Exploring the Impact of UNDP's National Literacy Program on Women's Socio-economic Status in Rural Pakistan

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Introduction

Despite undeniable progress in policy initiatives aimed at empowering women, this area continually remains one of the most critically under-addressed issues in our current socio-political discourse. Presently, women encompass half of the world's population (Nisar, 2020, 1); yet, they have historically faced systemic barriers and inequalities in access to education, economic opportunities, and political participation (World Bank, 2012). Such disparities are even more pronounced in developing nations, where often, factors like colonial legacies, political unrest, entrenched cultural norms and economic challenges further compound the obstacles facing women's equitable participation in society.

To this end, international non-governmental agencies such as the UN have implemented various programs, strategies, and initiatives across decades in developing nations. Within the UN framework, agencies such as UNESCO and UNDP, which are specifically tasked to assist countries in achieving sustainable development, have placed significant emphasis on this area. For instance, t, the pursuit of women's empowerment and gender equality remain central to the UNDP's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), under which extensive national and local networks are developed in such countries to alleviate poverty amongst women and children (Gilette, 2008, 198).

Invariably, efforts such as these continue to persist; however, the subsequent question that often arises is well-intentioned as they are, how effective they are in promoting long-term, substantial change. It is, thus, essential to critically evaluate the real-life impact and outcome of such initiatives so if there are areas of uneven results, they can be identified and improved in the future.

Substantive Importance

As such, this paper seeks to examine the effects of development programs such as the UNDP Literacy Programs in developing countries, using the context of the National Literacy Program enforced in rural areas of Pakistan.

Particularly, the context of Pakistan as a setting is deliberate and holds utmost importance for the research. Firstly, Pakistan embodies a unique intersection of challenges and opportunities relevant to the research. The country's diverse demographic has been marked with rural-urban disparities, varying degrees of economic development, and sociopolitical unrest (Nisar, 2020, 4). Moreover, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms within rural areas lead to the exclusion of women from essential education and economic opportunities, thereby limiting their access to resources and societal constraints. As a result, women are relegated to secondary roles solely in the domestic sphere and do not take part in the country's political processes. At the same time, Pakistan receives considerable attention and aid from international organizations like the UNDP (Nisar, 2020, 3) has been subject to many social cohesion and peace building activities, development and livelihood programs and community infrastructure programs (Nisar, 2020, 4).

Therefore, this context serves as a 'hard test' in research for whether community-driven development initiatives by such organizations are successful in meeting their goals (Beath, 2013, 1). The effectiveness of such interventions can have broader implications for the general class of interventions designed to promote the engagement of women in economic, social, and political activity in challenging environments (Beath, 2013, 1).

Theoretical Framework

Thus, the theory that anchors this research posits that while there are many factors of socio-economic empowerment, literacy is an isolated driver of empowerment, particularly for women in developing nations. In the context of rural Pakistan, 'literacy rate' does not merely

represent basic reading and writing but constitutes participation in an education institute or program that leads to the acquisition of critical thinking skills, financial literacy, and civic responsibility (UNDP, 2012).

The independent variable identified in this study is participation of young women in the UNDP's National Literacy Program in the village of Kasur in rural Punjab. Specifically, for the scope of this research, the focus is on women in single village; in reality, the UNDP's NLP aims to bridge the educational gap for out-of-school children, young people, and adult women across 122 districts and approximately 50,000 villages in Pakistan (UNDP, 2021). Specifically, our research will focus on the attendance of women under this program, in 'feeder' or community-based schools that have been opened in remote areas leading up to secondary education and equipped with resources such as teachers and teacher-learning material (UNDP, 2021). Whereas, the dependent variable is the socio-economic status of young women, which for this research, will be measured in three areas: participation in community decision-making, civic responsibility and change in employment or income levels.

Conversely, the mechanism of impact is relatively clear, resting upon three facets: empowerment through enhanced skill acquisition, societal and cultural transformation, and economic independence (Blanchard, 2023). First, because literacy encompasses a broadened skill set, participation in the UNDP's NLP directly influences these women's capacity to engage in meaningful, economic activities and employment opportunities. In rural regions such as Kasur, agriculture is the prevalent source of income (Nisar, 2020, 3) – receiving education beyond basic literacy will provide women with greater understanding and access to agricultural information, as well as the financial and decision-making skills required to partake in the industry. Second, such decision-making skills then will also translate into social and cultural transformation; the more

women in Kasur take part in the NLP, the more they will feel confident in their identities and thus, empowered into challenging pre-existing patriarchal norms that relegate them into domestic spaces under the autonomy of the men in their households. Finally, this can facilitate them into not only improving their own financial independence but also contribute to the household income, leading to a shift in household dynamics, where women's decisions are given greater consideration, further reinforcing their socio-economic empowerment.

Women's Participation in NLP -> Enhanced Literacy and Skills -> Socio-economic Empowerment and Status Improvement

Experimental Research Design

The subsequent field experiment is designed to investigate the impact of the UNDP's NLP on the socio-economic status of young women in the rural village of Kasur in Punjab. The hypothesis guiding the study is as follows: women in Kasur who have participated in the UNDP National Literacy Program will have an improved socio-economic status. This is guided by the mechanism that literacy improves economic and employment opportunities, increases sociocultural awareness, and instills skills a broader skill set.

Participants (Unit of Analysis)

The unit of analysis are young women residing in Kasur, rural Punjab who will be randomly sampled from the village's population to ensure a representative sample of the community's female population. Specifically, the target demographic is between 10 and 30 because this would include young girls who are currently in the program, older women who have potentially went through it and thus, are in a position where they can accurately be assessed if it helped them in their life, as well as, those who did not partake in them at all. This age also represents a key

segment of the population that is most vulnerable to socio-economic inequality because they can both contribute to socio-economic changes in the region and can also benefit from it improving.

Experimental Treatment – Operationalization of the Independent Variable

Participants will be systematically assigned to two distinct groups: the treatment group and the control group.

i. Treatment Group:

Consists of randomly selected young women divided into two categories: one, the ages of 10 to 18 who are actively in one of the NLPs and the other, older women from the ages of 19 to 30 who were in the past and have graduated onwards. For the first group, First, regular attendance will be monitored to ensure that they are actively engaging in the program. Then, to evaluate the effectiveness of the goals, results produced by the girls from assessments, tests or assignments will be measured to assess their literacy and critical thinking skills.

Furthermore, in-dept interviews will be conducted separately of the younger participant group to gauge their immediate perceptions of the program's impact on their educational, economic, and personal aspirations. Subsequently, the interviews with the older age group, who have graduated from the NLP, are designed to evaluate the sustainability of the program's impact. These conversations will delve into whether the skills and knowledge gained through the NLP have translated into long-term educational achievements, economic opportunities, and personal development. The goal is to ascertain if the benefits observed in the immediate aftermath of the program are enduring and have facilitated substantial change in their lives.

ii. Control Group:

Consists of women grouped in the same age range as the treatment group, specifically selected from the same regions in the village. However, they have not engaged in the UNDP's

National Literacy Program (NLP). Instead, their daily activities remain unchanged, primarily revolving around their roles in the domestic sphere, supplemented by any existing educational background they may have. The purpose of including this control group is to establish a baseline against which the impacts of the NLP on the treatment group can be accurately measured.

Still, the women in the control group will also undergo a series of consensual interviews, serving several essential purposes in the research design. Firstly, these interviews will capture a comprehensive picture of their current socio-economic status, including their levels of literacy, engagement in economic activities, and participation in community decision-making processes. This data will provide a crucial point of comparison to assess the effectiveness of the NLP in the treatment group. Secondly, the interviews will delve into the daily experiences and challenges faced by these women, offering valuable insights into the socio-cultural context of rural Punjab.

Considering their level of education is undetermined, having respond to surveys would not be an efficient form of collecting data; interviews would also paint an accurate picture of the the women's perceptions of literacy and education, their aspirations, and any barriers they perceive to their socio-economic empowerment.

Outcome Measurement – Operationalization of Dependent Variable

The operationalization for measuring the outcomes will encompass various methods. Firstly, interview responses to the same standardized questions will be compared for girls who are actively in an NLP with girls who are not to compare their progress in three key areas: the skills they possess and their awareness of employment opportunities, what they expect their personal roles are in society and how they aim to personally develop their identity. Comparing the two can paint a stark picture of the difference in mindsets influenced by obtaining literacy.

For the older group of participants who have previously completed the NLP, the study will track their educational trajectories post-graduation. This includes examining continued education pursuits, enrollment in higher education or vocational training programs, and any obstacles encountered in further educational development. The study will also assess changes in employment status and income levels for both age groups. Employment records and types of employment undertaken post-NLP will be analyzed, compared to participants in the control group, to understand the economic impact of the program. Additionally, any entrepreneurial activities initiated as a result of the skills acquired through the NLP will be documented.

Furthermore, community participation and civic engagement constitute another crucial aspect of the outcome measurement. Interview answers will paint a picture of the level of involvement of participants in the two groups in community activities and decision-making processes. This assessment will provide insight into the social empowerment aspect of literacy and education. The participants' engagement in civic activities, such as voting or attending community meetings, will be explored to understand the extent of their civic responsibility and participation in local governance.

Lastly, comparing answers to interview responses will also exhibit the difference in personal perceptions of independence and whether there is a difference in feelings of empowerment and agency that could potentially lead them to challenge inequality in the future.

Discussion

In order to strengthen the research, discussing the experiments advantages as well as is its limitations is key.

Validity

i. Internal Validity:

Refers to the degree of confidence in the causal conclusions drawn from an empirical study (Argi, 2023) As such, this study uses random assignment of women of the same groups from the smart parts of rural Punjab to either the treatment or control group. In doing so, it can help account for any confounding variables, whether observed or unobserved. Furthermore, the NLP's educational intervention acts as the experimental stimulus. Its effectiveness in enhancing literacy and thus, socio-economic status is the focal point of the study. Lastly, the intention behind the experiment is clear and well-defined to the reader and participants and does not breach any ethical concerns because responses are kept anonymous. As such, the internal validity of this study is likely moderate to strong.

ii. External Validity:

On the other hand, external validity refers to the generalizability of the causal conclusions drawn from an empirical study (Argi, 2023). For this research, the focus is on young women from a specific rural area in Pakistan and while this sample is representative of the specific population of interest, it is just one part of UNDP's efforts and thus, not a reflection of its overall effectiveness. While the representativeness of the same in field experiments this is generally better than in laboratory experiments, extending the conclusions beyond the study participants can still be a challenge. However, the NLP, as an educational intervention in a real-life setting, can be considered a realistic experimental stimulus. This adds to the external validity, making it moderate to strong, as the interventions and their effects are observed in a natural environment.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this study on the UNDP's NLP in rural Pakistan can provide valuable insight into whether such initiatives for women empowerment are even successful in meeting their

goals. Still, it is just a starting point: in order to paint the full picture, future research should broaden the study's generalizability by expanding to diverse settings and contexts.

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