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## PROMOTING FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

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### **Abstract**

A recent publication of the Ministry of Education, Islamabad, shows that the province of Sindh has a population of over 30 million. The overall literacy rate in this province is 46.7 %, while the female literacy rate is 35.4%. However, in the rural areas of Sindh the female literacy rate is 13.11% against the male literacy rate of 52.1%.

There are many social, cultural and economic factors that inhibit females from availing opportunities on an equal basis with the other segments of society. The literature also reveals that due to the above-mentioned factors females are confined to play a passive role in general and in the education sector in particular. According to a recent UNDP publication, there is considerable disparity between males and females in terms of professional development.

Considering the importance of professional development of females in the education sector in Sindh, the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED), under the Pakistan Non- Government Initiatives (PNI-II), took an initiative to launch a project titled ‘Strengthening the Capacity of NGOs/CBOs’. The project targeted to provide opportunities of professional development to 258 individuals, but the actual number of those who graduated was 388, considerably exceeding the planned target. Out of 388, 68 % (262) were females, which show the enthusiasm and commitment of the participants, collaborating NGOs/CBOs and AKU-IED towards the professional development of females. Through this initiative, females were trained as ‘agents of change’ to motivate their communities towards education of their children, in particular the girl child.

This presentation unfolds the learning experiences of the USAID Project-III team in promoting female participation in professional development programmes at AKU-IED.

## Introduction

Education is one of the important keys to breaking the vicious circle of ignorance and exploitation and empowering human beings to improve their lives. The aim of education is to bring about all round development, which includes one's personality, mental understanding and spiritual and moral values. Therefore, priority should be given to the primary and pre-primary levels of education, being the basis of the education system. However, these values should also be promoted in other levels and forms of education. Dr Mahbub-ul-Haq (2000) states in his report that "during the last 20 years, significant progress has taken place in the state of education in South Asia, but vast gap still remains between the educational achievements of male and female counterparts. There is a need to improve both the access of women and their inclination to non-traditional fields. School location, enrolment, facilities for female students and teachers, curriculum and examination policies are among the various school related factors that can contribute to gender gaps in enrolments. These factors can influence parents' decisions on whether to educate their daughters. It is also a basic human right. Therefore, educating women is an important goal in itself". And UNESCO's (1992) report states that as human beings, women, too, have the right to control and direct their lives. The renewed commitment towards 'Education for All' brings the best hope for improving the situation of women's education in this century.

In Pakistan, particularly in rural and suburban areas of Sindh, women are situated largely at the periphery of the educational system in comparison to their male counterparts. According to Bajiya (2002), "lack of education is one of the reasons for a lot of problems in our society". Traditionally, it is considered that women are confined to their homes and men are the breadwinners of the family. Education can play a crucial role in enhancing the status of women and placing them on an equal footing with their male counterparts. It also increases women's ability to secure employment in the formal sector. According to Haq (2000), "no society has ever liberated itself economically, politically, or socially without a sound base of educated women".

The World Bank conducted studies which indicated that "the countries with a lower female enrolment rate would have worse indicators of social welfare. In other words, a country, which neglects female education, will spend a great deal more to achieve a level of social well being similar to that of a country which has been supportive of female education" (Haq, 2002).

Successive governments of Pakistan have grappled with the issue of Universal Primary

Education (UPE), in general, and girls' education, in particular. In order to achieve the UPE target, several initiatives were undertaken at the government level but they did not seem to have any major impact. In the late 1990s the government of Pakistan recognized the role of community participation in the development of social sector, particularly education. Thus, community participation became a major thrust of government plans and programmes such as the Social Action Programme (SAP) Phase I and II to achieve the UPE target. As a result, several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) emerged as 'driving forces' to take leading roles in implementation of governmental initiatives at the grass-root level. Currently, 1,700 NGOs are registered in the Sindh province. Many NGOs/CBOs do not have adequate institutional capacity to manage the governmental and their own educational initiatives effectively. They have been experiencing numerous challenges, including gender equity and the quality of education, for promoting pre-primary and primary education in rural and suburban areas of Pakistan.

In order to strengthen the capacity of NGOs/CBOs, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provided financial assistance to the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) for 'Pakistan Non-Government Initiatives' (PNI). One of the projects titled 'USAID Project-III' within PNI-II deals with 'strengthening the capacity of NGOs/CBOs in primary education', in general, and girls education, in particular, in rural and suburban areas of Sindh. The Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) took on a leadership role in building capacity of the NGOs/CBOs through context- based professional development programmes. The project contained four major objectives: a) to build upon the successful NGOs/CBOs' work in rural Sindh; b) to provide management training to head teachers, community management and NGOs/CBOs staff; c) to provide follow-up support to teachers and others; d) to develop capacity among NGOs/CBOs members to better monitor and document the progress of their educational initiatives.

Based on the initial dialogues with 14 NGOs/CBOs and needs assessment workshops, the Project-III team at AKU-IED launched a series of professional development programmes related to classroom teaching and teacher education, educational management, monitoring, evaluation and documentation, in order to enhance individuals and organizational capacity of NGOs/CBOs. The purpose was to help teachers, headteachers and community leaders to become reflective practitioners so that they could deal with the complexities of classroom teaching, teacher education, educational leadership and managerial tasks at 'individual, organizational and community' levels. This project had served as a 'building

block’, both for AKU-IED and the NGOs/CBOs, in developing sustainable collaboration to improve the scenario of education, particularly for girls.

The purpose of this paper is to unfold some of the lessons learnt and challenges faced by the USAID Project-III team in promoting female participation in professional development programmes at AKU-IED, along with some narratives of female participants about their experiences. Diverse range of techniques were employed in collection and analysis of data such as course participants reflective journals, written reflective assignments, experiences from observations along with formal and informal interviews with different stakeholders and write-ups of follow-up visits and workshops.

### **Quantitative achievements: Step towards the peak**

One of the aims of USAID Project-III was to promote female participation in professional development programmes. Although these programmes may not create opportunities for more jobs, self-awareness through these programmes has helped the community to allow their females for availing such professional development opportunities outside their homes. The following table indicates that out of 388 graduates, 262 (68%) were females who benefited from the programmes. This seems a significant achievement of the project towards enhancing and promoting female participation for their empowerment. This also reveals the commitment and enthusiasm of both AKU-IED and collaborating NGOs/CBOs.

| Programme   | Number of Programmes Offered | Project Target | Project Result | Male             | Female           |
|---|------------------------------|----------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|
| Certificate in Education: Educational Leadership and Management | 4                            | 70             | 108            | 43               | 65               |
| Certificate in Education: Primary Education                     | 7                            | 125            | 210            | 54               | 156              |
| Advanced Diploma in Education: Primary Education                | 2                            | 26             | 32             | 11               | 21               |
| Monitoring, Evaluation and Documentation Course                 | 1                            | 30             | 32             | 14               | 18               |
| Master of Education: Teacher Education                          | --                           | 7              | 7              | 4                | 2                |
| <b>Total</b>  |                              | <b>258</b>     | <b>388</b>     | <b>126 (32%)</b> | <b>262 (68%)</b> |

A significant aspect of increased participation of females from NGOs/CBOs indicates recognition by the community leadership that females in rural areas have an important role to perform beyond their household chores.

### **Lessons learnt: What difference?**

Following are some of the lessons learnt by the project team along with anecdotes from experiences of teachers, headteachers, NGOs' leadership and community members, which reveal that the programmes have helped the female participants in changing their attitudes, perceptions and practices, at the individual and organizational levels. Most graduates demonstrated improvement in self-confidence, openness to share experiences, time management and problem-solving skills and attitudes; they learnt to disagree in a positive manner. They developed skills for looking into issues from different angles and leave the room open for further discussion. Change in their practice, understanding and attitude was noticed in many ways. The active participation of females apparently led to these changes. Readiness, willingness, and openness of female participants assisted the project team to contribute more effectively to their capacity-building.

### ***Mutual trust helps to understand each other's perspective and promote interest towards professional development***

Mutual trust served as a source for encouraging female participation in the programmes. It may be mentioned here that in the rural areas females are not allowed to work with their male counterparts due to cultural considerations. UNESCO (1992) reported that the men's negative attitude towards the education of their daughters/sisters or their wives reflect their deep-rooted fear that education will lead women to become independent and "uncontrollable", they may start "demanding" too much. But these programmes served as 'catalyst' in changing their perception about females' role in community development. AKU-IED and collaborating NGOs/CBOs collectively ensured that females should get high priority in all professional programmes. For this purpose, the project team, in collaboration with NGOs/CBOs management, remained in contact with participants and their families in order to resolve this issue. The NGO/CBOs' leadership seemed to appreciate AKU-IED's efforts in providing adequate support to all female course participants, specially those from the rural and sub-urban areas who came out of their homes for the first time and stayed in Karachi. For example, one of the female participants said, "[when] I wanted to participate in the first visiting teacher (VT) programme; my

brother did not allow me because of co-education... Today, [however] I am here [as] since my brother [was] convinced [when he saw] by the first VT and [CEM] graduates... their insistence did not allow my brother to say no...”. This fact has also been recognized by the NGOs/CBOs leadership and has resulted in developing enhanced mutual trust that provided more access to females to participate in AKU-IED programmes.

***Conducive environment, integrated and cohesive approaches to planning and delivery of the programmes contribute towards making a difference in organizations***

The project team, along with NGOs/CBOs, have continued to practice and learn that an enabling, safe and adequate learning environment can and does significantly increase female participation in the professional development programmes and has a direct impact for boosting up their enthusiasm and interest leading towards NGOs/CBOs capacity-building. Conducive environment and participative delivery of the programmes promoted self-recognition, positive self-image and stimulated critical thinking among participants. It emerged from reflections and actions that the programmes had positively helped in cultivating their ideas. Most of the female CPs started recognizing their strengths, knowledge, skills and intellect and started to believe in their rights to dignity and justice. As stated by one of the CPs: “We learnt various techniques and strategies to mobilize community towards girls’ education and critically looked at the hindering factors in promoting female education and now we know that we can and will make a difference”. During the professional development programmes, CPs revisited their current notion about the nature, status and attitude of the community in promoting female education. The majority of them shared their experiences, which highlighted the contextual realities of female education. The male CPs were supportive and of the view that their female counterparts could also contribute effectively.

***Field visits help in developing positive interaction, enhancing understanding of concepts and issues, improving decision making and institutionalizing the shared idea, and keeping morale high while implementing new ideas / knowledge***

Sharing their feelings during workshops at AKU-IED, the NGOs/CBOs leadership and schools’ management said that the field visits by the instructional team had been extremely productive, well focused, organized and thought-provoking for them. It has been noted during the field visits that the graduates, especially females, had played key roles in taking their schools to the present level of achievement. During the regular field/follow-

up visits, it was found that majority of NGOs/CBOs had assigned major roles to AKU-IED's female graduates who proved to be successful as effective teachers and educational leaders with strong decision-making abilities. One of the graduates believed that the programme experience raised her confidence to be a better principal:

...before coming to AKU-IED, I did not have sufficient leadership and management knowledge and skills, I was somehow not confident about my roles and responsibilities as a head teacher. Also, I was unfamiliar with the issues related to classroom management, school development, community mobilization, female education and team building. Even for minor things, I was dependent on my higher management. But after attending the programmes at AKU-IED, specially during the field components where I was being observed by my facilitators, who being critical, provided support and feedback on minor but important happenings made me realize the difference between what I have been up to and what should I do. I myself felt incredible improvement in my leadership and management skills. It developed my confidence to move forward and find out problems and their solutions locally and make decisions. For example, as a manager I was responsible to enhance girls enrolment in my school during this academic year but I failed. I did not understand how to solve this issue. Because my attitude was very bossy and I did not value my colleagues. After attending the programme, my attitude changed and I started working with my colleagues. As a result, we planned how to solve this issue and came up with ideas to knock at the doors of the community and meet with parents especially mothers and encouraged them to send their daughters to the school. Finally, we achieved the targets and realized the importance of involving mothers to solve the issue. Now we have decided that once a month there will be a meeting with mothers to strengthen partnership with parents. The programme really developed my interpersonal and management skills. I did not know how to walk on the tight rope of effective school management, but this programme has enabled me to run....

Opportunities for re-conceptualization about beliefs and practices provide unique learning and prepare for dedicated work regarding community development issues, especially promoting female education

Female participants seemed to be more sensitive towards practices of promoting girls'



education and the improvement of the quality of education in their schools. During one of the sessions, a CP shared: “In my area very few girls are able to attend schools. While in Karachi I see girls are more educated than boys. When I go back to my school after the course, I will motivate the community towards female education.... The programme made me realize that without female education there is no development”. To promote female education, majority of the participants elaborated their experiences to paint their contextual realities. During the field visits, it was evident to the instructional team that the CPs through different activities had highlighted the real situation before the community and motivated them. As one female graduate shared with the team members:

In my village majority of the people [male] used to do cock fighting and spent a lot of money on it but they did not want to send their girls to schools. According to them, educating girls was a costly affair. But with the help of CEM graduates and NGOs leadership’s efforts we had organized a parent’s day in the village. On that day students presented a tableau in which they presented the same situation. We were so surprised to see that some parents [fathers] came to us and realized that they were spending money on cock fighting [kukar larana] but never thought about our daughters education. They promised to send their daughters to the schools.

This visible impact on community perceptions regarding girls’ education was noticed in the field. The community now seems to be more enthusiastic about educating their girls. Even illiterate women in purdah are prepared to educate their daughters, as one of them shared with the team members: “asan ta na parhi saghiyasy per munjhi daih (Beti) khi ostaatain perhaeendas jastaeen ho-ai parhandi (I am not educated but I will educate my daughter as much as she desires).” Such reflections depict that people might have thought in line with the point made in Haq. (2000) that “children of educated mothers have a greater growth potential also they are more likely to send both girls and boys to school and to keep them in school longer”. A general awareness about the need to educate girls is visible. One can see boys and girls participating in more or less equal numbers in schools. This situation was created by the hard committed work of the graduates who have been engaged in critical thinking exercises and sensitization about the existing situation and their actual roles to be performed.

### ***Continued professional support helps in improving the school outcomes and enrolment***

The project teams working relationship with the NGOs/CBOs leadership and CPs/graduates

has been on the basis of equity, fairness, openness, and shared leadership. Systematic and continued support helped to enhance professional learning of NGOs/CBOs members and the project team. At this time, parent-teacher relationships have begun to improve which helped to control the dropout rate in these NGOs/CBOs schools. During the field visits the instructional team observed that the dropout in girls' enrolment has been decreased, perhaps, due to use of teachers' alternative instructional methodology, positive attitude and improving relationship with their communities. One of the students of Class IV shared her thoughts with the team members: "I never want to leave this school as I learn to sing, do art, [play] games and read storybooks. When I grow up I want to become a teacher in this school."

One of the graduates shared: "Because of the friendly and pleasant environment of the schools not only [the] girls are coming to school regularly but they are encouraging their mothers to visit the schools." One of the mothers from the same village told the team: "I am so happy because my daughter is here and she is neat and clean and is getting education, otherwise, she would have been working like me at home, sweeping, washing clothes and pots and taking care of hens, eggs and goats."

There is substantial evidence about the impact of professional development programmes on girl students' enrolment in schools of rural and suburban areas. The girl students' enrollment rate has increased by 25% on an average amongst the NGOs/CBOs schools. Some NGO/CBOs reported greater pressure from the parents for admission, but due to the lack of capacity, they politely refused to take more students from the same village or area. On the other hand, some NGOs/CBOs have opened more community-based schools.

***Capacity building requires clear and shared vision and mission. It only happens when the policies and plans for improvement are made collectively, which essentially require certain forums to be developed and sustained within and across the organizations***

For sustainability of professional development opportunities at the NGO level, AKU-IED assisted in establishing 16 Learning Resource Centres (LRCs) through which each NGO had been conducting field-based programmes for their teachers from different cluster schools. These LRCs are managed and led by the AKU-IED Advanced Diploma graduates, out of which 9 are female (out of how many?). Using these LRCs as forums for sharing, all respective NGOs/CBOs seem to have developed a positive attitude towards

networking among themselves. According to one of the NGOs, “Learning Resource Centre is serving as an information and communication centre for our educational programmes and other activities. It is a platform to hold free exchange of views, needs assessment where teachers, head teachers and community members are discussing their expectations, challenges and evolving solutions according to our context. We are also using this LRC for networking mechanism within and among NGOs for promoting NGO-based professional development programmes in order to ensure long-term sustainability.” AKU-IED also has provided a network forum not only for graduates from different NGOs to share, discuss and work together for school improvement but to develop new horizon of professional relationship within and across NGOs/CBOs through different professional events such as opening/closing ceremonies of programmes, seminars and workshops. This has helped the NGOs/CBOs for re-thinking their notions and practices with regard to capacity building at the organizational level.

## **Challenges**

Since the programmes being offered by AKU-IED are based on co-education, orthodox cultural boundaries inhibit females in working together with male counterparts, but enhanced mutual trust and respect between NGOs/CBOs and AKU-IED, and a collaborative environment, has served as a source for improving female participation in the programmes. A significant number of participants were females who came from rural and sub-urban areas of the Sindh. For most of them, this has been the first co-education experience. However, it remained as one of the major challenges to help female participants to work freely with their male colleagues.

- At times, the project team found communication gaps between course participants (CPs) and NGOs/CBOs leaders or middle management, which sometimes affected CPs participation in programmatic activities at particular schedule.
- Some of the partner NGOs/CBOs still need to bring about changes in Terms of References (ToRs) of the AKU-IED graduates as they are overburdened with work (classroom teaching and professional development activities). It becomes challenging for the project team when CPs/graduates cannot cope with the assigned tasks because of their heavy workload.
- There was a huge diversity among the CPs who belonged to different socio-economic, geographical, academic and professional backgrounds. At times catering to the needs of such a large and diverse group of CPs was a major challenge for the project team to overcome.

## Conclusion

Based on firm evidence the research team is confident that the professional development programmes brought a real qualitative change in the respective context. More importantly, the project has developed experienced and capable human resources, particularly females, committed to improving their schools and motivating their communities towards girls' education. It is hoped that these individuals will be utilized and supported by their stakeholders for contributing their best. Goleman (1996) in his comprehensive book 'Working with Emotional Intelligence' says, "Hope, in a technical sense, is more than the sunny view that everything will turn out right" (p.98). He also quoted Snyder's (1991) definition of hope, "believing you have both the will and the way to accomplish your goals, whatever they may be".

Providing encouragement and support to schools reinforces their will. Providing knowledge, tools and techniques gives them the way, Hope is what sustains change agents when facing difficult challenges and setbacks' (Prenton, 1999).

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