

Doctoral Dissertation

**Women's Empowerment and Participatory Development: A Case of  
Women's Organization in Pakistan  
(Summary)**

CHAUDHRY TEHREEM

Graduate School for International Development and Cooperation  
Hiroshima University

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Women's empowerment is an objective that is furthered at the international level in Sustainable Development Goals and many other development policies. The mainstreaming of empowerment in the development debate has led it to permeate every national and international policy and development initiative targeting women, marginalized and the poor. While, this globalization of development ideas does create many opportunities for women, it also poses certain challenges to achieve the said goals. In Pakistan, despite many efforts to improve the conditions of women, the situation of gender disparity is appalling. In the context of prevalent gender gap, inequality and the dissatisfaction with the work of NGOs regarding women's empowerment in the country, this dissertation examines the participatory mobilization activities of a women's NGO (Aurat Foundation) in order to underline the implications of its activities on women in Pakistan. A particular women's empowerment project (Aawaz) of the Aurat Foundation in Okara has been analysed to understand the complex relationship between gender, empowerment and women NGOs in Pakistan.

Specifically, this study explores the effects of the global empowerment policies on the women at the local level. The examination of the various discourses and socio-political factors surrounding the issue, shows that although the commonly used phenomenon of 'empowerment' by the women's organizations in Pakistan borrows a lot from the wider global trends (in terms of goals and set targets), it also involves a consideration of certain contextual factors in the local context. This complex interplay of various global, national and local factors makes it essential to view the issue of women's empowerment in Pakistan beyond the debate of NGO policies being 'empowering' or 'un-empowering'.

This study emphasizes that the NGO-led empowerment must be examined and understood from various perspectives, in terms of the global, national and local processes considering the multilevel nature of these struggles. At the same time, however, it becomes important to narrow the focus on the concrete realities that shape the social processes at domestic level. Since women at the local level are believed to be the actors that can bring change in the gender dynamics, it is important to understand their perspectives. The significance of this study lies in its approach and focus, as it attempts to understand empowerment from the grassroots; from the day-to-day interactions between women and NGO staff in the village setting in Pakistan. The originality of the study lies in the accounts of the local women; their own perception of empowerment and other benefits gained from the NGO program. It provides an analytical view

that deconstructs the issue of women's empowerment from the bottom-up which makes this case study unique, as no previous studies have attempted to approach women's empowerment from this perspective in Pakistan.

The research has been conducted at the regional office of the NGO in Lahore, district office in the Okara city and the villages and towns of the Okara district where the organization is operating at the village and town levels. NGO's empowerment approaches; political participation, capacity building and awareness-raising, at work on local and village levels have been analysed to understand practical implications for the population and effectiveness in achieving the goal of empowerment. The standard qualitative research methods have been used, including in-depth interviews (semi-structured and informal discussions), participant observation and group discussions.

The dissertation starts with the background discussion of the specific historical context which led to the emergence of the current discourse of women's rights in Pakistan. Close observation and analysis of the ideology and approaches used by Aurat Foundation, shows that women's rights are being promoted at the national level through a demand for an improved and progressive legislative framework for women's rights. Policy recommendations are being made by NGOs including the Aurat Foundation to incorporate development of women in the state policies in terms of annual budget allocation and developmental schemes. NGOs are expanding their activities to reach the grassroots in many parts of the country including the Okara district.

The awareness-raising interventions of the Aurat Foundation in Okara have proved effective in terms of enhancing women's self-confidence, bolstering participation and decision-making, and in some cases have led to individual women becoming empowered. It has helped in expanding the public space for women by providing them with information centres which also serve as women-friendly public spaces. This initiative has facilitated the process of empowerment, serving as a platform and a medium for support and capacity-building of the women of Okara. Behavioural changes are visible in certain areas where women and men are learning to be self-reliant and the community is collectively making an effort to change their conditions. Participants indicated feeling empowered as a result of increased self-confidence and a sense of self-worth. Women have not only gained strength on the personal level, but they are also helping other members of the community; encouraging them to be self-reliant in seeking the solution of their problems. The mindset of the community has been influenced; altering their

beliefs regarding issues like education, conflicts, gender norms or women's rights in religion. Strict gender norms of gender segregation have also undergone a slight change, making a dent in the rigid attitude and beliefs.

Another notable feature of the Aurat Foundation and its empowerment programs is the recognition of the local context. Against the backdrop of criticisms surrounding development work of NGOs that disregard the local conditions and context; Aurat Foundation attempts to acknowledge the demands of the local context by designing its strategies according to the religion, culture and the local traditions. The local context is kept in perspective during the implementation process, whether it is in the form of religious approval for democratic practice like voting, or addressing the practical needs of food, unemployment or health issues in the field.

At the implementation level, the development practitioners are also faced with a number of challenges and setbacks. While the situation has undergone a significant change since the establishment of the country, the prejudices against women based on traditional beliefs and religion remain deeply entrenched in the social structure which causes major hindrance to the empowerment process of the NGO. Practices like honour killings, dowry, child and forced marriages, son preference and wife beating still haunt the nation in a profound way. The fact that most of these practices are justified in the name of religion makes it even more difficult to uproot them.

The close examination of the empowerment policies of the Aurat Foundation in Okara reveals that the biggest challenge for development planners manifests itself when the top-down approach of planning comes at odds with the demands of the community. Although the NGO's policies emphasized local participation, local people and local contexts, the top-down influence is not completely absent. For most of the participant women, the immediate concern is to secure a living for their families. Many women who initially approached the Aurat Foundation ended up leaving the program because it did not provide any 'practical' benefit. This emphasis of NGO to target the strategic needs—sometimes not recognized or prioritized by the community—at the expense of the more immediate needs, undermines the bottom-up, participatory and alternative stance of empowerment. The de-synchronization and gap between local realities and values of the NGO limits the potential of the empowerment initiatives. The struggle to achieve a balance between global concerns vs. local needs is the major concern faced by the NGO staff during the implementation of Aawaz.

The discussion of both positive and negative aspects of NGO-led empowerment shows that despite the challenges and prevalent inadequacies, the claims of the NGO empowering the community cannot be simply ignored. As far as the impact of Aawaz on a wider scale is concerned, this study postulates a positive sequence of change from individual to collective empowerment. Individual empowerment is experienced by the women who participate in trainings as a result of engagement with Aawaz. Interaction with other participants and hearing their life struggles, serve as a motivational factor for the women. Collective empowerment can be observed as participants engage in social consciousness workshops together and discuss ways to improve their conditions and lives.

The study findings emphasize that the empowerment process at the grassroots in Pakistan is different from the women's organizations' perception of the concept. The data from the field reveals the uniqueness of the process of empowerment as it unfolds in the field. The empowerment at grassroots differs from the planned interventions as it changes and accommodates local needs during the implementation. The amalgamation of a strategic agenda of the NGO and the demands of the local context gives rise to a novel form of empowerment where women are not just the passive agents at the receiving end of the equation. They understand the process and influence it in their own way. In light of this, I argue that development interventions by the NGOs should use an integrated approach, which pays attention simultaneously to both strategic and practical aspects of empowerment, in order to make the process at grassroots more effective.