



The Women of Sultanabad Speak their Mind - Aga Khan University (AKU)

“(When) women will get justice, be treated as human beings, (their) rights will be accepted. (Then) society will be formed and women will be empowered.” – a Sultanabad woman

Family and community traditions (biradari) often dictate social life in Pakistan. These traditions bolster entrenched perceptions of women being subordinate to men and a man’s honor resting on the actions of women in his family. Women are subjected to low social status and predefined roles, preventing their mobility, social advancement, education and participation in the work force and politics.

The women in Sultanabad, a low-income settlement in the town of Keemari outside Karachi, are no exception. Many have migrated from the northern provinces of Pakistan, carrying with them Pakhtun traditions and male-centric codes of honor and social conduct. Women in Sultanabad have no formal education and lived according to the roles dictated by the men in their family and community. So how can women surmount such traditions to seek equality and empowerment? The Aga Khan University, a partner of the DFID-funded Women Empowerment in Muslim Contexts Research Programme Consortium (WEMC-RPC), took on the challenge in November 2007, building on its more than 10 years experience in health and social development in the settlement.

The first step for the AKU-WEMC team was to organize meetings to gather data on the participant’s existing situation and their needs with respect to empowerment, community’s overall health, mental health, reproductive health, daily work load, access to resources, violence against women and participation in decision-making. At the same time, the research team wanted to encourage women to voice out their concerns and aspirations in the hope that such reflective analysis would catalyze collective action to address their situation.

In a collective sharing called *Analysis for Action*, the women stressed the importance of policy provisions on improvement of women’s status in society, gender equality and justice, safeguarding of women’s rights and their equal participation in the development and decision-making in the community.

But many simply did not know where to find help or who to approach. They expressed frustration over the dysfunctional role of women’s councilors in their area, who they say have abandoned their responsibility by letting their husbands take their place in the assembly. “There is no use of women’s participation in politics since they can’t do anything. Their husbands go in the assembly in their place,” said one woman.

The women expressed disappointment in the gap between government policies and the realities on the ground, highlighting corruption in the utilization of government funds. Women also raised the importance of collective action in their community by forming a women's group (jirga) to resolve problems. "Women's decisions should be taken in (a) women's group," said one participant.

The women then brought their concerns before policy/decision makers in a local policy level dialogue in September 2008. The Union Council administrative head (nazim), the social welfare officer and representatives of non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations attended the dialogue and Sultanabad's women delivered speeches. (The Pakistan Press Foundation provided training in petition writing and public speaking.)

The women highlighted the lack of education resources (no classroom, no trained teacher) for more than 20 disabled children in Sultanabad. They complained about poor hygiene conditions in the community, particularly uncollected trash in the alleys. They raised the deplorable conditions in the government girls' school, where there is a shortage of teachers and security staff, and the failure of government funds to reach the school. They also raised concerns about the social environment in Sultanabad that restricted women's mobility and the unemployment problem for men in the area.

The dialogue allowed the women to claim unprecedented public space to voice their concerns and to hold government officials accountable for community development. The dialogue's format generated immediate answers from the government policy makers present. The Nizam promised to allocate a separate room for the education of disabled children at the girls' school and even asked for help from the AKU to find a trained teacher. The social welfare officer urged the women to organize a group, educate their girls and seek employment through the director of the women development department. A representative of the community-based organization acknowledged the need for women's mobility to match the economic needs of the family, but he insisted that women must always wear the veil (purda) in compliance with Muslim culture.

The Sultanabad dialogue facilitated policy changes in the area. It incited conscious realization, freedom of expression and choice among the women while reinforcing democratic principles of equality and power sharing – a process of "democratization from inside out". Its success could encourage women to use their reflective capacity in other domains of life to empower themselves. However, deeply-rooted cultural and religious norms remain sources of unfavorable conditions for women in Sultanabad. Employment opportunities for women are still lacking. The AKU-WEMC team continues to work with the women of Sultanabad to reinforce their success and encourage further collective action. It is also in the process of developing a list of organizations that could support the women in raising awareness and accessing resources well into the future.