

A POLICY BRIEF ON BALANCING GENDER ROLES AND PATRIARCHAL ATTITUDES IN THE CONTEXT OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT, FOCUSING AFGHAN REFUGEES SETTLEMENTS IN BALOCHISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This study is focused on analyzing gender roles and patriarchal attitudes in the context of women empowerment amongst the Afghan refugee population in Balochistan. Gender roles are the expectations of the society from individuals based on their sexual identities. Society provides guidelines to individuals that what type of behaviors, beliefs, approaches, and practices for each sex are socially appropriate. Women's empowerment, according to UNHCR, is a process that enables underprivileged women to gain access to information, resources, and decision-making authority as well as increase their awareness of community involvement to exert some level of control over their own environmental inequalities (Gender Equalities and the Empowerment of Women and Girls. Most of the Afghan Refugees in Balochistan are living in Pashtun populated areas bordering Afghanistan, in a patriarchal cultural setup, where deep-rooted patriarchy and traditional tribal social structure persist, and the areas of origin of most of the refugees living here are also under the influence of deep-rooted traditional patriarchy. Qualitative methods were used for the collection of in-depth primary information/data from social and political intellectuals as well as service providers, through key informant interviews and focused group discussions (FGDs). Quantitative methods were used for perception survey to gather quantifiable information from the refugees living in Balochistan. The findings of the study highlighted that there are certain traditional practices and actors who are hindering and enable the traditional patriarchal attitudes. These include: no education for women, limited or banned mobility of women, no say of women in decision making, imbalanced state social laws and the role of clergy. Based on the findings of the study, policy recommendations have been provided at the individual, family and community, civil society, and state and policy levels with required processes, approaches.

Key Words: Gender roles, Women Empowerment, Afghan Refugees, Balochsitan, Settlements.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper has been extracted from a research study that analyzed gender roles in the context of women's empowerment among Afghan refugees settled in the Balochistan provinces of Pakistan. The study identifies imbalanced gender roles and patriarchal attitudes as perpetuating inequalities and discrimination, thereby limiting opportunities for women's empowerment. Gender-based discrimination is widely accepted, particularly in patriarchal cultures like that of Afghan refugees, where even state social laws reinforce patriarchal norms and grant men greater authority over women. Men can perpetrate violence against women with normative and social approval (Mitra & Singh, 2007).

The phenomenon of refugees and internally displaced persons presents one of the most complex challenges for the international community. In both contexts, women are disproportionately affected, forced by circumstances to assume new roles without access to necessary resources. In Afghan refugee culture, women are integral to the family system, often prioritizing their families' needs over their own. Traditional cultural norms and beliefs have entrenched gender roles and relations among Afghan refugee populations. Thus, gender roles and attitudes in this context are not benign; they dictate behavioral norms and influence life outcomes (Rostami-Povey, 2007).

Afghanistan ranks very low in international measures of women's status due to deeply ingrained traditional patriarchal beliefs that impose strict gender roles, leading to extensive disadvantages for women across various development, empowerment, and participation indicators. According to the Gender Inequality Index (2018), Afghanistan ranked 143rd globally out of 162 nations, indicating significant disparities between men and women (Hamidi et al., 2021).

The situation is particularly dire for Pashtun women, especially Afghan refugee women in Balochistan, who endure violence and discrimination in the name of honor and tradition within their cultural context (Hoodfar, 2007).

1.1 Objective

The main objective of this paper is to offer policy recommendations and guidelines concerning women's empowerment and to provide policy guidance for addressing imbalanced gender roles and biased patriarchal attitudes within the traditional cultural context of Afghan refugees residing in Balochistan

2. METHODS

A mixed methods research approach was adopted for this study. Qualitative methods were employed to gather in-depth primary information from social, political intellectuals, and service providers through key key informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Quantitative methods, on the other hand, were utilized for perception surveys to collect quantifiable data from refugees living in Baluchistan.

Both exploratory and descriptive research types were applied to cover qualitative and quantitative aspects of the study. The research incorporated social-cultural, ethnic, and religious diversities. Social and political intellectuals, as well as service providers, were engaged for in-depth information through focused group discussions and key informant interviews.

The theoretical underpinning of this study was the empowerment theory, as posited by (Zimmerman 2000), which suggests that certain behaviors, activities, or structures have the potential to be empowering, and the culmination of these processes leads to a degree of empowerment. The sample size for the data was determined using a sample size formula, resulting in a sample size of 384 Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 21 software for quantitative data, while qualitative data was analyzed through thematic analysis using Nvivo software.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

This research examines the association between gender roles and women's empowerment, particularly in the context of Afghan refugees' settlements in Balochistan, characterized by a traditional patriarchal society. The study reveals that within the traditional culture of Afghan refugees, behaviors and belief systems favor men due

to imbalanced gender roles and biased patriarchal attitudes. These factors contribute to growing disparities and inequalities between male and female genders, granting more power and authority to men in the social structure while limiting opportunities for women in education, health, livelihood, decision-making, mobility, and access to public spaces.

Correlational findings suggest that specific gender roles for men and women in urban and rural settlements for Afghan refugee women are significantly influenced by factors determining the roles of men and women exacerbating disparities faced by women due to gender roles. It was observed that certain practices and agents reinforce biased patriarchal attitudes and weaken female gender roles, including illiteracy, lack of women's involvement in decision-making, restricted or prohibited mobility, imbalanced state social laws, and the influence of clergy.

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These policy recommendations are derived from the findings of this research study, with some extracted from primary data obtained from key informants and participants of focused group discussions, particularly when solicited for suggestions on achieving balanced gender roles and unbiased patriarchal attitudes. Understanding the intricate relationship between gender roles, patriarchal attitudes, and the resulting inequalities is crucial for comprehending how women's empowerment can authentically be fostered, especially within traditional patriarchal societies like that of the Afghan refugees.

4.1 Individual level

4.1.1 Sensitization

At the individual level, there is a need to engage with marginalized women and girls. Sensitization is the initial phase of mobilization and should be integrated as a key component of initiatives for women's development and empowerment. In this context, the objective of sensitization is to enhance awareness regarding the challenges faced by marginalized women and girls concerning sex and gender, gender roles, stereotypes, gender issues, gender equality, and gender discrimination. The goal is to sensitize them and foster an understanding that everyone is equal, entitled to their own thoughts and ideas, and deserving of equal treatment

4.1.2 Increasing Self-esteem and Increasing Confidence

The very foundation of empowerment lies in building 'power within'. Without this internal strength, initiating empowerment efforts would be challenging. A sense of empowerment instills women with the belief in their own capabilities and strength. Sociological theories suggest that children's awareness of gender equality and their role development are shaped through social learning and cognition (Li et al., 2022). Gender roles encompass the characteristics that society assigns to men and women. For instance, men are often perceived as independent, aggressive, and ambitious, while women are viewed as affectionate, gentle, and compassionate. To address such perceptions, especially among women and girls, they need to be taught that we are all born free and equal. Everyone has the right to a quality life and to live in freedom and safety.

4.1.3 Increasing Knowledge

At the individual level, the primary focus should be on supporting women to raise their awareness and empower them sufficiently to assert their inherent rights. There is a pressing need to initiate programs and activities aimed at assisting women in acquiring knowledge, skills, and confidence, enabling them to advocate for their rights within both family and community settings. This initiative will serve to mitigate the influence of

patriarchy. To ensure women can defend themselves against violence and discrimination, it is essential for them to be aware of their rights. Thus, raising awareness is critical for shaping beliefs.

4.2 Family and Community Level

4.2.1 Raising Awareness

Initiatives and activities aimed at raising awareness among all relevant stakeholders—women, men, heads of families, and influential community figures—regarding the significance of women's empowerment must be implemented at both the family and community levels. Additionally, it is crucial to emphasize the negative consequences of excluding women from mainstream participation, which results in an imbalance of power between genders. By highlighting the adverse effects of exclusion and oppression, stakeholders can better understand the importance of mutual support and collaborate towards the overall development of families and communities.

4.2.2 Shared Decision-making and Equal Access to Resources

Shared decision-making and equal access to resources at the family and community levels are among the most critical factors determining women's empowerment. Sensitization and mobilization components and strategies should be incorporated into programs and projects to encourage men to take a more active role in household chores and childcare, while enabling women to participate actively in decision-making processes. This approach ensures that women have access to and control over resources at both the family and community levels, facilitated by increased family support.

Before launching any program, a thorough gender analysis should be conducted to identify and address potential barriers to women's engagement within specific family structures and communities.

4.2.3 Family and Community Support

Families are at the forefront of the battle for gender equality in the pursuit of women's and girls' rights and empowerment. The family and community represent fundamental units that can offer support and affection. To guarantee support from families and communities for women and girls, mobilization strategies must incorporate the five approaches outlined by UN Women (2023), namely:

- Share the care.
- Support women's economic empowerment.
- Celebrate positive masculinity.
- Empower the next generation.
- End harmful practices.

4.2.4 Challenging and Revising Ideologies, Social roles, and Behaviors

To transform ideologies, social roles, and behaviors, it is essential to first identify harmful practices and barriers to women's empowerment. Subsequently, barriers to social change should be assessed. Systematically transforming ideology, social roles, and behaviors is a lengthy and challenging process, but it can profoundly impact the lives of women and girls, as well as the community as a whole. The following process of activities may be adopted for revising ideologies, social roles, and behaviors:

- Identification of harmful practices
- Assessment of factors resisting mobilization and the exclusion of harmful practices

- Mobilization sessions.
- Initiation of discussions to highlight the repercussions of harmful practices.
- Adoption of transformed social roles and ideologies.
- Initiation of collective actions and public commitments to new norms and practices.

4.2.5 Advocacy with Patriarchy Enablers

Patriarchy enablers play a crucial role as they reinforce the dominance of a particular gender within the community, a deeply ingrained aspect of the traditional culture among Afghan refugees in Balochistan.

Most of these enabler include elderly women, religious clergy, and illiterate men. These figures can be mobilized to recognize basic women's rights and promote balanced gender roles through the following activities and initiatives:

- Advocacy sessions
- Media campaigns
- Rights awareness sessions
- Advocating for the rights of other women
- Support initiatives
- Mobilization efforts to educate the next generation

4.2.5 Women Mobility

The study findings highlighted that in Afghan refugee settlements, women's mobility is restricted, thereby hindering their access to facilities, basic needs, and rights. Family heads and influential community members need to be mobilized on women's mobility issues through awareness-raising and motivational sessions.

4.2.6 Women's representation and Participation in Community Development and Governance Structures

Women's participation in community-based development and governance structures is crucial. Women constitute the most deprived and marginalized segment of society, particularly in the context of Afghan refugees living in Balochistan. They experience discrimination and violence based on their sex and gender. Due to their specific needs and experiences, women possess a better understanding of their issues and requirements. Therefore, their representation in all sectors of community development and governance structures is imperative.

4.3 Civil Society Level

4.3.1 Psychosocial and legal support

In the context of Afghan refugees living in Balochistan, females encounter significant discrimination, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and psychological abuse frequently. Consequently, they often experience mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. In such cases, the interventions of civil society organizations are crucial, as the victims themselves lack access to legal and psychosocial support.

4.3.2 Women Empowerment loaded initiatives

Civil Society Organizations working with refugees in Balochistan, including local, national, and international NGOs, should initiate direct gender mainstreaming interventions. These efforts should encompass initiatives aimed at eliminating gender-based violence and domestic violence while promoting women's social protection.

4.3.3 Localized and gap-based interventions

The CSOs/development sector organizations should adopt and develop localized frameworks of interventions that consider social, cultural, ethnic, and political diversities, as well as gender-specific contexts. To ensure gap-based interventions for gender mainstreaming, participatory assessments should be conducted to systematically prioritize the intervention.

4.3.4 Advocacy

The concerned civil society organizations need to advocate for and initiate dialogues on gender mainstreaming and women's exclusion issues at state and institutional levels. This advocacy is essential for policy improvement and revisions to provide an enabling environment for women's empowerment and inclusion in the mainstream.

4.4 State Policy Level**4.4.1 Research and Assessment**

At the state and policy levels, there is a need to conduct research and assessment surveys to identify gaps in women's empowerment and gender mainstreaming. Research and assessment serve as empirical tools that can effectively guide policies and interventions aimed at improving women's empowerment and gender mainstreaming.

4.4.2 Revising Laws, policies, and socio, and economic and political structures

Especially in the context of Pakistan and Afghanistan, the current socio-economic and political structures are patriarchal-oriented, and certain discriminatory laws and regulations persist in these countries. These legislations further perpetuate inequalities within social, political, and economic institutions, exacerbating disparities among women. Therefore, there is a pressing need to reform laws, policies, and socio-economic and political structures to ensure women's empowerment and promote gender mainstreaming.

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