HURDLES IN WOMEN DEVELOPMENT IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The paper endeavours to engage with development literature grounded in sociology and anthropology in an effort to highlight the conceptual shortcomings of development debate that sees status of women narrowly defined in terms of certain measureable indicators. It builds around the central theme that based on such universalistic assumptions, policies targeting the uplift of women's status in the developing countries have not achieved the desired results. In Pakistan's case, such failure is generally laid at the door of religious traditionalism and such conservatism is seen as the biggest hurdle in the path of women's development. The paper uses historical and philosophical methodologies to answer two central questions posited by it in terms of the adequacy of the criterion of status measurement as well as the role of religion in the status of women. Within sociology it is well known that the identification and definition of problem has a bearing upon its solution. The paper deconstructs the 'definition of the problem of women's low status' within the development discourse and establishes that status as is currently defined by development agencies does not reflect the particularities of Pakistani women's situation. It also concludes that as opposed to religious traditionalism, cultural imperatives, govern women's roles and statuses. It therefore, challenges the dominant perspectives of women development as universalistic and of minimal relevance to Pakistani women calling for extensive research on the lives of Pakistani women that can be used as the basis for development interventions.

Keywords: Literature, Anthropology, Assumptions, Methodologies, Universalistic, Perspectives.

Introduction

Women as a subject of research and policy are a late entrant in the history of development. The term Development itself is complicated by a plethora of definitions. The large number of key actors involved in the field of development further adds to this complexity.[1] Since the solution to a problem is dependent upon the identification and definition of the problem, women's issues too have been dependent upon how they have been identified, defined and later translated into policies. Development for women has largely been identified in terms of improving their status in the society with the implicit assumption that women in developing countries, in general, occupy an inferior status. Following this line of thinking, certain indicators have been identified like education,

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employment, political participation etc. that determine the status of women in a society.

The primary task of this paper then is to look at whether the biggest hurdle in the path of women development in Pakistan is the definition of the problem itself and that do we need to rethink how status is defined and measured.

Background

Pakistan is home to over 180 million people.[2] More than half of this population comprises of women. This demographic share looks rather overwhelming at the outset; however, amid a mix of religious and cultural taboos and stigmas they are exposed to on a daily basis, the figure does not translate into tangible financial, social and political standing for women in this country. Traditionally, women's status has been measured in terms of educational attainment and labour-force participation. In Pakistan's case, irrespective of the measure used, Pakistani woman's status is viewed to be inferior relative to that of men in comparison with other societies. Empirical evidence for this is provided, for example, by the limited participation of women in economic activities outside the house and by the high percentage of women who are illiterate.[3]

Some authors have attributed this low status of women in Pakistani society to misconceived notions and practices in the name of Islam – the religion of majority population in Pakistan. The commonly perceived role of women in Islam is often thought as the major determining factor of women's status in society[4] and hence an inferior status in society implies an inferior role prescription in religion. What has been overlooked is that the status of women within Pakistan varies from region to region although the dominant factor of the religion remains the same. Also if we expand our analysis to both India and Pakistan, the status of women is the same within a particular region irrespective of their religious beliefs whether Islam or Hinduism.

Perspectives and Policy Approaches on Women in Development

The term "Women in Development" (WID) was brought into usage by the work of a network of women development experts based in Washington DC in the 1970s. The involvement of these women in overseas missions led them to

start questioning the "trickle down" theories of development. They debated that modernization had a different impact on men and women. Instead of improving women's rights and status, the development process appeared to be contributing to a deterioration of their position. Here the work of Ester Boserup, a Danish Economist needs special mention within this WID based perspective. Ester Boserup's publication, 'Women's Role in Economic Development (1970)' challenged the assumptions of the "welfare approach" highlighting women's importance to the agrarian economies.

Building on Boserp's research, WID supporters rebuffed the narrow view of women's roles within development policy vis-à-vis women which only viewed them in their caring and rearing roles. WID approach characterized women as "productive" members of society rather than the "needy" beneficiaries. Women were now to be seen as actively contributing to development rather than passively receiving welfare hand-outs. Women under this perspective were re-framed as 'the missing link' in development, a previously unrecognized economic resource.

The focus on poverty alleviation and basic needs represented a transitional phase between early emphasis on women, welfare and the full-blown concern with efficiency which has emerged as a dominant theme in current WID policies. Later a fourth approach emerged owing to the inclusion of Southern voices. Empowerment – an approach that signifies third world feminist scholarly and activist endeavours.

By the late 1970s, WID's narrow focus on reducing inequality in education and paid work without paying attention to the overarching structural factors that supported such inequalities was being seriously questioned. In such an atmosphere, Marxist views gained importance that attributed women's inferior status to structures of production - a view shared by liberal feminists. Marxist theory holds that women's unpaid labour within the household and reproductive services are critical for capitalist employers. They produce future generations of labourers and maintain the current ones on a daily basis for the capitalists free of cost thereby keeping costs down and profits up. In times of dire need they can also be useful as a reserve army of easily exploitable and cheap labour. Marxism's concern with structural basis of exploitation endeared it to some feminists working in the development field.

Current Status of Women in Pakistan – A Situational Analysis

Four features generally considered important in measuring the status of women in any society[5] i.e. education, employment, political participation and health. Some studies[6] also include women's autonomy and independence as a measure of their status; however, these are 'means' to achieve education, employment and political participation as well as the 'end objectives' that can be achieved through these means.

Education

Education is the most significant aspect of modern human life. It is the primary yardstick to measure the progress of a nation. Around the world it is being deliberated to promote education and make it universally accessible to every individual. However, in most of the developing countries this basic right is denied by structural and cultural hindrances. In Pakistan this pattern is most obvious when it comes to female literacy. The official statistics released by the Federal Ministry of Education reveal that in an overall literacy rate of fifty eight percent, women have only a dismal forty percent share. The constitution of Pakistan states that: "*The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen years in such manner as may be determined by law.*"[7] The constitutional guarantee has not translated into a reality as on the Education Development Index, Pakistan lies at the bottom with countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as compared to other countries of the world. Although, the link between literacy and education has been proven worldwide, the current combined budget allocation of Pakistan on education amounts to 1.9% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Employment

Pakistani women live in a classical patriarchal society[8] which tends to mask their productive contributions. It wrongly depicts them as relegated to the domestic spheres spending larger parts of their adult lives taking care of their families. This misconception is saddled with faulty enumeration systems that collect information largely from men in the family who may feel embarrassed admitting that women in their families earn an income. Women in rural areas undertake unpaid farm labour as part of family enterprise that is not reflected individually nor is seen as an extension of their household duties like livestock

rearing. They are also largely concentrated in the informal economy doing work at home under a highly exploitative putting out system. All these result in an invisibility of women's productive work in Pakistan. The economic activity of women is grossly underreported both in rural as well as urban areas. The invisibility of women's work is not the only issue. Domestic work is a case in point. In Pakistan, women form the major bulk of domestic workers. Domestic service is an unregulated, unorganized, undervalued and highly exploitative form of employment. This kind of employment does not improve the social or economic status of women workers.[9]

Political Participation

Women in Pakistan have been part of, and continue to participate in politics, at various levels, from mobilization on specific issues to taking part in electoral politics (largely as voters), to sitting in local bodies and provincial and national legislatures. While women have been taken to collective and individual political activism during critical junctures in Pakistan's political life; like the Pakistan Movement, fight against the Hudood ordinances under the Zia regime and repeatedly during the various elections, their presence in the decision-making bodies of both political parties and national institutions has been minimal.[10] On recent intervention and pressurizing by international agencies, a guaranteed share of participation in national and provincial legislatures has been delegated to women. This has resulted in the increased visibility of women within these law making bodies. However, this increased visibility has not translated into any significant gains for women, as female representatives are bound by their class and party affiliations.

Health

Health statistics for women in Pakistan are one of the poorest in the region. Considering that Maternal and Child health was one of the primary objectives of development policy approaches. Recorded maternal mortality stands at 260 deaths by 100,000 live births. In addition restrictions on mobility place health services out of their reach. Early marriages and frequent pregnancies due to preference for more children are added disadvantages.

Status of Women and its Indicators

A woman's status could thus be defined as her standing expressed in terms of prestige, power, or esteem, vis-a-vis men. Operationally, status was

defined in terms of the indicators that reflected the social position of women in society; which was principally labour force participation and educational enrolment with a passing reference to political rights and social conditions.[11]

Anxious to go down the development route, successive Governments in Pakistan since independence too focused on the need to have programmes and projects for the uplift of women. Starting in 1955, every successive five-year development plan of the government acknowledged the low status of women and recognised the need for better education opportunities and improved health facilities for women if they were to fully participate in the economic life of the nation.[12] Whether it were the five year plans, or the reports of the Commissions on the Status of Women (1983 and 2000) or the workings of the Women's Division; all used the internationally established categories of measuring women's status and advised policies and plans for improvement based on these. Education, health and employment seemed to be the all-important sectors where effort was needed by government if the status of women was to be improved.[13] It is interesting to point out here that despite years of development planning, even the government from time to time acknowledged its failure to ameliorate the position of women.[14]

Low literacy and labour force participation levels of Pakistani women are indicators of a low status 'freeze them in time in the form of a spectacle'[15] and ignore the fact that there is a wide range of variety in their position within the country. For a Pakistani woman 'can be a highly qualified and self-confident professional, or a self-effacing peasant toiling alongside.[16] It is no wonder than women in Pakistan, though in a minority, can be doctors, lawyers, engineers, vice chancellors of universities, bureaucrats, presidents of labour unions, entrepreneurs and even occasionally the head of the governments. On the other extreme, however, in areas like Baltistan, women may be used in place of bullocks to till the land.[17]

Similar is the case of labour force participation which is also seen as an indicator of women's status. Women working outside their homes for cash-income are generally supposed to have greater say in household decision-making and more awareness of the outside world. In Pakistan's case however women's labour-force participation is not associated with enhanced status. Very few women worked out of choice and even majority of them were willing to give up work if their financial condition improved. Society frowns upon a working

woman. Man is the breadwinner and woman's place is in the house. Only certain types of jobs are considered respectable namely of teachers and doctors.

Another phenomenon which has been considered important in relation to women's status in Pakistan is son preference and fertility behaviour. Societies that are marked by gender inequalities and inferior female status are characterised by preference for male children.

Pakistani Society, Role of Religion and the Status of Women

The entire development agenda that aims at improving the status of women is indicator driven. These indicators are derived from top down universalistic approaches grounded in Western liberalism that assume a researcher what Naila Kabeer calls the universal belief in 'individual rationality and a global commonality of interests among women."[18] This belief leads us to assume that women are disembodied individuals whose lot can be improved by introducing similar types of policies around the world. If education, skill, training and outside paid employment can improve the status of women in America and Africa, same is true for women in Pakistan.[19]

Customary practices contrary to Islamic beliefs and statutory law are not uncommon in Pakistan.[20] Not only are they indicative of the Pakistani society but also bring to surface the gender inequalities inherent in it. The first incident cited is that of Karo Kari, literally meaning black, a name for honour killings. It is a Balouch tribal tradition now increasingly being followed by Sindhi and Punjabi feudal living in the tribal belts. It has been practiced for hundreds of years. The dice is heavily loaded against women as the accusations are always made by men who are the custodians of power in a feudal setup. The killers take pride in what they have done, the tribal elders condone the act and protect the killers and today the police connive in the cover-up. The mullah, the religious authority, is almost never consulted or involved, as the tradition has nothing to do with religion.[21]

Traditionally Pakistani society has been analyzed as composed of four ethnic groups – Punjabis, Sindhis, Pukhtuns and Baloch. Such an analyses, however, excludes people of places such as Gilgit, Hazara and Kashmir who cannot be placed in the four major groupings. To avoid such exclusions, ethnic groups in Pakistan can be classified into categories defined by social structure,

emphasizing each group's characteristic behaviour and values. Each such category is defined by characteristic patterns of leadership by its networks and organizations and by social and economic activities.

Female education is not considered a priority by majority of the villagers. In their value system the girls' activities in their adult life will be limited to domestic tasks and the rearing of children. When villagers send their daughters to school it is only so that they can read and write letters to them if they have problems with their husbands and in-laws. They do not want them to acquire some kind of professional qualification in order to earn an income. As to their attitude towards religious education is concerned, it is assumed that the women who taught Quran in the village in their homes to girls (a widow and a crippled woman) complain about the parents' lack of respect towards them as Quranic teachers and about their ignorance concerning the importance of religious education. Their pupils represent only a fraction of the total number of children in the villages.

Women do inherit land but leave their share of land to their brother or a close male relative after the death of the father; to do otherwise would lead to social conflicts and ostracism. In compensation, they receive a portion of the harvest and are guaranteed support of the brother in case of fallout with her husband or his death. Widows too are left with land by their husbands and are not required to marry their deceased husband's brothers to keep the land within the family like the tribal women. But their in-laws usually cultivate her late husband's land and may or may not take their own share of the production, depending on the type of relationship they have with each other. However, widows often face great social and economic difficulties, especially when there is no adult male child in the household, i.e. when no man can defend her interest. This shows that even owning land or property does not bestow a higher status on her and she generally has to rely on assistance from men. Everyone in the village tries to snatch her land through all kinds of means, including physical pressure and violence. Both men and women may use accusations of illegitimate relations to ostracize the widow and make her give up rights to her land. Her life is often ruined by permanent worries, insecurity and court action.

Although, majority of population in Pakistan lives in rural areas there is a substantial 34.3% living in the urban centers. The gendered social norms vary greatly among the four main provinces, especially in the urban centers. In cities

like Peshawar or Quetta, seclusion of women and gender segregation are followed most strictly, with women being almost invisible in public spaces that are dominated by men. In contrast to this, Karachi, the most modern city in Pakistan, women's visibility in public spaces and paid employment is more common. Lahore is situated in-between these poles. Certain influences of tribal life, dominant in Pukthun and Baloch tribes are obviously visible in the urban centres of the respective provinces populated by these tribes. In others, economic realities are rapidly changing social norms. Religious reality or tribal practices tend to turn a blind eye to the realities of economic hardships. More and more women are being pushed into the labour market due to economic pressures and they are finding paid employment in untraditional sectors where gender segregation is difficult to uphold.

As compared to rural areas, cities are places where one tends to encounter maximum dichotomies in theory and practice, between professed religion and practiced norms. A study of lower, middle-class working women living in a hostel in Lahore by Jasmin Mirza[22] revealed quite contradictory notions in relation to purdah norms. Women in the study claimed to use veil not for any religious reasons but rather to protect themselves from harassment through behaviour exhibited by men in the public sphere. When they were alone in the public spaces, they generally covered their heads with the dupatta, although they might not do so if accompanied by their brother or mother. Women who did not otherwise cover their heads with a dupatta definitely do so in crowded places like bus stops, in buses or in the bazaars, only because the danger of being harassed or touched is greater than in other places. Women living in the city dressed, in a burqa with niqab, when they visited their families in villages. Even women who were strong supporters of the burqa moved around in the hostel – and in front of male servants – without even a dupatta. They would go to the neighbourhood bazaar clad only in a chaddor because, as the researcher was told, it was not far – just around the corner. It would be too tiring for them to always dress in the burqa just for short trips like shopping or making phone calls from the Public Call Office. Also women who wore burqa or niqab in their hometown were not seen dressed like this in Murree, a tourist resort. They all moved around in Murree in chaddors or even just the dupatta and, contrary to their behaviour in Lahore, most of them did not even consider covering their heads. In Murree, a tourist resort affected by the casual attire of many local and foreign tourists who come from urban areas and the West, an atmosphere has

been created in which women can sit in snack bars and stroll around in the bazaars and the public without fear of being harassed.[23]

Their narration of their practice of purdah with Islam also proved contradictory in many instances. Mirza cites the example of a lower-middle-class working woman in her study who said she was against wearing jeans because her religion (Islam) forbade women to wear men's clothes. On the researcher's comment that then women should not even wear shalwar kameez as it is traditionally also worn by men she became confused. This is typical of Pakistani society as they confuse religion with social practices. A religious answer would have been that women cannot wear figure hugging clothes. That too is debatable on several grounds as in Islam men are also not allowed to wear figure hugging jeans that pronounce their manhood. Also women wear figure hugging shalwar kameez in urban areas with a dupatta no more than a thin scarf hanging symbolically from their shoulders but cannot go out without it as it is not a socially accepted norm.

Conclusion

The paper presents a snap shot of what development is, what is meant by women development and what approaches are used across third world countries to bring about improvement in the lives of women. It provides a critical summary of how development process is driven by universalistic approaches that are considered appropriate in all countries irrespective of their specific histories and geographies. It attacks the core of development 'ends' and the 'means' to achieve these end objectives. Where the end is an improvement in the status of women, the means adopted to achieve these are education, employment and political participation. When development process fails to achieve these ends through these means, it lays its failure at the door of religious traditionalism.

The paper inverts this reasoning on its head and claims that status itself is being measured by faulty indicators. Education and employment have not necessarily brought status to women in Pakistan. Majority of women in Pakistan are employed in low paid, low status jobs which do not bring social or economic betterment with them. Those women who have benefited from education and employment are already privileged in terms of caste and class. Political participation in provincial and national legislatures is limited to elite women who do not share interests with the poor women.

The paper also takes to task the misconception that development policies have failed to deliver in Pakistan as shown time and again by its poor performance on Gender Gap Indicators because of religious traditionalism. Pakistan is a feudal-tribal state governed by caste and class hierarchies. When it comes to the lives of women, these cultural imperatives are paramount even in face of religious instructions that give women right to education, work, choose their partners in marriage, and inherit property etc.

NOTES

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