

## SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN URBAN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

Women play an important role in maintaining peace and resolving conflicts at the community level. However, their participation in conflict resolution activities is often limited by various socio-cultural barriers. The present study explored the challenges faced by women in participating in community-level mediation in urban areas of Punjab, Pakistan. A qualitative research design was adopted for this study, and data/information were collected through Focus Group Interviews (FGIs) conducted in three major cities, including Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Multan. Thematic analysis approach was used to examine participants' experiences related to barriers affecting their involvement in conflict resolution and peacebuilding activities. The findings indicated that women faced multiple constraints, including household-level restrictions, gendered mobility limitations, socio-cultural norms, economic dependency, capacity gaps, and lack of institutional support. Further, Family expectations and social resistance often discouraged women from participating in mediation processes, while limited mobility and financial dependency reduced their ability to engage in public roles. In addition, lack of formal training and absence of institutional backing further restricted women's effectiveness in conflict resolution activities. The study highlighted the need for gender-sensitive policies and programs that addressed socio-cultural barriers to women's participation in peacebuilding. Providing training opportunities, improving financial independence, and strengthening institutional support might enhance women's role in community-level conflict resolution and promote inclusive peacebuilding practices in urban communities.

### INTRODUCTION

Women are significant in ensuring peace and conflict resolution in societies. In most communities more so in developing nations, women are involved in solving conflicts both family and neighbourhood level through informal discussion and mediation. Through their involvement, tensions are minimized, communication between conflicting parties is made better, and peaceful relations are encouraged in communities. Women can intervene in any family related conflicts, disagreements in neighbourhoods, conflicts between youths or conflicts between

communities and their intervention efforts would help in curbing the escalation of conflicts into more severe issues.

The role of women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution has been gaining attention in the world in the recent decades. The need of women involvement in peace processes has been emphasized by international organizations including the United Nations by putting up various programs like the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda (United Nations, 2000). It has been suggested in research that the participation of women in peacebuilding

processes may enhance the success of conflict management and lead to social stability in the long run (UN Women, 2020). Females can usually gain the trust of community members and facilitate the dialogue between the opposing groups, thereby facilitating the understanding of each other and leading to collaboration.

Nevertheless, in most societies, there is still limited participation of the women in the conflict resolution activities despite their contributions. The social and cultural norms tend to limit the female participation in the decision-making process, especially in a society where the leadership functions are conventionally male-dominated (True and Riveros-Morales, 2019). Women can have difficulties in these situations trying to take part in the community leadership or mediation processes. These difficulties could be family support absence, social critique, and lack of mobility or the fear of unfavourable attitude of the community members.

In Pakistan, women have a low representation in the public life that is closely related to the social and cultural order. The concept of patriarchy tends to restrict the mobility and decision-making capacity of women, which is why they cannot engage in community-level leadership and peacebuilding practices (Zakar, Zakar, and Kramer, 2012). Women are usually supposed to be at home taking care of their households instead of taking part in activities in the society like resolving disputes or acting as mediators. Consequently, women who might be trying to resolve issues within the community may be opposed by the family members or the community leaders who hold the idea that the role of resolving the dispute is the duty of the seniors among the males.

Women may also fail to influence the process of resolving conflicts in case of the lack of education and financial independence. Females with low educational attainment or lack of jobs are likely to be less assertive when negotiating resolutions among conflicting issues. The dependency of the economy on the male family members can further diminish the women involvement in the activities of the society such as mediation and peace building. In other instances, women do not want to engage in the conflict resolution process either because of safety issues or social stigma.

The cities of Punjab like Lahore, Rawalpindi and Multan offer slightly greater opportunities to women to become socially and civically active because of the increased access to education, employment, and community networks. Nevertheless, women can still face some obstacles even in urban areas including gender discrimination, institutional support, and absence of training in managing conflicts. Women trying to intervene in the conflicts can be opposed by the members of the male community who doubt their power or their ability to make decisions.

In most instances, women in conflict resolution efforts at the community level use informal contact, and interpersonal relations to execute their mediation efforts. Institutions and local authorities might not formally appreciate their engagement although they play a role in keeping the peace in any given community. Knowledge on the impediments that women encounter when involving themselves in conflict resolution would be valuable in coming up with policies that would promote gender-based peacebuilding strategies.

Most studies done on women, before, have concentrated on their role as victims of conflict or the beneficiaries of peacebuilding initiatives, as opposed to being part of the active processes of conflict resolution. Consequently, minimal studies have been conducted on the issues that affect women who seek to get involved in mediation or peacebuilding efforts in their societies. This disparity can be seen especially in urban centers where women involvement in mediation at the community level might be caused by social demands, cultural values and institutional restrictions.

Thus, this paper examined socio-cultural hindrances which confine the role of women in solving conflicts at the community level in Punjab urban centres, Pakistan. This study will attempt to find out what obstacles prevent the participation of women in peacebuilding initiatives at the grassroots level by conducting a study of the experiences of the women who participate in mediation practices in Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Multan. The knowledge of such barriers can assist the policymakers and other civil society organizations in developing policy that can facilitate the response of women in the resolution of conflicts and encourage inclusivity

in peace building activities among the urban residents.

### Literature Review

The contribution of women in peacebuilding and resolving of conflicts has been a well-known thing in the international arena. Different organizations like the United Nations have also highlighted the significance of the participation of women in the peacebuilding through programmes like Women, Peace, and security (WPS) agenda (United Nations, 2000). It has been proven that the involvement of women in the process of peacebuilding can enhance the communication of the opposing parties and lead to the eventual social well-being in the long term (UN Women, 2020). Instead, women devote much attention to dialogue, comprehension, and collaboration in their conflict resolution and in this way, hostility can be minimized and the conflict cannot develop into violence.

This world acknowledgement notwithstanding, women still experience a number of issues that restrain their involvement in conflict resolution actions. In many cases, women are not allowed to participate in decision-making because social norms and cultural expectations do not allow their contributions to leadership processes, especially in the world where the male is regarded as the primary leader (True & Riveros-Morales, 2019). In most societies, women are supposed to be occupied in the domestic areas like taking care of the household and child care, thereby limiting their potential to engage in any kind of activity in the society such as mediation or even peace building.

Patriarchal social structures are important aspects that contribute towards the influence of women in community matters in South Asian societies. Cultural practices tend to make women shun socializing with other people, either within their own families or in any other issues concerning dispute settlement or leadership (Zakar et al., 2012). Consequently, women who are trying to settle conflict are likely to encounter challenges of social disapproval or opposition by the members of the community who feel that issues of conflict should be resolved by the male elders or local community leaders.

Another significant cause that may restrict women participation in conflict resolving is

family restrictions. Women in most instances have to be granted the permission to visit community meetings or even take part in social activities by the male members of the family. Absence of family support can demoralize women to participate in mediation activities in case they are skilled or eager to find solutions to disputes in their societies. Women who make efforts to intervene in conflicts without the permission of the families could be criticized or pressurized to relinquish such efforts.

Women who are involved in the activities of peacebuilding are also limited by mobility. Women can be afraid of their individual security or social prestige and be unable to visit places where conflicts arise or attend meetings. Women in certain societies are not allowed to move freely as they do not consider it a culturally acceptable practice as far as modesty and safety are concerned. Such mobility limitations may render women hard to participate actively in the process of resolving conflicts.

Another challenge that may affect the involvement of women in the mediation process is economic dependence. Women that depend on members of the male family to support them financially may be restricted in making decisions at home. This addiction will diminish their self-confidence in taking up leadership roles in a community or in brokering solutions between opposing groups. Financial dependence may also reduce the women access to education and training opportunities that may help them better their skills of conflict resolution.

The education is significant as it raises the confidence of women and their capability to engage in activities in the society. A better-educated woman has more chances to take part in activities on the community level and share her views in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, inaccessibility to education in certain communities may decrease the level of awareness of women on conflict resolution methods or may discourage them to join in mediation processes.

Women can experience social stigma and gender discrimination even in the cities where educational opportunities and employment levels are relatively higher than in rural regions in an attempt to assume leading positions. Members of the male community will challenge the powers of women or their capacity to

effectively manage conflicts. These perceptions can make women less willing to engage in conflict solving processes or decrease the credibility of mediating processes.

The institutional support may also be wanting and that is another reason why women cannot participate in peacebuilding efforts. Those women who are in informal mediation tend to operate without being recognized or trained. The lack of support on the part of the local authorities or nongovernmental organizations may diminish the potential of their work and limit the opportunities of capacity building. When women do not have institutional support, they might find it difficult to solve more elaborate disputes that imply liaisons with formal institutions.

Women identified with social stigma of being in the public roles may also serve as an obstacle. Women who are actively involved in mediation or other leadership processes can be seen as a challenge to traditional gender norms. This image can result in being criticized by the community members or cause conflicts in their families. This can make some of the women not to engage in conflict solving mechanisms to save their social identity.

The research that has been conducted has largely been based on the success of women involvement in peacebuilding instead of the obstacles they experience in entering into such ventures. This is why the investigation of socio-cultural obstacles that restrict the effectiveness of women in conflict resolution at the community level is needed. The knowledge about such barriers could assist policy makers and civil society organizations to formulate policies that would enable women to participate in the mediation process and enhance gender-based peacebuilding behaviors in urban areas.

### **Methodology**

This study was used cross sectional exploratory qualitative research design to study the socio-cultural constraints which are restricting women participation in community-level conflict resolution in urban regions of Punjab, Pakistan. The use of a qualitative approach was due to the fact that it enables the researcher to know the lived experiences, meaning and perceptions of the participants in a detailed manner, in particular when the subject matter is social and

context-dependent (Creswell, 2014). This method was appropriate to explore the description of barriers to female participation in mediation and peacebuilding by women in terms of family limitations, social stigmatization, and gender expectations.

The research was done in three big cities of Punjab and they were Lahore, Rawalpindi and Multan. These cities were chosen to represent various parts of the province namely, central, north and south Punjab. An urban environment was selected due to the fact that the city provides somewhat more opportunities to engage in civic activities and interact with the population, but a woman might also be deeply impacted by the socio-cultural restrictions of the city. This makes urban Punjab a valuable location to study the opportunities and limitations to women involvement in conflict solving.

The respondents were women aged 18 years and above who had experience in helping to solve community-level conflicts in their neighbourhoods or social networks. Participants would be recruited using a purposive sampling strategy since in this type of sampling one is likely to identify information-rich participants that can provide pertinent information on the research issue (Patton, 2015). The priority was on women who had either facilitated disputes directly or they were informally engaged in community-level peacebuilding.

The information was gathered using Focus Group Interviews (FGIs). FGIs are often applied to qualitative research to investigate in terms of group discussion and interaction common experience and social belief (Krueger and Casey, 2015). This approach was suitable, as women were able to talk about general obstacles together, to share experiences and elaborate on each other in the course of the discussion. A total of seven FGIs were undertaken in the chosen cities of three in Lahore, two in Rawalpindi and two in Multan. There were around six to twelve people in each group, and that is the effective group size to have a balanced discussion and meaningful participation (Krueger and Casey, 2015).

The FGI guide was designed in line with the purpose of the study. The questions were based around the experiences of women that involved taking part in mediation, challenges they experienced in ensuring that a dispute was

solved, and the socio-cultural factors that minimized its participation. Every FGI involved was carried out in secure and neutral conditions to provide participants with the comfort and privacy. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants before their data was collected and informed consent was taken. Participants were also promised confidentiality of their responses, participation would be at will and free will.

The FGIs were taped to enable correct documenting of responses with the consent of the participants. Tapes were transcribed word-to-word to be analyzed. The analysis of the data was done based on thematic analysis which is one of the common techniques of the identification of patterns and recurrent meanings in qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Analysis was conducted according to some crucial steps of being familiar with data, coding, development of themes and interpretation to determine the main barriers including family limitations, limited mobility, social stigmatization, economic dependency and advantage of institutional support.

To increase the credibility of findings, the study has adhered to qualitative quality measures as suggested by most researchers such as precision in transcription, systematization in coding, and consistency in theme identification. These measures are used to enhance the credibility of qualitative research as the evidence can be based on the opinion of the participants and not on the assumptions of the researcher (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

### Result and Discussion

The qualitative data/information obtained in the form of Focus Group Interviews (FGIs) have shown that women in the urban areas of Punjab are exposed to a number of socio-cultural factors that restrict their involvement in resolving conflicts in their community level. Respondents have indicated that though women are ready to participate in the process of mediation and peacebuilding within the communities they live in, they are usually denied the opportunity by societal norms and family pressures, economic dependence, and security issues. These impediments influenced the confidence, movement, and authority of women to make decisions thus decreasing their involvement in

the mediation procedures. Other studies have shown similar socio-cultural limitations to women involvement in peacebuilding (True and Riveros-Morales, 2019).

### Household-Level Constraints

Among the most commonly mentioned obstacles was the unsupportive attitude in the family to the participation of the women in community-based mediation practices. According to participants, women on most occasions need the permission of the male members of the family to engage in activities that involve social or community aspects. This reliance on family acceptance usually puts women off in matters relating to conflict solving. The respondents noted that family members can consider the role of women in the mediation as a superfluous or improper one. In other incidences, women were to avoid taking any part in conflicts to preserve their family image or to escape being criticized by the society.

A Participant from Multan said

*"There are occasions when our family members do not give us permission to travel out or even meet in meetings where disputes are discussed."*

According to previous research, family patterns in patriarchal societies can also restrain the women to be more involved in the public life by reinforcing the traditional gender roles (Zakar et al., 2012).

### Gendered Mobility Constraints

Another significant barrier that was found to influence women to engage in mediation activities was limited mobility. According to the respondents, the issue of cultural beliefs on the safety and modesty of women usually limits their mobility beyond the house. Consequently, women cannot be in a position to attend meetings or visit places where conflicts are taking place.

In other instances, women were worried that they would not travel alone or communicate with the male members of the society when resolving conflicts. These fears can make women not to be involved in mediation procedures when they can effectively solve the conflict situations.

A Participant from Rawalpindi said

*"Sometimes we wish to contribute into the solution of quarrelling, but we can hardly go outside alone."*

Another form of barrier to civic participation of women, which has been cited in the South Asian societies, is mobility restrictions (True and Riveros-Morales, 2019).

### **Social Resistance and Socio-Cultural Norms**

The respondents also noted that they had received social stigma on trying to engage in conflict resolution. In certain societies, female mediators can also be thought of as meddling in the affairs that are supposed to be dealt by male elders or leaders in the community.

The mentioned perceptions can result in criticism or negative remarks by the members of the community. The active mediation of women can be branded as a defiance of the gender roles or an attempt to assume the leadership role.

A Participant from Lahore said

*“People think that women do not have to intervene in the disputes within the community.”*

The literature on the topic proposes that women may not become the decisions makers because the social resistance toward the role of women leaders is discouraging (UN Women, 2020).

### **Economic and Resource Limitations**

It was also found that women could not achieve their roles in conflict resolution because of economic dependence on the male family members. According to the respondents, women without a source of income of their own might not have a lot of decision-making power in the household.

Women might lose confidence and capability of taking up their public role like mediation or community leadership due to financial dependency. Women who depend on other members of the family in terms of financial independence might not engage themselves in conflict resolution processes as they fear disapproval or being unable to spend their money independently. Women might also be limited by economic factors that could deny them access to training or education that can help them improve their mediation skills (True and Riveros-Morales, 2019).

### **Capacity and Knowledge Gaps**

The respondents indicated that education or training in conflict resolution can influence participation in the process of mediation by women who lack such education or training.

Females who do not have many educational qualifications might not be as assertive in negotiating solutions between the opposing sides.

In other instances, the women said they wanted to be trained on mediation or communication skills to enhance their efficiency in solving conflicts. But without access to this type of training, they may not be able to participate in peacebuilding efforts.

A Participant from Multan said

*“We desire to assist in solving conflicts, yet sometimes we are unable to know what to do with hard circumstances.”*

It has been commonly believed that education is very useful in enhancing the contribution of women in the society and other forms of leadership (UN Women, 2020).

### **Institutional and Structural Barriers**

Another fact that was observed by the participants was the lack of institutional support of women who were engaged in informal mediation process. Women resolving conflicts usually act in a way that they do not receive any formal support or formal recognition by the local authorities, or the civil societal organizations.

The absence of support can curtail their capacity to deal with complicated conflicts that involve the process of coordination with other formal institutions. In the absence of institutional support, women mediators might encounter difficulties in being accepted by the members of the community or getting resources to mediate.

A Participant from Lahore said

*“It would be easier to solve conflict situations if support provided by the local authorities.”*

The past researches on gender and peace processes have identified institutional exclusion of women in formal peacebuilding mechanisms as a problem (United Nations, 2000).

### **Summery**

This research has shown that women of urban Punjab are exposed to several socio-cultural constraints that restrict their involvement in conflict management in the community. Those obstacles lie on the household, mobility, social, economic dependency, and institutional constraints. Though women actively participate in mediation activities in their communities,

their involvement is usually influenced by the gendered power structures and how they can allow them access to public positions and decision-making processes.

Household based limitations proved to be a major contributor to the activities of women in conflict resolution. Respondents stated that women usually have to seek the permission of male members of their families to attend a community meeting or mediation procedures. The result indicates the impact of patriarchal families constructions that support traditional gender roles and narrow the women participation in the public (Zakar et al., 2012). In cases where there is inadequate family support, women may not engage in conflict resolution exercise in their attempt to ensure family harmony or safeguard their social standing.

Another key barrier was also gendered mobility constraints. The cultural aspects of women safety and modesty might limit their freedom of movement beyond the home, hence limiting their power to meet or even in meetings with people in the community who have a conflicting issue. Women can be unable to participate in the peacebuilding process due to the lack of mobility although they can do the required mediation work. The same results have been presented in earlier studies, and it is likely that mobility restrictions may decrease the extent of women involvement in civic activities and leadership (True and Riveros-Morales, 2019).

Another factor that affects the participation of women in mediation on a community level is the socio-cultural norms and social resistance. The respondents volunteered that women who attempt to mediate in fights can be viewed as meddling in things that men of traditional age, or leaders, should meddle with. The perceptions can make women unwilling to engage in mediation things because of the fear of being criticized or getting negative responses like being seen as a bad girl by the members of the community. This observation is consistent with the available literature that suggests that gender expectations tend to make women unwilling to become leaders in decision-making procedures (UN Women, 2020).

Limits of economics and resources are also significant factors that influence the participation of women in conflict resolution.

According to the participants, women may have less influence on making decisions in the family and less confidence in taking up societal roles due to financial dependence on the male members of their families. The financially dependent women can also evade mediation processes because they fear the family rejection or being economically dependent. Other existing researches have also emphasized the significance of financial autonomy in enhancing the involvement of women in leadership and peacebuilding programs (True and Riveros-Morales, 2019).

The other obstacle identified was capacity and knowledge gaps which were known to hinder the women participation in the mediation processes. The members also indicated that they would like to be trained on communication and conflict management skills so that they can become better at solving conflicts. Nevertheless, inadequate access to educational means or some form of formal training can demoralize women to take up peacebuilding efforts. The education has been broadly understood as a great aspect in boosting the confidence and capability of women in taking part in the process of decisions made at the community level (UN Women, 2020).

Participants also cited structural and institutional impediments as constraining factors to women participating in conflict resolution activities. Informal mediation by women is unacknowledged and mostly unassisted by the local authorities or civil society organization. Lack of institutional support can decrease the efficiency of their mediation work and restrict their capability to deal with more complicated conflicts. Gender and peace processes research has been done on women and noted that institutional exclusion of women in formal peacebuilding mechanisms has been the past (United Nations, 2000).

Generally, the outcomes indicated that socio-cultural hindrance exists at various levels in order to shape the involvement of women in community based dispute settlement in urban regions of Punjab. To overcome these barriers, it is necessary to come up with gender sensitive policies and programs that would facilitate the participation of women in mediation and peacebuilding activities. Training opportunities, better access to education, and institutional

support can contribute to the participation of women in conflict resolution and the introduction of inclusive practices in the peacebuilding process among the urban population.

### **Conclusion**

This paper explored the socio-cultural avenues, which restrict the role of women in community level conflict resolution in Punjab urban centres in Pakistan. The results show that though women are actively engaged in informal mediation practice within their communities, the participation is affected by several constraints in the household, social, economic, as well as institutional levels.

It was observed that household level constraints were a significant contributing factor to the participation of the women in the peacebuilding activities. Women also need the family consent before they can undertake mediation at the community level thereby limiting their autonomy as well as participation in decision making. The gendered mobile restrictions also restrain the involvement of women as they limit their movements outside of the home because of the safety issues and the social norms.

The role of the socio-cultural norms is also significant toward the influence on the participation of the women in the conflict resolution activities. The respondents indicated that women who attempt to facilitate conflicts can be socially opposed by the members of the society who think that such a role is supposed to be undertaken by male elders or leaders. Women may fear to take part in mediation as a result of fearing to be criticized or to destroy personal reputation.

Another barrier that was found to influence the participation of women was economic dependency on the male family members. Financially dependent women might not be able to make decisions in the family and might also be less confident about occupying any of the roles in the society like conflict management. The participants also reported capacity and knowledge gaps and stated that they also required training in communication and mediation skills in order to become better in disputes resolution.

Besides this, structural and institutional constraints were also identified to curtail the

participation of women in peacebuilding processes. Informal mediation by women is sometimes done without the proper support and acknowledgement by local government and other civil societies. Their mediation process and their capacity to resolve complicated disputes are also likely to be less efficient without institutional support.

The results, in general, indicate that socio-cultural barriers are effective at various levels to determine the level of involvement of women in conflict resolution at the community level in urban Punjab. Discussing these obstacles is significant to foster gender-inclusive peacebuilding activities and increase the role of women in the social harmony in the urban communities.

### **Recommendations**

Resting on the results of the research, it is possible to make several suggestions to improve the role of women in community-level peacekeeping in Punjab cities.

To begin with, there should be awareness campaigns to support family support in the activities of women in the mediation and peacebuilding. The community based campaigns can possibly promote the idea of upsetting traditional gender norms that do not encourage women to take part in the activities of the society.

Second, training courses are to be conducted to enhance the communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution skills of the women. Such training opportunities can raise the confidence of women and their effectiveness in the mediation processes.

Third, there should be the attempt to enhance the mobility and safety of women in the open places. The community organizations and local authorities can collaborate to make safe places whereby the women can find it less fearful to engage in mediation and not be criticized.

Fourth, women should be encouraged to be economically empowered through vocational training or income-generating opportunities to enhance their financial empowerment. The fact that women can have financial independence can increase the power of their decision-making and promote their involvement in the leaders of their communities.

Lastly, women who are engaged in informal mediation practices should be given institutional support. The local governments and the civil society might come up with community mediation centers or support networks that will appreciate the efforts of women in the peacebuilding efforts and offer support as needed.

These measures could be implemented to address the socio-cultural factors and encourage women to involve themselves in the conflict resolution process, which would lead to inclusive and sustainable peacebuilding in the urban community.

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