part of the world, women derive their social status in the society through the male head of the family. The loss of such a male head not only entails financial hardships for women, but also the loss of social legitimacy to set up a household. Moreover, women who venture out of their households, are seen as less respectable women, and even then so, they have a limited access to educational opportunities and facilities, and livelihood options. Remuneration, as discussed earlier, is largely underpaid, and is mostly seen as a complimentary figure to the overall household, or just as their pocket money. And the vicious cycle is reinforced when women are barred from certain kinds of work in the society, either because they lack the skills to perform it (human capital), or the social legitimacy to exercise these skills (social capital). Also, the laws governing inheritance are also flawed and tilted in the male's favor, on the same pretext that the male is the sole provider and protector of the family (Sadaf Ahmed, 2010). The status of women in society is hardly going to change unless these issues are tackled.

### **Analysis of the Measures Taken in Pakistan for Women Empowerment**

Almost all governments have realized that without addressing the women issues, development would only be two *steps forward one step back* process. In order to handle these problems, various measures have been taken, which are given in the ensuing paragraphs.

- The formulation of a seven-member committee on Marriage and Family Laws in 1955, with a view to review the law governing marriage, divorce, maintenance and family laws etc, and also to deal with the women issues expeditiously.
- Family courts were established in 1964 with exclusive jurisdiction on matrimonial issues. Laws governing family courts have been continuously updated and amended by various governments. These courts provide a good forum for resolution of family issues.
- Polygamy laws have been changed and implemented to some degree of success.
- Three different commissions to look after women issues have been constituted over time, and have made significant contributions towards the up gradation of women's status in the society.
- There has been uproar against the Hudood Laws, as they were considered discriminatory towards women. These have been amended through the Protection of Women's Rights Bill in 2006. The Women's Action Forum was formed in 1981 to

respond to the implementation of the penal code, and to strengthen the status and position of women in society. It has played a central role in exposing the controversies surrounding the interpretation of various Islamic laws and their role in the modern state, and in publicizing ways in which women can play a more active role in politics (women's History, 2013).

- In 1998, a comprehensive National Plan of Action was launched, which serves as a guideline for resolution of women issues in twelve areas, namely women and poverty, education and training, health, violence against women, women and armed conflict, women and economy, power and decision making, institutional mechanisms, human rights of women, media environment, and the girl child.
- The Musharraf government introduced the National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women. Its aims and objectives were in line with the recommendations of the various Commissions.
- Women Political School was established in Ministry of Women Development in 2004 with an aim of training the women folk in enhancing their awareness about participation in the political institutions.
- In collaboration with various partners like First Women Bank Ltd., Aga Khan Rural Support Program etc, the government introduced schemes in all provinces wherein soft loans ranging from Rs. 5000 to Rs. 25000 were provided to deserving women to help them start projects (Mr. Aziz Ahmed, 2009)
- Various organizations, such as the Women's Action Forum, APWA, PAWLA, and the Business and Professional Women's Association are supporting small scale projects throughout the country that focus on empowering women. They offer a variety of activities such as instituting legal aid for indigent women, raising voices against the gender-based segregation in universities, and highlighting various incidents of violence against women. PAWLA has released a series of films educating women about their legal rights. Business and Professional Women's Association supports a comprehensive project inside the walled city of Lahore and the Orangi Pilot Project at Karachi seeks to empower women working from their homes by creating a network for them which takes out their dependency on the middle man for raw materials and finished goods (women's History, 2013).
- The Asia Foundation is a private, non-profit, non-governmental organization. Its Women Empowerment Program in Pakistan is committed to improving the lives of women in Pakistan. It has a 54-year old history in Pakistan and focuses on encouraging women towards their right to franchise, raise women's awareness of their rights, and gives them skills that they could use to earn an income. It has completed a program spread over 18 months to empower impoverished women throughout Pakistan. The aim of the project was to train women in the use of new technologies and understanding of markets so they could become successful in their businesses. Various skills were taught and participants attended enterprise development workshops to help build their capacity to assess market needs and develop important business linkages. More than 1200 women attended this program. As a direct result of this program, women started over 400 new businesses and on an average were able to increase their monthly income by at least Rs. 2000 during the life of the project (Asia Foundation, 2013).
- The recently launched **Benazir Income Support Programme** helps women with cash assistance of Rs.1000/ per month provided to poor households with an allocation of Rs 34 billion for 2008-09. This is the direct disbursement of assistance to the poor

women at her door step. It will certainly enhance her nutrient intake putting her in a better position to take part in the development of the country.

- The Social Action Program was launched in 1992-93 to accelerate improvement in social indicators. Closing the gender gap is the foremost objective of the SAP. Another major initiative by the government is the program of Lady Health Workers (LHWs). This is a community based program, under which LHWs have been recruited to provide basic health care advice including family planning to women at the grass root level. Other initiatives include the village-based family planning workers and extended immunization programs, nutritional and child survival, cancer treatment and increased involvement of media in health education (Asia Foundation, 2013).
- The women's movements in Pakistan have moved beyond the traditional role of reacting to government legislations only. They are now focusing on three major areas; first securing women's political representation in the National Assembly, secondly working to raise the consciousness of women regarding their rights over their own bodies and lives and lastly countering suppression of women's rights by defining and taking positions on various incidents as and when they take place (Women History, 2013)

### **Recommendation for Enhancing Women Empowerment in Pakistan**

The policy plans such as National Plan of Action, Objectives of National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women should be reviewed by the National Commission on Status of Women, and changes made according to emerging needs. Specific recommendations are given in succeeding paragraphs.

### **Curbing Violence and Exploitation of Women**

Implementation of existing laws and provision of justice must be ensured so that any discrimination can be immediately reported and duly taken care of. Legal action committees need to be set up at the grass root level and dedicated to overseeing women issues. Steps need to be taken to make sure that the state sanctioned rule of law institutions are accessible to women. These could include aggressive dissemination campaigns to acquaint women with their rights and steps that can be taken to redress violations of their rights. Police should be bound by law to facilitate women coming into police stations to report any abuse and lodging of FIR should be a hassle free and harassment free activity. Moreover, actions on such complains should be taken promptly and surely to set an example for all potential perpetrators. Family courts should be encouraged to settle cases at the earliest so that the effects of enforcement of laws for women spread into the society. It would go a long way towards providing security to women against domestic crimes. It is an important aspect which is usually ignored or avoided intentionally in most cases. As a result, women suffer because they do not have a legal recourse. In order to curb domestic crimes and violence against women inside homes, pre-nuptial agreements regarding upkeep and maintenance of women should be encouraged. In such cases, newly married women are most vulnerable particularly given the cultural fabric of our society, so there should be built in mechanisms in law that afford protection to such women. The focus in such cases should be pre-emptive legislations that do not seek to correct violence but to prevent them from taking place in the first place. Special laws need to be formulated that address particularly crimes against women. Sexual harassment, marital rapes etc. need to be recognized as ills affecting a huge proportion of our society and collective measures need to be taken accordingly. Laws pertaining to arrest and imprisonment should be revised. Only female Police should be

allowed to arrest females, and imprisonment of women with children should be an exception, and not a norm. All marriages and divorces need to be documented and maintenance agreements should also be recorded. The law of inheritance needs to be brought in conformity with Islamic law and the implementation method should be improved. Shelter homes should be established and properly advertised so that women know that they have a safe place to go to in case they are violated. Better intervention programs need to be formulated to look into cases of domestic violence. Crisis centers need to be set up as a first contact point for women seeking refuge.

### **Economic Empowerment**

Women comprise only 14% of the workforce. If self-employed and unpaid family workers are also taken into account, this ratio jumps to 40%. However, contribution of women to the economy, especially in rural areas is enormous; but unfortunately, despite recommendations of various commissions, it largely remains unnoticed. Therefore, in addition to portraying an incorrect picture of the contribution of women in the national economy, the resource allocation in various sectors like education and cottage industry etc is not done as per the share of women. This anomaly needs to be removed and proper job opportunities and remunerations for women need to be introduced, so that their labor is not misused and exploited. Micro financing which is already underway to help women set up their own businesses and works should be expanded and basic infrastructure and support to provide micro credit to women should be accorded to first woman bank and other companies in this regard. Initially to ensure that women become a part of the work place, a certain quota in government jobs should be reserved for women. Vocational schools need to be set up so that women are afforded the opportunity to equip themselves with different skills that they can use from the safety of their homes to uplift their economic and social status. Wages of agricultural and non-agricultural labor should be regulated in accordance with international laws for minimum wage. Women's home based work should be similarly regulated. In order to economically empower women working out of their homes, Ministry for Women's Development could help establish a central cooperative/clearing house that could draw on the existing and varied expertise of women working in the handicraft sector. Small loan program for enterprising women who are already trained in some work may be introduced. A training program on small business management, taxes and marketing may be attached to the program.

### **Social Uplift**

Socially also the status of women needs to be improved. They are the ones who should be addressed whenever any census takes place on women issues. Media should play its role in highlighting the issues that women face in their everyday lives. Women should be included in all formal and informal medium of justice so that they can identify the issues of complainants. Media drives as well as local state and NGO sponsored campaigns to foster women's participation in public spaces should be initiated. Women participation in the political process should be encouraged further. Women members of legislature could ensure that all policies and laws made in this regard cater to the minute dynamics of women issues. An effort needs to be made in this regard to make these avenues more open to the common women as well, as presently most women politicians are known more for their family backgrounds in politics, thus making it difficult for women to make a mark for themselves in this field, independent of their associations and backgrounds. The electoral process needs to be delinked from the local power structures.

### **Improvement in the Health Awareness**

Awareness campaign needs to be launched at a massive scale to inform women of their health issues. Many women suffer in silence and have a poor quality of life, only because they do not know what is wrong with them, how common it is, and how to treat it. This should be started with awareness about physical health, but should spread to include emotional and psychological health also. Women should also know what constitutes physical and emotional abuse, and should know what they are entitled to in terms of privacy of their bodies and minds. Government health facilities need to better ensure that the staff is regular at BHUs, and basic equipment is available. BHUs should have some provision of emergency healthcare, including the presence of medical personnel and ambulances.

### **Equal Education Opportunities**

Primary schools for boys and girls should be set up in all large and small areas, particularly rural ones. Women should be preferred to be hired as teachers. Training for pre-service and in-service teachers should incorporate a gender awareness program. Teachers should also be encouraged to interact with the parents of students, especially mothers. Moreover, teachers should be trained to be sensitive to the needs of their poorer students. Gender biases in school texts should be eliminated, and girls need to be exposed to women as positive role models through the school curricula. Affirmative action measure with respect to scholar ships for girls and young women from lower caste, religious minority, and low-income families need to be taken at all educational levels.

### **Conclusion**

Women empowerment, as an issue, is not confined to control over few factors. It is in fact a combination of literacy, employment and health. Women empowerment is an important concept in development of any society as it propels them into active agents of change, rather than passive recipients of its consequences. Women need to be empowered in the social, economic and political spheres. This empowerment and gender equality contributes to improving labour productivity and economic growth. And in the same vein, the disempowerment does not only affect individual women, but also their families, and, in turn, societies. Planners working towards an empowerment approach must therefore develop ways to enable women to critically assess their own situational requirements and try to come up with solutions that are pertinent to such requirements. Whatever planning does take place has to be in consultation with the beneficiaries.

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