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# Resistance and Potential for Development: Examining the Role of Religion in the Development of Women in the Infrastructure Projects in Pakistan

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## Abstract

Pakistan is going through large scale infrastructure development with most of the state-led mega projects being funded by international financing agencies. Many of these agencies have mandatory social safeguards to mitigate the negative impacts of the projects for project-affected-communities especially women. This provides the government an opportunity to advance the conditions of women in project areas. However, the gender mainstreaming efforts usually face resistance from communities on various grounds including religion. This study explores the nature of resistance on religious basis and the strategies used by the development practitioners to manage such resistance. A qualitative research approach was employed and through a purposive sampling technique participants were recruited for this study. In-depth interviews were used to collect data which was analyzed by thematic analysis. The data was collected from development practitioners working for government and international financing agencies on infrastructure projects. Resistance towards development of women initiatives are on interventions, presence of female staff in communities, and on giving access to project teams, including women, to females in communities. Major reasons for this resistance were suspicion of projects, especially if the financing agencies were Western, and the fear that development of women may result in women losing their religious and cultural values which may lead to the breakdown of the institution of family and Islamic society. The strategies to deal with these resistances include involving religious leaders as stakeholders, peer education through religious scholars, exposure visits for local religious leaders, developing gender and cultural sensitivities of the staff, meaningful consultation with community, and effective grievance redress mechanism.

**Keywords:** development of women, infrastructure projects, gender, development planning, religion, resistance, Pakistan

## Introduction

In Pakistan there is a significant ongoing investment in infrastructure projects in several sectors including roads, irrigation, mining, hydropower, and urban development. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one such initiative under which multiple infrastructure projects are either already underway or have been planned. Such projects

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bring many benefits for the country at large; however, their footprints and execution may also have adverse impacts on communities especially women.<sup>1</sup> These hardships may include displacement, unemployment, homelessness, increased poverty, loss of social and cultural capital, or violence.<sup>2</sup> Also in case of positive project outcomes, women do not receive benefits equal to those of their male counter parts.

In the 1990s, this realization and criticism of harmful effects of development projects resulted in the development of social safeguard policies to mitigate the negative impacts of the projects on project affected populations.<sup>3</sup> These safeguards were initiated by international financing agencies for their funded projects and were endorsed by many governments around the world that later made them part of their respective laws.<sup>4</sup> The objective of the social safeguards is to minimize the harmful effects of infrastructure projects and their operations and to improve the lives of the affected communities especially the vulnerable population such as women.

Gender blindness or gender bias towards women in development projects enhances gender disparities and results in unequal distribution of benefits between men and women.<sup>5</sup> However, the Government of Pakistan is well aware of the lower status of women on development indicators. Pakistan being signatory to the Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs) is taking steps to improve the conditions of its womenfolk. The larger infrastructure projects have the capacity (human resource and financial) and the mandate to help elevate the socio-economic conditions of the affected communities through project interventions. In the development sector, development of women has been done through various approaches including Gender Mainstreaming (GM). GM promotes that gender should be included in all development policies and programs at all levels. Thus, in development projects, gender mainstreaming encourages gender sensitivity in all stages of project cycle.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Dinabandhu Sahoo, and Niharranjan Misra, "Development-Induced Displacement and Gender Injustice: Some Critical Reflections," *Journal of Politics and Governance*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (2016): 19-20.

<sup>2</sup>Tulsi C. Bisht, "Negotiating Impoverishment Risks through Informal Social Structures and Practices," in *Lose to Gain: Is Involuntary Resettlement a Development Opportunity?* ed., Jayantha Perera (Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2014), 15.

<sup>3</sup>Michael M. Cernea, "Public Policy Responses to Development-Induced Population Displacements," *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 31, Issue No. 24 (1996): 1519, 1521.

<sup>4</sup>Usha Ramanathan, "Land Acquisition, Eminent Domain and the 2011 Bill," *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, Issue No. 44 (2011): 11.

<sup>5</sup>Sulabha Parasuraman, "Impact of Displacement by Development Projects on Women in India," *ISS Working Paper Series/General Series* 159, 1993: 1.

<sup>6</sup>Hilda Grigorian, "Impact of Gender Mainstreaming in Rural Development and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)," (Paper presented at *UNDP Gender Mainstreaming Annual Conference*, January 14, 2007), 11.

Gender mainstreaming also suggests that improvement in the status of women as a result of infrastructure project comes faster and is more sustainable if the development is more participatory. This requires collecting gender disaggregated data from project-affected-communities, conducting gender assessments, involving project affected women in decision-making, and having female project staff. The project staff may face various challenges in implementing these requirements due to the resistance from the communities.

One of the major sources of the resistance of community men towards development of women initiatives is based on religion. There is recognition of the importance of religion in the contemporary politics of development especially with regards to the development of women.<sup>7</sup> Although, many of the existing gender dynamics in communities are justified within the framework of religion, Pakistan is a patriarchal society. In communities around the country, women empowerment is largely not encouraged. The women have very little participation in decision-making at any level, whether household or community.<sup>8</sup> The status of women within households and community and their presence in public spaces is relatively low. All this goes on to suggest that patriarchy, traditions, and religion all play very important roles in maintaining the existing position of women in Pakistan. Often, it is difficult to understand particular acts or beliefs, without contextualizing them within socio-cultural and religious framework.

The resistance towards women initiatives on religious grounds may come from a wide range of individuals and groups within communities. The manifestation and intensity of resistance also varies for example there have been numerous incidents in Pakistan where particular interest groups have burned down government girls' schools and health centers in the name of religion.<sup>9</sup> In some cases the community religious leaders have also shown resistance towards projects by giving Friday sermon against a project and in some cases *fatwas*<sup>10</sup> against a project or particular staff.<sup>11</sup> This paper highlights the nature of resistance by communities and strategies adopted by the project teams during project planning and implementation to tackle resistance by communities, primarily men, in infrastructure projects in Pakistan.

## 2. Methodology

A qualitative approach was used to seek answers to the research questions. The purpose of a qualitative research study is to have a deeper understanding of lived experiences of

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<sup>7</sup>Ainoon Naher, "Gender, Religion and Development in Rural Bangladesh," PhD diss., (Heidelberg University, 2005), 31.

<sup>8</sup>The World Bank, "*Pakistan - First Phase of the Dasu Hydropower Project (DHP): Resettlement Plan, Vol. 7: Gender Action Plan* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2014).

<sup>9</sup>Multiple cases have been reported on national media especially in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In many cases Pakistani Taliban has taken responsibility for such incidents.

<sup>10</sup>Fatwa is a ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized authority.

<sup>11</sup>Data shared during a meeting with WAPDA project staff at the National Center for Resettlement and Rehabilitation, University of the Punjab, Lahore, May 24, 2018.

participants as they are constructed within personal, sociocultural, and historical contexts.<sup>12</sup> In addition, there is recognition that social reality is mostly subjective in nature thus influenced by individuals' perceptions and experiences.<sup>13</sup> This research employed a purposive sampling technique. In the first phase organizations were identified that are involved in infrastructure development projects in Pakistan. These organizations ranged from project executing agencies, provincial departments, federal ministries, and international financing agencies. Within those organizations participants were selected that have been involved with gender work in infrastructural projects as policy makers, project planners, managers, evaluators and social mobilizers.

In-depth interviews were undertaken using interview guides. The interviews were recorded, with an exception of a few, and in addition field notes were taken. Some participants on senior positions did not allow recording of their interviews so more detailed note-taking was done. The interviews were conducted in Lahore, Islamabad, and Peshawar. The interviews ranged from half an hour to over two hours. The data (interview transcripts and notes) was analyzed through thematic analysis i.e. data was examined to find meaningful patterns (themes) that became the categories for analysis. This involved reviewing transcripts and notes multiple times, developing codes, generating themes, refining and defining themes, and then doing the final analysis.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Findings

This study explores the resistance faced by the development practitioners involved in dealing with the gender aspects of infrastructure development projects. It was found that resistance is relatively more by communities that are in less developed areas with relatively socially conservative populations. The manifestation of this resistance is seen towards interventions for the development of women, working of female staff in the community, and not allowing the project staff (men and women) or local women to interact with each other. This resistance becomes a challenge for the project teams in all stages of the project cycle and may also become a security threat for the project team.

#### 3.1 Understanding Resistance

In Pakistan, like other countries of the world, there exists diversity within the country's population. No two communities are alike and resistance to gender aspects of projects also varies from area to area and project to project. The participants were asked about their opinion on the role of religion in this resistance. The data showed that there is a range of

<sup>12</sup>Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching* (London: Sage, 2017).

<sup>13</sup>Robert K. Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish (Second)* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2016).

<sup>14</sup>William L. Miller and Benjamin F. Crabtree, "Depth Interviewing," in *Approaches to Qualitative Research: A Reader on Theory and Practice*, ed. Sharlene N. Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 185, 188.

reasons for resistance to development of women work; however, an overwhelming number of participants believed that the resistance on religious grounds comes more from project that are in rural, tribal, or underdeveloped areas. They also highlighted the fact that in such areas the position of women is usually already lower, the women have little role in decision-making at household or community levels, and they are usually absent from the public sphere. According to the data, the reasons include a fear of the loss of women's cultural and religious values by exposure to the outside world and a suspicion of the Western and modernization agendas.

### **3.1.1. Fear of the Loss of Women's Cultural and Religious Values by Exposure to the Outside World**

One of the reasons for the resistance towards development of women initiatives by the communities is fear. This fear is based on a long list of suppositions about what the development of women initiatives would do to women, families, and the communities at large. These suppositions included women becoming headstrong, asking for their rights, wanting to leave home, challenging male authority, giving up traditions, and becoming men-hating feminists. These according to many members of community will eventually lead to the breakdown of the institution of family which in this society is considered the most sacred institution in Islam. One of the male participants shared his conversations with the young men in a project area:

*I interact with many young men in the community even outside of work. They say that their families do not like their talking to the project staff as it might pollute their minds. Those young men laughingly share many negative perceptions that their elders have regarding us. Imagine if the communities do not like their young men to talk to the project staff how they will react to the female staff interacting with their women. However once they begin to interact with us, their opinions begin to change.*

These fears are, at times, further fueled by the behavior or actions of the project teams on ground. For example, if the community sees the project staff, especially women, acting or dressing incongruously to their cultural values, they might fear that this might negatively affect their women and youth. The participants shared many incidents where the community members reacted very strongly against individuals or members of project teams because of their culturally inappropriate attire or behavior.

The participants criticized some of the development practitioner for behaving culturally inappropriately within the project sites and fueling the fears of the communities. One of the participants stated with frustration:

*In research and development work when we work in project sites we have to respect the local culture. This includes what we wear, what we say, and how we behave. We are not there to make a personal statement but to work and that means getting accepted by communities so that they feel comfortable while interacting with us and trust us. Unfortunately few of us have little understanding of these sensitivities and act unprofessionally which sabotages the project and affects the working of the team members. This may have long term negative effect on the project.*

Another female participant shared similar experiences and added that in one incident a development practitioner behaved so culturally inappropriately that there was a *fatwa*<sup>15</sup> issued against her. Following the incident some community members said that this was the reason they do not allow our women to meet these immoral women that come from outside. She said that she was told not to go into the field for next six months as her superiors feared that the community might mistake her for being the other women and harm her instead. This according to her led to many problems for individual project team members and also a suspension of project activities.

### 3.1.2. Suspicion of the Western and Modernization Agendas

The other reason for the resistance towards development of women initiatives by the communities is suspicion of projects and their financing agencies. The suspicion further increases if the financing agencies are Western international development organizations. The projects face suspicion by communities regarding the purpose and ulterior motives of the projects and their desire to gain access to their women. Since 911 and what followed around the world especially in Pakistan, factors such as American presence in Afghanistan, US drone attacks in parts of Pakistan, and Islamophobia around the world, led to a growing distrust of the West and modernization agendas in Pakistan.

These fears are not unsubstantiated as some foreign-funded NGOs have been banned by the Government of Pakistan on being involved in anti-state activities including in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province where a large number of project are being constructed. Few participants mentioned the incidence of Osama Bin Laden who was also found by the American military through an NGO that used a fake polio vaccination drive to access his hideout. One of the participants shared:

*Incident such as this (capture of Osama bin Ladin through an NGO) get international and national coverage and lead to fear and suspicion among local communities. This leads to a lot of trust deficit with development agencies and the project staff has to pay the price. Now many people think all development organizations are fake and have ulterior motives. People also don't tend to forget such incidents for a very long time.*

The data revealed trust-deficit among communities towards projects with links with Western organization despite being state-led. The perception that “West” is anti-Islam and is against Islamic countries such as Pakistan is prevalent in many communities. Through media the Islamophobic statements and actions by leaders of the Western countries especially USA and some European countries like France<sup>16</sup> are often highlighted and used by people in these communities to strengthen their arguments. It was interesting to note that the similar trust deficit from West and certain neighboring countries was also present among few participants as well. However it was limited to certain foreign funded non-

<sup>15</sup>a ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized authority

<sup>16</sup>Ban on *Hijab* (head scarf worn by Muslim women) by the Government of France

government organizations and political groups. These participants also included senior officials.

### 3.2. Managing Resistance -Strategies and Solutions

This section examines the strategies used by development practitioners in managing the resistances within communities that have been discussed in the previous section. All the participants shared their experiences from the field, especially the ones which helped them to create an enabling environment within which project could work affectively, despite the challenges that rise within project areas.

There was a consensus among the development practitioners that there could never be one formula or strategy that can work in every community. Thus the development practitioners need to have the capacity to understand the realities of communities, their values and norms, and their sensitivities. They need to be creative and think outside the box, while at the same time learning from the past experiences of other projects. The data reveals that the development practitioners use various strategies to manage resistance shown by local communities. These include involving religious leaders as primary stakeholders; peer education and exposure visits for local religious leaders; developing gender and cultural sensitivities among the staff; and grievance redress management.

#### 3.2.1. Involving Religious Leaders as Primary Stakeholders

One of the very important preconditions for any infrastructure project that is about to be setup in any community is to have the goodwill of the community towards itself, its intervention, and staff. Within the intervention, the gender interventions are usually given a higher priority especially in areas that have higher gender disparity. Positive perception of a project and its gender interventions at the community level is important in itself and also to contribute towards enabling the success of other interventions. These initiatives are conducted in a variety of ways, including meetings with individuals and community members, sharing of information, and at times providing certain facilities to the communities. For example Dasu Hydropower Project includes provision of piped water, vocational centers, hospitals, and schools for the community. All these provisions are made part of the plan for inculcating goodwill towards the project. These initiatives, at times, begin prior to the beginning of the project and many continue even after the completion of the project.

The initiatives to develop goodwill within project areas are usually targeted towards the individuals and groups that are identified through stakeholder analysis. Stakeholder analysis is conducted in projects to help the project teams to identify individuals and groups in the community that may increase the likelihood of the success of a project.<sup>17</sup> The data reveals that in most rural, tribal, and relatively socially conservative communities the

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<sup>17</sup>Pernille Eskerod and Tina Larsen, "Advancing Project Stakeholder Analysis by the Concept 'Shadows of the Context,'" *International Journal of Project Management* 36, No. 1 (2018): 164.



religious leaders are one of the very important stakeholders. They are also high up on the hierarchy of the power politics of these communities. Thus they are considered an important partner in development work. As one participant put it “they (religious leaders) are both opinion-makers and decision-makers within the communities.” Similarly, in most instances what is said in the *khutba*<sup>18</sup> of Friday prayer is held in great esteem by the community members and is more powerful than any campaign organized by the economic elites, local politicians, tribal leaders, or senior government officials in that community. Thus it is important to bring them onboard from the initial stage of the project and to use them as a resource. Also, the *mosque*<sup>19</sup> is a great place for the project staff to interact with the community men and Friday sermons are a good source of communicating messages to the communities.

### 3.2.2. Exposure Visits for Local Religious Leaders

It has been established that local religious leaders play the roles of opinion-makers and decision-makers in the communities, the project teams see them as an important stakeholder to be made partners with. The data reveals that one challenge that the project teams experience in convincing the religious leaders to provide their support is the lack of religious knowledge of the team members, usually social scientists or engineers, to have an educated discussion on social and gender issues within religious paradigm. As one of the participant shared, “discussions on social issues within religious framework could be tricky. One fear is that if I say something incorrect or misquote an *Ayat*<sup>20</sup> or *Hadīth*<sup>21</sup> and get into trouble.”

On the other hand, another participant added that staff member having knowledge about religion is not enough at times because one also needs to be accepted by the members of the community as an authority over the subject. He believed that, at times, the members of the community have a stereotypical image of a person who could know about religion for example having a Muslim style of beard and wearing certain kinds of clothes. He shared:

*I believe that I know quite a lot about religion and have winning arguments but because I do not look religious according to the cultural standards people might not accept what I say. Thus it is useful to have a person who also looks religious in addition to having the knowledge to become effective in communities.*

This challenge was dealt in one mega Hydropower project through exposure visits for local religious leaders. The project team identified *ulema*<sup>22</sup> who had in-depth understanding of the project area and were sensitive towards gender concerns in social and economic development. Periodic interactions were arranged between the local religious leaders and

<sup>18</sup>Sermon given during the Friday prayers

<sup>19</sup>Place of Muslim prayers

<sup>20</sup>Verses from the Holy Qurān

<sup>21</sup>Authentic sayings of Prophet Mohammad (SAW)

<sup>22</sup>Islamic scholars

*ulema*<sup>23</sup> where in-depth discussions took place. These interactions became productive in generating discussions, clarifying misunderstanding, and developing understandings for both the sides. According to a participant:

*My observation has been that, at times, cultural and religious practices overlap and make it difficult to differentiate whether a certain belief is either due to religion or culture. I now understand that some women insensitive practices I believed were because of religious beliefs are actually cultural practices for example getting women married to the Quran.*

In a similar project, exposure visits were also planned and a group of local religious leaders along with other community influential were brought to the International Islamic University, Islamabad. The purpose of this visit was to provide a broader exposure to that group so that they could interact with a wider range of national and international religious scholars and also the faculty. This they hoped would enable the religious leaders from the project-affected communities to know the perspectives of the scholars and academia on the rights of women in Islam and their responsibilities towards the communities. One participant involved in the planning shared that the decision to bring the local religious leaders to Islamabad instead of taking few scholars to the project area was based on the idea that individuals from the isolated communities need to see other parts of the countries for themselves instead of getting second hand exposure. Also they would be able to interact with a larger audience in Islamabad.

Another participant shared many positive outcomes of such an exposure visits from the project sites which usually are in less developed and more socially isolated regions of the country with lower development, especially education. He stated that overtime they can see the positive impact of these initiatives and now even the female gender specialist of the project team is comfortably interacting with the religious leaders of the community which was impossible a few months back. There are a couple of women staff members in the project now who are quite comfortably working there. He also added that a few local women can now be seen in public spaces, although in complete *pardah*,<sup>24</sup> which were nonexistent a while back. In conclusion, support of local religious leader can contribute tremendously in creating conducive environment that facilitates the development initiatives. In traditional societies, male to male interaction may be more useful especially with religious leaders that are more trusted.

### 3.2.3. Developing Gender and Cultural Sensitivities among the Staff

The data revealed that in communities how things are said, and who says it, is at times, as important as what is being said. The participants shared that the challenge of communities seeing development of women work as western agenda to destroy the fabric

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Purdah refers to the practice of women in Muslim societies of screening one's self by means of a large cloth.

of Pakistani society can be dealt with by having an understanding of what triggers such perceptions. One trigger is the use of certain words and terminologies such as women empowerment and women rights. These terms are most of the times perceived negatively as foreign or Western agenda and increase resistance among communities.

It is important to change people's mindset; however that takes a longer time so side by side smaller steps need to be taken. This may include replacing these words with softer terms that are acceptable in the local context such as community development of which women are a part of anyways. In addition it should be communicated by project staff in culturally appropriate manner and attire. A participant shared an incident from a few years ago when a consultant working on a large government infrastructure project went to the project area to collect preliminary data.

The project site was an under developed area in KP province. He took a group of young men and women from Lahore and Islamabad as data collectors from the community. The group of young women are said to be dressed inappropriately and they were also not interacting with the men in their group appropriately according to the local standards. The community got offended and there was a *fatwa*<sup>25</sup> given against the women in the group within a few hours. There was a state of panic with the project team for the security of those women and police was immediately called in. Those women were sent back immediately under police protection.

These women remained unharmed, however this incident has shed light on the importance of taking into account the sensitivities of the area in which the project is being carried out. This incident also had serious fall back impact and it took the project team a long time to normalize their relationship with the community. In addition no other women could be sent in the field for a long time. This incident also highlighted the unprofessionalism of the consultant who did not give the team members a basic training on how to do development work in the field. In addition, it may further reinforces the stereotypes held by the communities regarding project staff especially women. These incidents may be the result of the mistakes made by a few individuals, but its consequences and repercussions were faced by the project and its team for a long time afterwards.

The solution is in avoiding such incidences and in understanding the local realities and discourse of the local communities in the project areas. This is possible through meaningful consultations with the community members and by involving anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists. In many instances the projects are time-bound and have financial constraints, thus each step of the project cycle is expected to be executed quickly like the engineering work. It is important to ensure that the decision makers are made aware that the work involving human beings, especially where behavioral and value change is required cannot be rushed. Thus the project staff, no matter how experienced, needs to be

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<sup>25</sup>a ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized authority

made aware of the local cultural sensitivities including culturally acceptable terminologies, dress codes, and patterns of interactions may vary from site to site.

### 3.2.4. Grievance Redress Management

Despite working on all the above mentioned initiatives the communities might still have problems with the project and the project team. In such situations the Grievance Redress Committees have to play an active role. Grievance Redress committees are a mandatory requirement in projects by national laws and international financing agencies. They exist on various levels including project, district, *tehsil* to the highest levels where, many times, retired judges are hired to handle serious cases against the projects.

An active grievance redress committee will be able to address any issues that may arise in the communities' against individuals or the project and they should be able to nip it in its bud. This will reduce the chance of smaller issues turning into mega threats against the project team or the project itself. Thus, in order to make a project a success it is imperative to have an understanding about the communities and their social and religious concerns which may become a cause of grievance or resistance.

## 4. Discussion

The objective of this paper was to examine the resistance of communities stemming from religion towards development of women initiatives that are part of infrastructure projects. The study further explored the ways such resistance manifest itself and also looked into the strategies development practitioner employ to manage these cases. This realization of the negative impacts and criticism related to the disastrous effects on the environment and communities which fuelled such resistance led to debates within human right groups and the international development agencies. Eventually this lead to social safeguards deemed essential for the projects to mitigate the negative impact of projects on communities. These safeguards are mandatory requirement by most international financing agencies. Similar initiatives are part of the Pakistani law as well. Although these safeguards are there to promote protection and improvement to the project affected population in general, however, they have special emphasis on women, indigenous population, and other vulnerable groups like the elderly and people with disabilities.

As discussed earlier, there is a high level of gender disparity in Pakistan that has been ranking in the lowest tier of global gender index such as the Global Gender-Gap Index for many years now.<sup>26</sup> The projects that are in the underdeveloped areas of the country provide the government with an opportunity to uplift the local population, especially women. These projects have the finance, human resource, long-term presence, and expertise to bring physical, economic, and social development in the area, especially for women. This can contribute to the overall progress of the country.

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<sup>26</sup>World Economic Forum, "Mind the Year Gap," (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2020), 32.

The project teams while planning and implementing development of women initiatives as part of the infrastructure project face resistance from communities. This resistance could come from individuals or various interest groups in the communities. However, one challenge that the projects may face is resistance on the premise of religion. This resistance is manifested towards development of women initiatives, presence of women project staff in communities, and any interaction between the project staff including women and the local women. Many times, this resistance is initiated or gets further endorsement from the local religious leaders that occupy a central position in the power hierarchy in communities.

The basic reason for this resistance is the suspicion about the intent of the projects especially when the Western financing agencies are involved. A common perception is that the West is out to taint the morals of the Muslim women and Muslim communities. Such conspiracy theories are fueled by some media groups, political parties, and Islamophobia around the world. At times, this makes people in the communities fearful and suspicious which results into resistant to development of women initiatives.

The development practitioners themselves, at times, create problems for their own project by their culturally inappropriate actions and plans. This attitude further contributes in enhancing the negative impressions of the urban working women in the minds of the locals. The fear of communities is that allowing project staff into their communities and letting them interact with their womenfolk and children may lead to moral corruption eventually leading to breakdown of the institution of family and harm the Islamic social setup.

Another objective of this study was to explore the strategies the development practitioners employ to manage the resistance based on religious grounds. The data revealed that these strategies included involving local religious leaders as stakeholders, peer education of local religious leaders through religious scholars, exposure visits for local religious leaders, developing gender and cultural sensitivities of the staff, meaningful consultation with community members, and grievance redress mechanisms.

Within these strategies the most important is the meaningful consultation with community members. Consultation before and during all stages of infrastructural project is mandatory under Pakistani law through Guidelines for Public Consultation by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).<sup>27</sup> Similarly, most international financing agencies also encourage effective consultation for example the World Bank provides a Guidance Note on consultation to the borrower countries as mandatory part of the project before and during the project. The importance of consultation is that it keeps the project teams closely connected to the project stakeholders and allows them to know the issues and concerns of the affected communities. Furthermore, this allows them to get to the root

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<sup>27</sup>Ministry of Environment, Government of Pakistan, National Environment Policy, 2005, accessed April 18, 2019, <https://www.mowr.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/National-Environmental-Policy-2005.pdf>.

of community concerns which may become the cause of resistance. This further also helps the development practitioners to find appropriate solutions and implement them accordingly on time.

### 5. Conclusion

This article has analyzed the data collected from the development practitioners working in infrastructure projects on gender in some capacity. These practitioners come from various consultancy firms, government departments and ministries, and international financing agencies. It can be concluded that religion is an important factor that can facilitate or impede development of women initiatives. Furthermore, it can be concluded that to facilitate development of women, religious factor has to be considered fully. It is a challenge to separate religion from culture, especially when dealing with the origin of a belief or a certain value system. However, one has to realize that religion does not function in isolation or in a vacuum and there is usually a nexus of patriarchy, tribal culture, and socio-economic underdevelopment. Thus, for countries especially like Pakistan, religion has to be considered in the forefront of sustainable development agenda to improve the status of women.

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