

Identity and action for change¹

Comparison of two ethnic groups in Karachi, a mega city of Pakistan

by

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Karachi is the only mega city in Pakistan with a population of nearly 12 million. More than 50 per cent of Karachi’s population lives in *katchi abadis*, a local term for squatter settlements. Included in this category are the old villages in the land area of the city. Some of these villages are on the coastal belt (outskirts of Karachi) and some are found within the metropolitan city engulfed by the squatter settlements that emerged after 1947, when Pakistan was created, and which saw a large influx of migration into the city. These migrants were from up-country, especially from the province with a majority of Pakhtun population, during the late ’50s when industrial development was occurring in Pakistan.

Today, Pakhtoons constitute a large portion of Karachi’s population, and the city often witnesses conflict between them and members of MQM, a political party that mostly consists of members who were migrants from India after the creation of Pakistan. Some major riots in Karachi have been the result of clashes between these two groups. The indigenous populations of Karachi are the Sindhis, Baluch, Katchi and Gujarati speaking people. Thus the land mass of what is now Karachi is inhabited by sub-groups with varying ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

This paper examines a community-based initiative on women’s empowerment, with women in two squatter settlements of Karachi. One group consisted of women migrants, and the other groups were from an indigenous community. Both groups were Muslims.

Interactive sessions were conducted with seven women’s groups, five at one site (59 women) and two at the other (35 women). A total of 94 women were thus facilitated to explore their understanding of empowerment; identify what facilitates and impedes their empowerment; and to share their strategies for defying or resisting the impeding factors.

The process was spread over a range of 15 (10 Hrs) days to 30 days (80 Hrs). This process resulted in the formation of two women’s organisations which were to pursue the priorities for action identified by the women involved in the process.

¹ This paper is in press and will be published in *On Line Opinion*, Australia’s free internet journal of social and political opinion.

Empowerment was interpreted as <http://www.wemc.com.hk> “an increased capacity to make autonomous decisions that transform unfavourable power relations … It is an increased ability to question, challenge and eventually transform unfavorable gendered power relations, often legitimised in the name of ‘culture’”.

The research framework identified four levels for empowerment - starting from individual empowerment to collective action, getting organised and institutionalisation of the goals and objectives of the women’s efforts. Thus, the trajectory of action/s taken by the two groups was monitored, and any differences between the two groups could be noted.

Women’s understanding of their empowerment at the two sites was not substantially different, but a difference in their readiness to undertake collective action became evident as the two groups of women moved through the different stages of the research processes that led to the formation of women’s organisations at both the sites.

Women of the indigenous population appeared more enthusiastic to take collective action that would benefit women of their area, whereas women of the migrant groups did show an intention for collective action but appeared to imbibe less energy and enthusiasm for action.

The reason for the difference became apparent when Cognitive Behaviour Group Therapy (CBGT) was introduced in both the groups. The intended purpose was to use a tested psychological approach to women’s empowerment that is predicated on women exploring their own behaviour and perceived causes of that behaviour. This process of self-awareness is expected to lead to changes in behaviour as perception of causes changes. The action research process also assisted the women to identify priority areas for action, and they underwent advocacy training to present their priorities to the “decision makers” in their communities at a public meeting.

After the two public meetings, the WEMC research team continued to meet with the two groups to track actions for change at the community level. As action seemed to be slow in coming, group therapy sessions were introduced. This process revealed a difference in the women’s commitment to their communities.

The indigenous women were born, raised and married within their community. On the other hand, women of the migrant communities saw their area of residence as a strange place to which they arrived after their marriage, and those who grew up in the area anticipated marriages outside this community (marriages often being arranged in the villages of their parents); this resulted in a new generation of women who lacked any emotional investment or sense of belonging. This created a major difference in the desire and action for change in the overall area.

While the indigenous group was more motivated and committed to bringing overall change in their area of residence, a change that would benefit all women of the area, the migrant women were more interested in change for their individual selves. The more individual focus of interest of the migrant women was illustrated by their defensiveness in discussing and identifying causes of their behaviours. The CGBT experience that promoted collegial ties in the group of indigenous women had limited success in the group of migrant women, most of who remained absent while those who came showed liking for individual sessions with the therapist.

This research was part of the overall research of WEMC (Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts) which was initiated in these sites. The women involved in the CBGT are part of the larger group of women who experienced the participatory exercises through which they reflected on their lives and related to government policies for women, health, population and development and so on.

They are also now part of the women's organisations that came out of this process. The next phase will be to look out for possible leaders among these women. The research team is committed to working with these women for at least the next two years helping them to lobby the decision makers in their communities. The research team will also continue to find opportunities for the women to interact with larger women's and human rights organisations.

The current study is a modest step towards finding new ways to address the larger issue of ethnic violence in Sindh. At the micro level, empowering women is a step towards knowing what role women could play in saying NO to all forms of violence.

Findings from the study will be shared with civil society groups, and specially those working on women's rights and empowerment. While activism of civil society often does not engage with research activities, it is important to consider what these findings mean for women's empowerment and for researchers undertaking action research. The finding that a lack of belonging to a physical site could impede the possibility of collective action provides a criterion for selection of sites for those wanting to work on women's empowerment as collective agents of change in their environment. The finding also poses a new research question: when a sense of belonging to a site is missing, what collective identity could lead migrant women to action?

While research could enhance understanding of what triggers action in groups of migrant women, donors committed to women's empowerment could support and encourage work with women from indigenous communities.