

Strengthening Women's Participation in Political Processes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

This learning summary highlights the main successes, challenges and lessons learned from a project supported by Peace Direct and implemented by Aware Girls in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, in rural districts where patriarchal norms were deeply entrenched. The project aimed to tackle the underlying causes for the low participation of women in political processes, and included empowering women to voice their opinions and improve their leadership skills, and contribute to countering the spread of extremist narratives in the conflict-affected region.

Activities included participatory training for young women, community meetings and the development of Citizen's Committees as platforms to advocate for women's rights.

In total, over 500 women were reached through a mix of leadership training (focusing on 65 women) who then delivered targeted peer education to 472 women in Swabi and Mardan districts. 24 community meetings were held and four Citizen's Committees were formed, two male led and two female led, involving 79 community members.

The project ran from 2013-2016 and was funded by the Commonwealth Foundation. The following is based on an independent evaluation conducted at the end of the project in 2016.





Pictures Dania Ali/ Stars Foundation/Aware Girls

Evaluation of Efficiency and Effectiveness

- **Local knowledge:** Aware Girls' staff is all female, highly knowledgeable and familiar with the local context, and therefore able to relate in-depth to the young women and the issues they face. This contributed to contextually appropriate and effective programming, and made participants feel comfortable to join, share and reflect – all elements crucial for creating longer term attitudinal and behavior change.
- **Trust:** Staff were known, accepted and respected in the two districts of Swabi and Mardan. This was crucial in allowing the young women permission by male family members to join the five-day training and stay in a hotel. This trust was also essential to the project's behavior change programming. Behavior change work is highly challenging but particularly so in conservative, patriarchal societies where questioning the status of women, who are considered the honour of the family, is considered taboo.
- **Adaptive:** Given the difficult and often insecure context, Aware Girls staff used flexible methods to implement the project such as conducting community meetings informally through personal visits.
- **Sustainable:** The project was found to be sustainable for a number of reasons:
 - It targeted young people who, before the project, showed motivation and commitment to improving the political participation of women and who were therefore more likely to



Eleven out of nineteen surveyed women (58%) said that they had voted for the first time in their lives in the local government elections of 2015 following the training sessions conducted by Aware Girls.

continue the work of influencing and sharing information after project implementation.

- It succeeded in changing attitudes and behaviour, which is crucial for transforming the underlying causes of women's limited ability to participate in political processes.
- The direct project activities were small scale, focused on individual participants and based on process learning (where participants were actively participating in all aspects of training, including organisation and facilitation). This approach was important to build relationships with participants and promote involvement and ownership, important for sustainability.
- **Cost effective, high impact:** The main project costs were related to the training of participants. Following this, the project relied on volunteers as project participants go out in their communities to begin dialogue and build the confidence of women to participate in political processes. While the direct programming was therefore small scale and focused on the development and empowerment of individual participants, the impact had far reaching effects in communities.

“ The topic of women's rights is taboo in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, especially in the conservative districts of Swabi and Mardan. So, bringing together well respected men and women from different segments of the society to address these issues seems to be the only relevant strategy that would prove to be effective. After two years of implementing the project, one sees the relevance that was considered at the time of conceptualizing the project has proven to be correct. ”

Excerpt from evaluation

Challenges

- **Cultural constraints:** Restrictions on participants who were often not allowed by fathers, husbands, brothers or sons to participate and had to take considerable risks to do so. Addressing deeply rooted social norms that have become internalised was challenging. Young women sometimes questioned whether the opinion of a male family member was also their opinion.
- **Local norms:** Social rules forbidding young women to stay at hotels posed logistical

“ From the two trainings, one in Mardan and the other one in Swabi, four of the young women actually joined active politics. In addition, seven indirect beneficiaries also participated in local elections and six of them won. This level of impact is unheard of in the development sector in Pakistan. ”
Excerpt from evaluation

challenges for conducting the five-day training workshops in the two districts.

- **Measuring wider project impact:** Measuring the reach and degree to which information has been passed on and has influenced behavior or attitudes beyond the individual participants is highly challenging and requires staff time and capacity to conduct meaningful follow-up with participants.
- **Crucial role of Aware Girls:** While Citizen's Committee members said they would continue attending meetings, nearly all members were unwilling to continue the Committees without the support of Aware Girls. This challenges the sustainability of this part of the project.
- **Pre-existing motivation:** Understanding the degree to which it was solely the project which contributed to the results is difficult to ascertain because the project participants were already motivated and committed to creating change.
- **Changing wider political structures to be supportive of women's participation:** While individual representatives of political parties expressed support of the project and its objectives, they were also honest about the limitations to their power and ability to influence the Pakistani political system and actors.

Impact

- **Increased knowledge on women's right and need to participate in political processes:** Participants explained that most of them were unaware of their rights before the training. After the training, all surveyed participants showed their knowledge about human rights and political rights had increased, all understood the importance of women's participation in active politics, and all had identification cards.
- **Increased confidence:** Testimonies showed participants gained the confidence to participate in political processes. For many, the realisation they could contribute politically was the most significant.

- **Increased participation in political processes and leadership skills:** All women interviewed showed some form of changed political behaviour, such as:
 - Four of the young female trainees joined active politics and seven indirect beneficiaries participated in local elections in 2015. From testimonies, there is good indication that the training contributed to these outcomes. For example two of these women starting their political career after the training.
 - Eleven out of nineteen women surveyed (58%) had voted for the first time in their lives in the local government elections of 2015.
 - 100% of the young women interviewed said they were actively sharing knowledge in their communities and educating women about their rights, were encouraging women to get national identification cards to enable them to vote, supporting them to vote for the candidate they support, and were part of Citizen's Committees working to resolve women's issues from that platform. Project participants felt they had helped more women to vote and that the number of female voters had increased.
- **Changing the perception of men and the wider community:** 24 community meetings were conducted in Swabi and Mardan, as well as many informal meetings at the request of communities. Pre and post training surveys showed a significant increase in the level of knowledge of both men and women. Furthermore, the evaluation found their level of knowledge on topics of women's right and human rights to be higher than that of the local community.
- **Scalability and replicability:** Aware Girls' model has strong potential to scale because of the project's high success rate and because participants are largely self-motivated and independent once trained. While the context varies within Pakistan, women within Khyber Pakhtunkhwa face very similar issues in terms of political participation to women in the rest of the country. The project model is therefore likely to be effective and needed in other districts.



Four women who had attended a training session on political participation and seven indirect beneficiaries ran in local elections. 10 of these women won (four direct and six indirect).

Reflections from Peace Direct and Aware Girls

Aware Girls

This evaluation shows that the project achieved significant results on an individual, community and political level, improving the confidence and knowledge of young women to participate politically. Since then, Aware Girls has seen wider level change, seeing participants of the training become role models and mentors for other young women. The communities which were engaged became supportive of women's civic, political and electoral participation as witnessed in the local elections conducted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province in 2015. Aware Girls also found that by engaging a variety of stakeholders, including political actors and community representatives through the Citizen's Committees, the project effected wider change and contributed significantly to the current national narrative around the need for women to be included in political processes – a narrative that is gaining momentum in Pakistan now as the country prepares for electoral reform.

Peace Direct

These findings show that Aware Girls has found an approach to working within a very challenging context on a highly sensitive and controversial issue, producing results that were considered 'exceptional' by the evaluator, given the highly conservative context. One of the most important areas of learning for us is how Aware Girls framed the impact of this work both in terms of women's empowerment and peacebuilding. While the peacebuilding impacts are more difficult to measure, particularly in the short term, Aware Girls

were clear that the long term process of peacebuilding in the region must begin by challenging the cultural norms that limit women's participation in community life, as well as the influence of extremist groups such as the Taliban who seek to deny women even the most basic of human rights. This long term effort, with impact which will be measured in many years' time, has been very important in helping Peace Direct to think about how to support our partners to implement this type of work, consistent with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

Recommendations

- Expand the project to include more than one training session in each district and to cover other districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa based on the project's success.
- Expand trainings to include men in order to increase political participation among young men of all economic and social backgrounds as part of making the political system more representative.
- Collaborate with educational institutions such as schools and universities to introduce trainings or modules focusing on women's political processes in curricula to create more structural change.
- Continue to build on the capacity of those trainees who won recent elections and provide them with the knowledge needed to further understand the political system.
- Create accessible and easy to use training materials for others to use.



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