

## WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH POVERTY ALLEVIATION: A SOCIO-CULTURAL AND POLITICO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT OF CONDITIONS IN PAKISTAN

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### ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment is one of the concerns of international community. This concern is manifested in the formulation of Millennium Development Goals. The third of these goals is related to women empowerment i.e. to promote gender equality and empower women. Poverty is one of the major reasons of women's disempowerment. Different micro and macro level strategies are being used by government agencies and NGOs for poverty alleviation of women as a way to empower them. In the present study I have attempted to analyse whether poverty alleviation programmes can really empower women in the context of Pakistan. Critical in this discussion are the issues of efficacy of NGOs' efforts in the face of cultural norms and values of the society and the political and economic situation in which poverty alleviation programmes are run in a society. I have analysed the social, economic and political condition of women which is central in the process of women's empowerment. I have come to the conclusion that along with poverty alleviation programmes for women empowerment, attention on non-economic issues is central. Although poverty alleviation helps women to lead a better life, it does not improve the status of women in the household. Women are still victims of violence at homes and exploitation in offices and at workplaces. They are paid low than men. This calls for a social change and change in the minds of men for women.

**Keywords:** women empowerment, poverty alleviation, socio-cultural and politico-economic assessment.

### BACKGROUND

The concept of women's empowerment is increasingly used to understand what is needed to change the condition of poor, vulnerable and powerless women. The situation of women particularly in the third world and the developing countries does not seem to be very encouraging. They have fewer opportunities and less choice in making decisions of their lives. There are many reasons for disempowerment of women in developing countries. One of the major reasons is poverty. Before I discuss the relationship between poverty alleviation and women's empowerment, it seems important to understand the concept 'empowerment'. Rowlands (1995) notes that power is generally defined in terms of control and influence over others. The control is demonstrated by men over men, men over women, and by dominant social, political and economic class over those who are marginalized. If people are continuously denied power and influence in a society, they begin to internalize this denial of power. Rowlands uses the term 'internalized oppression'. The marginalized people become used to it for their survival in a dominant social, economic or political class.

The conventional definition of empowerment focuses on bringing people in the decision-making process. They should have access to political structures and decision-making in the economic and political spheres. Rowlands (1995, p. 102) argues that empowerment is more than simply opening up access to decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy that decision-making space.

McWhirter (1991) defines empowerment as:

The process by which people, organizations or groups who are powerless (a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context, (b) develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives, (c) exercise this control without infringing upon the rights of others and (d) support the empowerment of others in the community (McWhirter, 1991 p. 222).

There can be situations where all the four conditions can be met and also the situation where all the conditions are not fulfilled. Heyzer (1992:3) uses the term 'gender equity' while advocating most of the measures empowerment calls for. Moser (1993) emphasizes the importance of women's self-reliance and internal strength. Keller & Mbwewe (1991) argue that by increasing their self-reliance, women can assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist them in eliminating their own subordination.

The movement for women's empowerment dates back to 1985 when a group of third world feminists who called themselves as 'Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)' (Connelly et al. 2000) were closely involved in the emergence and Development of GAD. DAWN demanded:

We want a world where inequality based on class, gender and race is absent from every country and from the relationships among countries. We want a world where basic needs become basic rights and where poverty and all forms of violence are eliminated. Each person will have the opportunity to develop her or his full potential and creativity and women's values of nurturance and solidarity will characterize human relationships. In such a world women's reproductive role will be redefined: childcare will be shared by men, women and society as a whole only by sharpening the links between equality, development and peace can we show that the basic rights of the poor and the transformations of the institutions that subordinate women are inextricably linked. They can be achieved together through the self-empowerment of women (DAWN, 1985: pp73-75).

Kabeer (2003) argues that the earlier attempts for the development of women either included women in development projects or initiatives for women-specific development projects, but they did not discuss the themes of gender-based discrimination. Against these GAD calls for formulation of a balanced policy for development and poverty alleviation. GAD's focus is not only on women but also on men, the study of material conditions of both the genders, their socially structured behaviours and socially created opportunities and constraints that are inherent in their lives. As is evident from the declaration of DAWN, GAD forwarded the goal of women's empowerment to achieve equity based development. Empowerment is taken as "a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation of women, to greater decision-making, power and control, and to transformative action" (Karl, 1995: 14).

## NGOS AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Lewis & Wallace (2000) argue that non-governmental organizations grew in 1980s to provide services as delivery agents and to lessen the role of the governments by generating alternative thinking and approaches to poverty alleviation. NGOs are regarded as agents to address the problems of developing countries and their ability to reach the poor to tackle their problems. Due to the failure of modernization projects in developing countries, NGOs have been given preference to solve the problems of poverty alleviation, changing gender relations etc. (Lewis, 2005; Thomas & Allen, 2000). Donor agencies called for more space for NGOs to address the problems of poverty and inequality. There are various reasons for this policy shift in donors' attention towards NGOs. Firstly, there is evidence of governmental programmes for provision of services and addressing the problems at the grass root level. Secondly NGOs are regarded as more effective, more democratic and cheaper in provision of services. (Ebrahim, 2003; Manji, 2000).

NGOs may not be considered a short cut for success of the programmes. It may depend on the nature of the poverty alleviation projects and the empowerment approach employed by the organizations. Wieringa (1994) argues that gender planning should be based on a careful and a sensitive process of analysis which also involves the women of the target group. Together with the planners and the consultants, women can try to define what is to be done immediately and where a long term focus is possible. In all cases the transformative potential of the activities should be the central concern. The

process of empowerment should contribute towards the transformation in the relations of oppression women face.

NGOs are also criticized on the position that they are donor-led and donor-created (Townsend & Townsend, 2004). They are also criticized as being ‘briefcase’ companies who evade taxes and save their private gains (Howell & Pearce, 2000 p.77) and as implementers of imported ideas (Edwards, et al. 2000). All this criticism may be minimized if NGOs design a participatory process of the involvement of women/people in the initiation and implementation of the projects.

## **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

A number of issues emerge in the light of the above review. My primary aim is to explore whether the goal of women empowerment through poverty alleviation programmes of NGOs possible within the broader socio-cultural and politico-economic environment of Pakistan. Rowlands (1995) argues that empowerment is a process that cannot be imposed by the outsiders, although appropriate support and intervention can speed up and encourage it. It calls for an attitude of respect for and confidence in the people being worked with. Wieringa (1994) sees that there is a tendency among planners to divide up women’s lives into roles. The problem is that women lack the power to fight for a more equal gender division of labour; they work so much harder than men and paid less than men; they are powerless in relation to the state and to the political, economic and military fabric of society. Weiringa argues that helping women to better perform their roles may only strengthen their subordination. He calls for transformational effects of NGOs’ programmes in terms of women’s empowerment.

Secondly, the study will explore to what extent women's empowerment is related to NGOs’ poverty alleviation programs in Pakistan. Do poverty alleviation programmes really contribute towards women’s empowerment? The study also aims to explore the socio-cultural and political environment in which NGOs are operating in Pakistan. The study aims to analyze the social, economic and political condition of women and Pakistan and how NGOs can help women’s empowerment in such conditions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study is qualitative in nature and is based on library research. I draw upon theoretical literature mainly to analyze the concepts of empowerment and poverty alleviation.. The study has the characteristics of exploratory and descriptive as well as explanatory research. In exploratory research we formulate “more precise questions that future research can answer” (Neuman, 2000: 21) and as research on the stated questions in this study are almost negligible, so it will help raise questions and issues that might be tackled by future researchers. As the research is oriented towards development policy and has focused on a specific case to describe it in detail, so both these characteristics make it a descriptive research (Neuman, 2000). Finally, it is explanatory in the sense that I am trying to unearth cause(s) (Neuman, 2000) of empowerment and/or disempowerment of women in the context of poverty alleviation programmes.

The design of the study is case study. It qualifies to be a case study because it aims to provide a “detailed and intensive analysis of a single case” (Bryman, 2008: 691) (i.e. women’s empowerment through NGOs’ poverty alleviation programmes in Pakistan).

## **THE CONCEPT OF WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT**

### **Introduction**

The central question of my study is women’s empowerment through poverty alleviation programmes of NGOs in Pakistan. It seems appropriate to conceptually explore the meaning of empowerment. To understand the concept of empowerment, it seems necessary to understand the word ‘power’. Understanding the contexts in which the concept of power is used we can get clarity about the meaning of empowerment. What is power? Is it material or nonmaterial? Is it shareable or non-

shareable? Is it internal or external? What is empowerment? Whom to empower and how? I have attempted to answer these questions in this chapter. I attempt to pinpoint the main orientations regarding the meanings of empowerment. This discussion would not only help in understanding the concept of women's empowerment in this chapter but would also help in building the ground for the understanding and critique of poverty alleviation programmes by NGOs in the following chapters.

### **The Conceptions of Power and Empowerment**

The diversity in the conceptualization of empowerment results in focus on different aspects of women's lives and each conceptualization suggests a different way to achieve it and so one finds it hard to clarify its exact meaning. Explaining the concept power, Lukes has questioned: Is power a property or a relationship? Is it potential or actual, a capacity or the exercise of a capacity? By whom, or what, is it possessed or exercised: by agents (individual or collective?) or structures or systems? Is it by definition, intentional, or can its exercise be partly intended or unintended? Must it be (wholly or partly) effective? (Lukes, 1978: 633-4) Similarly Datta & Kornberg (2002) ask questions such as what is empowerment. Why empowerment? How to empower? Who to empower? All these questions have various answers. The answers may be even contradictory among different authors.

These disagreements seem partly due to the differences over the concept of power which underlies the notion of empowerment. Power has been defined in the books of Sociology as "the chance of a man [/woman] or a number of men [/women] to realize their own will even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action." (Weber, 1978: 926 quoted in Hindess, 1996: 2; See also Giddens, 2006: 845-6; Macionis, 2004: 316; Haralambos *et al.* 2004: 538-9). Another reason for confusion is that in a number of empowerment related projects, this word has been used to mean some other meanings like "better health or increased income" (Mosedale, 2005: 244). These are used as measures for assessing empowerment. Human beings conceive power as "... something we "have" or "lack," something we "use" to create a political effect on another actor" (Hayward, 1998: 1). Such definitions seem to be quantitative in nature. For instance, these suggest that a gain of power by person A is a loss of power for person B. This conception is rooted in a conception of social life as competition and/or conflict-bound (Mosedale, 2005; Rowlands, 1997, 1999). Rowlands (1997: 12, 1999: 141) calls it 'power over' conceptualization of power. If we look at this definition from gendered perspective, it would suggest that delivery of power to women would be loss of power for men. Perhaps, it is due to the prevalence of the conception of power in such terms that women's empowerment has not been accepted whole heartedly (Rowlands, 1997; 1999). The concept of power has also been viewed in the form of 'power to', 'power with', and 'power from within's (Rowland, 1997: 13; Mosedale, 2005: 250).

The above discussion clearly shows differences in views regarding the meaning or interpretation of the concept power. These differences may lead to differences in defining and understanding the concept of women's empowerment.

### **Women's Empowerment**

There are a number of agreements and disagreements among various authors on defining the concept women's empowerment. Datta and Kornberg (2002, p.4) argue that women's empowerment occurs when individual and group efforts correspond with those of *agencies* [emphasis added]. Policies and programs that states and international organizations undertake to alleviate the adversities that women face every day are well within the purview of empowerment. They do this by *enabling* [emphasis added] women to have more power over resources and decision-making. Here the meaning of empowerment is primarily focused on the meaning of power as power 'within', with 'power to' and 'power with' as subsidiaries. Furthermore, empowerment of women is taken as a process that involves shifting from a position of powerlessness towards the achievement of socio-economic and political participation. The role of international organizations and states may be questionable from a women's empowerment point of view, but there is agreement among the scholars that empowerment in its simplest sense means 'enablement'. However, an average woman in a developing country may not be

in a position to 'enable' her to attain power over resources and have a say in decision-making. Therefore, an external agent is needed (either a state's department or some other organization) to facilitate women's empowerment by creating enabling conditions (Mosedale, 2005). In a development context then, I may argue that empowerment starts with emphasis on 'power within' at the individual (micro) level and shifts to 'power to' and 'power with' at economic and political (macro) levels, a kind of dynamic duo where power is taken at individual and collective level at one and the same time (Kabeer, 1994, 1999; Moser, 1993). Hence, I can arguably state that empowerment of women is a continuum involving change at individual level as well as change at social and political levels.

### **Individual and Socio-Political Orientations of Women's Empowerment**

Women's empowerment has also been viewed and discussed in terms of individual/personal development and collective thinking as a group. According to Moser (1989: 1815) empowerment is "... the capacity of women to increase their own *self-reliance* and *internal strength*. This is identified as the right to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change, through the ability to gain control over material and non-material resources". Moser's focus on self-reliance and internal strength emphasizes the significance of the individual. However, Moser (1993) in explaining her view of empowerment does recognize that economic empowerment is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to address gender inequalities. She (1989) proposes transformation of all the structures of subordination from family to state and global levels. To change the structures, a sense of self-confidence and self-esteem are important players to mobilize women resourcefully. Kabeer (1999: 437) views empowerment as "... the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability." One of the most important things for this process of empowerment is 'power within', because only then can women develop an ability to control the resources (Kabeer, 1994: 229). Recognition of women's experiences, analyzing the issues that subordinate women need to be focused to initiate and develop this power from within. Kabeer's (1994, 1999) emphasis seem to be on women's agency. Her point is simply explained by Karl (1995). She (1995) states that traditional notion of measuring participation in quantitative terms meant development for women if more women were counted to be joining women's organizations at grass-roots levels even if "they were simply passive recipients of development aid, without any voice in the design, implementation or monitoring and evaluation of project" (p. 1). Against such an odd measurement of women's development, the main focus of Kabeer (1994) is on women's agency in the empowerment process. In an effort to make empowerment more than just taking participation in decision making, Kabeer emphasizes the inclusion of the processes that results in women's seeing themselves as capable and confident. But the question is how to include or initiate such processes. Kabeer (1999) recommends that the process of empowerment must involve shredding the socially constructed negative selves by developing in women a sense of capacity and right to act. However, socially constructed self-image cannot be undone at an individual/personal level alone. Therefore, Kabeer (1994) argues that women's empowerment must also involve collective action to bring social and political empowerment.

Rowlands (1997: 15) defines empowerment as "... a process ... [that involves] some degree of personal development, but that this is not sufficient; and that it involves moving from insight to action". She views empowerment as a three-dimensional phenomenon. Empowerment at the 'personal' level means "developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity" (Rowlands, 1999: 143); as 'close relationship' which means "developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of the relationships and decision made within it" (Ibid, 1999: 143); and empowerment at 'collective' level means "... individuals work[ing] together to achieve more extensive impact than each could have had alone" (Ibid, 1999: 144). Her sequence of the empowerment process has to start from 'power within'. It emphasizes the individual as a focal point in the process. But it is difficult for women alone change the gender conditioning and power structures. This calls for collective action. To develop a sense of confidence and conviction in self-initiative, women need to get organized for collective action towards their empowerment. This is what Rowlands (1997, 1999) means by 'power with' and 'power to', i.e. in collaboration with each other, women with similar interests can work 'with' each other 'to' transform social and political structures

for their betterment and attain a level of control which previously did not exist. By working and achieving these three processes in the empowerment process, the 'power over' structure can be challenged and moulded for an equitable social order.

Contrary to the conventional notion of women's empowerment as a bargaining process of win-lose situation, it is seen as achievable within the existing social order without challenging and/or affecting the overall distribution of power. Empowerment processes initiated would translate into benefits for all not just a few, and the empowered would become agents of development by becoming self-reliant (Craig and Mayo, 1995).

### **The Political Empowerment**

The need for political empowerment of women becomes more significant in a development context where 'power within' cannot be much beneficial until women are not strong and empowered from political point of view. Friedmann (1992: 32-34) conceived power in three forms: social power, political power and psychological power. The psychological power or individual's power results from developments in social and political power. Social power is meant to include skills and knowledge that at household level enhances production as well as provides bases for political power. Political power in turn is understood as a mechanism to influence policies that determine micro and macro structures and process. According to Friedmann (1992) political power could be influenced from collective action. His notion of psychological power is similar to Kabeer's (1999) and Rowlands' (1997, 1999) conception of 'power within' and hence, it would include individual attributes of self-reliance and self-esteem. Friedmann (1992) promotes the strategy of collective social power that can influence political power in the form of influencing social policies. Once the political process of policy making and legal structures are influenced it would translate into personal empowerment or (in Friedmann's terminology) psychological power.

Young (1993: 159) also emphasized on political power. By political power she means women taking "... control of their own lives, to set their own agendas, to organize to help each other and make demands on the state for support and on society itself for change." It suggests that the way towards empowerment is through political change. The justification that Young (1993) provides is that there is a "... need to transform women's position in such a way that the advance will be sustained". When political change is initiated by women, it would help them become empowered individually in their personal capacities. Hence political empowerment is seen necessary for individual and personal empowerment.

Johnson (1992 cited in Rowlands, 1997: 18) also argues that women's empowerment in the form of greater control over the issues in their daily lives is necessary, but more important is their control over political structures. She does not view empowerment at the individual and political levels to be related so that change at one level could influence and bring change at another level.

Rather, she gives primacy to women's involvement in political processes and gaining control of these macro-structures to initiate an empowering change at the individual level. In practical terms, it means organizing women to achieve power in politics to influence the social fabric and seek individual women's empowerment. As I mentioned earlier that in a development context like Pakistan, political power seems to be more important for women as all the decision making for women issues is made at the political level. Women can exert their 'power within' in a forceful way if they are politically protected. I think these two concepts are interlinked and both complement each other.

### **Gender and Development and Women's Empowerment**

As the concept of empowerment has various meanings, the concept of gender in development literature is also subject to multiple meanings. It is due to differences in conceptualizations. Differences manifest because of different ideologies and values systems in organizations: for example, the World Bank is economic focused, ActionAid and other such organizations have a rights

based approach (Warren, 2007: 189). However, in an attempt to put together the commonly agreed assumptions in GAD discourse, I may summarize its distinctive features. Firstly, the focus is on gender and global inequalities, for the alleviation of inequality it sees women as active agents not passive recipients. Secondly, to analyze inequality and inequity it looks holistically to all the sectors of social life and indices of diversity of both the genders. Thirdly, to emancipate the marginalized, especially women, politically and economically, it views their organization at grass-roots as a prerequisite for initial input for change. However, as a result of poverty and other social constraints they cannot move forward so there is a need for conscience-raising at grassroots level along with poverty alleviation. Finally, GAD stands for anti-poverty, welfare and equity approach as complementary rather than distinct (Young, 1997: 50-53; UNINSTRAW, 2006 cited in Beetham & Demetriades, 2007: 200)

The women's empowerment framework sees empowerment in "five 'levels of equality', which indicate the extent to which women are equal with men" (March *et al.* 1999: 93). In descending order of importance these levels of equality are: welfare, access, conscientisation, participation and control (March *et al.* 1999: 93; UNICEF, 1993: 5 quoted in Karl, 1995: 109). There are certain aspects of this framework that can be fitted into GAD's overall perspective. Firstly, the women's empowerment framework (as well as other frameworks) does not measure women's empowerment at macro-levels; rather it is micro-level analysis. Secondly, the way it divides women's equality into five levels suggests that it focuses on analyzing the type and level of 'welfare' first and considers women's level of awareness and political empowerment later. This is in congruence with Rowlands (1997, 1999), Kabeer (1994) and Moser's (1993) conception of empowerment, which starts from the notion of 'power within' and extends on to 'power to' and 'power with'. Being from a developing country, I do not see women's participation in political activities possible in circumstances where the entrenched socio-cultural practices and poor economic conditions would hardly let them even realize their "being and doing" (Mosedale, 2005: 252).

### Summary

From the above discussion it may be seen that the concept of empowerment in the context of development literature is quite opposed to the orthodox view of empowerment as a process of bargaining where to 'empower' one is the loss of power for the other(s). The reason for this difference is conceptualization of power in quite distinct and opposite to the 'power over' orientation in traditional literature. In practical terms women's empowerment is a continuous process. And as a process it entails the initiatives for change at grass-roots individual level. Through their realization of 'power within' women can get 'power to' through sharing and learning from each other. This 'power with' in the form of organization gives women the strength to challenge and change their individual and collective lives for the better. Unless women have knowledge about the issues that are central in their lives, and unless they get to know reflectively the whats and whys of their daily lives the discovery of political platform would be worthless. This also seems justifiable, keeping in mind the fact that neither men nor women share uniformity in their lives and experiences. To melt their differences and agree on an agenda to ask for at the socio-political level, there is the need for grass-root attempts at developing the 'power within'. To develop the 'power within' among women would require long term strategy towards their development. This would include initiating collaborative activities which are meant for their socio-economic development as well as facilitating them to discuss and learn from each other's experiences. And this, I believe, is also suggested in GAD's literature regarding women's development on a sustainable basis and realization of equity-based society. Both power 'within' and political power strengthens and compliments each other for sustainable development and empowerment of women.

## ANALYSIS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS OF PAKISTAN AND THE RISE OF NGOS

### Introduction

In the previous chapter I have discussed the concept of women's empowerment. Keeping in view the objectives of my study, there is a need to analyze the social, economic and political conditions of Pakistan. After presenting a brief picture of the socio-economic and political situation of the country, I will discuss the gender disparities in the condition of men and women in Pakistan. It will help in understanding the overall situation of women and the major reasons of their poverty.

### Socio-Economic Conditions of Pakistan and the Rise of NGOs

In Pakistan, as elsewhere, NGOs emerged in the 1980s. Therefore, it is pertinent to briefly review the socio-economic profile of the country during that period. The table 3.1 gives a summary of Pakistan's socioeconomic conditions at the beginning of the 1980s. It is inferable from the table that the Pakistan of the 1980s suffered from a number of anomalies: The annual growth rate of the economy since 1960 had been considerably low (2.8 %) while the population growth rate was relatively high (3%) (WDR, 1984: 218). The population growth rate and the high inflation rate (12.7 %) (Ibid.) meant that the population as a whole was faced with inadequacy in public services. The significant sign of this inadequacy is reflected in the table:

**TABLE 3.1: Socio-Economic profile of Pakistan (1982)**

<b>Economic Indicators</b>	GNP per capita (US\$) 1982	380
	Average Annual Growth Rate (%) 1960-82	2.8
	Average Annual Rate of Inflation (%) 1970-82	12.7
<b>Industrial Growth by Sector</b>	Average Annual Growth Rate (1970-82) of GDP	5.0
	Average Annual Growth Rate (1970-82) of Agriculture	2.7
	Average Annual Growth Rate (1970-82) of Industry	5.9
	Average Annual Growth Rate (1970-82) of Manufacturing	5.0
	Average Annual Growth Rate (1970-82) of Service	6.3
<b>Population and Demographic Indicators</b>	Population Size (million) 1982	87
	Life Expectancy at Birth (Years) 1982	50
	Average Annual Growth of Population(%) 1970-82	3.0
	Crude birth rate per 1000 population 1982	42
	Crude Death Rate per 1000 population 1982	15
	Total Fertility rate 1982: (Approximately)	13.6
	Life Expectancy for Males (1982)	51
	Life Expectancy for Females (1982)	49
	Urban Population as %age of total population 1982	29



<b>Education &amp; Health</b>	(%) Enrolled Males in Primary Schools in 1981	78
	(%) Enrolled Females in Primary Schools in 1981	31
	Population per Physician (1980)	3480
	Population per Nursing Person (1980)	5820

**Source:** *World Development Report (1984)*, pp. 218-266.

of people per doctor/attending nurse at that time (3480/5820) (WDR, 1984: 264). Furthermore, it is also evident that an outstanding 71% of population lived in the rural areas against the 29% in the urban areas (WDR, 1984: 260). The presence of such a large number of people in rural areas did not ensure a sound economic life because the agriculture sector of the economy had been growing slowly at 2.7% (WDR, 1984: 222). The data in the table is deficient in clearly describing women's situation at that time. However, the disparity in life expectancy indicates that women for a number of reasons, presumable socio-cultural and structural, were not getting adequate food or other resources to live longer than men. I am making this assumption based on the fact that biologically female life expectancy should be slightly higher than male life expectancy (Kabeer, 1996); given an equal environment women would outlive men; another fact indicative of gender disparity is the significant difference in primary school enrolment percentages between males (78%) and females (31%) (WDR, 1984: 262). These circumstances, coupled with the effects of Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) resulted in the further retrenchment of State's spending on public services and paved the way for the rise of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) (Boli and Thomas, 1999). But if we ask about the number of NGOs, their types, services and outreach, we would not find exact figures. This is attributable to the multiplicity of laws regarding the registration of NGOs, absence of adequate networking among NGOs and the government's failure to keep up-to-date records about NGOs<sup>9</sup>. The estimated number of registered and active NGOs in Pakistan is between 10,000 to 20,000; if the nonregistered and non-active CBOs and NGOs are added then the list may reach about 60,000 (Sattar and Baig, 2001: 6). Ali (2004) estimates that the NGOs registered under 'Societies Registration Act 1860', 'Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies Ordinance 1961' and 'Companies Ordinance 1984' alone is 56219, of which 78% are concentrated in the urban areas of Pakistan. With reference to my research, ascertaining the number of NGOs in Pakistan is problematic. It does need mentioning, though, that they have recently grown in number and size.

### Gender Disparities in Human Development Indicators

Pakistan is ranked 120 in 146 countries in terms of the Gender-related Development Index. It is ranked 92 in the Gender Empowerment Measurement ranking of 94 countries. Gender gap in all key social sectors is increasing in Pakistan. Table 3.2 shows glaring gender disparities that exist in some human development indicators.

<b>Table 3.2. Gender Disparities in Human Development Indicators</b>		
(percent)		
	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
Literacy rate	28.0	51.0

Gross primary enrollment	64.0	80.0
Combined enrollment ratio	25.0	50.0
Labor force participation	11.4	69.1
Earned income share	20.0	80.0
Seats in Parliament	3.4	
Top administrative/management jobs	3.0	
Maternal mortality	<b>340 per 100,000 live births</b>	
Mortality rate (1-4 years)	<b>Female 12% higher than males</b>	

Source: United Nations Development Programme (1998)

It is evident from the above table how wide gap is there between development indicators of men and women. Vast gap in literacy rate ultimately leads to greater ratio of unemployment among women and they become poorer than men. Very low percentage of women in the parliament indicates less participation of women in the political and law making process.

Asian Development Bank (2000) reports that Pakistani women are trapped in the cycle of dependency and subordination due to their low social, economic, and political status in society. The majority of women suffer from all forms of poverty. In order to change women's position and societal view of their inferiority, structural changes need to be brought about in the social and economic order that shape our social world. Women are totally absent from the state structures and decision-making bodies that could introduce such structural changes. Women's inclusion in governance structures is critical to bring about substantive changes in the development policies and programs that would lead to a shift in gender relations in the society. Presently, in order to maintain the status quo, institutionalized violence against women at the family, community, and state levels is used as a mechanism to ensure their compliance with gender norms. This serves to prevent any attempt leading to the subversion of the male order.

The rise of poverty reinforces conditions of oppression for women and children. In poor households with scarce means, gender discrimination in the allocation of household resources is more pronounced. Women suffer most from nutritional deprivation in low-income households. Poverty also forces women to work harder to earn and protect their families from starvation. This contributes to the stresses these women already face due to poverty and cultural oppression. It is estimated that two thirds of the psychiatric patients at any hospital or clinic are women. Women's poor mental and physical health has negative implications on their productivity and imposes high social and economic costs for the society (Asian Development Bank, 2000).

### **Political Condition of Women in Pakistan**

Asia Human Rights Commission (2009) reports that much more political space has been given to women's issues in Pakistan in recent years. *Attention has been given to the social and economic emancipation of women. All forms of violence against women are punishable under the law including the infamous honour killing. Pakistan is seen to promote awareness of human rights in the society by*

*introducing human rights components in education and curricula at all levels and mass awareness campaigns through media and civil society with particular emphasis on the rights of vulnerable groups especially women, children and minorities.*

Shami (2009) argues that although Gen. Musharraf very boldly increased the number of reserved women's seats to an unprecedented 20% in the Assemblies and 33% in the Local Bodies, reportedly as many as 31% of the women in NWFP, Baluchistan and Southern Punjab were not allowed by their men to vote. This type of oppression and dominance by men is now uncommon particularly in areas where literacy rate is already low and feudal system is still in practice. Women are restricted to their homes in the name of Jijab and people are seen to misuse religion to oppress the women. In its report, Ministry of Women's Development (1987) says that domestic violence in Pakistan is fairly widespread across all classes. It ranges from slapping, hitting, and kicking, to murder. Since the society, police and law enforcing agencies view domestic violence as a private matter, it goes unnoticed until it takes extreme forms of murder or attempted murder. A study conducted by the Women's Division suggests that domestic violence takes place in approximately 80 per cent of the households in the country. These are horrible figures and women cannot feel safe and secure. How can they contribute towards their individual and the national development in such circumstances?

Although women participation in political arena has significantly increased in the past few years yet, still they have no strong say in the national policies. The laws have been made but who will strive to implement the laws? According to the Asian Development Bank (2000) women's exclusion from decision-making bodies at the local, provincial, and national levels does not provide them any opportunity to voice their concerns or promote their perspective on governance. The male-dominated governance structure has been creating and recreating gender inequalities. Political party structures are male-dominated. Women in political parties are not given decision making positions within the parties and are often not fielded as candidates during elections on the pretext that they lack political skills. It is critical that women claim their share of power to make decisions that affect their lives. The value of women's strong political representation and reduction in the incidence of female poverty has been increasingly recognized all over the world. The traditional notion of women's role is primarily in the family context. The nature of political parties, the criminalization of politics and the culture of corruption that permeates public life and the fear of character assassination effectively block women's participation in government structures.

After having established a link between lack of representation of women in the political systems and the disproportionate poverty of women, women's rights groups, NGOs, and activists have started pushing the margin of the state and political parties to create political space for them through affirmative action. This is reflected in their demand to reserve 33 percent of the seats for women at the local, provincial, and federal government levels, to be filled through direct election by the joint electorate. They have also demanded a change in the Political Parties Act and People's Representation Act in favour of women (Asian Development Bank 2000).

### **Summary**

The above literature and discussion indicates that socio-economic conditions of the country are so good. Human development index in Pakistan is among the lowest in the world. Health and educational facilities are less and a considerable number of both the male and female population, especially in rural areas, is illiterate. Evidence shows that overall the social and political structure in the country is male dominant. Women have less access and opportunities to education, employment and participation in the political arena. Women face a number of social, economic and political problems. They have to face violence at homes. Although reserved seats for women in the parliament have been increased over the past few years, women still have fewer opportunities for making decisions for them. The failure of government to redress gender disparities and provision of social services for women have led to rethinking among women activists that they must become part of the state structure to influence policies and politics in their own favour. The lack of political commitment to

implement gender-related policies and laws necessitates women's participation in the government structure to ensure their implementation.

## NGOS AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROGRAMMES IN PAKISTAN

### Introduction

Undertaking an analysis of women's empowerment in the context of poverty alleviation programmes begs the question of describing in detail the meaning of and approaches to poverty alleviation in historical terms. As I am conducting analysis of women's empowerment through poverty alleviation so it seems necessary to discuss the poverty alleviation programmes implemented by NGOs. I discuss in this chapter what types of programmes have been run by NGOs and what are the possibilities for NGOs to design poverty alleviation programmes for women in Pakistan..

### Poverty Alleviation Programmes: Historical Perspective and Approaches

While discussing poverty alleviation programmes, two basic questions come in our minds and these need to be answered. Firstly, who should alleviate poverty? Secondly, how should poverty be alleviated? The first question relates to the agents of poverty alleviation and the second question relates to strategies of poverty alleviation. The agents/agencies of development or poverty alleviation can be the market, the state, or the civil society (Sietz, 2008). The market approach is essentially economic and its suggested path towards development and poverty alleviation is through relatively free market enterprises where the state-agencies operate only as regulators to ensure fair dealings. Contrary to this, from a state-centric perspective the development of a society and equal distribution of resources can be achieved when state departments are planning and managing the economic activities: left on its own, open market dealings would result in stark inequalities (Qudrat-I-Elahi and Rahman, 2007). Side by side with these two, the civil society perspective, having mushroomed since the 1980s, argues that free-market economics have detrimental effects and does not cater for the needs of those at the margins of socio-economic and political life. Additionally, government departments do not have the capacity to reach out to the poor and the marginalized. Therefore, to address the needs of such people community outreach social services may help address these gaps and imperfections.

The efforts for poverty alleviation have a long history. However, to keep focused on the temporal analysis in my research, I refer briefly to the decades of development since the 1950s till the 1980s. The decades of the 1950s and the 1960s were dominated by economic growth models. The assumption was that the fruits of development would trickle-down to the lower segments of society (Riddell and Robinson, 1995; Kabeer, 2003). Owing to the failure in realizing the 'trickle-down effect', in the 1970s, the basic needs approach emerged as an alternative. Making poverty alleviation central to the entire project of development, it targeted the poorest and the marginalized. The integrated rural development programmes (IRDPs) of the 1970s tried to address the needs of small landholders in the rural third world. As the title implies, these programmes were designed to provide social welfare, financial and health services to the poor. Nevertheless, the entire effort remained state-centric, with a top-down decision-making system without reference to the perceived needs of the people at local levels (Riddell and Robinson, 1995; Kabeer, 2003). Under the influence of the WID discourse, during the same decade, development activities started addressing women's marginality and poverty. Women were integrated into the then credit programmes, though without fundamentally changing or challenging gender based subordination (Moser, 1993; Kabeer, 2003). In most cases the subsidized credit did not reach the intended beneficiaries and usually credit went into the hands of the powerful members of the community (Paul and Subrahmanian, 1983). Additionally, rather than alleviating women's problems, their integration into the poverty alleviation programmes overburdened them further with additional productive labour (Moser, 1989; Connelly *et al.* 2000).

Despite the three decades of development, there was still persistent poverty without translating the fruits of interventions for the masses in general and women in particular. Thus in the 1980s the neoliberal policy came to the forefront. Its market-centered policies, though designed to generate growth, led to further rise in poverty, especially for women. Owing to the detrimental impact of

economic policies with negligible role for the state, NGOs became increasingly considered as cost-effective mediums for delivering services to the poor. Additionally, the linkage of WID with the development policies of the 1970s had also resulted in the poor outcomes for women's poverty alleviation. Therefore, GAD, arguing from an empowerment perspective proposed a more fundamental transformation of development policies (Moser, 1989; Connelly *et al.* 2000; Pearson, 2000). The existence of wide spread poverty in both the rural and urban areas of developing countries and especially impacting on women was a major concern for development policy. In the 1970s, when the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh undertook a successful initiative in providing micro-credit services to the poor, the microcredit movement came in to the limelight (Woller and Woodworth, 2001). Gradually, the provision of microfinance services by NGOs became streamlined into the official donor policies in the 1990s. The argument was that those who were outside the industry and the market needed credit which was not catered for by the commercial lending agencies (Rutherford, 2000). Considering credit as the missing element in addressing poverty, a large number of NGOs which were already flourishing clung to the bandwagon of microfinance (Dichter, 1999). Furthermore, as credit tended to be visualized as a means of economic emancipation, women-focused micro-credit programmes started with a view that income-generating activities will help in women's empowerment (Goetz and Gupta, 1996). Women's empowerment was assumed to be resulting automatically from micro-finance projects, where the cycle of economic empowerment could gradually translate into bringing positive changes in the social and political lives of women (Mayoux, 1998b, 1999b). This perspective was thought of as immediate financial help to the poor particularly in the third world countries where people could not even afford their living costs.

### NGOs and Poverty Alleviation

NGOs can employ different strategies to alleviate poverty. The strategies can be at micro level or at macro level. Suharko (2007) suggests that at a macro level, pro-poor growth combined with social development is now promoted by scholars, especially economists. At a micro level, promotions of small scale enterprises and microfinance including the Grameen Bank model have been recently referred to by various agencies. Sachs (2005) argues that the 'poverty trap' must first be solved in combating poverty. Although the poor have willingness to overcome their ill-being, they are not able to do it by using their own resources. There are so many factors that trap the poor until they are in powerless conditions, such as diseases, climate stress, environmental catastrophes, physical isolation, and also extreme poverty itself. He says: "The world's poor know about the development ladder: they are tantalized by images of affluence from halfway around the world. But they are not able to get a first foothold on the ladder, and so cannot even begin the climb out of poverty" (Sachs, 2005: 19-20). The poor must be helped to exit from the poverty trap otherwise it will be difficult for them to reach other sorts of development.

Clark (2005) states that NGOs use two approaches to alleviate poverty. He calls these approaches supply-side and demand-side. Fowler (1997) also talks about two approaches which I have earlier mentioned. These are micro-tasks and macro-tasks. In micro-task or supply-side approach NGOs provide various basic public services to the poor. It is argued that especially in countries where governments lack public services; NGOs play a significant role in the direct provision of social and economic services. In general, NGOs emerge and play the roles as service providers. In this approach NGOs directly provide services to the people. From the demand-side approach, NGOs play indirect roles. The demand-side role of NGOs can be seen as being an articulator of the people's 'voice'. Suharko (2007) says that in this approach NGOs mobilize and clarify the demand for services, from both the government and the market, so that the people are able to achieve its development goals. In the context of service delivery, generally, NGOs seek to improve the access of the people to the services provided by the state. NGOs also engage in policy advocacy to influence public policies concerning the poor people. In line of this approach, NGOs have developed various strategies to influence the process of public policy making and to control the implementation of development programs or projects. According to Hulme (2001), this is also an area into which NGOs have been moving during the 1990s when they revised and re-strategized to move away from direct service delivery and prioritized policy advocacy and lobbying.

In the development context of Pakistan, Amjad and Kemal (1997) say that Pakistan would have to shift to growth, reduction in income inequalities, employment, wages, taxation structure, and income transfers if poverty is to be alleviated over a not very distant future. Analyzing the role of NGOs in poverty reduction in Pakistan, Akhtar (2003) comments that NGOs implementing rural and urban development programmes in different parts of the country, provided a range of development services. Most of the NGOs adopted a participatory approach and worked closely with local communities. Amongst the more prominent NGOs were Rural Support Programmes (RSPs), Sungi Development Foundation and Orangi Pilot Project. The RSPs used a threefold approach that emphasized social mobilization or organization, building up of capital through regular savings and human resource development so that the rural communities may develop their own capacities and work for their own development. In recent years this approach has broadened in the scope to include a fourth component that was to promote and strengthen linkages between community organizations and other development partners including government. However, these days they have more focus on micro financing while forgetting all others.

One of the most important sectors which can be used as a significant tool for poverty reduction of women is the agriculture sector. NGOs may design some strategies to encourage more women in this sector. Evidence shows that in Pakistan women were active participants in the farm and livestock sectors (Shahnaz & Raza, 1995; Masood, 1988; Ali et al. 1976; Khan & Bilquees, 1976). Similarly evidence based on national level data indicated that women's agricultural activities were restrained by lack of land and other assets (Sather & Desai, 1994). Landless women were more likely to work as agriculture laboureres, however the demand for wage employment was seasonal, limited to a fewer activities and certain regions and their lack of assets to work, which excluded possibilities of self-employment. Another study shows that females were involved in collective production and income generating activities, like vegetable production, poultry farming and running plant nurseries. The objective was to organize women and to equip them with information, technology, saving any credit for income generating and to improve their status and quality of life (Banuri, 1997).

### **Summary**

We see two types of widely used poverty alleviation programmes by NGOs. These are micro-task or supply-side approach and macro-task or demand-side approach. A number of economists and scholar agree that an attempt should be made first to help people come out of poverty so that they may be able to strive for their further development. This can be done by helping people through micro-task approach. But for the long term development of the people and to ensure permanent means for their better living, it seems reasonable to involve people in macro-task approach. We see some evidence of this in Pakistan where a number of NGOs design long term development programmes particularly for women of rural areas. There are a number of opportunities in the agriculture and farming sector in Pakistan and women actively participate in different income generating activities. But the problem of unequal distribution of agricultural land needs immediate attention. NGO s can do better service if women have access to land.

## **WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN PAKISTAN**

### **Introduction**

This chapter takes the analysis further and focuses exclusively on women's empowerment and poverty alleviation in Pakistan. In order to understand the role of poverty alleviation in women's empowerment, it is contingent to sketch out the socio-economic conditions in which women in Pakistan have been living. To do so, firstly, I explore the status of women in Pakistani society. I also present a current picture of gender disparities in the socio-economic condition of Pakistan. In the end of this chapter I analyze the link between poverty alleviation and women empower in a development context like Pakistan.

## Status of Women in Pakistan

In comparative terms Pakistan has fared better in terms of its GDP growth. The figure does not indicate that the GDP has been continuously rising, but juxtaposed with countries of the same status (e.g. Bangladesh) Pakistan's economy has a somewhat stable poverty rate. However, when it comes to its achievements in Human Development Indicators (HDIs) and Gender Related Development Indicators (GDI) its performance is relatively poor (Johnson, *et al.* 2000). A simple example of the Human Poverty Index (HPI) in historical terms would illustrate this. In 1970 the Human Poverty Index (HPI) for women was 70.1 while for men it was 60.6. By 1985 HPI for women had come down to 61.8 and for men it was 50.0. More recently in 1995 HPI for women was 55.8 and for men HPI was 41.0 (Human Development Centre, 2000 cited in Goheer, 2003: 2). Taken together we can say that the situation of men and women has been progressively improving, but viewed separately it is clear that women in Pakistan have been relatively poorer, less educated and less healthy than men and with the passage of time the gap has been increasing: between 1970 and 1995 there was 32.3 percent change in the HPI for men and 20.4 percent for women (Ibid). This disparity is partly attributable to the government's lack of informed and uniform policy regarding the plight of women and partly because of imposition of Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs). Whatever Pakistan's economy it further dwindled due to SAPs, the major effect of which has been on women. In particular, the cutting back of public spending on health and education affected women more seriously than men (Mumtaz, 2007). If we look at the figures from Human Development Report (2007-08, see table 5.1) it is clear that the government's allocation of funds for health and education is quite low. Amidst this disparity women's situation is more serious given their participation in economic activities in different sectors, poor education and low health status.

Besides the macro political and economic circumstances which have had more negative repercussions for women, cultural norms and values have also operated to the detriment of women's empowerment. There are considerable variations in the cultural norms and practices regarding women's status and participation in social life, but overall the cultural norms and values thwart women's socio-economic development and empowerment. Women suffer from the lack of information and the lack of access to public services. In the case of the women in rural areas they live in an even more paradoxical situation: they perform duties to fetch water, fuel etc. to the household but they are denied access to public services (Mumtaz, 2007). A clear example is the manipulation of legal and religious doctrines in cultural practices.

**Table. 5.1: Gender Disaggregated socio-economic conditions of Pakistan**

Economic Growth and Poverty	GDP Per Capita (PPP US\$) 2005	US\$ 2370
	National Poverty Line (1990-2004)	32.6
	GDP's Annual Growth Rate (1990-2005)	1.3
Demographic & Survival Indicators	Urban Population (% of Total)	34.9
	Life Expectancy at birth (2000-05)	63.6
	Infant Mortality Rate (per 1000 live Births) 2005	79
	Probability at birth of surviving to age 65:	Female: 66.6 % Male: 63.2 %
	Maternal Mortality Ratio (per 1000 live	320

	births) 2005	
Priorities in public spending (% of GDP)	Expenditure on Health (2004)	0.4 %
	Expenditure on Education (2002-05)	2.3 %
Gender Related Development Index (GDI)	Rank	125
	Life Expectancy at Birth (years) 2005	Female: 64.8 % Male: 64.3 %
	Adult Literacy Rate (1995-2005)	Female: 35.4 % Male: 64.1 %
Gender inequality in Economic activity	Agriculture (1995-2005)	Female: 35.4 % Male: 64.1 %
	Industry (1995-2005)	Female: 35.4 % Male: 64.1 %
	Services (1995-2005)	Female: 35.4 % Male: 64.1 %

**Source:** *Human Development Report (2007-08)*, p. 239-340

Sharia' laws have the right to inherit property, own and control it. But a large number of women do not get it. According to UNICEF (2007) women in the rural areas of Pakistan own less than 3 percent of plots. In the case of women who inherit property, it is largely controlled by men of the family by "general powers of attorney, gift deeds, or voluntary relinquishment of the property by the female to the male heirs" (World Bank, 2005: 20). The gender disparity in Pakistan is also characterized by class-based and region-wise variation. In 2005, 65 percent of women were employed in agriculture while 35 percent were employed in manufacture and the service industry (UNDP, 2007/08: 340). Similarly, with reference to education only 32 percent of women have been to primary schools while in urban areas the rate of primary literacy is 66 percent (GoP, 2006-07 cited in Dawn, 2009). In view of these facts it would not be wrong to conclude that women in rural areas suffer more in terms of their rights (Arshad, 2009).

### Poverty Alleviation and Women's Empowerment

There has been increasing emphasis on women's empowerment since the last three decades. A variety of approaches and rationales have been discussed in literature regarding women's empowerment. Zulfiqar (2010) states that women's empowerment can be achieved through a number of factors like access to educational opportunities, participation in the political process, provision of economic opportunities and micro-credit programmes. It is not limited only to micro-credit facilities. Mayoux (2000) argues that empowerment depends on what types of meanings of empowerment women have in their lives. There can be different forms of empowerment required by women according to their needs and demands. He presents three types of empowerment: economic empowerment, increased well-being and political empowerment. Poverty alleviation is linked with economic empowerment. It



is only one type of empowerment and the first step towards women empowerment is to let women decide the kind of power or empowerment they want for themselves. Without understanding women's own perspective on empowerment, it is not possible to have meaningful policies for improving their status.

Women's empowerment has been a major theme in Pakistan's national development policies since independence. All the governments, both military and civilian have tried to increase the socio-economic status of women through various approaches adopted in their respective terms. Currently, although the status of women in Pakistan varies across economic, social, rural/urban and religious/ethnic divides, gender inequality remains high and intense in almost every sector of public as well as private life. Domestic violence, gender discrimination, lack of access to education, health care facilities and career opportunities are a few manifestations of the social subjugation of women in the society.

International community has joined hands with all the developing and under developed countries to empower women. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were endorsed by the world community in the year 2000. The third of these goals is related to women empowerment i.e. to promote gender equality and empower women. Although progress has been made in some of them. One of the important questions regarding women's empowerment is whether poverty reduction is the only way to empower women in the development context like Pakistan. The statistics reveal that a number of women and families lead a life below poverty line in the country. Not to speak of educational and health facilities, some families even cannot afford two times meals. If people are dying of hunger, it will be natural that they will just think about food and water. It is ridiculous to talk about political power and law making in front of a person who is dying with hunger. Under such conditions it seems a reasonable argument to do the financial help of poor people. It will help them buy food and other stuff which can at least survive them. This is the situation where micro credit approach works for the people and NGOs help the poor with some sort of immediate financial help. The question is whether poverty alleviation through economic help and offering better paid jobs really empowers women. Whether it improves the status of women in a male dominant society?

Zulfiqar (2010) argues that for the working women in most of the developing countries, the nature of work and its social dynamics does not shift the balance of power in their favour. It does not improve their status in relation to men. If we accept that economic participation leads to empowerment as a valid argument, then one can argue that a CEO of a company is a highly empowered person. But along with economic development, empowerment has a strong non-economic dimension as well and a very rich person may not necessarily be empowered. Authority itself cannot guarantee empowerment of women, neither can participation. These concepts have different meanings and interpretations for individuals. Women's participation in economic activities can lead to decrease in incidents of domestic violence or can increase their access to information and mobility but at the same time, it can also mean the exploitation of their labour by men who assert and enjoy complete control over women's earnings. Numerous examples are available all over the world, where men are seen to be involved in physical, mental or psychological violence over women for getting control of their income or not allowing them to spend their money according their own choice. Even the kinds of exploitation women have to face at workplace are many. Women have to face a number of issues like low and differential wage rates, long and odd working hours, tough working conditions, health and environmental risks and sexual harassment. These issues seem to exploit women through visible and invisible means. Under such circumstances it seems that the link between economic participation and women empowerment is a complex one. What is important, however, is the women's own vision and views about empowerment.

The situation is not so discouraging however. Women's participation in economic activities has considerably improved and changes are occurring in the gendered division of labour. Although the pace of change is slow, however, a number of factors are responsible for this improvement like education, rural-urban migration, declining fertility and family size, globalization and technological advancement. The factors responsible for female participation in formal economy have been many

including commercialization of agriculture sectors, landlessness, recession and increased cost of living and lack of state provided social and health care services and personal economic security. Globalization has also transformed the way both men and women experience their lives. The increased economic and social restructuring of the world has also had strong effect on gendered subjectivities, roles and responsibilities. Now the women have a wide range of economic opportunities even in professions which were traditionally considered male dominated like pilots, scientists, economists and politicians etc. Factors like access to information and independent media have played a great role in bringing about social change around the world. One can safely say that gender equality and women empowerment have to make men and women equal partners with equal powers.

### **Summary**

Women particularly living in rural areas of Pakistan have limited access to information, education and health facilities and employment opportunities. Majority of fortunate women who have access to economic activities face different forms of exploitation at homes and in offices and at their workplaces. Men are seen to assert control on women's income and property. In such a scenario, can we say that poverty alleviation leads to women empowerment? It seems to be a tricky link in the context of Pakistan. Although there is an evidence that women's access to economic participation does play a role to enhance their empowerment, there are certain other factors also to be considered. Non-economic factors like socio-cultural conditions, misunderstood religious interpretation and political situation of the country does have significant influence to enhance or restrict women's empowerment.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The idea of women empowerment through poverty alleviation of women in the prevalent socio-economic and political conditions of women in Pakistan sounds complex. Although helping poor women particularly in rural areas is always welcomed, it does not seem to be a long term solution to the issue. The lack of government's will and absence of basic infrastructure necessary to cope the problem have paved way for NGOs to step in and deliver whatever they can to help the poor people in general and women in particular. Higher ratio of corruption in government departments have also added to the significance of NGOs.

Before initiating any intervention to cope the problem of poverty, there is a need to assess the socio-economic and political condition of women in Pakistan. Women in rural areas tend to be poorer and illiterate than men. This problem is the result of the government's lack of appropriate policy measures for health and education on the one hand and lack of will to initiate effective policies for women's development on the other hand. The neglect from the national and provincial political administrations along with the cultural norms of rural areas has resulted in more problems for women. Moreover, the agricultural system in rural areas has historically operated in such a way that both men – but especially – women have worked as virtual serfs of the big landlords. In these circumstances, considering women's empowerment without first changing their existing relationships with the landlords, could hardly work out as a solution worth trying. This entire scenario demands changes at the level of policy making and administration. Ironically, in the domain of politics a large number of politicians are those landlords on whose lands the poor men and women are working as virtual slaves.

Above all the tragedy is that the government does not want to spend on education and health sector. Illiteracy is also a big hurdle in the way forward. The current trends in the budgetary allocation to health and education as part of GDP are considerably low in Pakistan as compared to other countries of South Asia. These trends coupled with the impacts of international economic pressures and financial crises may not provide bright prospects for women's empowerment in the near future. Ironically, while women's empowerment is being referred to frequently in poverty alleviation policies, both by the government and the donor agencies, at the same time international financial institutions are creating further regimes of conditionality. To cater for the demands of the international

financial institutions, the government is obliged to cut further the spending on public services. In such circumstances, visualizing the positive impact of poverty alleviation programmes seems rather doubtful. This is because the gender division of labour in the household is still biased against women, which means that the imposition of further taxes and surcharges on the household would negatively affect women more than men.

The argument I want to build is that economic participation alone does not lead to women's empowerment. In a male dominant society, access to wealth and economic prosperity does not improve the status of women in the household matters. The concept of empowerment is a complex concept and contains different interpretations for different individuals. Poverty and disempowerment is a social problem and it is not possible to tackle with it at an individual level. As empowerment is a state of mind and 'within', NGOs and government agencies cannot infiltrate anything from outside. However what they can do is to develop an environment where women can exercise their free will and choices in life. Provision of an environment free of all discrimination, violence and exploitation is necessary.

Women's empowerment seems to be a long term process and needs institutions and law reinforcement to ensure equal opportunities for women. I think it is possible only if the government is seriously willing and involved to address the issue. NGOs can work only in a limited scope and in limited areas. They can only operate to provide their services whether these are financial services or human services for providing training to women. It is the responsibility of the government to ensure safe and secure work places for women. Zulfiqar (2010) argues that 'gender based interventions are socially transformative and unless the underlying gender inequalities, inequities and constructs of masculinity and femininity are addressed, the status of women within the household and in society at large will not improve. There is a need for equity and equality between the roles, responsibilities, powers and rewards distributed between men and women. This will require a long term process of social change and cultural transformation particularly in the Pakistani society, which is predominantly patriarchal.' The social change can be brought through providing education and enhancing literacy, access to information and socio-cultural exchange of goods, services, capital and people within country and across the world and it is likely to take time.

NGOs can use both the strategies for poverty alleviation in Pakistan i.e. micro-task and macro-task. At the immediate level there is a need to feed the poor and needy families and women. After this process, some macro-task activities can be organized and implemented. Awareness programmes about gender discrimination, exploitation of women and inequalities can be organized for both women and men. Without bringing about a change in the minds of men, it seems unlikely to develop a better condition for women. At the government level, although the laws have been developed to protect women rights and to ensure gender parity, the issue of implementation of laws is crucial. This is not a separate issue though because the overall situation of law and order in Pakistan is not very good. However condition of women is worse than men. Honour killings, forced marriages, rapes, violence at homes are still not uncommon phenomena. All these are non-economic issues. Women empowerment through poverty alleviation programmes and participation of women in economic activities sounds workable, but along with this issue, the non-economic issues also need to be addressed. If social and political issues are not addressed, it may be difficult to implement the poverty alleviation programmes because of lack of favourable environment in the country.

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