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12TH Annual Conference on Rural Women Day 2019 – Collaboration between RSPN and PODA



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Overview

October 15 marks the International Day of Rural Women, first celebrated in 2008 to recognise “the critical role and contribution of rural women, including indigenous women, in enhancing agricultural and rural development, improving food security and eradicating rural poverty.” Celebrating international days can be utilised as a powerful advocacy tool to educate the public on issues of concern and reinforce achievements of humanity.

Similar to previous years, Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) and the European Union funded SUCCESS programme collaborated on the Annual Conference on Rural Women Day with Potohar Organisation for Development Advocacy (PODA). This year the 12th Annual Conference on Rural Women Day took place on October 15-17, 2019 in Islamabad under the theme “Synergising Rural Women Leadership for Rights-Based Development”. The conference is the largest networking event for rural women of Pakistan where over 3,000 women from over 100 districts interact with policymakers, donors and stakeholders from government, businesses, civil society, media and academia. This unique gathering provides rural women leaders to pass a resolution about women’s economic, social and civil rights annually and report back on its implementation.

Committed to promoting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the conference offered many dialogues and panel discussions focused on rural women e.g. issues faced as women farmers, women in leadership positions, and harassment faced by women. Prominent guests speaking at the conference, included diplomats such as Dr Geoffrey Shaw (Australian High Commissioner in Pakistan), Mr Kjell-Gunnar Eriksen (Norwegian Ambassador in Pakistan), Ms Androulla Kaminara (Ambassador of European Union Delegation to Pakistan); government representatives such as Dr Shaista Sohail (Federal Secretary of Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety Division), Ms Shunila Ruth (Member National Assembly of Pakistan and Chair Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights), Mr Shafqat Mahmood (Federal Minister for Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training); and international donors such as Ms Xiaohong Yang (Country Director, Pakistan Resident Mission, Asian Development Bank) and Ms Aisha Mukhtar (Deputy Country Representative UN Women).

In order to fully take advantage of the advocacy potential of the conference, this year RSPN and SUCCESS is also hosting a panel session on “Rural Women taking Charge through Social Mobilisation; Success, Lessons and Challenges”. The robust panel discussion on the first day of the conference, featured Sindh Commission on the Status of Women Chairperson Ms Nuzhat Shirin, RSPN Chairman Shoaib Sultan Khan, RSPN CEO Shandana Khan, NRSP CEO Dr Rashid Bajwa, SUCCESS Programme Manager Fazal Ali Saadi, RSPN’s Programme Officer of Gender and Development Sadaf Dar, and women beneficiaries working with RSPs all over Pakistan.

The three-day event showcased various food and artefact stalls which included handicrafts from the RSPs as well. Overall more than 50 women activists and RSPs women staff participated in the conference. A conference of this scale was appropriately covered by the media with mentions in leading English newspapers such as “Dawn” and “The News” providing further advocacy opportunities to RSPs.

Summary of the Proceedings

RSPN's policy dialogue particularly focused on SDG 5 "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" at the final session on day one (15 October). The dialogue titled "Rural Women Taking Charge through Social Mobilisation: Successes, Lesson Learnt and Challenges" aimed to promote the ways in which rural women leaders could lead grass-root community institutions. Community institutions promote socio-economic development and empower women through social mobilisation. Social mobilisation is a process whereby people are organised in order to enable them to collectively think and act upon their development.

Introduction to Social Mobilisation

Shandana Khan, CEO of RSPN explained the role of women in rural development. She elaborates "A woman alone cannot achieve a lot on her own. In order to truly make a difference, women need to be mobilised." The government's *Ehsaas* programme can also be achieved through this social mobilisation process, and hence RSPN is aiming to coordinate with the government. RSPN and the respective RSPs are certainly "unusual programmes" as they have the support of the government but are not run by them.



Shandana elaborated on RSPN, explaining that it consisted of ten member Rural Support Programmes (RSPs) that espouse a common approach to rural development: social mobilisation. Beginning from the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) in 1982 in Gilgit-Baltistan, RSPs have expanded throughout the country. "We have organised people in five lakh *tanzeems* (community institutions), half of which are led by women."

She particularly acknowledged their programmes in Sindh that are 100% led by women. The SUCCESS programme in Sindh empower women through funds and grants to generate income, trainings to learn different trades, and eventually form their own government linages to carry out their own self-initiatives.

To expand on the difference social mobilisation has brought in their lives, Ms Ishrat, member of Local Support Organisation and a Community Resource Person (CRP) from Tando Allahyar says "Earlier, men would refuse to take women from the village to hospitals or anywhere else. But today, after joining a Community Organisation in Tando Allahyar under EU-funded SUCCESS, our commute issues have reduced. We collectively visit government departments to hold them accountable for the provision of services." Becoming a part of community institutions has not been achieved without struggles though, as Ms Ishrat explains "People made several accusations against me when I first joined the *tanzeem*. They said that I go out, meet strange

people and men, but here I am in Islamabad today and sharing my successes”. Her achievements since participating in the community institution have been immense, as she elaborates “The Union Council Chairman came to see before I left for Islamabad. Earlier, these government officials would call me by my name but now they call me ‘madam’ signifying my importance”.

Poverty Graduation Programme



A prominent way in which social mobilisation allows for socio-economic women empowerment is by reaching at the household level. This can be achieved through a poverty graduation programme led by the RSPs. RSPN’s most prominent poverty graduation programme is the SUCCESS programme that functions in the Sindh province. As the programme completes its fourth year, lessons were shared from the programme, so that it may be sustained and utilised in other poverty graduation schemes.

Programme Manager, SUCCESS, Mr Fazal Ali Saadi explained the lessons learnt, found below:

- People alone cannot accomplish much on their own, they need to be mobilised, making the voice of the vulnerable more prominent.
- Poverty graduation or reduction programmes tend to have issues as the respective non-governmental organisations make the design of the programme without consulting the beneficiaries. Recent Nobel laureates¹ claimed that in order to truly make progress in

¹ Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer won their Nobel Prize in Economics in 2019 “for their experimental approach to alleviating global poverty”

poverty graduation, the people must be asked about their needs. Hence, it is clear that beneficiaries of RSPs programmes must be involved in the development process.

- The community institutions made are for the people in the field. The presence of RSPN cannot be sustained, it is up to the people themselves to maintain the community institutions.
- Access to financial resources is crucial to socio-economic empowerment of the poor. It is for this reason, SUCCESS offers interventions such as Income Generating Grants, Community Investment Funds and Micro Health Insurance to the most vulnerable sections of society. CIF especially is a revolving fund that can allow loans to be sustained in the long-run for the community.
- Labour participation of rural women is quite immense but it is not sufficiently recognised. Therefore, the SUCCESS programme offers skills trainings to further enhance women participation in the market and provide better financial compensation.
- Besides low income, poverty also encompasses the lack of basic goods and services such as health, education, clean water and sanitation. In popular discourse, it is assumed that the poor do not view services such as education as essential. However, research has shown that for the poor sending their children to school has hidden costs (such as time). The poor do not have the same access to these services compared to other segments of society. It is the responsibility of the government to provide access to such services.
- Additionally, government planning does not involve the people which leads to its failure. For example, the government provides free immunisation against polio, however, Pakistan is still struggling to become polio-free because they have been unable to get the public on board with their planning.

Ms Arifa Mazhar, a human rights activist, moderating the session, shared similar sentiments with the lessons articulated by the programme manager. She expressed “Without the involvement of women in programmes, these programmes will fail.”



To elaborate further on the achievements of the SUCCESS programme, Benazir from Mohenjo-Daro, Larkana shared her experience with the programme. Benazir began, "I belong to a village where education for women is looked down upon but together, we have mobilised ourselves and have enrolled 215 girls in the village after joining the Community Organisation under SUCCESS".

She did determine that there are certain public services that cannot be achieved through her Community Organisation or even the RSP working in the field, in this case Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO). It is the government's responsibility to the people to provide access to

such public services. She believes that she can make the government accountable through the Joint Development Committees under the SUCCESS programme.

Ms Arifa Mazhar, had also witnessed similar initiatives undertaken by women in rural areas. When she questioned women about going against traditional norms of “purdah” to protest unfair government policies, they replied that when a child is hungry they go to the mother not to the father for their pain. Therefore, the women felt it was their responsibility as mothers to hold the government accountable, even if it meant coming out in public.

Legal Empowerment Programme

In the process of attaining rural women empowerment, RSPs do not limit themselves to poverty graduation programmes. They also view legal empowerment as an essential process through which rural women are enabled to use the law to advance their rights and their interests.

The first legal empowerment project was carried out by Sarhad Rural Support Programme (SRSP) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2011 which continues to function. National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) carried out programmes funded by Open Society Institute in South Punjab and Sindh, training 160 community based paralegals (84 women and 76 men) facilitating roughly 9,000 cases (60% of which were women related cases).

Ms Sadaf Dar (Programme Officer Gender & Development, RSPN) determined that the legal empowerment programme ending in May 2019, had its challenges but had massive impact on rural communities and women in particular. The programme created rights based activists at the community level; promoted RSPs’ outreach; fostered accountability and combated impunity; improved the functioning of justice institutions; and injected rights into the development discourse.



Commenting on the future of the programme, Ms Sadaf Dar said “At this forum, I would like to take the opportunity to announce that the paralegal is a relatively new programme, but because of its impact it should become a national programme”. She added, “Community-based paralegals must be given recognition so women can easily reach out to them, which they are unable to, given poor access of legal instruments in rural areas.”

Paralegal Noor Bibi from Nowshera, KP explained her role in the programme saying “I have enabled many women to understand the simple process of getting CNICs registered and file complaints in police station and NADRA on their own, back in my community.” Over 210 women were able to make their identity cards through her efforts. The biggest difference that, Noor Bibi has witnessed in the community has been that most women are able to perform such basic legal tasks on their own.

Contribution towards Sustainable Development Goals



With their work in the community RSPs have managed to have a positive impact on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To enable a more direct impact on the SDGs, NRSP launched the WISE (Water, Immunisation, Sanitation and Education) interventions in Tando Muhammad Khan and Bahawalpur. The focus of the programme is to address the diverse problems related to unhygienic practices, unsafe drinking water, low enrolment and low immunisation coverage.

Explaining the role of women in the programme, CEO NRSP Dr Rashid Bajwa, said “Only women can go door to door in Pakistan. Men cannot do the same. Therefore, it's necessary to empower women to spread awareness on the 17 sustainable goals to every household in Pakistan. We can achieve these goals through partnership with all women in Pakistan.”

The programme has proved to be a success as the regions with the WISE programme are closer to achieving the targets set by SDGs compared to other regions in the country. This achievement seems even greater when Dr Rashid Bajwa revealed that additional funds were not required to carry out the WISE programme, NRSP did it on its own. “Our model can be used by anyone. No additional funds are required, these villages can do it on their own.”

Shagufta Shaheen, a beneficiary of NRSP, attests to the fact that women can bring about the necessary changes towards development. “However, there needs to be a change in the mind-set of the people. Just like our homes, we have to start seeing the street and the village as our own. We would not need to depend on anyone after that. Education can also bring about this change. I have only studied till primary school, but my daughter will do her Masters to positively

impact her community. This way the mind-set in my own household towards female literacy has changed”.

Social Mobilisation in Transgender Community

Women programmes tend to also include the transgender community. Ms. Uzma Yaqoob from Forum for Dignity Initiative (FDI) felt that women do not accept transgender people in their programmes. However, transgender people identify as women. The answer for the community could be social mobilisation. “RSPN have not explicitly explored the transgender community in the social mobilisation process. Poverty graduation may be occurring but it is happening without transgender people”.

Therefore, she urged RSPN and the respective RSPs to consider this vulnerable community in their programmes as well, and form potential linkages with FDI. Ms Uzma Yaqoob also pressed the audience of rural women to reach out to transgender people in their communities and bring about a united front towards empowerment. Even audience members such as Nasir Ahmed from Balochistan supported Ms Uzma’s statements and urged women to work with transgender people in their communities.

Open Discussion



The panel discussion of experts and community activists were supplemented with an open discussion as questions were taken from the audience.

Supplementing previous community activist speakers, Khanzadi, an activist from Rahim Yar Khan, also expressed the impact on her village after the formation of community institutions especially on women. “After forming *tanzeems*, women were able to sit and solve their own issues.”

Nasir Ahmed, from Balochistan inquired on the presence of RSPs in his province so that women in his region could also avail the same opportunities. He wanted to know the breakdown of the districts that had NRSP and Balochistan Rural Support Programme (BRSP). Rashid Bajwa answered that NRSP functioned in six districts while the rest were under BRSP.

Audience members used the platform that PODA provided to acknowledge certain issues. Sajida Khan the chairperson of district committee from Haripur, complained about the functionality of district committees. “My district committee was notified on 8 December 2017 by Pervez Khattak in the Chief Minister House, however, we are yet to be functional”. The representatives of PODA made a note of the comment and will look into the matter.

Parveen Lodhi from Hyderabad, claimed that women councillors have come a long way, but men still continue to be chairpersons. Women councillors do not have access to sufficient funds or office infrastructure. “I want to use this platform to shed light on these issues so that they can be solved.”

Role of Sindh Commission on the Status of Women

Ms. Nuzhat Shirin, Chairperson, Sindh Commission on the Status of Women, spoke about the importance of the commission in the empowerment of women. She appreciated the work carried out by RSPs, and then proceeded to explain that the function of such commissions towards participatory development.

Some of the commission’s achievements include setting up 8 law reviews to review laws, rules and regulations affecting the status of women; monitor mechanism and institutional procedures; encourage and sponsor research to generate studies relating to gender issues; and develop dialogue with NGOs experts and individuals in society. “Essentially, we are a monitoring body that provides recommendations to the government.” One of their most substantial achievements has been by their research committee as it linked with OXFAM to produce statistics on human rights.

According to Ms Nuzhat Shirin, “The commission functions to bring civil society institutions with their specialised expertise together in order to mitigate their work further.” She explained that they do not “take funds from donors, these funds should remain with the civil society.” By linking with civil society (through MoUs), the commission can fulfil its obligation and make a difference.

The Chairperson announced that next year, they should not have the PODA and the commission’s conferences separate, but have a combined conference instead. This will allow for greater coordination and impact.

Conclusion



Chairman RSPN Mr Shoab Sultan Khan, spoke at length about the formation of the RSPs and their role in empowering rural women. "My experience working with Akhtar Hameed Khan during my days as Assistant Commissioner taught me that we don't need to reinvent the wheel to reduce poverty. We just need to study experiences of other countries/communities, and adjust it to our situation," said RSPN Chairman Shoab Sultan Khan.

The learnings from this experience and teaching formed the basis of RSPs' approach to rural development. "The key [to RSP programmes] is to mobilise communities and teach them the skill to create wealth of their own. Then improve on those skills, brush up their leadership potential and outline their needs to set poverty reduction programmes in motion" said RSPN Chairman.

Clearly poverty existed at the household level, however, the government could not reach each poor household, therefore, they formed RSPs to organise the poor households to form their own community institutions. These community institutions are institutions of the people, and are an essential part of grassroots level democracy. For governments to reduce poverty these institutions of the people need to be recognised and used as conduit to provide their services to the poor.

When using this same principle towards women empowerment, Mr Shoab Sultan Khan was told that rural women will not work in a female-led programme in Sindh back in 2008. Yet through their efforts now 20 Lakh women have been mobilised in Sindh. "Women are the only ones that are the solution to Pakistan's problems." Expressing the subsequent impact of RSPs he says "Those women that earned Rs.5 now have become empowered and earn Rs 5 Lakhs".

He concluded that the recently launched government's *Ehsaas* programme will benefit from RSPN and RSPs expertise. "We will work with Ms Sania Nishtar and the *Ehsaas* programme through the women and *tanzeems* [associated with RSPs] to create greatness."

Policy Recommendations

The following are the policy recommendations that emerged from the policy panel discussion:

- People alone cannot accomplish much on their own, they need to be mobilised, making the voice of the public prominent. Mobilising women can provide the most vulnerable sections of society the skill to create wealth of their own.
- Poverty graduation or reduction programmes tend to have issues as the respective non-governmental organisations make the design of the programme without consulting the beneficiaries. Therefore, beneficiaries (especially women) in poverty graduation programmes must be involved in the development process as they are the ones that understand their needs the most.
- The sustainability of community institutions depends on the beneficiaries themselves, as these institutions cannot be maintained by the respective RSPs in the future.
- Access to financial resources is crucial to socio-economic empowerment of the poor. It is for this reason, SUCCESS offers interventions such as Income Generating Grants, Community Investment Funds and Micro Health Insurance to the most vulnerable sections of society.
- Labour participation of rural women is quite immense but it is not sufficiently recognised. Therefore, the SUCCESS programme offers skills trainings to further enhance women participation in the market and provide better financial compensation.
- Poverty also encompasses the lack of basic goods and services such as health, education, clean water and sanitation. The poor do not have the same access to these services as compared to other segments of society. It is the responsibility of the government to provide access to such services.
- Additionally, government planning does not involve the people which leads to its failure. For example, the government provides free immunisation against polio, however, Pakistan is still struggling to become polio-free because they have been unable to get the public on board with their planning.
- In order to enhance legal empowerment of rural women, a community-based paralegal programme should be supported. The current community-based paralegals need to be recognised so women in the community can easily reach out to them, given the poor access of legal instruments in rural areas.
- In order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), women should be empowered to spread awareness to every household in Pakistan.
- Women empowerment programmes, based on social mobilisation, should also include the transgender community as they identify as women.
- Government-led Commission on the Status of Women should form linkages with civil society and bring civil society institutions with their specialised expertise together in order to mitigate their work further. PODA might consider collaborating with the Commission and combine conferences in the future.



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