
Role of Women Organizations in Household Economy -Before and After the Attabad Lake Disaster in Hunza Valley-

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Abstract:

The paper presents the holistic picture of the changes and development brought by the grass root organizations fostered by AKRSP in the village Gulmit, Gojal, Hunza, Gilgit Baltistan. The study is conducted in three evolutionary phases, the living conditions before the intervention of AKRSP in the village, change and development after the intervention of the women organization by AKRSP, and lastly impact of Attabad lake disaster on the living conditions, and on the women organizations. Development and changes are seen against different indicators like economic, social, political, and cultural realms. The main thing which was focused is the contribution of women in the household economy with special reference to the women organization. The data presented in the article has been collected by the qualitative anthropological research technique.

Key words: development, empowerment, agriculture, horticulture, household, women

Introduction

Women are playing an important role in WID (women in development), such as participation of women in the social

organization of the village like women organization WOs. They are participating in the women organization which improves women's managerial and organizational capabilities and capacities. The main objective of women organizations is to increase women autonomy in decision making and also increase the women self-confidence.

AKRSPs Women in development (WID) program began in 1982 to address the demands of the women. The reason for starting a separate WID program and separate women's organization (WOs) was to provide a platform for the women to converge and share their problems and to voice their demands freely and confidently. The basic objectives of WID activities are to create village level leadership, management and technical skills and capital through savings.

AKRSP (Aga Khan Rural Support program) started the woman organizations (WOs) for the rural development as well as the improvement of the lifestyle of the women the formation of WOs provided women a vehicle to improve their economic position through social organizations. The aim of the grassroot organization was to empower the uneducated women.

The basic approach for the women in the development program of AKRSP is to help women in the increasing their productivity and decreasing their workload as much as possible in the task they have been performing traditionally. Apart from the technical packages it also aims to develop the relation with other social agencies, education sector etc.

Locale

The present study was conducted in village Gulmit, Tehsil Gojal, district Hunza Nagar. It is situated 140 km north of Gilgit Baltistan on the Karakorum Highway. Gulmit is the largest village of the Upper Hunza Valley. It marks a border between the Brushaski speaking territories of central Hunza and the upper Hunza Wakhi speaking territories.

Geographically, it is situated between 36-23⁰ N and 74-54⁰ E. It is situated at the height of 2435 meters above the sea level. Gulmit is a valley bounded by Shatubar and Ghulkin glaciers on the west and north respectively, while Hunza River flows in the east.

Research Methodologies

Qualitative anthropological research methods which include participant observation, key informant interviews, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect empirical data. Systematic random sampling, purposive sampling, and snowball sampling were used during research. There were 5 WOs in the village, 3 of them were thoroughly studied and two partially. Hundred households were selected as sample unit. It was a longitudinal research.

Life Condition before the Intervention of AKRSP

Before the intervention of AKRSP, the people had a sole dependency on agro-pastoralism (agriculture and livestock rising). The people were growing limited quantity of *baqla* (fava beans), barley, wheat and potatoes for household consumption. In horticulture, only few farmers were growing spinaches, and people had a limited number of fruit trees especially apricot. The community had a subsistence economy depending almost entirely on livestock and agriculture. The main crops cultivated were fava beans and barley. The climatic condition was cold for the wheat cultivation: it was therefore given less importance. Among the fruits, there existed primarily apricots while few dwellers would grow pears. There was no tradition of growing various kinds of vegetables, except for growing some potatoes, which they were on a limited scale for the households' consumption, and not for commercial purpose.

Before the intervention of WO in the research locale there was no such economic activity of women. Women were considered just inferior and she was just bound within the domestic sphere. She was just like a robot walking on the orders of male. There was no platform for the women to unite. The occasion where they met were marriage and death ceremonies and only in *jammāt khanna* (place of worship). There were such households who considered it embarrassing or abashed when their women worked in orchards or attended death ceremonies. There was a concept of the veil from the males in the village the women avoid to meet even their relatives. They had no right to voice their demands and even take decision of their life. The same situation for the women has also pointed out by Roger in 1980.

The main economic activity of the women was spinning in local terms called *tikmai* and knitting, making clothes, hats, coat by hand. There was no concept of the machine. Although it was very tough task but the women helped each other to complete it. They use to help each other as voluntary labor in local term called *kiryar*. Women's roles and responsibilities mainly included cooking, washing, sweeping, rearing children, bringing firewoods, grazing and caring the livestock, cleansing cereals, fetching water, and processing and preparing dried-fruits and dairy products, and so on.

There was no concept of currency that time there was the barter system in the village. They exchanged goods and services by the barter system. Women made things of wool and exchanged it by food items. They meet each other on such activities. They raise livestock's and sheared the wool for making sweater, socks and coats and the dairy products for exchange.

There was no concept of education. According to my respondent only three females were educated before the intervention of WOs in the locale, and they were matriculate. It was considered awkward to educate the females. The three

females were teased by the people that what they can do with their education, and that they will spoil the society by motivating other females toward education. The motivation towards education was after listening to the *farman* (sayings/orders) of the present *imam* (religious leader).

The food pattern was very simple. Mostly they use to eat bread of barley and fava beans and dry apricot soup because they were not much aware how to grow vegetable or other crops. Only those households grow vegetable who have visited the city and they grow it just for their home consumption.

Not all peoples of the valley had appropriate clothing. They had woolen clothing with a few exceptions of non-woolen-cloths brought by the Chinese traders in the caravans. Further, some local businessmen brought consumers items on the horses from Gilgit.

Confined to their domestic chores, women had no rights in their personal decision-making processes such as marriage, engagement. Food of good quality was for the male members and low quality or even the leftovers were for the women. Being a rare item, wheat bread was offered only to the guests, and if something left was presented to the male members in the house; but as per routine, both gender groups ate the bread of fava-bean in their houses. The people considered girls' education (like boys' education) awkward by saying: would the girls become *khalifas* or a *munshi* (clerk)? In case of any negligence or otherwise, there was harsh behavior of the male member compelled women of the village attempt suicide. Divorce of women was relatively high. Abinta Malik (1994) in a training workshop has highlighted the gender discrimination before the intervention of WOs.

The main hurdle was of transportation in the path of development of the area. They traveled on horses to the city to bring the basic amenities of daily routine. That person traveled only who has a small business of like daily base need. Mostly they were pedestrian there was no single vehicle in the village

and even they didn't see how a vehicle is before the opening of KKH. After the opening of the Karakoram Highway (KKH) in 1978, some villagers attempted to venture into business and some affiliated with services, especially Pakistan army and Aga Khan Education Service (AKES) as teacher.

Before 1983, there was no health facility at all in the entire Gojal. Among the whole Hunza, there was the only dispensary in Aliabad, established during the British Indian government. The people of the region therefore depended mainly on two types of healings: supernatural knowledge, and acquired indigenous knowledge. Within the former approach, there were further categories. First, individuals would present special offerings to God in their meditations place. Second, patients healed by clergies called *khalifasor mullo*, who would make amulets or other healing tools. Third, pay special visits to the shrines such as Bobo Ghundi in Chipursan valley. Fourth, pay visits to the shamans called *bitan*. The mortality rate was very high and diseases like dysentery were common among children.

There was no social status of women. There were boundaries for women and their activities were defined and she could not cross those boundaries. Before the AKRSP's intervention in the village, the people, like other societies, organized around their interests at the level of descent groups (families, lineages, clans) and village, besides their age-grade or friendship associations. The community would diverge on different issues, but for their communal interests, they converged again. Politically, the people would organize around the *lumbardar* (headman of the village) and performed their tasks at community level, such as the involuntary or forced laboring called *ashar* in local terms.

AKRSPS Intervention and Development

AKRSP initiated its function in the village through social mobilization by the community leaders and *immamti*

institutions. The intensive mobilization has resulted in the formation of women organizations in the village. The organizations were formed in 1983 and 1984 in the research locale. The aims and objectives of the organization were to reduce the poverty from grassroot level, socioeconomic development, and to generate income by using the local resources, and women empowerment. Khaleel (1994) has also highlighted the same in the twelfth annual review of AKRSP.

Saving was the first initiative taken by AKRSP in the village. They trained the women how to save money to tackle the future challenges. A woman starts saving from one rupee, which she gets it either from her husband or her son. In the initial stages of the organization the women of the area participated cordially in weekly meetings and savings. There was no other activity like education or other social activity that they cannot give their time. They converge on the communal interest and diverge for their individual interest. The other reason for preferring the organization is that it is owned by the sitting *imam* and they cannot deny their participation for the betterment of their life. The saving is mostly utilized for the education of their children and for the health purpose. Some women looked upon her saving as social security in her old age.

After 1984 AKRSP with focusing on social organization and savings, also introduced different varieties of seed-potatoes, plants (both of fruits and timbers) and so on. Above all AKRSP built the community's capacities in a variety of fields including agriculture, horticulture, sericulture, preserving and drying fruits, forestry and plantation, livestock, wildlife, internal lending (V/WO banking), bookkeeping, leadership, community participation, enterprise initiatives. Abinta Malik said in review of first WID staff Gender awareness training workshop in 1994.

AKRSP trained the women how to generate income by using the local resources. They were trained in the field of poultry farming. The members of the WOs were given training

of poultry management and disease control, how to make a home based poultry farm and how to maximize the profit. The organization enabled them to generate income by selling the eggs and meat and she used the money for her weekly saving.

The women were trained in horticulture, 1 member from each WO were given training in Islamabad and Gilgit that she could forward it to other members in her WO. The first and most successful project by AKRSP was of collective orchard for the WOs. In which all the contribution was of AKRSP but the labor work was from the members of the WOs. They participated enthusiastically and worked as volunteers. There was no paid employee of the organization. This project helped the organization to be strengthened in the village and voluntarism was the backbone of the organization. The project was about fifteen years and its aim was to make the women rigid and expert in the field of agriculture and horticulture and marketing of the products. They sell the vegetables and used the money for that member who worked in the orchard and the money was saved in her saving card. Different fruit plants were also planted in the orchard, especially apple, they sold the fruit yearly and that money was also used for each member saving. And jam, jelly training was given to the members of the WO and those fruits which were not sold they make it jam or jelly and sold it or used it for home consumption.

Apricot is the specialty of the village. The area is famous for dry fruits, especially dry apricot. Every household owns three or four orchards of apricot trees and it is also a source of income of the area. The members of the WOs are trained in drying, grading, washing, and marketing of dry apricot. This training is conducted almost every year in the village and there are also master trainers in each WO who further promote the training to other members of that WO.

The members of the WO are trained in sewing, knitting, cooking and embroidery and other field of income generation. Different vocational centers are opened with collaboration of

other organizations like KADO and government organizations to train the women in the field of handicraft and they are also trained in the marketing of their products. There is also a display center for the products of the masters in handicraft. This is also the specialty of the area which attracts the tourist toward the valley. And almost the customers of these products are foreigners. It is also an income source for the women and they also display their products in different exhibition held in Islamabad specially.

A project of sewing machines was brought to each WO in the locale, and for the first time in 1986 master trainer from lower Hunza was hired for the training in the area and three hundred members of the WOs actively participated in the training, and now they are the master trainer of their area, the training becomes the source of income for the women.

Another successful project of AKRSP was providing heifers to the members of the WO. It was brought through AKRSP for the discount rate and the amount was paid in installments. This was to change the breed of the traditional cows and to replace the unproductive one. The dairy product of the Heifer was self-sufficient for domestic consumption and commercial purpose and used the money for their savings.

Community leadership training is also conducted after every three months for the youth of the village and the head of institutions. The aim of this training is to prepare the youth for the future leadership and to run the institutions in a better way.

Internal credit was granted to the member of the WO for the educational purpose, health issue, for buying livestock, fertilizer, seeds of different crops, and fulfilling the expenses of the marriage etc.

Impact of Women Organizations on Lifestyle of Women

AKRSP has changed the lifestyle of the women not only in the economic sphere, but also socially and politically in the small village through its grass root organizations. There was an abrupt change in the living style of the inhabitants. The community has ended up the crops of fava beans and producing large amount of potatoes which contribute significantly in the economy. People produce varieties of vegetable for their home consumption and also for commercial purpose. Less productive plants have been replaced by more productive plants like apricot, apples, cherry, etc. All the households have their own dairy products because instead of rearing traditional cows, many people prefer one or two hybrid Heifer and replacing the previous of breeds which were less productive in milk.

The women can now take the decision of her family affairs and voice her demands; she has equal rights as the male has in the family. According to Ali (1990) there is no more gender discrimination now. And the most interesting that she can contribute economically parallel to her counterpart either directly or indirectly. She has the access to the market now she can independently display her products in different cities of Pakistan. She has become independent for her basic amenities of life.

Utilization of the Saving and Income by Local Resources

The women utilize their saving mainly for educational issue of their children's for business and enterprise; addressing health and chemical fertilizers; buying the livestock, developing land, meeting marriage requirements and meeting agricultural needs such as purchasing seed potatoes, etc.

Some women look up their saving as security for their old age as if their children's leave them that they must not be dependent on other relatives for their livelihood. They also use

it for their health treatment. The income they generate mostly they use it for their weekly saving and for the daily domestic use. Some of the dwellers use the saving to construct new houses.

Impact of Attabad Lake Disaster on the Women Organization

On 4th January 2010 a massive land sliding occurred in the village named Gharaiaat nowadays called Attabad which blocked the Hunza River and transformed it into a giant artificial lake which strengthens 12 miles upstream of the Karakorum Highway. The lake reached 13 miles long and 100 meters in depth in the month of June 2010 completely submerging lower Shisket and partially flooding Gulmit. The lake flooding displaced about 6000 people from upstream villages and submerged all the moveable and immovable properties of the inhabitants. It also submerged the Karakorum Highway from Attabad to Hussaini Village, which has created a big hurdle for transportation and now the means of transportation in the village is a boat but it depends on the weather condition of the village. The disaster has adverse effect on the living condition of the inhabitants either directly or indirectly. 25, 000 population of upper Hunza is affected due to the disaster.

The disaster has adverse effect on the women organizations of the village. One of the WO is totally submerged. The members are scattered because the lake has submerged their properties and they are now the IDPs [internally displaced people] they are shifted to different areas of the village. The main platform where the women were united was the *Jammat Khana* where they collected their weekly savings and conducted their weekly meeting, submerged in the lake. After the disaster they didn't collect their savings once. The main source of income of the village was agriculture, livestock, and fruits. The lake has submerged all the source of

income so, according to the people, it's the main reason for the failure of the WO. The members are using their savings for educational purpose that their children's education should not be affected. Now most of the members have joined other WOs in the village. The other reason is that the direct effectees of the lake are in psychological trauma and have become terrible due to the man-made disaster. The people consider it a man-made disaster due to the dead political structure of the region.

For the basic amenities of daily use, especially food they are dependent on relief given by the republic of china and FOCUS. The relief factor has also a very bad effect on the activity of the women. Those members of the WO who were trained in sewing, handicraft, cooking, etc. did not pay attention to their work. Relief is the main hurdle on the way of the economic activity of the women.

Another but main hurdle is about transportation in the village. They are traveling by boat from the village Gulmit to lower Hunza, which depends on the weather condition. As the village's climatic condition is very worse in winters due to huge and harsh wind and the temperature goes below the freezing point, the lake water freezes in winter and it's impossible for the boats to travel. So the inhabitants of the village face more problems for traveling, so to carry their products and crops in the market is now difficult and even impossible, so they have reduced their effort in the agriculture sector, especially the cash crops like potato, dry apricot, and apples which were the main source of income. The women cannot travel independently after the disaster because the village is now not much secure due to the involvement of the non-locals. Female avoid traveling without the support of any male member of the village. The marketing of the products is now difficult for the women they cannot carry their products out of the village. This problem has reduced the activity of the females mainly. The female access to market is now difficult due to the transportation because they

have to change two to three means of transportation to reach the marketplace.

Tourism was another source of income of the area. The area is famous for the natural beauty, green scenery, high peaks and glaciers which attract the foreigners towards the area. Due to the hurdles in the transportation the tourists are avoiding to visit the area and it has an adverse effect on the business of women. The tourists were the customers of their handmade products. Although the lake has added more beauty to the village, but the hurdle is about transportation which is risky for the people of the area. Due to wind huge and giant waves are raised which is very dangerous for the open boats and very risky. The local peoples are now used to the mean of the transportation because there is no alternative mean so they have to compensate, and the life of the locals is adventurous due to the risks and dangerous mean of transportation especially in winters.

The disaster compelled people of one hamlet named as Goze with a population of 600 and 80 dwellers to be displaced. They scattered in different area of the same village due to this factor they could not unite and they are in trauma because they lost their whole life assets within a few days. It will take time to rebuild their minds and to be resettled. The IDP women are not concentrating on their economic activity as they are getting the basic amenities through relief and they have stopped their WO not collecting weekly saving and there is no meeting conducted for the rehabilitation of the WO.

Conclusion

Today's society of Gulmit is not that society which existed prior to the AKRSP's intervention year, but rather has evolved itself and/or transformed in many respects. Economically, the community does not depend solely on the agro-pastoral mode of life, but men and women have diversified their livelihood

strategies in also doing businesses (within and out of the village); and engaged in employments in public and private sectors, and civil society organizations. The women are no more engaged in domestic chores, but can run their house economically parallel to her counterpart. The Women organization has transformed the women's lifestyle abruptly. The women got social status in the society she can equally take part in the family affairs and also in the communal activities. As the women are uneducated but can survive equal that of the male. There is an evolutionary change in the lifestyle of the people of the village life before the intervention of AKRSP in the village, tremendous change or paradigm shift after the formation and foster of grass root organizations in the village and consequently after the formation of the Attabad lake which has again changed the life of the inhabitants.

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