

Empowering Marginalized Voices: The Transformative Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Advancing Women's Political Empowerment

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ABSTRACT: Women's political empowerment is considered an essential element of sustainable development. This study examines the transformative role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in advancing women's political empowerment in District Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. A quantitative research design was employed, with primary data collected from 270 respondents selected through random sampling from three Union Councils, i.e., Bahrain, Madyan, and Tirat. Proportional allocation ensured representative sampling. Data were gathered using a structured interview schedule based on a three-point Likert scale and analyzed through SPSS using the Chi-square test to examine associations between variables. The findings reveal that NGOs significantly contribute to enhancing women's decision-making power, political awareness, and participation in public forums. A majority of respondents acknowledged the role of NGOs in organizing training workshops, preparing women for public engagement, and advocating for increased parliamentary representation. However, limited encouragement for women to contest elections highlights persistent socio-cultural barriers. The Chi-square results indicate a highly significant relationship ($P=0.000$) between NGO interventions and women's political empowerment. Overall, NGOs emerge as key agents in fostering political inclusion, capacity building, and gender equality. The study concludes that strengthening NGO initiatives can further enhance women's political participation and leadership, ultimately contributing to democratic development and social transformation in the region, consistent with broader findings on women's empowerment in Pakistan. It is recommended that NGOs should boost women's elections participation, political training, government collaboration, anti-barrier campaigns, and funding to enhance empowerment.

KEYWORDS: NGOs, Women's Empowerment, Political Participation, Decision-Making, Gender Equality

Introduction

Women's empowerment is assumed to mean increasing the basic rights, capacity, and resources of women to make decisions and work autonomously in political, economic, and social domains (Inter-American Development Bank,

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2010). In other words, it means that women should be given access to resources and assets, and given a free environment, so that they can consume the capital to achieve a self-sufficient position and also live a respectable life.

In Pakistan, particularly among women in the Pakhtun society, they encounter multiple structural, cultural, and economic barriers that restrict their life opportunities and agency. These include limited access to formal employment, control over property and inheritance, quality education, and productive resources such as land and credit, all of which constrain women's ability to build independent livelihoods and participate fully in the economy. Deep-rooted gender discrimination, patriarchal social norms, and male-dominated political, religious, and institutional structures further reduce women's freedom of movement, economic participation, and influence over household and community decisions. Cultural constraints, such as restrictive notions of honor, narrowly interpreted family codes, and social pressures on women's mobility, severely limit their public presence and occupational choices. In this context, the concept of purdah (seclusion) is often misinterpreted and enforced in ways that curtail women's education, work outside the home, and social engagement (Imran et al., 2010; Imran & Iqbal, 2019). Combined with workplace insecurity, harassment, and lack of gender-sensitive policies, these factors collectively undermine women's empowerment and long-term socio-economic development (Imran et al., 2010).

The political component regarding women's empowerment would include the ability to organize and assemble for social change. As a result, the process of empowerment must involve not only individual awareness but also collective action and awareness. The concept of combined action is important to the purpose of achieving social alteration". From the above mechanism, it follows that empowerment enables women to make choices, which constitute reasonable power and negotiating leverage for them. It is concluded that women can be empowered individually. The idea of feminism is one that enables women to have a voice in the affairs of the home and show combined power. At the end, he concluded that incorporating the feminist point of view in the idea to empower women implies a very long-term redesign of cultures, the base of which would be a democratic relationship (Stromquist, 1993).

Augusto and Zahidi (2005) reported that the last sixty years have seen a progressive growth in international awareness of the dilemma of needy females in poor countries and the need for political, social, economic, and gender justice, as well as admission to basic human rights. Women have made important developments in some countries of the world, but carry on be banished and underestimated in poor and developing countries of the world. Imran et al. (2018) and Imran et al. (2020) revealed that in the context of gender-based participation in the political sphere, modernization has encouraged women to engage in political affairs, both by exercising their right to vote and by contesting as candidates in elections. Beyond other contributing factors, this shift in women's political participation can be linked to the rising level of awareness and political consciousness among the general population.

Bandura (1986), in a proposition regarding women's empowerment, suggests that one's expectations about oneself decide if a specific attitude will take place, the range to which individuals extend his/her effort, and whether the individual can keep on while confronting challenges. This notion of being self-efficient is reconciled by the beliefs of a person or prospects about the ability to solve some problems in an effective manner or show specific attitudes. It can be explained that when people of low intelligence face a hard situation, they decrease their participation instead of trying to understand the situation. Their philosophies of effectiveness about themselves work as hindrances to alter which can enable them to get empowerment. Apart from that, personal confidence is not essentially a hereditary quality but can be nurtured and developed. In this way, the concept of self-efficacy is developed mainly in relation to our education. Bandura classifies four means in which self-efficacy and anticipations are attained, i.e., enactment endeavors, displaced learning, spoken persuading, and affective status.

National Population Commission & ICF International. (2009) described survey results that 28% of women aged 15 to 49 have used physical force since age 15. Domestic violence is faced by 15% women in Nigeria. These women say that their partner or husband NGOs' performance and the government with respect to women empowerment in Nigeria say that most frequently compelling the ferocity. Due to Islam, seven percent of women aged 15 to 49 have never been sexually assaulted. Physical violence is different in different areas of Nigeria. Women in villages face violations of fundamental rights from the age of 15, but women in cities and towns are relatively safe (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010). The majority of females (52%) of Sothern areas face a harsh situation, including body beating, as compared to 20% in the Northeast and 13% in the North West zones, respectively (National Population Commission & ICF International, 2009). As a result, the Nigerian husbands enjoy full sovereignty over their wives and can beat them at any time.

Faridi et al. (2009) conducted a study in the Bahawalpur district of Pakistan, and they are of the view that participation of women in working is directly proportional to their education because education increases the skills and efficiency of women and the power to understand and apply new technologies. Similarly, the small portion of working women in Pakistan in general and Baluchistan in particular is a lack of education in women, their limited approach to education, the less developed infrastructure of the province, and the relatively more fragile political and social organization.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2010) stated that women in Nigeria are not protected by law in all areas of Nigeria. Only nine states out of 36 in all of Nigeria have laws for the protection of women from domestic violence. In most5 of the states in Nigeria, there is no strong law to protect the rights of women from violation. Since Nigeria gained its freedom seventy years have been passed but there is no organized law to protect women. Men are allowed to beat women by law, but they will not seriously injure them. The Nigerian law is a mixture of many laws, like Islamic law, customary law, English law, and some other laws. In the Southern part, customary law prevails, and in most of the Northern areas, Islamic law is promulgated. But these laws have so far failed to stop domestic violence against women, and it is reported that domestic violence can be seen everywhere in Nigeria (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010). Results of the National Population Commission & ICF International (2009) disclosed that more than 2/5th of women (44%) and almost 1/3rd of men (30%) approve that a spouse is tolerable in thrashing his wife for doubtful motives. Working out without ignoring and telling him the children are the two greatest universally quoted defenses for beating a wife among men and women.

Research Questions

1. What is the association between NGOs' role and women's political empowerment in the target area?
2. Based on empirical findings, what targeted recommendations can strengthen NGO strategies for women's political empowerment?

Research Objectives

This study primarily deals with the following objectives:

1. To know about the association between the role of NGOs and the political empowerment of women in the study area.
2. To formulate recommendations grounded in the research findings.

Materials and Methods

The study titled “Empowering Marginalized Voices: The Transformative Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Advancing Women's Political Empowerment” was designed in the context of a quantitative research design. The population universe included three Union Councils—Madyan, Bahrain, and Tirat—which are prominent scenic, high-altitude localities located within Bahrain Tehsil, District Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan. Primary data were collected through a random sampling technique. From a total population of 107,666, a sample size of 270 respondents was selected according to the sampling procedure suggested by Sekaran and Bougie (2016). The sample was then distributed across the three Union Councils using proportional allocation, expressed by the formula:

$$n_i = \left(\frac{N_i}{N}\right)n \text{ (Chaudhry \& Kamal, 2011)}$$

In the above formula, the symbols represent the following: n denotes the total sample size required by the researchers; N stands for the total population in the study area; N_i refers to the population of each Union Council; and n_i indicates the sample size required for each Union Council under the proportional allocation method.

In this study, the sample was distributed across three Union Councils, namely Tirat, Madyan, and Bahrain, using proportional allocation. Based on the field data, Tirat, with a population of 21,870, contributed 55 respondents to the sample; Madyan, with a population of 24,009, contributed 60 respondents; and Bahrain, the largest in terms of population (61,787), contributed 155 respondents. In total, the combined population of the three Union Councils amounted to 107,666, from which the researchers selected a total sample size of 270 respondents, ensuring that each council was represented in proportion to its share of the overall population.

An interview schedule incorporating a three-point Likert scale was used as the main instrument for gathering primary data in the target area. The conceptual framework of the study comprised two variables: the independent variable (the role of NGOs) and the dependent variable (women's political empowerment). The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 20). Given the suitability and analytical value of the Chi-Square (chi-squared) test (Kothari, 2018), the data were analyzed through this test, following the procedure outlined by McCall (1975).

$$\chi^2 = \sum_{i=1}^r \sum_{j=1}^c \frac{(O_{ij} - e_{ij})^2}{e_{ij}}$$

In the above formula, O_{jk} represents the observed frequency in the cell formed by the intersection of the j -th row and the k -th column, r denotes the number of rows, and c the number of columns. The formula instructs one to calculate the squared difference between observed and expected frequencies for each cell, divided by the expected frequency. The resulting value follows a chi-square distribution with degrees of freedom computed as $d.f. = (r - 1)(c - 1)$. Throughout the data collection process, ethical considerations were carefully observed and adhered to.

Results And Discussion

Univariate Data

The univariate findings and their discussion are outlined below.

Table 1*Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Respondents' Responses on the Role of NGOs in Women's Political Empowerment*

S#	Statements	Yes	No	Uncertain	Total
1	NGOs produce women political leaders	110(40.7)	111(41.1)	49(18.1)	270(100.0)
2	NGOs improve the decision-making power of women	180(66.7)	70(25.9)	20(7.4)	270(100.0)
3	NGOs provide a political forum for women where they can address their issues	170(63.0)	60(22.2)	40(14.8)	270(100.0)
4	NGOs pressured the government. to increase the number of seats in parliament for women	130(48.1)	80(29.6)	60(22.2)	270(100.0)
5	NGOs arrange workshops to train women to polish their political skills	190(70.4)	34(12.6)	46(17.0)	270(100.0)
6	NGOs encourage women to stand in elections	60(22.2)	170(63.0)	40(14.8)	270(100.0)
7	By increasing women's quota in parliament, women will ensure the meeting of their basic rights	160(59.3)	50(18.5)	60(22.2)	270(100.0)
8	NGOs prepare women to participate in public gatherings	190(70.4)	30(11.1)	50(18.5)	270(100.0)
9	Only political empowerment headed by NGOs can lead to a better quality of life for women	134(49.6)	56(20.7)	80(29.6)	270(100.0)

Note: Numbers in the table represent frequencies, and numbers in parentheses represent percentages.

Table 1 shows the perception of the respondents regarding the political empowerment of women with reference to the district Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The data showed that the 40.7% of respondents agreed that NGOs produce women political leaders. Whereas 41.1% were not in favor of said statement, and 18.1% respondents had no idea about it. This statement is supported by Stromquist (1993), who concluded that incorporating a feminist point of view in the idea to empower women implies a very long-term redesign of cultures, the base of which would be a democratic relationship. However, the majority of the respondents (66.7%) articulated that NGOs improve the decision-making power of women, while 25.9% respondents disagreed, and 18.1% respondents had no idea about the said statement. NGOs play an important role in women's empowerment as well as to improve decision making power of women. As mentioned by the Inter-American Development Bank (2010), women's political empowerment is assumed to mean increasing the basic rights, capacity, and resources of women to make decisions and work autonomously in political, economic, and social domains.

It was further noticed that the majority of the respondents (63.0%) agreed that NGOs provide a political forum for women where they can address their issues, whereas 22.2% respondents disagreed with it, and 14.8% were unaware of this. In addition, 48.1% of respondents agreed that NGOs pressurized the government. to increase the number of seats in parliament for women, while 29.6% respondents disagreed with the above statement, and 22.2% respondents were unfamiliar with the said statement. This aligns with Augusto and Zahidi (2005), which says that the last sixty years have seen a progressive growth in international awareness of the dilemma of needy females in poor countries and the need for a political forum in which they can address their issue, social, economic and gender justice as well as admittance to basic human rights and NGOs also pressurized to government for the seats in parliament. However, 70.4% respondents agreed that NGOs arrange workshops to train women to polish their political skills, while 12.6% respondents opposed it, and 17.0% respondents were unfamiliar. This is in line with findings of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia [ESCWA] (2017), wherein a project of the United Nations under the supervision of the Economic and Social Commission of Western Asia (ESCWA) was carried out to prepare women for the political and economic initiatives in Western Asia generally, while in Beirut, Lebanon, particularly. Therefore, a workshop was held under the theme "Gender and women's issues", aiming to

advance the capacities and civil society organizations regarding gender equality, political participation of women, and economic empowerment of women.

Furthermore, 22.2% respondents agreed that NGOs encourage women to stand in elections. while 63.0% respondents do not agree with the said statement, and 14.8% respondents had no idea about it. However, 59.3% respondents agreed that by increasing women's quota in parliament, women will ensure the meeting of their basic rights, while 18.5% respondents disagreed with the above statement, and 22.2% respondents had no idea about it. Moreover, the majority of the respondents 70.4% opined that NGOs prepare women to participate in public gatherings, while 11.1% respondents disagreed with it, and 18.5% respondents had no idea about it. In the research area, the majority of the respondents 49.6% agreed that only political empowerment headed by NGOs can lead to a better quality of life for women, while 20.7% of respondents disagreed, and 29.6% of respondents had no idea about it. The above results agree with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia [ESCWA] (2017) that UN Women provokes female rights generally, specifically women's political involvement to ensure an increasing number in international, national, and local parliaments; to maximize the quotas of women, as well as to abolish constraints in the way of female participation and the political arena. In addition, some other activities of the UN Women include training women as effective political candidates and leaders, increasing the quota system in parliament, ensuring the right to vote, protected from election-related violence, promoting gender sensitivity to promote women's leadership, and preparing women to participate in public gatherings to address their issues, which they have faced since the dawn of history.

Bivariate Data

The bivariate findings and their discussion are outlined below.

Table 2

Association between the Role of NGOs and Women's Political Empowerment

Statements	Attitude	Yes	No	Uncertain	Total	Statistics
NGOs produce women political leaders.	Yes	110(40.7)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	110(40.7)	X ² =310.270 P=0.000
	No	42(15.6)	69(25.6)	0(0.0)	111(41.1)	
	Uncertain	0(0.0)	12(4.4)	37(13.7)	49(18.1)	
NGOs improve the decision-making power of women	Yes	152(56.3)	28(10.4)	0(0.0)	180(66.7)	X ² =282.354 P=0.000
	No	0(0.0)	53(19.6)	17(6.3)	70(25.9)	
	Uncertain	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	20(7.4)	20(7.4)	
NGOs provide a political forum for women where they can address their issues.	Yes	152(56.3)	18(6.7)	0(0.0)	170(63.0)	X ² =428.265 P=0.000
	No	0(0.0)	60(22.2)	0(0.0)	60(22.2)	
	Uncertain	0(0.0)	3(1.1)	37(13.7)	40(14.8)	
NGOs pressured the government. to increase the number of seats in parliament for women	Yes	130 (48.1)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	130(48.1)	X ² =307.723 P=0.000
	No	22(8.1)	58(21.5)	0(0.0)	80(29.6)	
	Uncertain	0(0.0)	23(8.5)	37(13.7)	60(22.2)	
NGOs arrange workshops to train women to polish their political skills	Yes	152(56.3)	38(14.1)	0(0.0)	190(70.4)	X ² =307.710 P=0.000
	No	0(0.0)	34(12.6)	0(0.0)	34(12.6)	
	Uncertain	0(0.0)	9 (3.3)	37(13.7)	46(17.0)	
NGOs encourage women to stand in elections	Yes	60(22.2)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	60(22.2)	X ² =294.813 P=0.000
	No	92(34.1)	78(28.9)	0(0.0)	170(63.0)	
	Uncertain	0(0.0)	3(1.1)	37(13.7)	40(14.8)	

Statements	Attitude	Yes	No	Uncertain	Total	Statistics
By increasing women's quota in parliament, women will ensure the meeting of their basic rights.	Yes	152(56.3)	8(3.0)	0(0.0)	160(59.3)	$X^2=350.389$ $P=0.000$
	No	0(0.0)	59 (18.5)	0(0.0)	50(18.5)	
	Uncertain	0(0.0)	23(8.5)	37(13.7)	60(22.2)	
NGOs prepare women to participate in public gatherings	Yes	152(56.3)	38(14.1)	0(0.0)	190(70.4)	$X^2=282.400$ $P=0.000$
	No	0(0.0)	30(11.1)	0(0.0)	30(11.1)	
	Uncertain	0(0.0)	13(4.8)	37(13.7)	50(18.5)	
Only political empowerment headed by NGOs can lead to a better quality of life for women.	Yes	134(49.6)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	134(49.6)	$X^2=266.173$ $P=0.000$
	No	18(6.7)	38(14.1)	0(0.0)	56(20.7)	
	Uncertain	0(0.0)	43(15.9)	37(13.7)	80(29.6)	

Source: Field survey.

Table 2 depicts the relationship between NGOs' roles and women's political empowerment. The relationship between the role of NGOs in producing women political leaders concerning women's political empowerment was found highly significant ($P=0.000$). NGOs work to raise awareness among women by organizing workshops on political awareness with the help of UNDP and other leading organizations (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2010). The participation of women in the 2007 parliamentary elections and concluded that imperfect electoral processes, gender stereotypes, and a lack of political experience, as well as limited financial resources, put female political candidates at a disadvantage.

Likewise, the relationship between women's political empowerment and the notion that NGOs improve the decision-making power of women was found highly significant ($P=0.000$). These results are in consonance with Dekker et al. (2013). There is also a smaller body of literature on the linkages between women's access to and control of property and land and their decision-making power within the household. This material has been well-summarized in a handful of literature or evidence reviews. In addition, the relationship between women's empowerment and the notion that NGOs provide a political forum for women where they can address their issues was found highly significant ($P=0.000$). Basu (2005) asserted that, in relation to South Asian parties, it is generally the political systems with the strongest democratic institutions that offer greater opportunities for women's representation.

Moreover, the relationship between women's political empowerment and the opinion of respondents that NGOs pressurized the government to increase seats in parliament for women was found highly significant ($P=0.000$). The government of Pakistan has increased the number of special seats for women, which is a big development for women's empowerment. Now women can raise their voice in the parliament. These findings are supported by Matland (2002), who refers to a country's level of economic development as an important factor that influences the extent of women's representation in its national parliament. Matland (2002) maintains that development leads to a weakening of traditional values, increased urbanization, and greater education and labor force participation for women, all of which increase women's political resources and decrease existing barriers to political activity. Also, the relationship between women's political empowerment and the question that NGOs arrange workshops to train women in order to polish their political skills was found highly significant ($P=0.000$). In most areas of Pakistan, workshops of NGOs can be seen, where workshops are regularly arranged for women to polish their skills. The above statement is supported by UNO, ESCWA (2017), which plays a leading role in assisting member states to translate global commitments into reality. Among such commitments is the pledge to advance women's issues and to empower women socially, economically, and politically. In such backdrops, the ESCWA Centre for Women is providing technical support to the Council of Women in Lebanon to advance their capacities and the capacity of local NGOs and Civil society organizations, on issues of gender equality, political participation, and economic empowerment of

women. Similarly, the relationship between women's political empowerment and the fact that NGOs encourage women to stand in elections was found highly significant ($P=0.000$). The U.S. Agency for International Development (2014) indicates that USAID has adopted a relatively holistic approach, recognizing that women may play a variety of roles in the electoral process — as voters, activists, candidates, and elected officials, and need to be empowered in all of these capacities.

In addition, the relationship between women's political empowerment and the notion that increasing women's quota in parliament will ensure the meeting of their basic rights was found highly significant ($P=0.000$). An increase in the number of seats for women means that the voice for women in parliament will increase at the same level. Women will get more power to solve their problems. These findings are supported by Maffi et al. (2009). Likewise, the relationship between women's political empowerment and the respondent's reply that NGOs prepare women to participate in public gatherings was found highly significant ($P=0.000$). According to the culture of Pakistan, women in rural areas usually can't participate in public gatherings. But in recent years, such participation has increased due to an increase in the number of NGOs. This is aligned with the findings by Rodriguez et al. (1994), who have summarized the advantages of NGOs in development. They are effective at service delivery; able to promote and motivate local participation; effective in reaching vulnerable groups such as women and minorities; quick and innovative in-service delivery and, thus, able to respond quickly to emergencies; and able to accurately articulate and respond to the needs of the communities which they serve.

Moreover, the relationship between women's political empowerment and the respondent's response that only political empowerment headed by NGOs can lead to a better quality of life for women was found highly significant ($P=0.000$). It has been noticed that those women who earn good salaries in NGOs live a better life. Due to their jobs, their families also understand the importance of jobs. Ghimire (2006) pointed out that women's political empowerment was not a goal in itself, but it is instrumental in stimulating society for political and social empowerment, which would further stimulate the overall development and refinement of society. The presence and participation of women in the decision-making process would enable them to revise the gender discriminatory policies and laws on one hand and would support equality-based new laws and policies on the other. As far as the legal position is concerned, the constitutions of almost all the South Asian countries accept equal rights for all citizens and reject any discrimination based on gender alone.

Conclusions and Recommendations

NGOs play a crucial and statistically significant role in promoting women's political empowerment in Swat by enhancing decision-making capacity, political awareness, and participation in public and institutional domains. Despite notable progress in training and advocacy, structural and cultural constraints continue to limit women's direct political engagement, particularly in electoral participation.

It is recommended that NGOs intensify efforts to encourage women's participation in elections, expand political training programs, and collaborate with government institutions to strengthen gender-inclusive policies. Additionally, awareness campaigns should address socio-cultural barriers, while increased funding and policy support can further enhance the effectiveness of NGO-led empowerment initiatives.

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