

AGA KHAN RURAL SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Gender Roles in Transition in Northern Areas and Chitral (NAC)

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Introduction

This document will try to summarize the evolution of AKRSP's Gender Equality (GE) programme and the key lessons and experiences gained in this area, so far. Specifically, it will attempt to synthesize and update key outcomes and results of IDPR and its leveraged activities within the framework of AKRSP's current development strategy.

The analysis draws on the findings of numerous internal studies and external reports, including donor reports already submitted to CIDA. However, some examples and indicators of trends presented here are anecdotal, based on *in-situ* knowledge of AKRSP and observations of local stakeholders and participants. This is unavoidable because many dimensions of the overall change seen in the area are not adequately captured by available studies.

Although a significant volume of research material is available on specific aspects of AKRSP, including its GE work, it presents an incomplete picture, especially for external audiences, who have no way of comparing and contrasting the difference from the starting conditions and judge the cumulative change. Although more in-depth studies are needed to document the broad scope of change and transformation taking place in the area, we have been regularly documenting and reporting some of these trends through our longitudinal impact studies².

Having said that, there are also genuine difficulties in the available M&E tools and reporting templates that tend to miss out subtle and incremental processes of change, particularly the growing trends in awareness, increased confidence and competences among women and men, and the gradual shifting of societal norms, attitudes and values, with regard to gender roles.

Another difficulty in any work of this nature is the issue of attribution. Although, AKRSP is a major player in this area with a deliberate programme to catalyze social change and economic transformation, other developments, particularly investments in education, road communication, expanding markets and telecommunication technology are also making a major contribution to this process—developments that are not easy to separate from AKRSP-induced change.

In no way, this paper claims to be a complete account and an all encompassing synthesis of more than two decades of work put in by AKRSP, and its impact on the individual and collective life of women and men in this area. Its purpose will be served if it can help in setting an appropriate context and provide some useful leads, insights and reference points for initiating a meaningful discussion on this important topic.

Historical Settings

As in other traditional societies, the socio-cultural, physical and economic environment in NAC has shaped the prevailing roles, attitudes and activities of women and men in the region. With a

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² Socioeconomic Study of Northern Areas and Chitral (SESNA) series of AKRSP

long feudal legacy, isolation and a subsistence economy, the status of women has remained unequal to men in NAC in almost every aspect of life. The high degree of inequality between women and men first observed by AKRSP in 1983 was not surprising, given the prevailing conditions of poverty and isolation, and social, institutional and economic stagnation that defined the context of communities living in NAC at that time.

In the first surveys conducted by AKRSP on the gender division of labor, women were found to share a larger burden of agricultural labor, in addition to their traditional household chores, family care, and collection of fuel-wood and potable water. The studies further showed that in cases where men left their homes for seasonal wage labor, the responsibility for farm and family labor fell entirely on women, children as well as aged parents.

AKRSP's diagnostic process showed that while women provided much of the agricultural labor, they were excluded from ownership of land and other assets, decision-making at the household level and higher levels. Women's mobility was restricted; they were almost entirely excluded from labor and factor markets, they had little or no say in political, religious and civil society institutions. The most severe limitation was their constrained access to social sector services and information.

The first Annual Review of AKRSP published towards the end of 1983, records the prevailing conditions found in the area, in the following words³:

Generally speaking, women's activities tend to be under-valued. There is no tradition of women's integration into wage labor. Moreover, due to the traditional and segregated nature of society there is an acute scarcity of skilled and literate women. In one large village, for instance, there was not a single literate woman, and village women identified a girls' school as an urgent priority. Although villagers were willing to provide a rent-free room for the school, they were unwilling to accept a male teacher and unable to find a female for the purpose. This is typical of the conservatism in many villages. The isolation of the district and its poor communication facilities with the rest of the country have tended to aggravate the problems of women.

In the early 1980s, NAC had one of the highest rates of infant mortality in the world, which stood at about 220 per 1000 live births [reference?]. A woman gave birth to 8 children on an average—perhaps an instinctive maternal insurance against high infant and child mortality! Maternal deaths during pregnancy and at the time of delivery were commonplace, though the exact numbers are difficult to ascertain. Almost 80% of the population was believed to live below the national poverty line. Per capita income was less than a third of the national average, which itself was quite low at about \$270. Literacy rates ranged between 10% and 20% for males and 0% to 8% for females depending on physical isolation and social orientation of different communities. Farm production was pre-dominantly subsistence oriented, except a few animals, trees or dried fruit sold locally by households to meet their emergency cash requirements.

Programme Approach

AKRSP was founded on the premise that people possess the potential and will to change their own lives, but lack organization, skills, and capital. An external catalyst or support organization is

³ AKRSP: First Annual Review, 1983, pp 43.

thus needed to mobilize people for them to realize their innate potential, manage development through collective action and achieve economies of scale.

In order to translate this approach into a scalable development programme, AKRSP asked the rural communities to form Village Organizations (social capital), accumulate savings (financial capital), and acquire new skills (human capital). As an immediate incentive, it promised a small infrastructure grant (physical capital) to those communities which would accept its terms for a continued development partnership.

AKRSP soon realized that, although this approach offered the best response to the general conditions of social decay and lack of investment in local resources and infrastructure, it would almost automatically exclude women because of their social constraints. AKRSP felt that without the participation of women, its development support would be incomplete and not have a lasting impact.

However, the difficulty remained in reaching out to women in a traditionally segregated society. Working through men ran the risk of leaving the women out of decision making and distorting their actual needs. Without openly bringing the subject of women to the exclusively male community gatherings, AKRSP quietly began to assess various options and soon concluded to extend the same three-point partnership to women as well.

By this time, the Programme was only a few months old, but it had already passed the first test of its credibility by responding rapidly to receptive communities (helped by a helicopter to reach out to remote villages), through social mobilization services and cash grants for small infrastructure projects (banking services were not available at that time). The infrastructure component, called the Productive Physical Infrastructure (PPI) was designed to serve as an “entry point” for creating a village institution, and providing hands-on training to its members in community mobilization, project and resource management, as well as conflict resolution.

When the subject of women’s participation was eventually brought into the open in Village Organization (VO) meetings, initial reactions ranged from outright rejection, curiosity, and men insisting to represent women’s interests. AKRSP did not press the point further and instead focused on building its rapport with the newly formed VOs.

A few weeks later, a village called Sherqilla, located in the Punial sub-division, sent a surprise resolution, requesting AKRSP to form a Women’s Organization (WO) in their community.⁴ This was a breakthrough that AKRSP was waiting for. In the first year, 10 WOs were established in the Gilgit district, and this number increased to more than 100 by the end of 1985, with a combined membership of 5,351 and savings of PKR 1.35 m⁵.

As an initial rule, PPI grants were limited to one grant per VO; the interest in WOs was at least partly motivated by the possibility of a second grant in the investment hungry villages.⁶

⁴ Sherqilla has the distinction of being one of the first two villages in the area, where His Highness the Aga Khan had established a Girls Academy in the late 1970s. The impact of this high-quality secondary school on the thinking of the local community was probably the main reason for this brave initiative.

⁵ AKRSP: Third Annual Review, 1985, incorporating Twelfth Progress Report

⁶ Historically, village infrastructure, such as irrigation systems were built by the local *Mirs* and *Rajas*, who used their considerable authority to mobilize free labor from their subjects to develop new land for cultivation and to expand their revenue base. As the authority of feudal lords weakened and eventually their rule came to an end, infrastructure development also slowed down. During the two decades preceding the creation of AKRSP, little or no investment was made in the life supporting irrigation infrastructure in NAC. The renewal of traditional systems of collective action for

Economic empowerment as an entry point

Based on the initial analysis of local conditions and available knowledge at that time, AKRSP thought it would be most appropriate to focus on income generation and social mobilization as the defining features of its GE programme. This strategy was pursued with the conviction that with *economic empowerment* and the *right of association*, women in the area can be assisted in improving their conditions, and that can also serve as the first step towards addressing deep-rooted gender disparities.

In practice, this proved to be an ambitious plan. The primary difficulty was reaching out to rural women with social mobilization and saving services and new productive skills. Without precedence for female employment and the non-availability of suitably qualified local women, AKRSP had to recruit women with requisite technical skills from the south. This option had its own challenges, such as linguistic barriers and cultural differences. The interface with the main body of rural women still remained a major challenge for a long time, especially in remote valleys. Even though WOs were formed in significant numbers in the first ten years or so, their leadership remained largely in the hands of men, as there were few literate women to transact the business of WOs.⁷

With no entitlement to land, restricted mobility, extremely low literacy rates, lack of skills, and exclusion from labor market and financial services, finding viable income earning opportunities for women proved to be an extremely difficult undertaking. AKRSP tried to confront this problem in a number of ways. To redress the issue of 'assetlessness', AKRSP encouraged WOs to create their own financial assets through a disciplined savings programme, which was then linked to micro-credit services. The Programme also financed the acquisition of land through long-term leasing arrangements and established fruit orchards to be collectively owned by WOs. Next, it provided training, and subsidized seed and other inputs and marketing services to enable women to produce and market vegetables and poultry products to earn their own income and put this income into their savings. This again proved to be a difficult challenge in the initial years, such as the delayed nature of returns from orchards, technical difficulties to ensure quality and uniformity in the market-bound produce and a virtually complete exclusion of women from market transactions.

Nonetheless, these initiatives opened up new possibilities for women that were previously unthinkable and helped change the attitudes of both women and men about their traditional roles.

A key outcome of the social organizational effort and tangible economic services for women created a lively debate among and between VOs and WOs, creating a new wave of awareness and understanding and creating pro-equality constituencies among men.

Thus the Great Gender Debate begun in these traditional societies. Taking advantage of this thaw in gender relations, AKRSP introduced formal sensitization activities and tools for gender assessment, planning and capacity building.

creating public goods in the form of voluntary VOs, minus the coercive authority of the Mirs, was a major contributing factor in the initial success and acceptance of AKRSP approach.

⁷ The male leadership of WOs, which was thought as a mere necessity, actually helped produce GE champions and an effective pro-women constituency among VO activists, which endures to this day.

This multi-dimensional strategy of working to improve the overall awareness and attitudes through social mobilization, and combining it with tangible economic incentives and capacities and capabilities, proved to be an effective and scalable GE programme.

Evolution of AKRSP's GE Strategy

Since inception, AKRSP's GE strategy has gone through several iterations, reflecting changing conditions, regional variations, opportunities, awareness and co-learning with the local communities. The core of this strategy is closely linked with the overall approach followed by AKRSP for the inclusive and balanced development of small farming communities living in NAC. The GE strategy and its associated programmes have evolved in incremental steps, in response to new opportunities and entry points available at different stages of AKRSP and its changing context. For AKRSP, GE goals have remained both a desirable end, and an essential contribution to the larger purpose of participatory community development and social and economic transformation.

In 2003, AKRSP undertook a major strategic exercise to reposition and retool itself for the next set of challenges and opportunities that were emerging on the horizon.⁸ That year, AKRSP celebrated 20 years of its engagement in NAC, and reflected on its achievements and lessons in an international conference co-sponsored by CIDA and DFID in Islamabad.⁹ As AKRSP was preparing its next funding proposal to CIDA at that time, we took this opportunity to include key elements of our Strategy in the IDPR.

The new Strategy focused on creating and strengthening a second generation of civil society organizations, further empowerment of women, and engaging public and private sector partners in a broader dialogue on development. These foci thus became the central themes of IDPR. The main thrust of this new programme was to create permanent institutional capacities in the area for addressing key challenges of inclusive and sustainable development: e.g., poverty, gender equality and policy reform. The three components of IDPR were designed to mutually reinforce each other and produce an institutional environment for *indigenizing* AKRSP's participatory legacy in the area.

With this change, AKRSP entered a new phase in its existence in which the major focus shifted from direct delivery of services to creating and fostering 'successor' institutions rooted in local communities. In this phase, the primary role of AKRSP remains strategic: e.g., mainstreaming pro-poor and pro-equality policies and participatory practices in the public and civil society sector institutions, and investing its resources and expertise to improve existing, and create missing services. The basic idea was to create a *marketplace* for development services by working on both the demand and supply sides of the development equation.

Results, outcomes and trends

Increased awareness and confidence

Though difficult to measure but clear to observe and compare with the past and rest of Pakistan, the level of awareness has increased in NAC for the need to achieve balanced improvements in the quality of life of both women and men in the region. Though never documented in detail, the

⁸ AKRSP's main Strategy document and thematic strategies

⁹ *Valleys in Transition (2005)*, a book compiling selected papers presented by AKRSP and external researchers

strong religious and cultural resistance to women's inclusion in public initiatives has diminished even in the most conservative areas. For instance, in Nager, where not a single woman could be found with a higher secondary school level education to serve as a teacher in 1980s, 1,400 girls appeared in the matriculation exam in 2005. With a growing base of literate women, skilled women, mobile working women, adult-literate women, income earning women, and politically active women, a critical mass effect is being produced in NAC, with positive impacts on gender relations within the families and in the society at large.

In the initial years, it was unthinkable for the Programme staff to meet with women, and even women staff was refused entry into many villages because men feared that they might "contaminate" the minds of local women. Threats against girl schools and health centers were common, and some were actually burnt down. In the documentary, *Taller than Mountains*, a woman staff member describes how in a particular village a group of armed men disrupted a survey and took away the paper work at gun point.

These feelings have not gone away completely, but have become a rarity now. Instead, community leaders, politicians and even religious leaders are now lobbying hard to get funds for girls schools. This has happened through investments in women's and men's organizations, sensitization, training, exposure, capacity building, and social and economic development initiatives.

Reduced gender disparities

At the household level, discernable shifts can be observed in decision-making and division of labor. Although these patterns are still skewed in favor of men, the trends are gradually changing. On the economic front, more women are able to own and control incomes, which has increased the overall household income and well-being and helped improve attitudes and gender relations at the household level; the number of women entering the job market, especially in the new sectors is seeing an upward trend. More significant, there is an impressive number of women who now own their own businesses; their mobility and access to social services and information have increased, thus breaking the traditional barriers that excluded women from the public domain.¹⁰

However, the most significant change is taking place in the educational sector, especially in access to primary education. AKRSP's latest longitudinal study conducted in 2005 shows a steady increase in household income allocated to education. Across the Programme area, the average proportion of household income allocated to education has increased from 10% in 2001 to 13% in 2005, with the highest increase recorded in Gilgit District, where it has gone up from 11% to 18% during the same period. The proportion of household income allocated to education stood at only 5% in 1991. Much of this increase is believed to be the result of greater investment in girls' education. This is clear from an increasing trend in the overall female literacy rate in NAC, which is accelerating at a faster pace, relative to male literacy.¹¹

Similarly, in the health sector, household income allocated to health increased from 6% to 10% in the programme area between 1991 and 2001. The highest jump was in Chitral (from 3% to 10%), followed by Baltistan (6% to 11%), which shows that these farthest districts are now catching up with relatively more accessible areas of Gilgit and Ghizer.

¹⁰ AKRSP: SESNAC Report, 2005

¹¹ Ibid

The health, education and sanitation status of households is expected to have improved even further as a result of more recent investments in social sector activities under IDPR, which are designed to increase the quality and outreach capacity of service delivery agencies, and the absorptive and value-added capacity of communities.

Overall household incomes have increased, and income poverty and inequality is coming down significantly. These dual and mutually-reinforcing drivers of change—improving quality of life indicators and attitudinal change in gender relations—are helping to shape a society in NAC that is increasingly able to use its optimum potential and chart a balanced and socially inclusive path for sustainable development.

Improved institutional environment

Policy and institutional reform was a major target of IDPR. The Policy Dialog and Partnership (PDP) component sought to create pro-women and pro-poor constituencies and capacities in the public, private and civil society sector institutions.

A major success in this area has been the extension of provisions guaranteeing at least 33% representation for women in elected institutions under the Local Government Ordinance, 2004. This Law, which included other provisions to devolve power to local government system was applicable to Chitral, but not to the Northern Areas. Through intense lobbying and assistance in drafting the legislation, the women's representation provisions were successfully extended to the Northern Areas in 2005.¹² During the last local bodies elections, a large number of women, who had previously been groomed as leaders and activists in the WOs were elected to local councils. AKRSP followed up with intensive capacity building support, under IDPR, to hundreds of elected representatives at all levels. This initiative has created better rapport and understanding between women and men and helped in a smooth transition to gender integration in democratic institutions.

AKRSP has also assisted the local Administration in the Northern Areas in establishing a “Women's Development” Cell in the Planning and Development (P&D) Department, which is responsible for providing policy guidelines to other Line departments in developing their Annual Development Plans. AKRSP has also invested considerable resources in transferring knowledge, tools and expertise in gender analysis into planning by a variety of local institutional actors—from the Planning and Development Department, to the Police Academy and Association of Taxi Drivers.

As can be expected, policy reform in the public sector is a slow process, especially at the lower tiers of government in developing countries. However, an encouraging outcome of this work is that for the first time, women professionals have been recruited at senior levels in the P&D Department, gender concerns are being recognized and incrementally included in planning and budgetary processes, and Line Departments are under pressure to follow specific guidelines to improve their practices.

In AKRSP's own work, emphasis on gender integration in civil society institutions, gender inclusive community level planning and resource allocation decisions, is beginning to pay dividends. Formal higher level institutions, such as Local Support Organizations (LSOs) are striving to have more gender balanced governing bodies, management committees and staffing

¹² The number women legislators have increased from 3 to 10 in the Northern Areas Legislative Assembly, including 2 former AKRSP staff.

structures. Although there is great variation in the extent and quality of gender participation in decision-making across different programme regions, the trend clearly points to greater integration. For instance, in lower Chitral, Nager and Baltistan, areas considered as relatively conservative, it is no longer unusual to see women and men participate in joint workshops, conferences and other training events.

Even in religious rites conventionally considered as an exclusively male domain, the traditional barriers are coming down. In many instances, school girls are being given the opportunity to recite verses from the Holy *Quran*, a common practice in Muslim societies to open a public event, but an honor that was previously reserved for men.

A major reason for these trends and changing gender attitudes is a rapidly increasing pool of literate (both formal and informal education), highly educated professional and other working women. This increasing base of women power is changing the face of gender relations in all aspects of life, from politics and economics to culture and religion.

Dynamics of organizational capacities within AKRSP

As a leader and role model for inclusive and participatory development, AKRSP has strived to build and continuously improve its internal capacity for integrating gender concerns in its policy and programmes. In practice, this has entailed affirmative actions, gender education and orientation of its staff and formulating and implementing specific pro-women policies.

Perhaps nothing can illustrate more vividly the outcome of AKRSP's conscious pro-women staffing policy and actions than the story of the first five young women who were recruited with great difficulty in 1984. They are Noor-el-Ain, Yasmeen Karim, Uroos Bibi, Gulistan Ibadat and Kulsum Farman. Three of them had an education of only 10th grade and two had higher secondary school certificates, when they were hired.

Today all of them have earned Master's or equivalent degrees from Western universities. Noor-el-Ain is currently a Provincial Minister, responsible for education in the government of Northern Areas. Yasmeen Karim is a Senior Programme Manager responsible for Gender and Social Mobilization sectors in the AKDN-sponsored Earthquake Reconstruction Programme in Azad Kashmir; Uroos Madad is a Senior Manager with International Red Cross (IRC) and in the process of relocation to the United States; Gulistan Ibadat is a high flying Consultant and settled with her family in London; and Kulsum Farman heads AKRSP's Gender and Development Programme in Baltistan region. These women have been the torch bearers, role models and a source of inspiration for the next generation of professional women, who joined AKRSP in greater numbers and had had even better professional and career opportunities.¹³

The list of young women and men, who worked for AKRSP and built a national or even international career, is quite long. However, this success comes at a cost—a high staff turnover that continues to challenge AKRSP to this day. The high staff turnover is primarily a result of high demand for AKRSP-trained professionals in an expanding development sector in Pakistan, as well as in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Many of these young professionals had started their career at AKRSP and after a few years were in a position to avail their next opportunity, typically at 2-3 times their salary.

¹³ Yasmeen Karim and Kulsum Farman received symbolic nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize by an international organization called *Women for Nobel Laureates*.

Though an apparent loss to AKRSP, there are at least two positive aspects to this trend. Firstly, it creates openings for a steady stream of fresh graduates from the area to join AKRSP and to avail similar career opportunities. Secondly, the steady outflow of AKRSP alumni helps in spreading its “message” to other organizations, thus scaling the approach at no cost to AKRSP.

The staff turnover issues notwithstanding, AKRSP has been able to maintain its core capacities and competencies at all times. Given the wide array of functions carried out by AKRSP and a culture of continuous training and learning, its professional staff members have been able to acquire multiple skills and develop a multi-task orientation.

At the governance level, AKRSP attracts individuals of highest professional caliber selected on merit at the national level. The Board of Directors includes five women out of 18. They include a CEO of a large development network, a top gender specialist, an educationist, a health expert and an economist.

The Board approved a new Gender Equality Strategy in 2006, which has guided the management to ensure equality of opportunity for all staff. It articulates desired policy and specific actions to integrate equality perspective in all systems, procedures and policies at every level. Although the ultimate goal of GE is still very far, AKRSP is proud that it has made a serious beginning on this long journey.

Last year, AKRSP received a prestigious award from ASA, a national Gender Watchdog in Pakistan, rating it as the second best gender-friendly organization in Pakistan, after Geo TV. Johnson and Johnson came out as third.

Conclusion and lessons learned

AKRSP places the challenge of GE in the larger framework of inclusive and participatory human development. It understands traditional gender roles as a social construct and holds patriarchal values of society responsible for lack of women’s empowerment and unequal development opportunities relative to men. For AKRSP, gender equality does not simply mean equal numbers of men, women, girls and boys; nor does it mean treating men and women, girls and boys exactly in the same way. What it has sought to achieve over the last 25 years is a shared vision of development for women and men, a vision where there is freedom from poverty, and women and men, girls and boys have equal opportunities to make choices, and where they can live together with dignity as valued members of their families and communities.

Gender Equality goals cannot be achieved by just bringing a change in the conditions of women but requires transformative processes within the structures and systems, e.g. presence in decision making positions, equitable distribution of resources, which are the main cause of inequality and subordination. Women and men themselves have to assume the role of change agents and therefore, *empowerment* becomes a central tenet to achieve gender equality goals.

Based on AKRSP’s specific experience in this area, it can be said that promotion of gender equality interests in culturally sensitive areas of NAC require ongoing dialogue with all the stakeholders, including religious and cultural opinion leaders with the objective of building pro-equality constituencies. Further, organizations pursuing gender interests in traditional societies can be more effective by adapting flexible strategies to suit local conditions. Gender equality goals can be pursued more effectively when practical and beneficial considerations, such as

tangible social and economic projects are blended with awareness and sensitization programmes, based on local needs and priorities.

Although many gains have been made in NAC in the past 25 years, some traditional gender roles have been reinforced, and new ones added, this time on generational rather than gender lines. For example, as a result of increased off-farm economic opportunities, working men and women are no longer able or inclined to share the farm labor with older members of their family. This means that older women and men often have to assume even greater on-farm and household workloads. At the same time, with more frequent school attendance, children can no longer contribute at the same level to household chores and farm activities, such as livestock herding, thereby increasing the workload on the farming women.

Gender disparity, despite many recent improvements, persists in NAC, but to a much lesser degree than observed in the recent past.

A number of generic lessons can be distilled from the long and continuous engagement of AKRSP in NAC and its specific experience in this sector. Some of these are listed below:

- The first lesson is that GE strategies work best when they are firmly anchored in a holistic and participatory development framework and integrated with tailor-made investments in local resources and capacities in a long-term partnership mode
- The second lesson is that the motivation for change must come from within the society in the form of a social awareness movement, induced and guided through a sustained social mobilization effort
- A third lesson is to take an incremental view of change processes; earning the respect of stakeholders, adapting to their needs; being there for the long haul, and finding the right “entry points” at appropriate opportune moments
- A fourth lesson is to learn to leverage resources, reward good practices, encourage dialogue, and create pro-equality champions and constituencies among local stakeholders
- A fifth lesson is to accept failure, face up to unintended consequences, learn to retreat when necessary, take accidental shocks and their consequences as given, and learn from all forms of experience
- A sixth and final lesson is to consistently earn the respect and trust of stakeholders and retain it at all times through professional and transparent delivery of the tasks and responsibilities.