

Role of Civil Society in Empowering Pakistani Women

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ABSTRACT

Civil society in Pakistan has been playing its role in social, economic and political empowerment of women. Unfortunately, despite of the emergence of vibrant print/electronic media, wide-spread network of women related non-governmental organizations and the focus of political parties on women related issues; a large segment of female population is still struggling hard for the equal status. However, it is pertinent to state that the notion of women empowerment is deeply linked with an over-all change in patriarchal structure of the society, on one side and the truthful understanding of religion (Islam) on the other. We cannot neglect this reality that the growing trend to provide equal opportunities of education and employment to women has contributed to their welfare, but not effective through to make a dent in their over-all well-being. In spite of the fact that more representation is given to the women in legislatures, neither have they suggested remedies for the grievances and dismal plight of women, nor they could suggest the broad framework to improve the role of female socio-economic and political in Pakistan.

KEY WORDS: Civil Society, Pakistan, Woman, Welfare, Gender, NGO

Introduction

This paper intends to establish a linkage between the issues of women empowerment and the contribution of the civil society, to achieve a respectable status for the female population, within various sectors of the Pakistani society. Pakistani women share 59 percent in the total population of 160 million, but are relegated to the secondary role, due to the growing gender disparity. Although, at some places, women status as an equal member of the society have been marginally acknowledged. However, the considerable gender disparity against women is still a dominant factor in hampering women empowerment. Despite of various legislative and executive measures of the federal and provincial governments in the past, regarding gender issues, the Pakistani women are still facing all kinds of discrimination. The main reason is that even today, when the requirements of the society and women have changed drastically, the patriarchal

mindset, outdated traditions and cultural norms continue to hold their ground. As a result, women's participation in social, economic and political spheres has been substantially curtailed. It is this kind of gender disparity which raises many questions, particularly when it comes to granting equal status to the deprived women. It was acknowledged in a report that women placement in the Pakistani society was far from satisfactory, as pointed out by Sharma (2003), in a commentary:

In 1997, the report of the commission of inquiry for women observed that socio-economic indicators pointed to discriminatory laws and practices widening the gap between men and women in almost all key sectors. The report also noted that certain form of violence against women had increased and handicaps faced by women in the matter of their legal status had obviously increased in certain areas (pp. 99).

In this regard, civil society organizations in Pakistan, particularly those that concerns women, along with print/electronic media, political parties, academia, professional associations, traditional and non-traditional faith-based organizations (FBOs), have played significant role in educating women, regarding their rights. These women related organizations have gradually taken their current space in Pakistan, after an uphill task, due to the conservative mind-set of the society, strong orthodoxy and over-all absence of any women related social movement in Pakistan. It must be recognized that some other non-state actors, as hinted above have also played some role, for the empowerment of the women. For our purposes, we will concentrate on the contribution of women related organizations, while keeping in view the contribution of media (print/electronic) and political parties, as well.

It is noticeable that women related NGOs have played a significant role in bringing awareness among women, related to their social, economic and political rights, but there are many critics who feel that these organizations do not relate socially and economically to the "victims", as the organizers belonged to urban high middle class. This creates a huge gap in perceptions and understanding of the real issues of the oppressed Pakistani women by these set-ups. The history of women activism in Pakistan can be traced during and after the independence movement, when many women related voluntary organizations did not only actively participate in the freedom struggle but they were also on the forefront in the nation building process. In post-independence era, the nature of women participation was different from the similar organizations of today, due to requirements of that time. It is important to mention that till 1960, there was an absence of any effective organization to struggle for equal status of women in Pakistan.

The upsurge in the women organizations in Pakistan can be divided in three phases. The first phase started in 1960s due to the demand of family laws by women NGOs according to the addicts of Islam and the second phase began in 1970s, against the women related discriminatory laws which particularly affected their social status in the society. The third phase can be traced in 1990 with the mushrooming of women organizations in Pakistan, due to the wide spread effects of globalization. Moreover, the surge in information technology also helped to generate awareness among women, so that they could voice their demands for equal rights.

It is relevant to state here that despite of the efforts of civil society organizations towards women empowerment, no substantial change can be observed to up-lift a woman's status or even to make the society, more conducive for the requirements of the female population. The existing conditions are more or less the same as in every walk of life, they are facing gender discrimination in various forms. There are various reasons behind these failures, like the patriarchal mind set of society, miss-interpretation of Islam by fundamentalists, discriminatory legislations and last but not the least the absence of proper implementation of women related laws. The National Report of Pakistan for the Fourth UN World Conference for Women admitted that women "continue to suffer because of oppressive patriarchal structures, rigid orthodox norms and stifling socio-cultural customs and traditions"(sachet Pakistan, 2002). It can be derived from this statement that the efforts of civil society can only be fruitful if the effects of deeply rooted patriarchy could be managed and minimized.

In order to comprehend the role of civil society organizations, regarding women empowerment; there is a need to evaluate the already achieved efforts of these organizations, along with the understanding of those issues of Pakistani society, which are continuous to resist against all kinds of efforts and struggles for women empowerment.

Women Placement/Status in Pakistani Society

At a cursory glance, it seems difficult to categorize exactly the status and role of women in the Pakistani society, but a closer look at the social class structure, provincial demarcations and rural and urban divisions would enable us to understand the placement of women. However, it is estimated that despite of this categorization, women of all strata perform almost the same role, and have similar handicaps, with little modifications, as per the requirement of their existed settings. On aspect which is common in all kinds of categories is the generations old patriarchal settings of the society.

In the Pakistani society, we can identify at least four different social classes, based on economic considerations. The classifications can be made as follows: upper class³, middle class⁴, and lower class⁵, and those belonging to the lowest economic status. In societies like Pakistan, economic status determines the social

prestige, in the community. It sounds unfair because the educational level and a person's profession should be more important to determine its contribution towards the society. Additionally, justice and the necessities of a healthy society demand that a person's respect must be considered in the basis of its educational background rather than on the basis of its financial wellbeing exclusively. Although, women related organizations are generally geared towards education and more employment for women but they cannot achieve this goal, unless enough pressure is executed from all sides to change a particular mind-set.

Another factor to be taken into consideration is the cultural values. The cultural values have more or less an equal impact on the lives of women; belonging to different classes but in hard reality it varies from one class to another. The upper class women are generally educated with strong financial position and available resources. However, in some cases, even the women of this stratum become a victim of strong prejudices from deeply rooted tribal or *Baradari*⁶ base structures and it becomes an uphill task for them to pursue their rights. An example can be cited, where a twenty-seven-year-old Samia Sarwar, the daughter of a prominent businessman and head of the Chamber of Commerce was gunned down in 1999 in her attorneys' office, in Lahore by a gun man, hired by her family, as she was in the process of seeking a divorce from her estranged husband. It is important to state here that in this incident, there was hardly a civil society organization or media group which exerted enough pressure on law enforcement agencies to bring the culprits to justice - and ultimately this incident faded with time.

The middle class women to a certain extent, are unable to raise any effective voice against the violation of their rights, which normally comes from a certain mindset of the male family members (although mothers – mostly uneducated or semi-educated, are equally responsible to enforce these prejudices). Hindrances are created when it comes to higher education and choosing a profession. It is not surprising that these prejudices against woman exist in this class as it is under strong influence of orthodoxy and this class claims to be the custodian of existing cultural and religious bigoted values of the society.

The most vulnerable are the woman of the lower strata, as she neither has resources to resent against unjust treatment, especially domestic violence, nor she is aware of her basic rights - what to say of her desire to get education and empowerment. In this social class, as mentioned above, the traditional patriarchal attitude of society is a serious hindrance for women empowerment. While supporting this argument, a country briefing paper on Pakistani women by Asian Development Bank (2000) stated "Pakistani women are trapped in a web of dependency and subordination due to their low social, economic and political status in society. The majority of women suffer from all forms of poverty. In order to change women's position and societal views of their inferiority, structural changed need to be brought about in the social and economic order that shape our social world"(Critical Issues of Women in Pakistan, 2000).

After understanding the above mentioned social class structure, it becomes important to define the position of Pakistani women in rural and urban divisions. The nature of work is relatively different for the urban woman, as compared to their rural counterparts. In rural set-up, women are expected to perform their house-hold responsibilities, along with the bearing and rearing of children, which normally are in large numbers. The lack of education due to unavailability of adequate facilities further restricts the role of rural women to house-hold activities, within the four walls. In the case of farming community, after completing their house related responsibilities, the women contribute equally towards the income of their family, as they work with them in the fields, but this contribution is hardly recognized. Consequently, they are at the mercy of their men, even for the fulfillment of their basic needs. Furthermore, they are largely marginalized, when it comes to the social and economic decisions of their family. However, it is only when they become older (mothers of grownup children or even grandmothers), that they are able to exercise certain control over their household decisions. This status of women becomes worse when we move to the rigid tribal setups of Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtoon khuwa (including FATA areas), where the tribal system is deeply rooted in the social structure, in a way that women mobility outside their home is nearly impossible and they are bound to operate within the tribal customs. In such areas, “slightest deviation from this code has disastrous consequences. An indiscreet word with a member of the opposite sex to whom one is neither married nor betrothed, for instance, will result in the swift death of both man and woman” (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987, p.21).

The conditions and role of women are comparatively better in the urban areas of the country due to women’s exposure to education, print/electronic media, and last but not the least the various awareness programs, introduced by civil society organizations. These all elements put together, have contributed to transform the position of urban women in social, economic and political fields, but this modified role of women is still confronted by many handicaps, as domestic and societal prejudices prevails, side by side.

It is relevant to state here that women discrimination in urban and rural division have different magnitudes. The main reason is the patriarchal nature of the Pakistani society, which despite of giving space to the modernizing agents, is unable to transform the over-all structures of the society, as even today according to women right activists: “a women’s assets are calculated only in terms of her power of reproduction, and as an object of sexual satisfaction. In a country where the mere suspicion of ‘indecent conduct’, let alone pre-marital sex, is enough cause for ‘crimes of honour’, such assets can only come in to play after marriage”(Ibid, p.23). In such situation, the real impact of women empowerment in the Pakistani society becomes farfetched.

Social Movements and Emergence of Women Activism in Pakistan

Social movement can be defined as a collective attempt, which aims to bring comprehensive and fundamental changes, in any social order. A social movement is a vital sign of awareness, which mainly comes through education, increased mobility, industrialization and urbanization. These social movements are normally led by civil society, under the pretext of different objectives, which usually deals with the welfare of a particular or more segments of society. In the broader context civil society has been defined by the Center for Civil Society as:

Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy group.

The world history is full of examples, where social movements successfully brought significant changes in the existing structures of society. The few prominent social movements in the West were the French Social Movement 1789, American Civil Rights Movement 1963 and Feminist Movement, which occurred at the beginning of 19th century (the women had demanded suffrage and political equality). Conversely in Pakistan, at the time of independence, all social forces were diverted towards the struggle for a separate homeland in which there was an over-whelmed participation of women. After this achievement, the Pakistani society, irrespective of gender, participated in the process of nation building and therefore the demand for separate women rights did not arise. There could be many reasons of this neglect.

The first women organization known as All Pakistan Women Association, (APWA), founded by the wife of first Prime Minister, Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan⁷ in 1949. The founding members of this association belonged to either upper or middle class, therefore it was active in the urban centers, with little to offer 70% rural woman. Nevertheless, it goes to APWA's credit that it mobilized support for the acknowledgement of Muslim Personal Law of Sharia in 1948, which recognized a woman's right of inheritance. They also struggled to include a Charter of Women's Rights in the 1956 constitution, which however could not be materialised. Moreover, the same association put forward the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (MFLO) in 1961, which prescribed the comprehensive procedure of marriage and divorce, according to the addicts of Islam. It is noticeable that although Pakistan got independence in the name of religion (Islam), but due to the conservative mind-set of the society, the equal rights of women as per the principal of religion, was not secured. After APWA, as mentioned above, women

related NGOs remained static for about twenty years but then mushroomed in 1960, 1970s and 1990s. Table 1 below contains basic information about the prominent organizations, which were established between 1947 and 2011.

**Table 1: Selected Women Rights Organizations
1947-2011**

Year	Name	Focus
1949	All Pakistan Women Association (APWA)	To promotion the socio-economic uplift and constitutional rights of women.
1954	Pakistan Federation of Business and Professional Women	To raise status (including economic status) of women by ensuring equal opportunities in education, training, and employment.
1955	United Front for Women Rights (UFWR)	The front reflected the failure of existing political parties to take up the issue of women's rights and it became inactive during the rule of Ayub khan first as Chief Martial Law Administrator and then as president. The front completely disappeared after the promulgation of 1973 constitution.
1970	ShirkatGah (SG)	To help women in raising their voice for socio-economic and political issues.
1976	Aurat Foundation (AF)	To promote awareness among women of all socio-economic levels of their rights and status in society (information dissemination. Extensive training courses conducted at grass-roots level for the empowerment of women.)
1981	Women Action Forum (WAF)	To lobby on behalf of women and to holds demonstrations and public-awareness campaigns.
1985	Simorgh	To response against the promulgation of retrogressive and discriminatory legislation through conducting research programs.
1989	War Against Rape (WAR)	To lobby on women's issues, particularly on rape and violence against women.
1990	Dastak	To offer free legal aid to women fleeing abusive and murderous families. It further provides psychological women victims of violence.
1992	Bedari	To improve conditions of women in the community through training, research, and advocacy.
1996	Kashf Foundation	to provide cost effective and quality microfinance services to poor women, by adding value to women's existing economic opportunities in order to enhance their role in economic and social decision-making.
1998	Rozaan	To enhance the self-esteem of all people, especially women and children in order to work towards a society. It further aims to provide psychological counseling to the women against violence.
2001	Alliance Against Sexual Harassment (AASHA)	It is an alliance of 6 organizations, committed to end sexual harassment at workplace.

2003	Women Empowerment, Literacy & Development Organization (WELDO)	To bringing about “Sustainable Social, Economic and Environmental Enhancement for the Development of a Self Reliant, Healthy and Prosperous Society”.
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Source: Compiled by the Author from various sources

The role of above mentioned organizations cannot be undermined in bringing awareness among women regarding their social, economic and political rights. The organizations differed in their scope and target. Such organizations as APWA and UFWR, established immediately after independence, aimed initially to address women related social and economic with less focus on political awakening. Therefore, initially the objectives of such women NGOs were to provide education, health facilities, economic assistance and awareness to deal with the socio-economic pressures. Some organizations faded with time, due to their limited scope and short term planning. Consequently, these organizations were able to benefit only a limited women population. At the same time, some new organizations for highlighting women rights were formed in 1970s like ShirkatGah, Aurat foundation. These women NGOs strived hard to voice the demands of women but unfortunately, their impact was not noticeable due to their exclusive focus on urbanized women. Consequently, the different type of discrimination against them still continues, some with even greater magnitude. This dismal situation is reflected in various impartial reports. For example, according to 1998 Human Development Reports, Pakistan ranked 138 out of 174 developing countries on the Human Development Index (HDI); 131 on a list of 163 countries on the Gender Development Index (GDI); and 100 on a list of 102 countries on the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM).

It is relevant to point here that the notion of women activism in Pakistan is not only linked with NGOs but associated with an over-all emergence of civil society. In this regard, it is important to take notice of at least two factors which hindered in the way of women activism in Pakistan:

Firstly, any move to voice a desire for even minimal rights has been looked upon as a threat by the reactionary forces. It has always resulted in a situation of confrontation with the *maulvi*, within the legislatures or at the public level. Secondly, in Pakistan right from the country’s inception to the present, it has been a very small proportion of women, the urban educated middle and upper classes, which have pushed for the acceptance of women’s rightful position in society. In the early years such women could be counted on the figures of one hand and almost invariably belonged to political families (Madani, 2005, pp.87-88).

Apart from the NGOs, the most effective medium to bring awareness in women is print/electronic media, which has made efforts to draw attention towards the constraints and handicaps that women confront in the male dominated Pakistani society. In recent years, media has focused on the unjust and cruel century's old socio-cultural traditions like *vani*⁸, *watta-satta*⁹, *karokar*¹⁰, and marriage with Quran¹¹ etc. Apart from that, since women being a part of feudal society, also bear the highest whimsical blunts by the influential land honors, who have exercised control over their lives for generations. In such situations, even men are the victims, but women bear a double impact. With the passage of time in certain areas of Pakistan, the tendency to control the lives of women continues, much more than the other areas of country, due to the deep influence of tribal culture. Example can be given of Balochistan and FATA, where the women are provided with limited opportunities than their counter parts in other parts of the country. This country-wise gender discrimination has been exposed in recent times by print and electronic media, through various newspaper articles, TV dramas, talk shows and documentaries, which are not only the agents of change but a credit, goes to them for re-defining the cultural values. While supporting this argument, a consultant and advisor of local and foreign NGOs, Arif Hasan stated, "Globalization and structural adjustment have changed the culture of Pakistan state" (Hasan, 2009, p.xxv). However, the real impact of these efforts on the attitude of society is yet to be assessed.

Role of Civil Society in Bringing Socio-economic Awareness among Pakistani Women

The patriarchy of Pakistani society as mentioned, poses serious hurdles for the socio-economic empowerment of women. But we cannot overlook a reality that with the passage of time, civil society struggled to bring awareness amongst the women of Pakistan. In the Pakistani society, a woman is considered to be a responsibility of father, brother or husband and even the grown up sons. It is a common practice that all important decision of her life, like selection of career and decision about marriage is taken by male members, in their relevant capacities. Consequently, women in many instances are still dependent, regardless of their achievements in academic and professional life. However, the trend to discriminate between male and a female child in respect of providing facilities of elementary education, at least, has significantly changed and the credit goes to the growing economic pressures, which demands that girls should be a partner in financial responsibilities. According to a writer on women issues,

The concept of women empowerment is not limited to control over reproduction or financial independence only, rather it is a combination of literacy, employment and health. Women empowerment is an important and useful concept in

the development of a community as it represents women as active agents rather than passive recipients of development policies (The Nation, 17 January, 2009).

The role of women NGOs, print/electronic media and street theaters becomes important as they not only highlight the issues relating to social and economic discrimination against women but they also present solutions to this problem.¹² These all mediums of information do focus on the subject of women's socio-economic empowerment, in one way or the other. Moreover, the growing number of newspapers and magazine through a variety of articles continue to sensitize the readers about the need to acknowledge equal status for women. However, the contribution of NGOs, working for women and the impact of print media is quite limited on women population of Pakistan, due to following reasons.

First, larger numbers of NGOs are confined to major urban centres and have failed to make a breakthrough for the uplift of rural women. While supporting this argument, Dr.Tahmina Rashid, an expert on gender issues remarked, "the activities of the large majority of women's organizations are confined to certain 'posh' pockets of major urban centres, yet in a few slum areas, considerable grass-root activity can also be observed, where lower class women are evidently struggling against heavy odds to make ends meet" (2006, p.175). This restricted impact of women NGOs is also acknowledged by women rights activist Farzana Bari, who presents a realistic viewpoint behind this veracity by stating that "the activists strongly feel for women issues but they are not yet very active and effective. Moreover, the diversity among women in Pakistan is a barrier to formulate a common agenda for activism and there are cultural variations amongst various regions that make it difficult to incorporate all voices"(Ibid, p.173).

Second, according to 1998 census of Pakistan, the female literacy rate is only 36.8 percent (female literacy ratio of rural women is 20 percent), which is very low as compared with male's, which is 61.3 percent. Moreover, this gap exists all over Pakistan, which further helps to support the argument that there is a widespread gender inequality in the country. The table below depicts the gap between the percentage of literacy of men and women in the four provinces. Although, these are the statistics of 1998, but still are relevant even today.

**Table 2: Literacy Rate in Province by Gender (Percent)
1975-1995**

Year	Punjab		Sindh		NWFP		Balouchistan		Pakistan		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
1975	31.6	12.6	39.3	20.0	24.1	5.3	15.0	4.2	31.8	13.0	23.2
1980	36.4	16.4	39.7	21.5	25.7	6.4	15.2	4.3	34.81	15.7	25.9
1985	40.8	18.2	43.2	22.4	30.5	7.1	17.9	4.9	38.9	17.0	28.4
1990	45.2	20.8	46.5	23.7	38.1	8.6	21.0	5.7	43.4	19.1	31.7
1995	50.0	24.9	51.6	25.8	47.3	12.0	25.3	6.6	48.7	22.5	36.1

Source: Social Policy and Development Centre, "Social Development in Pakistan, Annual Review, 1998", p.130.

Due to the low literacy rate of women, the reading materials related to women issues, in the shape of articles, published discussions and reports in newspapers, magazines and journals of different NGOs, mostly go unnoticed and only few educated women get benefit. While further elaborating this notion, Rashid stated, "the literature is mainly published in English or Urdu though the female literacy rate in Pakistan is very low. The large majority of women are unable to read either of these languages. Moreover, most women are located in rural areas so their access to these organizations and their published material is limited and above all, they lack the financial resources to purchase this literature" (Ibid, p.176).

In spite of these handicaps, the widespread impact of electronic media and street theaters cannot be overlooked, which through talk shows, dramas, documentaries and stage acts are working for threefold objective. First, they highlight patriarchal structure and orthodox elements in the society. Second, they sensitize female population regarding their rights in general. Third, they act as pressure group for the policy makers to legislate on women related issues.

Role of Civil Society in Highlighting Political Awareness among Women

At present, the magnitude of women political participation in Pakistan is not different from their marginal social and economic role, as discussed in preceding pages. However, it is important to distinguish that woman participation during Pakistan movement was altogether different in its nature and impact due to the demands of that time, therefore women worked side by side with men. This equal role of women was further encouraged by Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who had a liberal outlook but unfortunately, soon after his death chauvinistic attitudes, supported by orthodoxy significantly reshaped women's lives, resulting in curtailment of their equal political participation. It is relevant to mention that during the freedom struggle, women actively participated as they were encouraged by the male members of their families. This support motivated women of all three

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social classes to enthusiastically participate in the meetings, demonstrations and other political activities, either being in the forefront or a mere follower. In this regard the Quaid's sister, Ms. Fatima Jinnah, along with Begum Shahnawaz, Begum Salma Tassadque, Begum Shaista Ikramullah and many others like them worked day and night to mobilize the Muslim women of British India under the platform of Muslim League, for a political cause to create a separate homeland for the Muslims of Sub-continent.

After the creation of Pakistan, the political activities of the women could not sustain its momentum and those belonging to the middle and lower classes even could not equip themselves with education, due to their restricted mobility. The condition of women belonged to rural areas of North West Frontier Province (NWFP), Balochistan and interior Sindh were more vulnerable, as they encountered extreme restrictions owing to their conservative ethos and conventions. A strict Purdah¹³ is observed as an integral part of the tribal custom of these areas. According to an expert on women issues, the women of these areas were "sharply demarcated and divides public and private spheres of life for women, in such a way that the economic and political powers were designed as male domains" (Kabir, 2003). These women could not even perform normal functions, without seeking a prior permission from their patrilineal head of the family. To fill the lacuna, some women from elitist families came ahead and tried to become the representatives of these women. To give an example from a present situation which is not different from the services of former education minister, Zubaida Jalal, who came from the remotest part of Balouchistan can be cited.

According to another view, even the reformist liberal movement spear headed by Ghaffar Khan and his political cadres could not become effective as they were considered an opposing political force by the ruling party. In these circumstances, the elitist women had to bear much more responsibility, as they were the solitary source left to keep the women voice alive in parliament and other public places. These women leaders had a complete support of women NGOs and they collectively built pressure for the succeeding governments to accept the social and political demands of the women section.

**Table 3: Legislation on Women and Role of NGOs in Pakistan
1948-2012**

Year	Name	Description	Response of Women NGOS
1948	Muslim Personal Law of Shariah	Bill recognized a woman's right to inherit all forms of property. At that time, there were 2 Women in constituent assembly.	APWA
			Support
1961	Muslim Family Law Ordinance (MFLO)	It aimed to regulate the family affairs by protecting the women rights against unjust prevailing procedures of marriage, divorce, and polygamy, etc. when this ordinance was passed; there was a Martial law in Pakistan and no legislative body was intact.the	UFWR APWA
			Support

		commission was working named as Rashid Commission, which had total 7 members, 2 were women.	
1980	Hudood Ordinance	The ordinance was promulgated through an executive order, which was considered as against the rights of women. The ordinance was passed by Majlis-e-Shura in which there were 20 nominated Women.	WAF; SG; AF Oppose
2006	Women Protection Bill	Its main purpose was to amend the laws under Hudood Ordinance as this ordinance victimized the women. When the bill was passed, there were 72 women in National Assembly	APWA; WAF; ShirkatGah Conditional Support
2009	Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Bill (could not become a law)	The bill intends to combat violence against women and children, with the help of a strong network of protection committees and quick criminal trials against suspected abusers. The bill was passed by the National Assembly unanimously, but unfortunately the bill lapsed after the Senate failed to pass it within the three months period, required under the constitution. When the bill was passed, there were 60 women in National Assembly	ShirkatGah: Aurat Foundation Support
2010	Sexual Harassment Bill	The bill was for those Pakistani women, who have to interact mostly in a “bad-mannered” surrounding, especially when they come out of their homes for market places, traveling by local transport and when performing their duties at workplace, along with the male colleagues. When the bill was passed, there were 60 women in National Assembly	Alliance Against Sexual Harassment (AASHA) Support
2011	Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Bill	The bill was to constitutionally protect Pakistani women against the abomination like giving a woman in marriage or otherwise in Badla-e-Sulha, Wani, or Sawara, marriage with the Holy Quran, and depriving women of their inheritance. The bill has proposed strong penalties for the offenders indulging in anti-women practices. When the bill was passed, there were 60 women in National Assembly	Despite the support of all women NGOs the bill was pending from last three years in N.A on technical grounds. Support

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2012	Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Bill	The bill aims to control the import, production, transportation, hoarding, sale and use of acid to prevent the misuse of acid and provide legal support to acid and burn victims. the bill recommended 14-years lifetime imprisonment sentence and fines up of Rs 1 million as a punishment for the perpetrator of this crime.	<p>The Acid Survivors Foundation.</p> <p>Depilex Smile Again Foundation</p> <p>Support</p>
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Source: Compiled by the Author from various sources.

Table 3 provides a cursory view of the laws, ordinances and bills on women related issues from 1948 to 2011 in Pakistan. These legislative measures cannot be evaluated without keeping in mind the efforts of women NGOs, which did not only sensitize women of all strata but they built pressure in the legislature for ensuring women equal social, economic and political rights.

According to the table, MFLO in 1961 was the first step to ensure women rights according to Islam. Although, when the ordinance was passed, there was no legislative body working in Pakistan as the state institutions were operational under the command of the military. General Ayub Khan constituted a commission, to make a new constitution to govern the state. This commission had total 7 members, out of which only 2 were women, which hardly represented approximately 50 percent population of the country. However, women NGOs like UFWR and APWA supported the ordinance as it was for the first time in the history of Pakistan that some kind of protection was provided to women, by regulating the matters of marriage, divorce, polygamy etc. It is worth mentioning here that the history of women rights in Pakistan is spread over achievements like MFLO, as well as setbacks like Hudood ordinance, enacted by Zia-ul-Haq, in 1980 as mentioned in table 3. It nearly took away the basic rights and freedom of women which were provided by MFLO in 1961. Hudood ordinance faced severe criticism at national and international levels, due to the discriminatory clauses of the ordinance. The tragic part is that even the governments of Benazir Bhutto and Mian Nawaz Sharif could not undo Zia-ul-Haq's "unjust" laws. The reason which can be ascribed to this omission is that their tenure were short and both faced political turmoil and instability, during the democratic era of 1988 to 1999.

When General Pervez Musharraf took over, first as Martial Law administrator and then as President in 1999, his liberal approach motivated women NGOs to build pressure on his government for ensuring women rights. This pressure was further added, when the mushroom growth of privately owned TV and radio channels came into being.¹⁴ consequently, women reserved seats in National assembly were increased from 20 to 60 and in provincial assemblies, 128 seats were reserved for women. In addition to this, Women Protection Bill (WPB) was passed in 2006 as mentioned in table 3, with a conditional support of such NGOs like APWA, WAF and Shirkat Gah, because it was generally believed that WPB was unable to completely repeal the draconian laws of Hudood ordinance. These

organizations demanded the abolition of the Federal Shariat and Appellate Shariat court, under the pretext that it created a parallel judicial system in this country under Hudood ordinance and that all citizens should be treated equally under one system. However, one cannot over-look the steps of Musharaff government for the women political empowerment, in the form of the reservation of 10% quota for women in Central Superior Services, 10% quota for women, across the board, in all government departments along with the re-structuring of the Ministry of Women Development¹⁵. In 2009, another bill to prevent domestic violence was tabled in National Assembly (N.A), under the name of 'Domestic Violence Bill', as indicated in table 3. It is relevant to mention that the bill was passed from N.A unanimously due to the presence of 60 women in parliament and pressure from women organizations but the bill lapsed, after Senate failed to ratify it within three months period, required under the constitution. This bill has not been tabled again as yet (till Dec 2011) and the tenure of this government will end by the end of 2012. However, an encouraging step to secure women position at workplaces was taken in 2010 and 2011, in the shape of 'Sexual Harassment Bill' and 'Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Bill' with the strong support of women Alliance AASHA, with other women organisations.

Apart from women organizations, women wings in political parties have also played a role of pressure groups for different governments. Interestingly, almost all major political parties like Pakistan People's Party (PPP)¹⁶, Pakistan Muslim League (PML'N')¹⁷ and Muttahida Quami Movement(MQM)¹⁸, have their women wings. Unfortunately these wings could not play any active role to bring a noticeable improvement in women political representation. However, these wings do support the initiatives of women organizations to address women related issues, inside and outside the parliament.

Hurdles to Empower Women

There are numerous hurdles in the way to empower Pakistani women. The first is much quoted and discussed patriarchal mind set. It is a known fact that the Pakistani society exhibits a patriarchal mindset, with the dominance of male over the female in a family setup. This particular status not only limit the opportunities for women but it also supports the discriminatory practices against them. Therefore, various forms of abuses against women are endemic in Pakistan. Dr. Khalid Muhammad of Kifayat academy, a well know women related NGO, highlights the abuse against women by stating, "women in Pakistan face the threat of multiple forms of violence including sexual violence by family members, strangers and state agents; domestic abuse, including spousal murder and being burned, disfigured with acid, beaten and threatened, ritual honor killings; and custodian abuse and torture" (2004). According to the Pakistan National Reports in 1995, 1997 and 1998, the basic reasons of gender discrimination and abuse against women are oppressive patriarchal structures, rigid orthodox norms, and

stifling socio-cultural customs and traditions. In addition to this, the discriminatory laws and practices are further widening the gap between men and women, in almost all key sectors, consequently, different forms of violence against women has increased. In this situation, the notion of women empowerment becomes a challenge for the Pakistani women, especially for those, who belong to the middle and low classes, partly due to inadequate financial resources and less exposure to higher education.

The second hurdle is the rigid interpretation of Islam, which is the religion of 97 percent population of Pakistan. Although, Quran and Sunnah acknowledges the equal status of women but unfortunately, the rigid interpretation of Islamic injunctions by the orthodoxy, most of the time semi-educated, has played its role to confine the women's role in socio-economic and political affairs. However, in various verses of Quran and the early Islamic practices, equal status of man and woman is acknowledged and confirmed. To give one example, 4:19 verse of the Quran says:

O ye who believe! Ye are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should ye treat them with harshness that ye may take away part of the dower [money given by the husband to the wife for the marriage contract] ye have given them, except where they have been guilty of open lewdness; on the contrary live with them on a footing of kindness and equity.

Various examples can be provided from Islamic history where women were at par with men in all activities of life, including during the battles and wars. There have been numerous women personalities, which are regarded equal and at times more in status and their contributions.¹⁹

The third hurdle is discriminatory legislation and slackness of executive bodies to implement the existing laws, on women related issues. Since independence, to provide equal status to women, various ordinances, legislative bills and amendments in the constitution took place but this legislation remained in letter not in spirit.

Conclusion

In recent years, the significance of civil society particularly media, women organizations and women wings of political parties cannot be over-looked, in bringing awareness among Pakistani women, regarding their equal socio-economic and political rights. Although, this consciousness has opened new avenues of empowerment, however, large number of women population, belonging to all three social classes is still facing acute forms of discrimination, in every field of life. This gender disparity begins from home, when, at the time of first birth, the married couple and their relations prefers a son over a daughter. This preference

continues in the field of education and providing the other facilities. While supporting this argument, a noted journalist, Zubaida Mustafa stated, "If the worth of a woman receives greater recognition, the daughters would also be cherished and provided the same nourishment, care and education as their brothers. It is also important that the worth of a woman is taught to boys from early childhood and they are not brought up to believe that they are of a rank superior to their sisters." (The Dawn, 28 July, 2010).

Similarly, there is a need to recognize the equal economic rights of Pakistani women. For this, they should be encouraged by families in their respective professions. Moreover, Pakistani society should realize the growing financial needs, which demand the equal contribution of women in the family's income. In order to achieve this, the state can effectively play its role by announcing some incentives like "part-time jobs, shorter and more flexible hours and tax benefits for families, (which) could facilitate the participation of women in the formal workplace" (Ibid).

The struggle of equal rights for women does not confine to socio-economic empowerment but this notion further extends to the equal political participation of women. Despite the fact that women seats in central as well as provincial parliaments were increased due to the pressure of civil society, however, this could not compensate the grievances of female population at large. Moreover, whatever limited opportunities have been provided for the women of middle and lower class, are not enough to guarantee equal rights and opportunities for the women population.

While concluding, we can say that the efforts of media, women organizations and political parties to empower Pakistani women cannot be fruitful until the patriarchal mind set of the society changes. This transformation could come through education, acceptance of equal status of female child and last but not least the proper understanding of Islam, which adhere equal status of women. While supporting this argument, Hakeem and Aziz presented a solution in these words:

An historical appreciation of the current role and status of Pakistani women is possible only when their lives are analyzed in their entirety, including such aspects as their cultural values in the family, community and nation, as well as their demographic and economic role (Hakim & Aziz, 1998, p.728).

Secondly, the State should be firm in the execution of the women related laws to discourage any type of discrimination. Thirdly, the civil society particularly print/electronic media, women related organizations and women wings of political parties should not only focus on highlighting the women related problem but they should also propose solutions to eradicate any hindrance to ensure women social, economic and political empowerment.

Notes

1. *Patriarchy* is a social system in which the role of the male, as the primary authority figure is central to social organization, and where fathers hold authority over women, children, and property, while the females are dependent and subordinate.
2. The NGOs, which established soon after independence, primarily for social and economic empowerment of women were as follows: Women's voluntary Service in 1948; Pakistan Women's National Guard (1949); Karachi Business and Professional Women's Club (1954); Family Planning Association of Pakistan (1953); Pakistan-Child welfare Council (1959); Pakistan Red Cross (1948); Pakistan Nurses federation (1949) and House Wives Association, Democratic Women's Association (1950); Behbud Association (1967) and Soroptomist Club (1967). Initially, only few women organization could focus on women's rights as the United Front for Women's Rights (1955), and Anjuman Jamhooriyat Pasand Khawateen (1969).
3. The upper class is the group of people at the top of the economic-social hierarchy. Members of an upper class may have considerable power over the allocation of resources and governmental policies.
4. The middle class are a group which is located socio-economically between the working class and the upper class.
5. The Lower class occupies the lowest socioeconomic position in a society. Another term for this class is a Working Class, which is employed in lower tier jobs (as measured by skill, education and income), often extending to those who are unemployed or underemployed.
6. Baradari means *Brotherhood* originating from the Persian word "*Baradar*" meaning "Brother". In Pakistan, it is used to denote a number of social strata among South Asian Muslims. The Hindu caste system influenced the South Asian Muslims and resulted into formation of *Brotherhood* or communities that practiced social stratification. The Hindus of different castes converted to Islam due to Sufi missionaries, formed their own baradaris. The tribal and clan affiliation are also considered as kind of baradary in Pakistan.
7. Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan was wife of Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan. Begum Ra'ana took the lead in starting women's voluntary service in 1948. On her initiative, was formed the Pakistan Women's National Guard (PWNG) and the Pakistan Women Naval Reserve (PWNR) in 1949. In the same year, Begum Ra'ana established, All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA). She was the first Muslim woman to win the United Nations Human Rights Award and to receive the Woman of Achievement Medal, (1950).
8. *Vani* is a child marriage custom in certain areas of Pakistan. This custom is tied to blood feuds among the different tribes and clans, where the young girls are forcibly married to the members of different clans in order to resolve the feuds.
9. Bartering bride for a bride.
10. If a woman has illicit relations with a male, according to the custom of *karokari* (black male & black female), the punishment is death. It is mostly practiced in the province of Sindh. In a number of cases, fathers, brothers, husbands and sons kill

- innocent women for their own purposes like getting rid of the woman for property, for revenge, for defeat of enemy, for getting another woman from enemy tribe and for hiding any committed crime.
11. According to a custom of Sindh province, (in some families) if a suitable match cannot be found for a girl they get the girls marry to the Holy Quran, in a ceremony. The purpose is to deprive property share to the female members of the family.
 12. In Pakistan, there are more than 100 registered NGOs (working for women rights), more than 120 private television channels and about 40 state-owned radio stations.
 13. It is a practice that secludes the women from public by means of concealing clothing (including the veil) and by the use of high-walled enclosures, screens, and curtains within the home.
 14. During the rule of President Musharraf, PEMRA (Pakistan Electronic Media regulatory Authority) issued license to 83 TV channels in the private sector. About 60 channels were fully functional in private sector, including 22 news channels, 35 in general entertainment category and 3 of the religious genre.
 15. Ministry of Women Development is the principal institutional mechanism for the advancement of women in Pakistan. In 1979, the Women's Division was established as part of the Cabinet Secretariat. The main objectives of the division were (i) to improve the quality of life of women in the country, particularly in rural areas and (ii) to deal with problems peculiar to women, especially working women. In 1989, the Women's Division was upgraded to the level of a ministry. In 1997, it was merged with the Ministry of Social Welfare and became the Ministry of Women's Development. The MWD was re-born as an independent body in 2004.
 16. PPP was founded in 1967.
 17. The pre-independence history of Pakistan Muslim League started with its foundation in 1906 but later it could not maintain its identity and also became a tool in the hands of various military dictators.
 18. MQM was founded in 1984.
 19. a) The life of Hazrat Aisha (wife of Prophet PBUH) gives enough evidence that a woman can be far more learned than men and that she can also be the teacher of scholars and experts. She had 200 students including both men and women and there are 2210 Islamic traditions narrated from her. b) Hazrat Fatima (the daughter of Prophet PBUH) was a very knowledgeable person. She accompanied his father in various battles. She was also well-aware of her rights and whenever necessary stood up for them. c) Hazrat Zainab (the daughter of Hazrat Ali and Hazrat Fatima) bravely stood by her brother, Imam Hussain at the critical time, and after the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Hussain, led the caravan of women, children and sole male survivor, in the palace of Yazeed, where she gave an impressive account of the concept of justice and true spirit of Islam.

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