

Speaking for Change

VOICE & WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Scoping Paper For
Pathways of Women's Empowerment
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6. Women's Voice: Setting the Context

A woman in Pakistan faces discrimination from the day she is born. Her birth is celebrated with less fervor than that of her male sibling. She has relatively less access to education -- for every 100 boys there are only 45 girls enrolled in primary schools. If fortunate enough to move beyond elementary schooling, her employment opportunities are largely restricted to socially acceptable jobs like teaching and nursing. Pressure to produce a male heir is one of the main reasons for the high fertility rate of 5.4 and the widespread incidence of anemia in pregnant and lactating women.

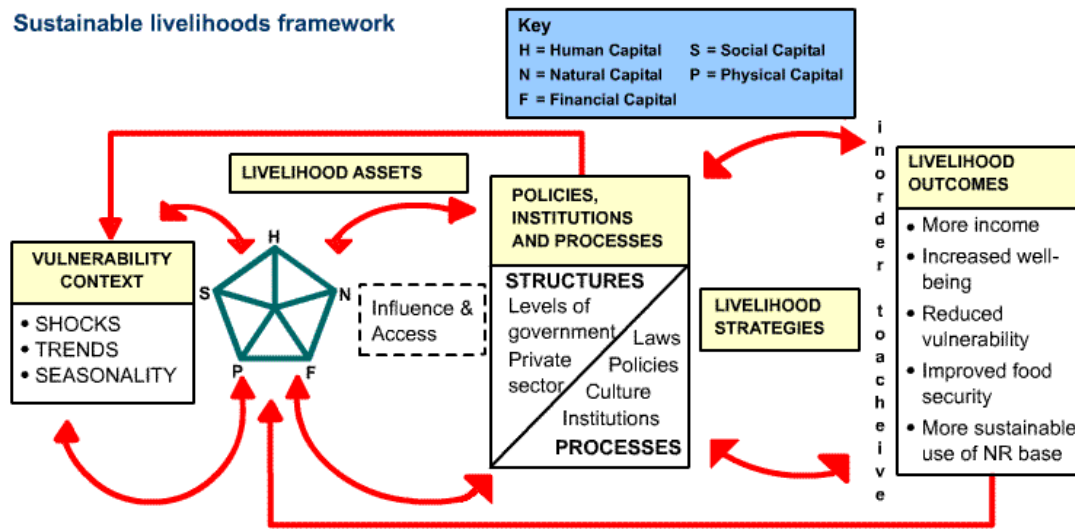
Customary practices allow sale and exchange of women in marriage, and even sanction their murder in the name of "honour" if women dare to exercise control over their lives. Discriminatory laws like the *Zina* Ordinance (one of the *Hudood* Ordinances of 1979) and the Law of Evidence of 1984, severely restrict Pakistani women's access to justice.

Women's dependency on men is enforced by patriarchal structures entrenched in social, cultural, and religious systems in Pakistan. This dependency cuts across classes. The status of women is generally perceived to be subordinate to men. Often their very identity is a reflection of the identity of their male relatives. Women are often denied inheritance rights, adequate food and nutrition, freedom of expression, freedom of mobility, employment, participation in community activities, and decision-making.

Our status is lower than that of cows and goats.

Analysts
Pakistan Participatory Poverty Assessment, 2003

To understand women’s voice, this paper uses the *Sustainable Livelihoods Framework*.



The central feature of this framework is a pentagon of capitals. The premise is that people possess different amounts of five types of basic resources or “capital” that are important for contributing to people’s well-being. They are also *assets* – ways of storing and transforming capital so as to achieve livelihood security. They are:

Asset Base	
Natural	land, forests, water, marine and wild resources
Produced	physical infrastructure and credit
Human	nutrition, health, education, skills, local knowledge
Political	power or powerlessness
Social	networks and dense patterns of association

The separation between these assets is to some extent arbitrary, as one type of asset can often be closely linked to another. For example, a woman can draw on her social capital in the form of collective identity in order to enhance her access to produced capital. Political capital, defined as the ability to influence decisions, is also interconnected with other forms of capital. Women’s voice, their ability to influence decisions at the household, community or national levels, is their political capital, which is in turn connected with other capitals.

The *Sustainable Livelihood Framework* is the basis of Pakistan's Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA), a nationwide analysis of poverty by the poor. Initiated in 2000 by the Government of Pakistan, the PPA was conducted in 51 poor sites across Pakistan. The following section is based on its findings which were released in 2003. According to the PPA, women in Pakistan -- especially poor women -- have a very low asset base. Land is a key asset determining power and social relations.

Those who have more land wield more power and authority. A big landlord has resources to approach the police and courts and can have a political background. Kammis [landless tenants] stand at his doorstep, obey him and also expect help from him. The landlord decides the fate of the poor and has complete control over local justice system.

Analysts
Pakistan Participatory Poverty Assessment, 2003

Women have few rights and little control over land, forests, and other natural assets. Even where women have legal rights over these assets, they have no control over their use and benefits. For example, the PPA indicated that women in a region of NWFP had equal rights to forest royalties but found men had the power to decide how to spend the received amount. Similarly, even if women earn as much as men from seasonal agricultural labour, they have less control over their earnings.

Women also reported little control over other assets. Women's health status is worse than men due to inadequate access to general and reproductive health facilities, and lower food in-take. Access to girls' secondary and high schools is inadequate or even non-existent. The belief that there is not much to be gained from investing in girls' education because they would ultimately get married and 'belong' to another household also restricted women's access to education.

Customs such as *valvar* and *dunia* (bride price) also reduce the status of women to mere commodities to be bought and sold. The PPA reports that in some parts of Pakistan bride price can range from Rs.10,000 - 150,000.

Bride price reduces a woman to the status of a slave and a state of helplessness, subject to cruel behaviour of her in-laws.

Analysts
Pakistan Participatory Poverty Assessment, 2003

Women are used as compensation to settle disputes. For example, to settle a murder case the *jirga* might issue a verdict in which five or six girls from the family of the murderer are “married” into the family of the victim as compensation for the crime. Often girls or women given as compensation are severely mistreated in the homes of their “husbands.”

The inability to arrange dowries for “marriageable” girls is also a major issue, leading to delayed or mismatched marriages and the viewing of daughters as a burden. Even if married through a decent process, victimization of a woman occurs if she is unable to come up to the culturally defined expectation of giving birth to a male child.

Seclusion and segregation limits women’s mobility and access to facilities such as schools and healthcare, and also restricts their opportunities to earn an independent income. In many places strict *pardah* confines women to the immediate environs of their home and neighbourhood. Even in cities, women fear the stigma attached to working outside the home. In some places poorer women have gained greater mobility as they are forced to venture out in order to support or supplement household incomes. However, this physical mobility does not translate into any sense of empowerment. And in some cases, economic pressures have even forced women into prostitution.

As women have few natural, human, produced, and social assets, it is not surprising that women’s ability to influence decision-making – their political capital – is very low. Even if they have gained greater honour, dignity and respect than in the past, they continue to have little influence in decision-making processes. Many have limited or no say in important decisions like marriage and divorce. While older women may be at times consulted in household decisions, even they are not in a position to defy or go against male decisions.

Whether women belong to a rich or poor family, they do not have a right to make decisions.

Analysts
Pakistan Participatory Poverty Assessment, 2003

The low asset base of women is compounded by their high vulnerability and increased sense of insecurity over the years. Violence, sexual harassment, and the fear of both are widespread among women in Pakistan. Some customary practices like the so-called “honour” killings, including *karo kari* and *spin thore* are forms of violence against women that pose serious threats to their lives. Women who dare to violate family “honour” by marrying a man of her choice could also lose her life, which is often justified on cultural grounds with women in some areas accepting the practice.

Domestic violence against women and children is considered acceptable by men and women. The routine beating of wives by husbands often does not need any justification and is considered their personal family matter. Victims of domestic violence have little or no recourse to justice and often do not even get support from their own families.

It is the right of the husband to beat his wife – no one can question him on this act. If we don't have the meal ready on time, then our husbands beat us. If for any reason we cannot cook, men beat us with shoes.

Female Analysts
Pakistan Participatory Poverty Assessment, 2003

The lack of protection and justice available and accessible to women reinforce their inferior status in society. For example, the custom of early childhood marriages, though against the law, is widely prevalent.

In some ways, the lives of women have also seen positive changes over the past decades. The gender gap in education and basic health has narrowed. Women have entered the labour force in larger numbers than ever before, some in managerial positions. More recently, there is increased media attention on women's issues. And women have increased representation in elected bodies.

Nevertheless, the number of women without adequate and equal access to education, health and other services remains alarmingly high. The Pakistan Participatory Poverty Assessment (GoP, 2003) confirms the feminization of poverty. One of its key findings is that among the poor in Pakistan, women are the poorest. Even if the *condition* of women has improved, their social *position* remains largely unchanged.

A woman is considered nothing more than a man's shoe. The only real home for a woman is her grave.

*A female analyst
Pakistan Participatory Poverty Assessment, 2003*

Many complex factors shape women's multiple realities in Pakistan. One of the more important is the lack of political capital that continues to deny women a voice in household, community, and national affairs.

7. Political Space

On assuming power in 1999, General Pervez Musharraf presented a seven-point agenda for reform. Among his government's more significant policy initiatives was the reservation of 33% seats for women in local government (the highest proportion ever reserved for women in any elective body) and 17% in higher levels of government (the highest proportion of reservation ever made for women in legislative bodies) announced in 2000 and 2002. These bold and far-reaching efforts are one of the most positive steps taken towards women's political empowerment.

According to data available from the Election Commission of Pakistan, a total of 35,963 women were elected to 39,964 seats reserved for women at all tiers in the 2000-01 local government elections, i.e., 90% seats were filled. Additionally, 126 women were elected to seats reserved for minorities; and 16 women were elected as *nazims/naib nazims*. The total number of women representatives in the local government system from 2000-05 was 36,105. Significantly, the reserved seats at the Union Council level were contested through direct elections by a joint electorate of men and women. However, the method for the *tehsil* and district levels remained indirect. In 2005, elite control over democratic processes and institutions in Pakistan conspired to recapture part of the political space given to women in the local government system. Changes introduced prior to the elections in 2005, reduced the number of Union Council seats from 21 to 13. This slashed the number of women representatives in the system to half – even though the proportion of reservation remained at 33%. Though this represented a significant reversal, the system continues to present opportunities for women’s participation in the electoral contest and politics.

Prior to the general elections of October 2002, the Government of General Musharraf introduced electoral reforms that increased the number of seats in all legislatures, and reserved 17% seats for women. For example, in the National Assembly, 60 seats were reserved for women out of a total of 342 seats. The following table provides data for the provincial assemblies:

Province	General Seats	Seats Reserved for Women	Non-Muslim Seats	Total
Punjab	297	66	8	371
Sindh	130	29	9	168
Balochistan	51	11	3	65
NWFP	99	22	3	124

In Pakistan’s political context these policy initiatives are very significant. Opportunities for women to enter the electoral contest have traditionally been severely restricted. Social attitudes thwart or remain unsupportive of women in leadership positions. The feudal and undemocratic culture of most political parties in Pakistan also restricts political space for

women. Though daughters, wives and sisters of male political leaders may hold important positions in political parties, ordinary female political workers are mostly relegated to the Women's Wing and are seldom given party tickets. In three elections held between 1990-97, after the removal of special seats for women, the average number of female MNAs was 3.3 in a 217-member National Assembly. In six elections between 1985-97, the average number of female legislators was 1.5 in the 87-member Senate. The electoral reforms of 2002 substantially changed these figures.

Though the reservation of seats for women was less than the 33% demanded by women's rights groups and also recommended in various governmental reports and plans. Moreover, the system of indirect elections of women to reserved seats prevented their mainstreaming in the political system. Notwithstanding, the electoral reforms did increase the public space of women. However, the substantial increase in women legislators is not matched by an increase of women in cabinets where their representation remains nominal – even though we presently have the largest federal cabinet in the political history of Pakistan.

The very presence of a large number of women legislators and councilors has changed the political fabric of the country. Numbers are important, but they alone are not enough. What is needed are representatives that advocate women's interests. Some have. Legislators across party-lines have braved opposition from their own ranks as they continue to seek amendments to make legislation against “honour” killing effective. Similarly, an opposition MNA from the Pakistan People's Party (Parliamentarians) was able to get party support for a bill on the controversial Hudood Ordinances. Cynics may complain that these initiatives have not made any “real” difference. This may be true. But what is important is that they are shaping a new political agenda. This is significant given that the legislative agenda is largely determined on the basis of political expediencies. The expanded political role of women in Pakistan is widely celebrated and internationally applauded. Yet, the challenges to their political participation remain formidable.

Women's political role must be viewed within the context of the state of democratic processes and institutions in the country. Pakistan's core elites – the military, administrative bureaucracy and traditional political class, continue their shortsighted competition for power. They have manipulated electoral processes and used the legislatures to pursue self-interested and partisan ends. As a result, even if there have been free and fair polling days, Pakistan has seldom experienced free and fair elections. Political maneuvering generally begins much before polling day. Contestants, political parties and other power brokers are involved at various levels to achieve political “adjustments” that determine voting patterns before the electoral contest takes place. These political practices are an extension of feudal traditions. They make a mockery of citizens' right of choice and representation. Voters and contestants are equally marginalized. Women are more profoundly affected. For example, in the local government elections of 2000-01, documented evidence in some parts of NWFP exposes the conspiracy of political parties -- of religious, social, and liberal shades – denying women their right to vote and contest. *Dua-i-khair* (a traditional practice marking the successful conclusion of an agreement) were held to announce this collective decision.

The elite troika of the military, bureaucracy, and a certain political class also hold sway over the legislatures. Despite four longish periods of parliamentary government (1947-58, 1971-77, 1988-99, and 2002-06), Pakistan's national and provincial legislatures remain weak and ineffective. They are sidelined in the making of public policy, lack capacity to oversee government performance, do not represent the public's concerns and interests, nor provide a forum through which significant groups in society can negotiate their differences.

Democratic processes and institutions are critical as they provide an enabling environment for women's political empowerment. Equally, women's political participation will strengthen and democratize political processes and institutions. But clearly, much needs to be done to achieve democratic reform.

8. Alternate Strategies

Inspiring civil society initiatives have helped expand women's political space in Pakistan. These initiatives are focused on mainstream as well as non-formal political space. Campaigns on voter's education, paralegal training, and action research have successfully enabled women to enter electoral contests as well as have greater voice in decisions taken at the household and community levels. This section analyzes the role of (a) Pakistan's women's movement; (b) one civil society initiative, the People's Assemblies; and (c) the media in expanding women's public space.

3.4 Pakistan's Women's Movement

The Women's Movement in Pakistan is distinctive for its courage and tenacity. Early after independence, the All Pakistan Women Association set examples of charity-based initiatives to improve the condition of women. In the 1980s, the Women's Action Forum led the advocacy against discriminatory laws against women during the military dictator Ziaul Haq's repressive regime.

The movement has had an enormous impact on defining public discourse on women's rights. The many issues raised in this paper have become part of public discourse due to the untiring efforts of individuals and organizations that have struggled for women's rights and voice in Pakistan.

Though the movement's fire has somewhat diluted over the years as its leaders took on myriad issues affecting women including environmental degradation, failing reproductive health, and dysfunctional democratic institutions. However, it has the capacity to come together on issues of common concern.

3.5 People's Assemblies

People's Assemblies – a platform for citizen debate and activism

Ordinary citizens in Pakistan are largely socially and politically excluded. The People's Assemblies process was initiated in 1998 to create and expand the political space for ordinary citizens. "People's Assemblies will change the relationship between citizens and the state," claimed Omar Asghar Khan¹ who conceptualized the process and provided leadership to it. The People's Assemblies serves as a platform for citizens to debate, analyse and define their own political agenda. It seeks to build coalitions among citizen groups and create constituencies of support for implementing their agenda. Public debate and participation are fundamental characteristics of a democratic society. By promoting citizen discourse and activism, the People's Assemblies seek to establish conditions for democratic reform in Pakistan.

As the Musharraf government announced its proposed local government policy in early 2000, a network of more than 50 civic organizations held a series of People's Assemblies. The process enabled broad-based civil society engagement in politics and the contributed to the democratization of society. The network which emerged from across the country, drew public input into the Local Government Plan, advocated the devolution of power, and ensured the participation of women and marginalized groups in the devolution process. It would be fair to say that through the People's Assemblies a large number of civil society organizations reclaimed political space in decision-making, and drew legitimacy from direct contact with the grassroots. The focus of many organizations was transformed from charity, community development or development advocacy to political engagement.

During the period February-July 2000, a series of 45 People's Assemblies were held on the impending local government policy. There were two reasons for initiating this process. First, effective devolution of power is recognized as an essential ingredient for

¹ Omar Asghar Khan was a well-known activist, development practitioner, and political leader. He provided leadership to civil society efforts to secure livelihood rights of the marginalized. He served as the Federal Minister for Local Government, Rural Development, Environment, Labour, Manpower, and Overseas Pakistanis in Pervez Musharraf's cabinet from 1999-2001. He founded the Qaumi Jamhoori Party in 2001 and was elected its President in May 2002. He died under mysterious circumstances on 25 June 2002.

democratization that is an overarching objective of the People's Assemblies. Secondly, there was intense public interest in the impending policy and an expressed need to influence it. 40 People's Assemblies were held in selected villages and towns across Pakistan. Public opinion was then synthesized at the provincial level with an Assembly held in each of the four provinces of Pakistan. The process culminated with a National People's Assembly in July 2000. The entire process involved more than 15,000 citizens. The profile of participants included farmers, labour, political workers, social and human rights activists, business persons, trade unionists, media persons, professionals, teachers, and students. About 30% of participants were women. The numbers and profile of participants are significant within the context of Pakistan's political culture that traditionally does not include citizens, particularly women, in policy dialogue.

“Power must be devolved to the local level so that people can participate in governance,” said a farmer in rural Multan. “Women should have 50% representation in local government,” recommended an old, turbaned man in the conservative town of Bannu. “We want local government but this government will not be able to stop the feudal class from grabbing power through it,” feared a young student in urban Karachi. “What will happen to our recommendations, will anyone listen to them?” doubted a teacher in Balochistan. These are voices of ordinary citizens in Pakistan.

Three important factors contributed to making the People's Assemblies on local government a meaningful process. First, citizens' voice was given primacy. Often public debate in Pakistan is about “experts” talking to people for 95% of the time and perhaps 5% devoted to taking questions from them. This ratio was turned upside down in the People's Assemblies. In this process ordinary citizens set the tone and tenor of the debate. “Nobody has asked our opinion before now,” said a daily wage earner in Kotri, a small town in Sindh. This reversal of roles also had a downside. It restricted space for informed debate. For example, public opinion emerging from this process was overwhelmingly in favour of non-party-based elections. Though aware that this opinion negated basic democratic principles, the organizers had little choice but to project this opinion as it represented the voice of citizens.

Second, women's participation was made a non-negotiable element of the design. Even in the more conservative areas the organizers did not relent. However, cultural sensitivities required use of creative strategies to ensure the participation of women. In a conservative village in Dir, the organizers overcame resistance to women's participation by agreeing to arrange seating in a manner that ensured segregation. This tenacity paid off when one of the participants went on to contest and win the local government election.

Third, the public debate was not considered as an end in itself but a means to influence public policy. Senior cabinet members were invited to the Assemblies turning them into platforms of dialogue between citizens and policy makers. Written reports were also sent to key policy makers within 24 hours of holding each Assembly. And press articles helped give public opinion wide coverage. These efforts met with some successes but also encountered a few failures. Public opinion advocating at least 33% representation of women, creating political space for workers and peasants, and the subordination of the powerful bureaucracy contributed to including these elements into the final policy announced in August 2000. However, strong public opinion favouring land reforms to level the playing field for the elite and non-elite and the abolition of the separate electorate system that effectively disenfranchises religious minorities was not able to influence the policy.

Since the People's Assemblies on Local Government, many organizations have successfully taken the process forward in different areas and forms. Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation is one of the civil society organizations that have consistently promoted public reasoning and action through the People's Assemblies. The Foundation is working with rural communities in Hazara since 1999. Changing the relationship between the state and citizen is its central objective. The People's Assemblies process is a key part of the Foundation's programme strategy to expand the political space of the marginalized so that they are able to effectively engage with the state.

Following the devastating earthquake of October 2005, the Foundation organized a series of 14 People's Assemblies during the period December 2005 to June 2006. These Assemblies are enabling affected citizens, particularly the more marginalized including women and the poor, to analyze and express their priorities, and assert influence on public and private rehabilitation efforts. More than 20,000 affected women and men have participated in the series of 14 People's Assemblies on Rehabilitation. Included in this series is an Assembly held in an earthquake-affected Village Makarvai in which women led the debate. On a freezing afternoon in January 2006, more than 600 women gathered at the venue – a piece of fallow land owned by local farmers. Confident, clear and determined, they came to speak out, and to be heard. About 400 men also participated in the Assembly. Sitting behind a *shamiana*, they came to listen.

The lives of poor rural women are often characterized by suffering, submission and silence. Rarely are they pictured as assured, assertive, and articulate. The women participating in this Assembly challenged these myths and stereotypes. “The earthquake has given us a chance to speak, we want to be heard, we may live in villages but we too are Pakistanis,” they asserted.

Participants widely criticized the government's house reconstruction subsidy of Rs.175,000. “The amount is not enough for reconstructing our homes,” complained a woman attending the Assembly. Many echoed this sentiment, pointing out that the package may not be enough to meet the costs of rubble disposal and construction in the mountainous terrain. They expressed serious concerns about the prohibitive increases in labour and transportation costs. “Labour that cost Rs.200 before the earthquake, now costs Rs.500-600,” said Madiha from Village Burooj.



There was much apprehension about pre-determined designs of homes. “We cannot make houses as per these designs,” criticized participants. “We need open spaces, and designs which are in harmony with our rural culture and traditions, we do not want pre-fabricated designs imported from cities or from abroad,” they said.



“The earthquake has left deep crevices in our land, it is not fit for reconstruction, where will we go?” was the anxious comment of a participant. “We are tenants, what will happen to us?” worried another. They suggested that the government should allot plots to affected households.

Priority needs also centered around water, infrastructure, health and education. “A natural spring is our only source of water, which is inadequate for our needs,” said Nighat Bibi from Pattan Khurd. “We need water, and that too within reach as women have to spend many daylight hours for fetching water,” said Noreen from Village Kopanna. “We need female doctors, and gynecologists,” said Zareen Bibi from Nammal.

Bibi Zaqia from Village Changli also prioritized improved road access and a school as key needs of her village. The girls’ primary school in her village was completely flattened by the earthquake, killing nine young students. On the morning of 8th October, girls attending classes ran out as the ground shook violently. Nine unfortunate girls were killed by falling debris as they ran back into their school trying to retrieve their schoolbags.

Many young girls spoke passionately about their right to education. “Are girls less important than boys? If we are equal then why is our education not given due importance?” questioned Aasiya from Village Sihali. “The population of our union council is 22,000, and yet there is not a single school for girls in our area,” argued a resident of Union Council Dalola.

“Our pleas to upgrade our dilapidated school building were simply ignored. Who will be held responsible for the deaths of students?” questioned Rabya, a student of the Garhi Habibullah girls school in which more than 200 girls were killed. Rabya was trapped under falling debris for more than two hours before she was rescued.



Complaints about corruption in distribution of compensation abounded. “My *chacho* [uncle] waited in queues for hours but was not given his check as he was not able to produce his NIC card which is buried under the rubble of his home,” said a young participant from Village Devli Bandi. “My name was included in the *Patwari’s* list but I did not get any check as I do not have my husband’s NIC card,” said a woman in her late seventies.



It was suggested that relief distribution should involve local public representatives. Rejecting this, Shamim from Village Pattan Khurd said “these representatives have proved utterly useless and have failed us. We only have ourselves to blame as we voted them in. We must review our voting patterns and in future elect representatives that can honestly represent our interests.”

The above glimpses of the voices emanating from Assembly are representative of discourse in similar events held across the affected areas in Pakistan. They demonstrate that women are prepared to assert their public space if given an opportunity. And that their discourse is clear and bold.

Though the People’s Assemblies, as well as similar public debate initiatives, are often independent efforts made in different parts of the country, they have cumulatively

promoted public discourse and enhanced civil society engagement in policy advocacy. The focus on the more marginalized is a key feature of these initiatives. Detractors of these processes often question the impact of the assemblies on policies or the lives of the marginalized. Though it is important to assess ways in which these processes can be made more effective; their role in promoting public reasoning, and expanding public space for the marginalized are significant benefits especially within the context of the country's social fabric.

3.6 The role of the media

The print media includes writers and publications that have consistently played an important role in shaping and influencing public opinion. Print media has also helped bring issues into the public domain. For example, the chilling gang rape of Mukhtaran Mai was first reported by a local reporter. The media also includes a large body of rag press that has spread misinformation and portrayed women in negative ways. However, all shades of the print media are able to reach a limited number of people.

Since the liberalization of the electronic media in 2000, private media outlets have played a significant role in Pakistan. More than 20 television channels are operational, with at least two dedicated news channels. Additionally, more than 10 radio channels are also on air. Though capacity concerns are justified, the media has expanded public debate to include more marginalized voices, and focus on issues that were considered taboo. For example, private media has telecast discussions on violence against women, and STDs. One of the channels recently broadcast an entire series of debate on the controversial Hudood Ordinances. As the channel is owned by a large publication house, it was able to leverage the impact of the series by publishing a series of advertisements in the leading newspaper it owns. The media is also playing an important watchdog role on government performance. For example, the media coverage of the earthquake and its aftermath ensured that ground realities in terms of number of casualties and the government's relief assistance were broadcast to a wider audience.

Another important contribution of Pakistan’s media is the space it creates for women to enter this profession as directors, producers, anchors, and actors. Some channels have followed affirmative policies to ensure that women have equitable opportunities in the media. And then there is the example of HUM TV, established as a women-focused channel.

The media is not only independently expanding the public space for women, the collaboration between the media and other civil society actors is also making significant contributions towards a more open society. For example, the collaboration between the media and Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation has ensured that citizens’ views expressed in People’s Assemblies are channeled to audiences across the country and beyond. The proceedings of a People’s Assembly were broadcast live on the local radio channel, Power 99. Moreover, television channels not only covered the Assemblies as news stories, they also produced programmes around the voices of the affected.



Women affectees attending a People’s Assembly are interviewed by a television channel.

Though the media has many positive contributions, the intense competition among them has also led to irresponsible reporting and programming. The goal of “breaking news” has at times led to transgressing norms of media reporting. Equally, the desire to attract revenue from advertisements has led to sub-standard programming. Notwithstanding these challenges, the media continues to serve as an important lever for expanding the public space for women.

9. Challenges

Conservative forces are among the most formidable challenges to giving women greater voice in decision making. Equally challenging are pervasive and entrenched patriarchal values and traditions that restrict women's choices. As this paper illustrates, women's voice is linked with their asset base. Initiatives are needed to increase and strengthen women's asset base. Sadly, there is little incentive for policy makers to pursue policies that enable women to make their asset base more secure and reduce their vulnerability. Policy attention is needed so that women have greater access and control over natural capital. They need effective education, quality healthcare, and secure and fair employment. Women's limited access to justice is also a major obstacle that needs to be removed. Affirmative action is needed to expand women's political space, and establish inclusive and democratic political processes, systems and institutions.

2. Recommendations

The realities of women's lives in Pakistan are complex and challenging. This paper presents People's Assemblies as one of the drivers of change. It is proposed that the process, in its various forms, should be studied to assess its potential for expanding women's public space.

It is also recommended that contextual differences and their impact on processes such as People's Assemblies should be studied. For example, within the earthquake-affected areas in Hazara (NWFP) there are varying contexts. The Hindko-speaking districts of Abbottabad and Mansehra are less restrictive than the more conservative districts of Batagram and Kohistan. It is suggested that strategies for different contexts should be analyzed based on lessons drawn from similar initiatives across Pakistan.

It is also suggested that the opportunities presented by the media -- print, television and radio -- should be assessed and champions from among these media should be identified. Ways of dealing with the pressures of competition and popular demand for sub-standard programming should be identified.

Further action research is also needed to understand and develop links between mainstream political processes, civil society initiatives such as People's Assemblies, and the role of the media.

It is also suggested that the lives and work of role models from Pakistan's women's movement should be documented and widely disseminated. Much is owed to the untiring efforts -- spanning several decades -- of many individuals that have given this movement dynamic leadership. One such individual is Shahla Zia, or Shelly as she will always be affectionately remembered. Her enormous contribution in shaping the agenda of the women's movement and giving it consistent momentum has set an inspiring example for others to follow. With her passing in 2005, the movement has lost a dedicated and determined leader. However, her life and work must be documented so that others can draw inspiration from her insights and efforts, and continue the struggle she valiantly fought.

I hope to see the day when we can hold our heads high and be the standard setters on women's rights issues in the world, rather than constantly lagging behind and being defensive about the situation in our countries. [We] must harness our power and resources, build on our strengths and pursue our goals of gender equality and justice with commitment and without fear. Collectively, I believe we can achieve them.

Shahla Zia
*Excerpt from Address to the SAARC Autonomous Advocacy Group of
Prominent Women, June 2004*