

Policy Briefing

Supporting Women's Empowerment in Pakistan: Lessons for Donors

In a context where democratic culture and civil society space are under threat, rights-based organisations face increased restrictions on their activities, and donors are finding it harder to engage with them. However, findings show that donor support is crucial for successful women's empowerment initiatives. Our research on women's activism in Pakistan suggests donors should strategically support women's social and political action for empowerment and accountability by continuing to support advocacy organisations, which develop women's skills to engage with participatory political processes.

Key messages

- Long-term women's empowerment and accountability outcomes rely on support from civil society organisations, many of which in turn require sustained donor support.
- Women rely on their involvement and experience with civil society organisations to support their claims, develop leadership skills, and mitigate the risks involved in activism.
- Restrictions on foreign funding and tighter legal controls on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are impeding support for women's organising, network-building, and advocacy.
- Donor-funded accountability programmes play an important role in supporting women's paths to empowerment, political participation and conflict prevention, but they need a network of well-functioning local NGOs to reach women in their communities.
- During times of shrinking democratic space, donor support for NGO advocacy builds a legacy of empowered women ready to mobilise when political space opens up.

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Women empowerment leaders rely on their involvement and experience with civil society organisations.”

This *IDS Policy Briefing* highlights the implications for donor action to support women's social and political action of findings from Action for Empowerment and Accountability research on gendered protest and changing civic spaces.

Women engaging in protest face grave and growing risks

Using qualitative research tools and media mapping, we asked what drives women to take to the streets in protest in Pakistan. Women from the minority Hazara community in Balochistan reacted to relentless sectarian

attacks by defying social and political norms and coming out in protest. Female Pashtoon Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) leaders in conflict-affected northwestern former tribal regions demanded accountability for damages and the return of missing persons, yet they face sedition charges, forcing some into hiding or exile. Young feminists organising the Aurat Marches to commemorate International Women's Day were maligned by the religious right in an attempt to block their gatherings, and some threatened with blasphemy charges for their anti-patriarchy slogans.

Aurat Marches

Inspired by the 2017 United States Women's March, young feminist activists in Karachi began the Aurat Marches to mark International Women's Day 2019 with a public expression of discontent at the lack of gender justice in Pakistan. At least 3,000 participated in the first march, the largest feminist mobilisation since the Women's Action Forum's street protests against the military regime's anti-women laws in the 1980s.

Women's marches spread to six additional cities – Hyderabad, Peshawar, Quetta, Mardan, Multan, and Faisalabad – bringing the greatest number of women onto the streets for a generation. Women representing a range of gender justice issues took part: community health workers mobilising for employment benefits; Hazara women demanding state protection from sectarian terrorist attacks; those working on LGBTQI issues; women from the fisherfolk community; and older feminists from the Women's Action Forum.

They called on the state to address gender-based violence and protect the social, political, and economic rights of women. Qurat Mirza, an Aurat March organiser explains, the march's main achievement was to bring different groups together and build new relationships between them. She hopes they will coalesce into a 'movement that believes in progressive politics, is against state militarisation, and, because women are involved in these movements, the men running the state are automatically terrified of them' (interview, 6 June 2019).

The women's most controversial slogans called out everyday misogyny and the culture that keeps women suffocated and unsafe. One woman said, the march is 'a day where I am visible, where I can be visible for who I am without worrying about what I am wearing without worrying about who I am... just embodying myself' (interview, 12 July 2019).

The marches generated backlash in the media and beyond. Right-wing groups petitioned courts to ban the 2020 march, alleging that it violated Islamic values and that its organisers were funded by anti-state groups. However, political parties broadly supported the marchers, particularly in Sindh province, where ruling Pakistan Peoples Party politicians defended the women's right to peaceful protest and provided police protection due to threats of violence against them. Amnesty International issued a statement supporting both the march and its popular slogan, '*mera jism meri marzi*', ('my body my choice'). The federal government was less enthusiastic, warning television channels against showing the march's 'indecent' banners and slogans. Right-wing religious groups organised counter marches, and where divergent marches came into contact, some feminist protestors suffered physical assaults.

Women leaders draw on both political party and civil society organisation (CSO) support to mitigate the risks of participating in protests. Many exercise leadership by building on advocacy experience gleaned from their work in CSOs. They access support from the women's movement, which has a rich nationwide network of activists who bring visibility and elite support to local activism. Some leaders also move between engaging in formal party politics and protest actions to amplify their claims for social justice.

Narrowing civic spaces threaten women's ability to safely engage in social and political action towards greater empowerment and to advocate for policy gains. Today, many national NGOs face government restrictions to foreign funding and on the scale of their operations. Thus, decades of network-building and advocacy experience risk being lost as NGOs are forced to reduce. Opportunities for donors to cultivate partnerships with them are also reduced, including support of future empowerment and accountability programmes and work with government for more inclusive and progressive policies. The threat to advocacy NGOs also significantly impedes the nurturing of future women leaders who are committed to building an inclusive democratic state.

Donor-funded programmes have significant benefits for women's empowerment goals and conflict prevention. The UK government-funded AAWAZ Voice and Accountability Programme (2013–18) successfully mobilised women from fragile and conflict-affected contexts in Pakistan to raise awareness about women's rights, prevent domestic violence, support progressive laws, increase women's political participation, and support social inclusiveness. Many of these women used this knowledge and experience in another UK-funded programme, Consolidating Democracy in Pakistan (CIDP – 2016–20), to increase women's voter registration for the 2018 national elections. Both programmes

were made possible through building upon partnerships developed by NGOs with decades of rights-based advocacy and development work. These same NGOs, donor-funded since the 1980s, are directly linked with policy gains and increased women's political participation achieved through the women's movement.

Democratic processes are essential to enable women to participate in public life safely and work with the state to promote accountability for their rights as citizens.

During opportunities for inclusive democratic political participation, programmes like AAWAZ and CDIP can support the strengthening of both citizen participation and political institutions. Yet our research shows that even during periods when democratic spaces may not be open to robust donor programming, and in fact may be shrinking, donor funding to CSOs and capacity-building of state actors can help to build constituencies for inclusiveness that may reap results at a later stage. The UK government's role in supporting advocacy programmes is a legacy that has been built over many decades, even during periods of military rule. Its long-term benefits have increased women's ability to exercise their political voice: as legislators, voters, and civil society leaders.



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Policy recommendations

- **Demand and supply-side programmes remain important for building constituencies for participatory democracy over time.** Even as formal democratic processes come under pressure in fragile contexts, donor programmes should continue to support participatory action through strengthening civil society groups. Through sustained work with rights-based organisations with a strong track record of advocacy for strengthening democracy and improving women's rights, donors can contribute to improved empowerment and accountability outcomes. The investment in supporting women to be community resources, interlocutors with state institutions, and participants in local and national political processes will help women participate in political processes and self-advocate for their rights as citizens more safely.
- **Donors should continue to empower CSOs to engage with the courts, legislators, and government**

departments in support of women's empowerment and conflict prevention.

Support to government bodies that hold the state accountable, such as national commissions on women's status, child protection and human rights, is vital for maintaining accountability for rights-based policymaking. It builds allies and interlocutors within government, creating safe avenues for activists to articulate their rights-based claim-making from their organisational platforms.

- **Long-term women's empowerment outcomes need sustained donor support to CSOs.** Donors need to continue supporting organisations and activities that empower women to act as claim-makers. This support helps women to emerge as leaders, traverse the formal/informal political terrains, and mitigate the risks for their communities. It builds constituencies for participatory politics and democratic engagement which can be drawn upon to strengthen institutions when political space emerges and women can step in to exercise formal leadership. ■

Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton, BN1 9RE, United Kingdom +44 (0)1273 606261 ids.ac.uk

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Further reading

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- Khan, A.; Jawed, A. and Qidwai, K. (2020) '“We Have to be Everywhere”: Women and Protest Politics in Pakistan', presentation at 'New Leadership for Global Challenges', Development Studies Association Conference 2020, University of Birmingham, 16–19 June 2020

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