



STATE OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND COMMUNITY PERCEPTION IN RURAL PAKISTAN (A CASE STUDY OF MALAKAND DIVISION)

Arab Naz¹
Waseem Khan²
Mamoon Khan Khattak³
Umar Daraz⁴
Irum Mughal⁵
Muhammad Asghar Khan⁶

ABSTRACT

Development of a nation depends upon the active involvement of both male and female at the grassroots level. Women empowerment is crucial for community development and sustainable solutions to various problems at a large scale. The current study is an attempt to investigate community perception towards women's empowerment in Malakand division, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan. Data is obtained from 225 respondents including youth, women, men and local elders (particularly leaders) in five (05) villages through structured interview schedule and the responses have been obtained on a Likert-type scale for analysis to show agreement or disagreement of the respondents. The study shows that women's empowerment in terms of mobility, economic resources, decision-making, political participation, and awareness creation lacks parity and females are more deprived in this regard. The study suggests that women in particular need more education, capacity building, employment, control over resources and economic opportunities.

Key Words: Participation, Empowerment, Traditionalism, Decision-Making, Perception, dependency

The Study's Rationale

The debate on development started since 1940 when the concept of development was first introduced by scholars (Boserup 1970), *Women's Role in Economic Development* Alinsky Soul (1971), *Rules for Radicals* A.G Frank (1969, 1979), Amin (1974) and Parpart (1989) are famous in this regard. For many decades, the idea of development was the issue and a discourse that can make a paradigm shift towards women's empowerment in the modern time. The issue women's inclusion in the development process is however controversial in a sense that most of the debate is moving around either to include or exclude the gender component in development or not. Research and scholarships i.e. the study of Kabeer, (1999) and Fonjong,

¹ Department of Sociology/Social Work, University of Malakand, Pakistan

² Department of Sociology/Social Work, University of Malakand, Pakistan

³ Department of Social Work and Sociology, KUST Pakistan

⁴ Department of Sociology/Social Work, University of Malakand, Pakistan

⁵ Pakistan Academy for Rural Development, Peshawar

⁶ Department of Sociology and Social Work, University of Malakand, Pakistan

(2001) support the active participation of people in women's empowerment while Bartlett, (2008) argue that women's empowerment is only possible through community active participation in the given direction and program. Similarly, the true picture of women shall be the outcome of community in which they are living as argued by Oakley (1991), that participation of community helps them towards their goals' achievement and development. In addition, participation for genuine empowerment requires knowledge and understanding over the prevalent problems by both the general population and women themselves so that proper strategies can be adopted to reverse the situation (Fonjong, 2001).

The Problem's Statement

The social, cultural and political constraints are very common among Pakhtuns that are the obstructing factors in women's empowerment that is explicit and are multi-sectoral and multi-dimensional (Naz, 2011). Such constraints are implanted in social, cultural, political, religious and local perceptions of people. The social impediments are found in the form of cultural norms and values, mainly associated to patriarchy and male dominance (Khan, 2012). Like other *Pakhtun* regional cultures, the research community is also male dominated and there is rigidity in its structural and functional aspects. Economic resources and decision-making process are male-controlled while females are being looked depended for their personal matters, which also elucidate power and authority relations among males and females.

Female observe strict *Purdah* as their religious as well as cultural obligation and thus are confined to four walls with limited access and mobility to public places. The role of religion is vital but its male-driven interpretation leaves no space for women to exercise their rights to property, marriage, spouse selection, divorce, and other moral and intellectual rights such as women could not express their views in marriage contract and bride price fixation, while male members again take responsibility in such affairs (Naz et al. 2012). Women have very low religious knowledge and wisdom and their access to such religious education is guided by *Pakhtunwali*. Women, however, remain busy in domestic engagements performing domestic chores and their labor starts since dawn to dusk while males look busy in public domain engaged in most of gainful activities.

With regard to political rights, women have no such equality with men in the dispensation of political rights. Women have been deprived of their rights to vote, contest elections, visit polling stations and take part in any political campaign (Naz and Rahman, 2012). Besides, at government level, women have no such representation in government policies and programs. Perception of the community, particularity of males' members is the reflection of cultural practices and *Pakhtunwali*. The dominant male interpretation is unequivocal in practice of cultural activities. Male members are unwilling to allow female to make contribution in terms of many aspects of the social, cultural and political atmosphere (Khan and Naz, 2012). Furthermore, male bias, gender-blind perceptions, social and cultural stigmas, traditionalism, male-oriented values, threat to male autonomy, etc. are common male perceived notions that female have no right to avail equal opportunities of life. The present study is an attempt to analyze the perception of various strata of the rural population towards women's empowerment in rural Pakistan. In order to understand the issue with more elegance and detail discussion, it is important to learn about empowerment in general and women's empowerment in particular.

Empowerment

The dictionary meaning of the term Empowerment is to give someone power, authority, and ability to make decisions in particular direction under the autonomy provided to them. The idea of power is more central in understanding empowerment because it has the ability to bring change. Max Weber (1946) point out that power is often related to our ability to make others do what we want, regardless of their own wishes or interests. In this regard, power is

influence as it controls, or even resists the will of those who have no power. He further argues that power exists within the context of a relationship between people or things. Power does not exist in isolation nor is it inherent in individuals. By implication, since power is created in relationships, power and power relationships can change. Now to understand empowerment, there are various approaches such as Rappoport (1984) says that it is easy to define empowerment by its absence but difficult to define in action as it takes different forms in different people and contexts. Even defining the concept is subject to debate. He further argues that asserting a single definition of empowerment may attempt to achieve it formulaic or prescription-like, contradicting the very concept of empowerment. A common understanding of empowerment is necessary, however, to allow us to know empowerment when we see it in people with whom we are working, and for program evaluation. Bailey (1992) question how we precisely define empowerment within our projects and programs will depend upon the specific people and context involved. As a general definition, however, empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important. Ackerley (1995) claim that empowerment can be considered a change in the context of a women or man's life that enables her/him increased capacity to lead to a fulfilling human life, and to Zimmerman (1984) characterized by external qualities such as health, mobility, education and awareness, status, in the family, participation in decision making, and level of material security, as well as internal qualities such as self awareness and self confidence.

Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is a very complex, multi-dimensional phenomena emerging from a wide literature of both feminism and development. Aurat Foundation Report (2011) unveils that women's empowerment includes economic, political, social, cultural, religious, personal, psychological and emotional elements. Empowerment appears to be context-specific and has multiple determinants. Women are capable of empowering themselves while external actors and agencies can create supportive environments. Women's empowerment is very difficult to define as sometime specialist in the subject include access to material resources i.e. land, money, credit, income, employment opportunities, provision of work, access to power and decision making in terms of political empowerment etc. Similarly, scholars include freedom of choices in life, rights granted in the constitution, rights of education, health, mobility to reach various facilities and even reproductive choices. In this context Kabeer, (1999) is of the view that empowerment is very complex a multidimensional and can be interpreted differently by different people. Similarly, empowerment to him is the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them (Kabeer, 1999). In the same context, the study of Mosedale (2005), pointed that women empowerment the process by which women redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and do in situations where they have been restricted, compared to men, from being and doing. In short, one may believe that women empowerment provides them equality, basic rights, economic opportunities, and many other opportunities that determine course of their destiny with decisions making pertaining to their livelihoods.

Theoretical Framework

The current research has been undertaken utilizing the sociological perspectives on post-modernist feminist developed by Michal Foucault (1926-1984), de Beauvoir (1908-1986), and Derrida (1930-2004) as well as supported by Butler (1995) and Frug (1992). Similarly, Marxist's Feminist i.e. Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Engels (1820-1895) dependency has been taken into consideration to describe the subordination of women and understanding of masculine and feminine identity. The development approaches started in 1940 and onwards i.e. Gender and Development is taken into consideration as the GAD describes gender

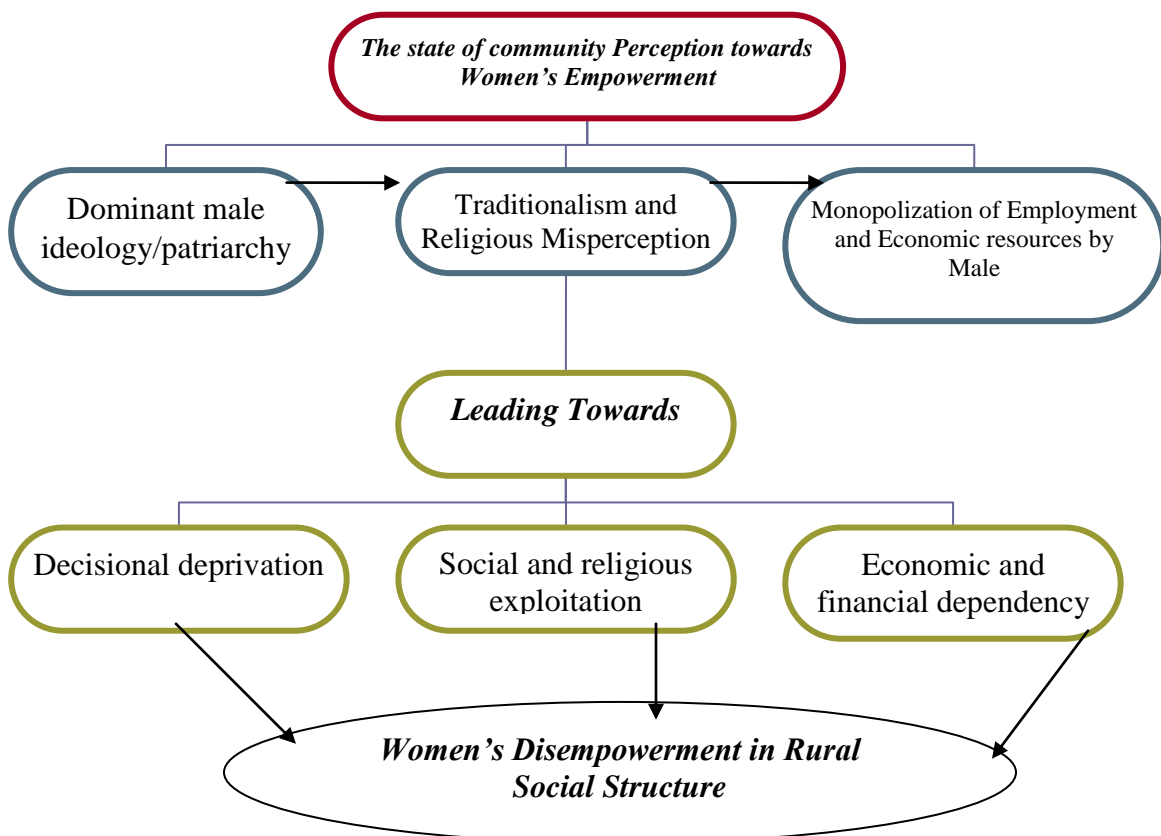
development and women’s empowerment (Parpart, 2000). Extracts have also been taken from Boserup’s (1970), study *Women's Role in Economic Development* to understand the impacts of development programs on the status of Third World women and Alinsky Soul (1971), *Rules for Radicals* is utilized for understanding of women’s power. The work of the dependency theorists including Frank (1969, 1979) and Amin (1974) and Parpart (1989) for women dependency and integration of women in patriarchal world has been utilized to focus on the role of women and their practical and strategic gender needs as put by Moser (1989), Molyneux (1985) and Haq (2000) in their work and finally the Women Empowerment Framework (WEF, 1994), which measures women empowerment at the levels of welfare, access, awareness raising, participation and control.

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate community perception regarding women’s educational empowerment and decision making process
2. To know community perception about women’s employment and income generation
3. To analyze community perception regarding women’s political empowerment and participation

Women’s Empowerment Model in the Study

The women’s empowerment model (WEM) has been derived from the cited literature and field data



MATERIALS AND METHODS

Description of the Study Area

This research activity aims to analyze the perception of the community members about women's educational, economic and political empowerment in a patriarchic social structure of the selected villages of District Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan. The study empirically analyzes the perception of various strata of population including youth, women, men and local elders (particularly leaders). Due to the large and vast geography of District Malakand, the researchers surveyed five union councils of Tehsil Batkhela coded as UC-1, UC-2, UC-3, UC-4 and UC-5 and randomly one village was selected from each of the union council for representation having population of 156641 (District Survey Report, 2010).

Population and Sampling

Based upon their location and nature of setting, each of the village was considered as a separate strata and equal number of samples i.e. 45 from each of the village were selected from all five villages of the UCs. As the target population of these villages remain 5342 (including male and female) a total of 225 respondents were selected (including educated, male, females, youth, and leaders having educational qualification of graduation and above) using stratified random sampling technique.

Data Collection Tools and Collection Procedure

The study illuminates the perception of community towards women's empowerment that is based upon the notion to obtain specific interests, the information were obtained on structured interview schedule and the responses were recorded on a Likert-type scale having the options (1) to some extent (2) to greater extent. Besides, the information obtained is thus utilized under the given women's empowerment framework. Before data collection, a kind of training was arranged to fill-out the schedule and after orientation, the field visits were planned accordingly. The collected information was finally coded in Excel Spreadsheet in a computer based program through SPSS for analysis and frequencies were calculated according to the given variables.

Results of the Study

The results of the study are analyzed according to the given criteria in a chronological manner with defined headings. The section describes the possible answers and the state of women's empowerment in the research community.

Perception regarding Women's involvement in various Decision Making

The information obtained from the field data show that most of the participants in the given population (77%) perceive that women's involvement in the decision making process is the prime factor that make women independent. Similarly, a large number of respondents (71%) favor women's domestic level decision-making to a larger extent and link such decision making as compulsory aspect of the familial relations. The information patently reflects that economic decisions are male oriented and only male are the bread earner to a major extent i.e. 35% of the participant hold the opinion to equally distribute the economic resources between male and female where 65% disagree to support women's economic participation. Besides, mobility as a factor in women's empowerment was opposed by majority of the population i.e. 69% as such mobility can create social and cultural problems for the society in general and family in particular (Table-1).

Table-1. Perception Regarding Women's Involvement In Various Decision Making

PEOPLE PERCEPTION	RESPONDENTS VIEWS		Total (n=225)
	Agree	Disagree	
Need of women's decision making process	77%	23%	100%
Need involvement in domestic decisions	71%	29%	100%
Women participation in economic decisions	35%	65%	100%
Women's need mobility rights	19%	81%	100%
Women right in mate selection	12%	88%	100%
Women involvement in politics	13%	87%	100%
Education is necessary for women empowerment	47%	53%	100%
Control and access to economic resources	14%	86%	100%

The analysis also confirms that people perceive women's involvement in issues of mate selection as their basic right; however the choice shall be given to her in an indirect form; as 81% of the perception favor that male ought-to to use such rights for female's mate selection. Similarly, the politico-social structure is dominated by males while females are not allowed to cast vote or campaign an election. In the given sample, the dominant perception of the respondents is based upon the general orientation of the masses i.e. 87% of the perception disagree to the political decision making and active involvement of females in political activities. While asking about the educational decision making and women's empowerment, most of the perceptions as noted during the field study favored female educational empowerment to some extent as 47% of the perceptions regarded female education as necessary for running of familial affairs and rest of the respondents have no such humanistic attitudes towards female education. The utilization and access to resources are perceived as men's tasks by majority of the population (86%) because male is the sole earner of the economic gains and shoulder familial as well as outside responsibilities and female shall perform the domestic chores and live according to the norms and values of the culture.

The State of Community Perception in Women's Educational Empowerment

The statistics obtained in regard of women's educational empowerment from the field data discouraging and most of the respondents consider female education as secondary option i.e. 88% of the total population have such perception. The enrollment of females at primary level is relatively high as compared to higher levels of education, which rarely available to low income families and perceived well by only 23% of the population. From the religious point of view, education is fundamental as well as religious right of both male and female but only in few cases; they are allowed up-to secondary or higher secondary levels or at least to graduation yet majority of the community members perceive it negatively and create devilish ideas as supported by 73% of the population.

The information also points to the various kinds of perceptions that are associated with female education in the area that reflects mindset and level of understanding of local people. Most of the participants (82%) perceive that formal education is contradictory and against cultural traditions and further 80% of the community members conceive that educational empowerment of women negatively affects the familial and cultural relations to a larger extent. For majority of the community, educational empowerment is a source of independence and liberalism supported by 79% and visualizes such empowerment as a major factor that brings change in role of women, i.e. in domestic domain (Table-2).

Table-2.The State of Community Perception in Women's Educational Empowerment

PEOPLE PERCEPTION	RESPONDENTS VIEWS		Total (n=225)
	Agree	Disagree	
Educational empowerment of women	12%	88%	100%
Education is fundamental rights of female	27%	73%	100%
Education is contradictory to cultural traditions	82%	18%	100%
Affect familial life and domestic domain	80%	20%	100%
Education is a source of liberalization for women	82%	18%	100%
Women education is against the religion	73%	27%	100%
Women education leads to modernity	86%	14%	100%

Another approach as obtained from analyses of field data, which opposes women's educational empowerment as religious people declare such empowerment contradictory to the teaching of Islam as 73% of the participants view it a source of promulgation of western ideas and that also brings changes in prevailing *Purdah* system. From another point of view, 86% of the population perceives educational empowerment of women as a change towards modernity, which in turn brings liberal and secular ideas to community that ultimately leads to disruption in the familial and social relations of the masses. These perceptions of the masses thus however, obstruct women educational empowerment but in today's modern world, many of the families and their members have brought changes in their vision towards male and female education.

The state of Community Perception regarding Women's Employment and Income

Employment and income generation is a prospective element in women's empowerment. The data analysis and other details indicate that 83% of the participants perceive that most of income-generating activities are the responsibility of male and further at times, they negatively perceive women's income and employment opportunities to a larger extent. The formal sector jobs are opposed by most of the respondents i.e. 85% while such ratio favor minor jobs related to knitting, embroidery, tailoring and other activities to earn their survival and maintain their empowerment (Table-3).

Table-3. The State Of Community Perception Regarding Women's Employment and Income

PEOPLE PERCEPTION	RESPONDENTS VIEWS		Total (n=225)
	Agree	Disagree	
Income generating scheme are male oriented	83%	17%	100%
Women employment in formal sector	85%	15%	100%
Women are for homemaking/ <i>Purdah</i> observance	84%	16%	100%
Women income is a sign of defamation	81%	19%	100%
Women employment is considered as social stigma	80%	20%	100%
Cultural tradition prohibit women's employment	79%	21%	100%
Women income reduce the honor of the family	78%	22%	100%
Women and teaching jobs	89%	11%	100%

The information obtained from the field data shows that men perceive that the prime duty of women is homemaking and observance of *Purdah* (84%) because the codes of *Pakhtunwali* and other cultural traditions do not encourage women's participation and mixing for earning and economic gains. Most of the community members (81%) are of the opinion that women's income is an evil that is a sign of defamation for male members and the employment and income for them is men's responsibility. The data further show that female income is also treated as a social and cultural stigma (80%) and such income stands inferior in front of men and cultural traditions prohibit a male to eat from income and employment of women as

perceived by 79% of the participants. Besides, analysis indicates that women's income and employment reduce honor and dignity of family and those who are dependent on female earning are stigmatized with cowardice i.e. 78% of the information perceive accordingly and the people prefer government jobs in teaching departments as the best possible employment which is almost supported by 89% of the population.

The State of Community Perception about Women's Political Empowerment

On the political level, people in general and women in particular are ignorant and have not much awareness about politics and political administration as supported by 81% of the population. The political mindset is overwhelmingly dominated by masculine perception as 91% of the population perceives politics and political empowerment as men's task. Traditionally, they perceive political system as one of important kind of rival groups system, i.e. 81% of the participant conceives such system as the source of agnatic rivalry and female are delicate in their opinion to fight such conflicts. Similarly, political empowerment of women is against the traditional codes and women involvement is viewed as prohibited and politics is mostly male oriented in nature, which is supported by 87% of the population.

The data shows that a portion of sample (16%) perceives women's politics as positive because it is necessary for their social and cultural empowerment. Political change according to them leads to social and cultural change and that directly or indirectly contribute to women's empowerment. Further, political empowerment of women as perceived by 15% of the population will create favorable conditions for women's representation in policies and programs that are meant for development. In addition to various positive impacts of politics, women's participation is compulsory as noted by 17% of the sample data for their own status and position maintenance and decision making to develop knowledge and wisdom and to sensitize women about their basic human rights. Such information generally leads to an argument that women who are actively participating in political set-up such as casting vote, contesting election, policy, plans etc have more capacity and experience about society in general and towards women problems in particular and such women have courage to speak and power to make decisions (Table-4).

Table-4. The State of Community Perception about Women's Political Empowerment

PEOPLE PERCEPTION	RESPONDENTS		Total (n=225)
	VIEWS		
	Agree	Disagree	
Women's ignorance about political administration	81%	19%	100%
Political structure is dominated by male ideology	91%	09%	100%
Political system is the source of agnatic rivalry	81%	19%	100%
Women's politics is against cultural traditions	87%	13%	100%
Women empowerment is necessary for social development	16%	84%	100%
Political empowerment is favorable for women development	15%	85%	100%
Women's political empowerment create wisdom and knowledge	17%	83%	100%
Women political participation is against <i>Pakhtun codes</i> and religion	84%	16%	100%
Politics are based on tradition and religious ideology	78%	22%	100%
Politics disturbs domestic domain and personal identity of women	81%	19%	100%
Women's politics are against Islam	71%	29%	100%
Women's politics is threat to women honor	78%	22%	100%
Women can not decide and manage political matter and affairs	79%	21%	100%

Information of the research show that the negative repercussions of the political involvement of female are more as compare to the few positive components. Most of the community members (84%) perceive political participation of women as against *Pakhtun* codes and even religious teachings. Similarly, 78% of the perceptions regarding women's political empowerment are based upon traditions and religious ideology, which restricts women's mobility and such codes overshadow women's lives to tackle and shoulder responsibilities of domestic domain. Most of the information (81%) perceive that women's political empowerment is a leading factor in disturbing the domestic domain, familial and personal identity of women. Accordingly, 79% of the population perceives that women have no such provision of politics in Islam and even in the cultural aspects while they opt for home as the only domain where a woman can live in modest form. The political domain is dominated by males and 78% of the males are recorded to perceive politics and political empowerment as a threat to women's honor, dignity and even veiling. Further, male members have misperception about women's knowledge, wisdom and most (79%) of the respondents are of the opinion that women cannot decide and manage matters, as they have no communal and social experience. Besides, they have no access to modern education and facilities of information and thus it not only secludes them but also restrict their participation in social, cultural, political and economic activities.

Discussion over the Analyses

This study is an investigation into community perception about women's empowerment in rural areas of District Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan. The question was to find out an answer that what do community members i.e. male, female, youth and leaders perceive about women's empowerment? The analysis has been framed under various headings and thus shows that there are two types of perceptions regarding women's empowerment in relation to the subject area and theoretical framework, i.e. old traditional perception (which is the outcome of long historic process and cultural conditioning). Such perception restricts female only to domestic domain, while the second perception is based on modern thinking (which is the outcome of social change and modernization) and promote balance and gender based equality at various levels. The traditional perceptions as noted from the analyses are dominant and culturally accepted while liberal forces face difficulty in bringing change in respective gender roles towards women's empowerment. The liberal perceptions have variety of opinions and each group has its own thinking about women's empowerment. The phenomenon of empowerment means to provide opportunity of decision-making to women, to work for their improvement and sustenance (Kabeer, 1999) however, it has differently been perceived by local people. Little flexibility does exist in their relations, attitudes, behaviors and even in their wisdom and thinking about women's empowerment. Usually majority of members do not talk about issues and problems of women in public and they mostly bury serious issues, i.e. honor killing and other pre-marital relations under carpet. Issues of women's education remain controversial and different attitudes towards its attainment are adopted.

The data shows that there are people who support women's empowerment and consider it a necessary element for development but such empowerment shall have a quality of least disturbance in familial, social and cultural values. The empowerment which amounts to crossing religious boundaries and cultural traditions are not acceptable to the larger population. Any attempt against traditional structure would lead to various evils, which would have its repercussions for both familial and kin relations. The liberal forces further perceive that women constitute majority of population thus it is therefore compulsory for women to have same facilities as available to men. In their view, women can contribute in family economy if they are given proper education and employment chances in this regard. They view that women should join those jobs, which do not disturb social structure and social relationships of area. In supporting their argument, they add that women have capacity to

perform jobs and activities that could minimize their dependence over men. They perceive that women's empowerment increases capacity and capabilities of women and make their wisdom more reliable to locate and understand their problems. Empowerment brings gender equality in their roles and it provides chances of utilization of their skills and capacities to enhance and to share burden of men up-to a greater extent and to them, such contribution is more visible in nuclear families of area.

Keeping traditional stratum of the locality in view; majority of males perceive women's empowerment as negative and against the customs, traditions, norms and values of *Pakhtun* culture. They perceive that women's empowerment and independence in social and cultural spheres is a gateway to social evils and such empowerment will also lead to ruptures in norms and values of culture. Empowerment to them is freedom and relaxation and further, such freedom and relaxation would make women free of cultural, social and familial restrictions. Empowerment for women is traditionally against the relative cultural set-up and it disturbs relative gender roles. The area is also dominated by religious values and majority of the people perceive women's empowerment contrary to religious understanding. Men have relatively more power to dominate social, cultural, political as well as religious spheres of women's lives. In addition, they negatively propagate religious knowledge and even forget basic women's rights as allowed in Islam. It is true that males' perception is against women's empowerment; however, changes are coming in perception of males at various levels, e.g. in education, employment and teaching profession. Further, due to modernization and educational empowerment of various families, the mental horizon of local people is broadening and they are now too much flexible in adoption of new ideologies in their personal and impersonal relations that is said to be a shift towards modernity and social change.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The study of the various perceptions regarding the state of women's empowerment describes that there is no clear and nude picture of the community under study about women's empowerment. It is concluded from the detailed analyses and discussion over the data that females in the target community have no such rights in terms of decision making, education, political involvement, employment and income and the many other familial and cultural relations. They have been deprived of their basic and fundamental rights and this also discloses the fact that the role of *Pakhtunwali* is more dominant in shaping women's lives than religion. Besides, local people perceive women's empowerment as an evil and a kind of liberalism and that will disturb not only familial life but in large would destroy the social structure of area. Similarly, majority of males perceive women's educational, political, economic, and decisional empowerment issues as against the norms, values, traditions and even religion and there is no such overt discussion over such issues in public spheres.

The analyses thus conclude that community perception, particularity of males' members is a reflection of cultural practices and *Pakhtunwali*. The dominant male interpretation is unequivocal in practice of cultural activities. Analyses of local perception shows no such positive orientation towards women's empowerment, however, a stratum of male has some positive perceptions by acknowledging that being half of the overall population; women need to be empowered for development of society. But they too, were unwilling to allow them for bringing disturbance to cultural boundaries because these limitations in turn, make hurdles in way of women's empowerment and development. Furthermore, male bias, gender-blind perceptions, social and cultural stigmas, traditionalism, male-oriented values, threat to male autonomy, etc are common male perceived notions that females have no right to avail equal opportunities of life. Congregationally, all these factors make it difficult to improve and bring changes in social, cultural and political atmosphere of area.

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