

WOMEN'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PARTICIPATORY APPROACH A Critical Assessment

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Abstract. This study assesses the effects of a Government run participatory development project on the social and economic empowerment of women and its implications for poverty alleviation in Nasirabad area of Balochistan (a province of Pakistan). The need to evaluate the project's effects in terms of empowerment arises due to the perception that interventions in the form of programs and projects have little effects on women's development in the Province due to institutional and cultural factors. To test the validity of this proposition, a case study of Pat Feeder Command Area Development project which is the largest community based development project of government has been taken for analysis. The project is evaluated in terms of participation, access, and sustainability. The project provides useful insights into the issue of women's empowerment. The findings show quantitative improvements in the indicators such as capacity building, access to micro credit, involvement in economic activities and reduction in the workload. The results confirm the paradoxical situation facing beneficiaries with respect to involvement in economic activity and spending income. The paper finally concludes that the positive effects of

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Author Note: This paper is mainly based on the M. Phil. theses of the first author completed at the Department of Economics in 2007. The study was based on the Pat Feeder Command Area Development Project (PFCADP), started in 1995-96 with the assistance of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The Project was launched in the Command area of Nasirabad Division of Balochistan. Its main components are watercourse development, agriculture, livestock, community organization support and Project Coordination.

project are not sustainable due to poor functionality of Women Development Groups and therefore, suggest considering the viability of these groups in future follow up/new development projects.

I. INTRODUCTION

This is well documented that participatory approach, *i.e.* a way of development through participation of the stakeholders such as government, beneficiaries, donor agencies and NGOs can improve women's empowerment more efficiently than any top down approach. It is further argued that a sense of ownership is developed under this strategy which is necessary for reduction in poverty on sustainable bases (Korten, 1980; Holt, 1990; Sullivan, 1993). The simple mechanism of this approach is that; Women are organized at the grass root level around their needs in such a way as to enhance their capabilities by improving their participation in and access to the development schemes.

Recognizing the importance of participatory approach, Government of Balochistan and donor agencies have adopted it as an essential element of rural development strategy. Most of the on going and completed foreign funded development projects in the province such as National commission for human development, Minor community irrigation project, Balochistan area development program have strategized women empowerment as their complementary goal. However, the impact assessment of these projects reveals that the desired change has not been seen on the grounds despite positive policy response of government and allocation of huge resources (Planning and Development Department, 2003). The irony of the situation is that the component of women development of these projects or programs give more discouraging results which is a matter of great concern to the management of development projects and policy makers. So far no serious efforts have been made on the part of donor agencies or researchers to investigate the causes of poor performance of participatory development projects especially in terms of women empowerment.

To understand the situation, a case study of Pat Feeder command Area Development Project is taken for analysis. The project was launched in Nasirabad Area of Balochistan in 1997 for development of agriculture sector through an integrated approach (combined efforts of Farmers association, Water management, Agriculture loan, Livestock and Crop sector). The project involved Women Development Groups (WDGs) in the designing, implementing and evaluating of packages of social and economic services considered necessary for their development. Need assessment criteria was

followed in the selection of packages. According to this criterion 'the needs of the beneficiaries are identified by themselves' government or donor agencies just evaluate and design the projects as per their problems and wishes. The initiatives of project in case include; social mobilization for group formation; training in management of livestock use of micro credit; and washing pad. While the physical services include portable water supply and credit facilities.

The project assumes that the greater interaction of women with the project services and their involvement in the development process will increase their capabilities thus will be having positive impact on their poverty reduction. As the project was completed in 2003, and left some impacts on the socio-economic status of women therefore, the need arises to assess the validity of assumption from the perspective of empowerment which was also one of the important objectives of the project.

The study basically aims at investigating the following important research questions.

- (a) Whether the project has socially and economically empowered women?
- (b) What are its implications for poverty alleviation?
- (c) What policy change is needed?

These questions are broadly relevant to women's social and economic empowerment and have greater implications for poverty alleviation strategy in the study area as well as in the province.

II. DATA AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS

The primary data used in the study is mostly based on the sample survey conducted for evaluation of impact survey in 2003. The sample size of women was one hundred and sixty five representing all 165 minors and covering all ten water distributaries of project area. The respondents selected were the members of (WDGS). Triangulation method was used to crosscheck the validity of data. According to which, information gleaned from various sources were used. Questionnaire, observation, interview and discussions with key informants/office barriers were the important instruments of data collection whereas secondary data were collected from project documents, related literature, and other Government reports.

As regards methods of analysis, pre and post project scenario about women empowerment conditions were compared on the bases of selected

indicators,¹ which were developed from the definitions available in the development literature wherein 'empowerment is defined in terms of both material and non material well being. It also refers to the relationship between power and development implying increased Capacity of women to enhance their internal strength and to influence the direction of change by gaining access to control over material and non material resources (Boden and Zoe, 1997). As empowerment is a multi dimensional process it enables women to realize their potential in the development process. Thus the key indicators emerging from the definition are as under:

- (a) Ability to build group capacity.
- (b) Reduction in workload.
- (c) Ability to participate in economic activities.
- (d) Ability to Access financial and economic institutions.
- (e) Ability to make decisions about spending their income.

Social empowerment is judged from the perspective of organizational capacity of WDGS and reduction in workload. Women's workload in terms of time use was estimated on the basis of profile activity based on project Socio-Economic Baseline Survey (1999), while economic empowerment is measured in terms of enhanced contribution in productive activities (agricultural, livestock, and poultry).

Since the direct contribution in money is difficult for their economic role, the enhanced work share in terms of percentage has been used. Moreover, other economic related indicators were also developed to assess the situation such as spending their own income, access to and utilization of micro credit and access to market. Finally a comparison of the selected empowerment indicators was also made to assess the level of achievement.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before analyzing the project's effects on the socio-economic status of women, pre intervention scenario is better to compare the dynamics of change in the study area. Prior to intervention, according to Socio-Economic

¹The selected indicators about the component of women development comprise the key variables both quantitative and qualitative such as (a) women involvement in the development activities, (b) change in workload, (c) use of surplus time, (d) women's abilities to undertake and manage collective activities, (e) use of livestock and midwifery activities, (f) attitude towards training, (g) utilization of savings, (h) availing loan facilities, (i) change in water related diseases, and (j) abilities to spend their own income etc.

Baseline Survey (1999), women constituting 50 percent of the population area had insignificant access to social infrastructure. The traditional cultural system left them predominantly illiterate, the overall literacy among women was (0.8) percent. The concept of triple burden (family labor, heavy domestic work load and high fertility rate) was quite relevant to the women of study area. High degree of gender inequality prevented them to play any significant role both at household and community level. Though the majority of poor women were participating in the economic activities such as Agriculture, livestock and husbandry, their contributions were seldom recognized thus were found poorer and more vulnerable group of the society. The project under the objective of empowerment took certain initiatives regarding capacity development which are being assessed against the following indicators.

IMPROVING CAPACITY OF WOMEN AS A GROUP

Organizational arrangements are the first step-In the improving of social and economic capacity of women. Group formation for women development is a powerful tool in weakening the inside and outside dichotomy (Bennett, 1992). It also is considered essential for their better accessibility to resources. Moreover, general awareness about community needs, readiness to accept new technology, openness to change in spite of culture barriers, is some of the positive outcomes of grouping.

As compared to male organizations of the project, organizing women in groups was found more difficult in the study area due to cultural reasons, and lack of local expertise. The project efforts in the initial years could not bring about any significant change in the capacity building of women In spite of tremendous ground breaking efforts by the female project staff. The results confirm that more than 75 percent of women groups were organized on week bases in the later stages of project implementation (Project completion review report, 2003) in other words, the quantitative targets about group formation were achieved but failed to achieve group development activities in a qualitative manner such as participation, networking and awareness. The quality of training, knowledge and information sharing were found poor. As a result, women access to employment and social resources remained poor. Though, they were trained in all important social and economic activities (health and sanitation, rural poultry midwife, kitchen, and gardening) the frequency of training was 85 percent their capabilities increased to a little extent with respect to utilizing the project resources, which means that the project failed to pay required level of attention to the post formation skill buildings. This fact was also confirmed during discussion with the project

staff. Most of them agree that group formation of women has turned out to be an end instead of a means to women's development. Similarly women's capacity can be judged from their ability to undertake collective activities such as embroidery, grain storage, cleaning of village. 41 percent respondents replied in affirmative that they handled the collective activities while majority 60percent replied negatively so it can be inferred that women capacity could not be enhanced as per desired during appraisal of project.

The question arises why in spite of outside exposure and effective interaction with the project staff; the women groups remained underutilized. One of the reasons is lack of democratic process within their organization, women from the influential families dominate the decision making process, which is also a common feature of women institutions in the province. Secondly, rural women still feel shy in getting training from the male members, the positive response was found for training in Trained Birth Attendants (TBA) and poultry husbandry, because both trainings were conducted by female staff

REDUCING WOMEN'S WORK LOAD

Reduction in women's workload is an important indicator of gender development. Poverty reduction interventions are usually evaluated in terms of workload. There is a consensus among the development practitioners that the projects having positive impacts on reduction of work load should be considered successful and sustainable as they can get them released from the burden of diseases, more children and poverty (Wallace, 1982; Chilowa and Gaynor, 1992).

The issue of women's heavy workload and its implications for socio-economic development is also highlighted through cross country empirical study that women who are under heavy traditional work burden are more vulnerable to disease and poverty. Heavy traditional household activities have physical and psychological implications. One of the most serious and wide spread occupational health hazards for women is the carrying of water, fuel and other heavy loads Because of their triple burdens, *i.e.* reproductive, productive, and community management roles in society, the effects of poverty hit women particularly hard. Empirical evidence on time use show that in most countries women work longer than men do; when the invisible work done inside the home is included (World Bank, 2001).

Generally speaking, divergent views on the issue of women workload exist in the study area. The dominant perception prevailing among comparatively educated class is that rural women are under heavy burden of

housework and child bearing. In some parts, they also pay significant contribution to economic activities especially in southern Balochistan. However, their role is not recognized and appreciated due to social and cultural factors. They also strongly believe that women have potential and hidden talents which can be exploited by raising awareness and developing skills. The problems are only how to exploit their spare time and skills. On the other hand, there are general misconceptions especially among illiterate, rural people that women cannot pay any productive role, as they are physically and culturally inferior to male. Their contribution should be confined to the four walls. They were supposed to maintain house and take care of children. If any role is assigned outside the house that will badly affect their traditional domestic role. This view clearly indicates that there is trade off between women's economic role and maintenance of house. The same view also is widely prevalent in the tribal structure of province.

As regards the effects of project, the survey results confirm considerable reduction in workload in the study area also evident from the impact evaluation survey 2003. While assessing the sources of workload, it was found that burden related to fetching water, water related to disease; animal care and childcare have been reduced as endorsed by 90 percent of sample women. Estimates based on socio economic base line survey (1999), the overall saving time used ranges from 3 to 4 hours For example, women used to spend one hour fetching water from long distance on average, which is now saved. Similarly, estimating women's workload related to water born diseases has come down by 50 percent Roughly speaking, women used to spend from 6 to 7 hours in week, In the same way, workload related to livestock activities has come down due to control of disease and easy availability of fodder crops.

Concerning allocation of spare time, the time gained is being utilized for embroidery, maintenance, welfare of family, and childcare. The ranking wise results follow as 54 percent for embroidery 32 percent for household management and 13 percent for assisting male members of family. Giving more time to embroidery is due to the fact that these activities are conducted normally within the four walls of house.

Effects of Project on Economic Empowerment of Women

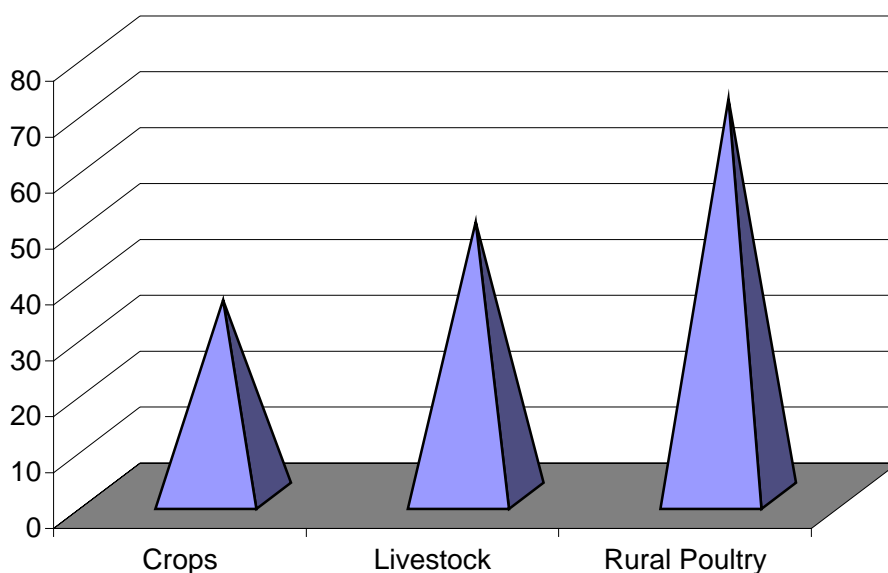
Assessing the changing economic role of women is essential not only for determining pattern and trend of gender related income activities but also for understanding the attitude of male towards gender development, the biases and stereotype thinking of the people of the study area.

INVOLVEMENT IN ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

Here, it is worthwhile to mention that traditionally women were already doing some economic activities. The project just enhanced their role in the same economic activities by mobilizing their strength. As per survey results, ranking wise the 1st major activity is poultry constituting 100 percent. In other words, all sample women are involved in the poultry activities while the live stock constitutes the 2nd most important activity comprising 70 percent live stock including all the activities related to rearing live stock such as feeding, milking processing milk in butter, ghee as well as giving the medicines to animals. The 3rd most important economic activity coming from survey results (60 percent) is women's involvement in cultivation and harvesting of wheat and cotton crops.

FIGURE 1

The Percentage of Respondents Involved in the Productive Activities of the Project Area



Source: Impact Survey 2003

The results as are illustrated in Figure 1 are encouraging. Their intensive involvement in production activities nullifies the myth that women in tribal setup cannot play any effective role in economic activities. Unlike other parts of province, in Nasirabad area, two positive aspects of women development have been observed. First, poor women are willing to take part in economic

activities as the cultural factors are comparatively less rigid especially among lower class of society. Secondly, the practice of purdah for female, seclusion is not strictly observed. Therefore, their social interaction with male members of family or society is comparatively easy than the southern parts of Balochistan.

ACCESS AND UTILIZATION OF MICRO CREDIT

Women's accessibility to and utilization of micro credit is an important sign of economic empowerment. A number of empirical studies confirm positive impacts of micro credit on poverty reduction of women. The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and Agha Khan Rural support programme in Pakistan have experienced remarkable progress in producing impressive results through participatory process. (Bamberger and Aziz, 2002).

The Taraque Trust Foundation (NGO) through its well-planned credit and saving program has improved the capacity of WDG for self-employment activities, the poorest women are taught to save, to invest and to stand on their feet.

As per data developed by the Tarquee trust, 56 WDGs was covered during 1999-2002. Almost 95 percent recovery was reported. The pattern of loan use indicates that agriculture is the priority area for investment. Livestock, embroidery and grocery shops are the other areas of loan utilization.

TABLE 1
Indicators Related to WDGs Utilization of Loans
in the Study Area during 1999-2002

Indicators	1999	2000	2001	2002
Total disbursement (Rs. million)	5,650,000 (100%)	2,667,400 (-53%)	16,890,000 (533%)	2,634,000 (-84%)
Number of borrowers	123 (100%)	359 (183%)	167 (-53%)	277 (66%)
Recovery of Loan	100%	100%	90%	94%

Source: Calculated from Taraque Trust Data 2003

Analyzing the utilization of micro credit, two types of findings emerged from the survey data. One is promising and the other is discouraging. The bright side is that it is mostly utilized for productive purpose. According to

survey results, 67 percent of credit is used for livestock while 21 percent for small business and 5 percent for personal use. Utilization of micro credit in income generating activities has empowered women economically as it started and promoted the process of women's involvement in economic activities productively, which they were not doing before intervention. Through this program, saving habits were also developed among women. However evaluating the results of micro credit also brings out the discouraging aspects of program that the outreach is limited to few women only 19 percent WDG members have accessed who cannot represent the entire population of poor women, so the credit program implemented by TT in the project area can be termed as discriminatory against women. The finding regarding the role of micro credit is discouraging and therefore, is contradicting the claims of studies that the micro credit is the tool of poverty eradication (Jacob, 1998).

ENHANCING ACCESSIBILITY OF WOMEN TO MARKET

Poor access to assets and control over income is the main gender issue in tribal society of Balochistan. The survey results also confirm the same disappointing scenario. The linkage between women and market was found almost non-existent. Hardly 6 percent women approach the local market to sell their products. Only through male members, they send their products to markets implying that the women can produce but not market their products. It was also noted during discussion with WDGs members that they receive low price in local market for their products due to weak bargaining position. The project efforts seem to have been failed to improve their access to market. The reasons can be partially searched in both cultural rigidities and social exclusion in the form of limited mobility and lack of awareness and partly can be found in poor institutional capacity of women.

Comparing the performance of project on the basis of above indicators, we can say that quantitatively some indicators have significantly achieved its results. Some have failed to show the significant results. The highest achievement has been noticed in terms of reduction of workload and the training received 92 percent-90 percent respectively. Whereas getting women involved in economic activities, the project performance is moderate Access of utilizing and maintaining the physical structures such as washing pad, buffalo, wallow etc. is less significant 15 percent. Access to micro credit is 9 percent. While most of the indicators such as linkage of WDGs with Government line departments, possession of income and assets of women reveal is lowest level that is 5 percent. Organizing women as a community group also shows poor performance.

Implications of Women's Empowerment for Poverty Reduction

The main findings coming from the above discussion produce the following positive and negative implications for poverty reduction of women in the study area:

The indicators related to the Social Empowerment such as awareness, capacity building, and participation give different ramifications. Generally awareness about development needs and priorities has been increased which is evident from their knowledge and desires for launching new schemes of development (Ahmed, 1999). Male attitude towards female regarding economic activities seems to have been increased, which will be having positive implications for their autonomy and decision making ability. The findings is peculiar in the social context of project area, however the other similar impact study "Balochistan Community Irrigation and Agriculture Project (BCIAP) 2002" contradict the project impact on positive attitude of male towards women development in the Northern Balochistan (Qilla Saifullah, Muslim Bagh, Lora Lai) due to cultural rigidities. In the same way, latest impact assessment study on the "Balochistan Area Development Program 2010" funded by UNDP and Government of Balochistan, reveal that the success of project with respect to male attitude towards women by and large depends upon the socio-cultural scenario of the project area. The program activities face challenges due to non-cooperation of their male counterpart. So it can be deduced that the strength in the voice of women can be easily created in the society where the male has friendly attitude towards women.

Reduction in the traditional housework load of women leads to better health, which in turn increases their efficiency and performance. It is also hypothesized that releasing/easing women from domestic work burden can increase their economic contribution and thus will reduce poverty. Both these arguments seem to be valid in the study area.

Curtailement in water related diseases as a result of clean drinking water reduced women's workloads, many poor families who used to allocate scarce resources to medical treatment are now not spending money for the same purpose. The time used data confirms positive change in health, hygiene and feeding practices, which can be attributed to reduction in workload. Moreover, time saving as a result of reduction in workload can be used productively provided opportunities are made available within the villages. Their community role is also expected to increase due to availability of extra time.

Assessing women's economic empowerment, it may be pointed out that role of women in economic activities has been increased indicating new economic opportunities in the study area. As a family member, they are bound to help their male members it should be noted that the household in the study area is joint production unit where labor supply is the joint responsibility of the household. The women who were working in the farm belonging to tenants and small farms are contributing to the income of their family and therefore, it can be deduced that it will eventually reduce poverty. Thus, it is proved that there is a positive relationship between women's economic activities and family well-being. This finding is in line with the empirical study that economic empowerment leads to family welfare (Pillai, 1995). Another positive economic empowerment implication deduced from the discussion comes from the fact that the majority of women 85 percent received training about kitchen gardening, grain storage, nursery raising, food preservation and pickle plucking. Similarly women's control over income and assets could not improve as per their contribution in economic activities. Only micro credit has improved their economic position but the amount is so meager that cannot be sufficient for poverty reduction. Paradoxical effects of women's involvement in economic activities emerged. On the one hand, women participation in economic activities has increased, but their access and control over income from agriculture sector has not increased due to cultural system. This implies that the claim of previous studies is not applicable in the study area that women's greater participation in economic activities leads to enhancing control over income. The reason can be attributed to unpaid economic activities, which is common practice in the study area. For these reasons, one can say that the project could not address the issue of economic empowerment in providing a strong base for self income generating activities.

Women organizational base is not on solid ground. They do not own project assets/services due to poor involvement in the development process. The direct linkage with other department /institutions was found almost non-existent. As a result the desired goal of creating confidence among women could not be created. Besides information based on observation also indicate bleak picture of WDGs in the project area. They include: (a) spontaneous demand for WDG for the sake of temporary benefits, (b) WDG dependents on Agriculture Development Group (ADG) for operation, and (c) limited coverage of common women as most of the WDG. The project left some temporary and members were wives and relatives of ADG members. Moreover, women's role in decision making is still none existing the participation level at community level is not satisfactory. Project failed to

bring women into the mainstream of social development. Therefore, it can be stated that the powerlessness of women, which is the important sign of poverty has not yet been reduced from the study area in its true perspective.

As regards the sustainability of WDGs, the success of participatory approach by and large depends upon strong institutions through which resources are shared and delivered. The WDGs are important community development groups but were developed on weak footings during the implementation of project. The question of its sustainability has become even more important at post implementation scenario when government withdrew its support. According to the officials of line department (agriculture, irrigation, livestock) most of the WDGs could not maintain its functionality. As a result the physical infrastructure developed for women remained unused/under utilized and therefore the expected benefits dried. The non-functionality of WDGs has serious implications for poverty and vulnerability of women in the study area in the long run. The finding of study with respect to functionality of women groups is in consistent with the study of World Bank that women are underutilized grass-roots institutions (Constantina, 1990).

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We have analyzed women empowerment within the theoretical framework that enhancing socio economic conditions of women through participatory approach can lead them to empowerment which in turn will reduce their vulnerability to poverty. Recapitulating the main findings of discussion, we can say:

- (a) The project has enhanced the role of women in economic activities leaving positive effects on their family welfare.
- (b) Paradoxical effects of woman's involvement in economic activities have been noted their access to and control over income has not increased due to cultural system.
- (c) Social empowerment in terms of awareness, health, hygiene, pure drinking water and their impact on health reveal positive change.
- (d) Time used data confirm positive change, the workload has been reduced, and in other words time poverty is no more serious issue of woman in the study area.
- (e) The effects of micro credit on woman development are generally positive but due to meager amount and less coverage, it could not leave significant impact on their standard of living.

- (f) The overall effects of empowerment of woman for poverty reduction in the study area were found positive but less significant and less durable.
- (g) Potential developed among women through training needs to be exploited by follow-up programs in the study area.

The above discussion of results clearly concludes that the project's efforts in strengthening the social empowerment of women such as group formation, networking and knowledge about by laws of community and information sharing could not leave any significant effects. However, the significant effect has been found in the reduction of workload, which will be having positive effects on their socio economic status. The time saved demands more productive activates in the form of gender development projects in the study area. It has increased the contribution of women in economic activities especially in live stock without getting direct benefits in the form of income. The findings related to micro loan demand appropriate saving and credit facilities that address the particular needs of poor women especially of live stock keepers.

In exploring the implications of empowerment for poverty alleviation, we found positive implications of empowerment for poverty alleviation. However, the question of sustainability of women groups is the area of concern mitigating the positive effects of project especially when the government handed over the project to communities. In future government should launch sustainable community development project with the collaboration of local NGOs.

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