

Rural Women's Struggle for Empowerment: A Case Study of Sindhiani Tehreek's Resistance and Resilience

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Abstract

This research paper examines the transformative role of Sindhiani Tehreek which was formed in 1982 under the leadership of Rasool Bux Palijo and scores of women's who's belonged to peasant's families. The Sindhiani tehreek also known as Women's movement of rural Sindh. Tehreek emerged as progressive movement, aimed for safeguarding the women right, empowering women in every field of life because women were facing lots of challenges due to patriarchal norms. However, the tehreek had adopted various strategies such as uniting women to challenge male dominated structure and oppressive political system that created obstacles to women in the rural Sindh. Moreover, this work will highlight another aspect Sindhiani Tehreek's like redefined Sindhi nationalism and struggle for equality in the rural society. Additionally, this research work has used various techniques and methods for data collection and to accelerate the quality of research, researchers chose to adopt qualitative methods of Historical research.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Rural Women, Patriarchy

Introduction

Rural Sindh was a place where women had to keep quiet, and their dreams were crushed by traditional norms and male dominated society. there was a one man stood up and said, "That's enough." named, Rasool Bux Palijo. Who witnessed his mother and sisters getting the short end of the stick and was deeply concerned about it. So, he formed Sindhiani Tehreek in 1982 as a women's wing under his political party of Sindh, Awami Tehreek. The primary goal of Sindhiani Tehreek was to struggle for women's empowerment in rural Sindh. The Tehreek had emerged as an interest group by the marginalized women of rural areas of Sindh, to direct respond against the repressive social and political environment of the Zia-ul-Huq's regime.

At that time, anti-women laws were introduced like Hudood Ordinances by the military dictator. Palijo cited that those discriminatory laws restricted the basic rights and freedom of women in the region, particularly Sindh. Before this, women already faced the various challenges, such as lack of access to ownership of land, economical tensions, limited educational opportunities, participation in decision making and health problems, causing of all these hurdles towards women were patriarchal system and conservative, traditional norms. Sindhiani Tehreek developed as the opposition group against all those obstacles faced by women especially in rural Sindh. The movement adopted the various strategies to achieve the goal, such as mass rallies in the streets, organizing conferences, educational campaigns and political activism, educating women about their fundamental rights, and addressing gender-based oppressions of rural women.

Furthermore, this research-based paper will emphasize the resilience and resistance of the Sindhiani Tehreek for the empowerment of women in rural Sindh. How Tehreek occurred and challenged those established norms of gender inequality through the various strategies to achieve their objectives and key achievements in empowering women in rural Sindh. Additionally, this work will elaborate the movement's struggle for decades as an interest group for women in rural Sindh.

Questions

While analyzing Sindhiani Tehreek's role in rural women's empowerment, some important questions arise.

1. What socio-political conditions led to the creation of Sindhiani Tehreek?
2. What specific objectives does Sindhiani Tehreek aim to achieve?
3. How has Sindhiani Tehreek empowered rural women, and what strategies has it used?
4. What outcomes and impacts have Sindhiani Tehreek achieved?

Historical Background

The Sindhiani Tehreek can be traced back to GM Syed's interest group for the rights of peasants and marginalized communities in Sindh. The group known as Sindh Hari Committee, was founded in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Meanwhile, Zia-ul-Huq government exploited the rights of rural women especially in rural Sindh. Through the implementation of discriminatory law by Zia, women were denied access to land ownership, education opportunities, political participation and right to make their own life decisions. Another aspect is the patriarchal and feudal systems dominated women, relegating them to subordinate roles in both family and community. Meanwhile, there was a need for women's organization to protect their rights, especially in rural Sindh.

The Sindhiani Tehreek was established on 27 November 1982 in the Thatta District. It is an organization for women called as "Sindhi Women Movement." At that time the deprivation and suppression of women was considered as societal norm, and women had considered it as their natural fate. This was the first progressive women organization in the history of Sindh to safeguard the rights of women and to work for their prosperity. Moreover, the Tehreek was a direct reaction to supremacy of patriarchy system. Also, Tehreek was aligned with the Hari Committee for the protection of basic human rights. Both were on one page to fight for their rights against traditional norms and those laws introduced by military dictator. Tehreek wanted to empower rural women through aligned with any political platform, because the male dominated society did not allow women to come on street for rising their voices.

One notable historical achievement of Sindhiani Tehreek was its active role in the MRD protests, where women marched alongside men to demand the restoration of democracy and challenged so many other issues of Sindh. This historical context reflects that the Sindhiani movement has played a significant role not only in advocating women's rights but also challenges the system that perpetuates their oppression.

Objectives of Sindhiani Tehreek

The fundamental objective of the Sindhiani Tehreek is to empower women in every space of life and to overcome the social, political, and economic inequalities that have hindered women's progress for decades. Such objectives also included the protection of Sindhi nationalism, preservation of literature, and struggle for democracy and freedom for the whole of Pakistan and fight against social class distinctions and patriarchy. Some objectives are further elaborated the Sindhiani Tehreek goals.

1. Empowerment of Rural Women:

Sindhiani Tehreek was established for only one cause to empower women in rural Sindh by raising awareness of their rights and challenging deeply rooted gender discrimination those prevent the women for empowerment. Tehreek purposed to shift the perception that women's roles and limitations were merely their "natural fate." According to central member of Tehreek, Hoor-un-Nisa, the primary goal of Sindhiani to empower women in every space of life and to overcome the social, political, and economic inequalities that have hindered women's progress for decades.

2. Combat Gender Discrimination and Patriarchy:

An essential aim was to challenge traditional, societal norms that oppressed women, such as domestic violence, forced marriages, and denial of educational opportunities and decision making for themselves. Sindhiani Tehreek sought to demolish patriarchy system and fight for the equality in the rural Sindh, especially for women across all spheres of life.

3. Promotion of Sindhi Nationalism and Cultural Identity:

Beyond gender issues, Sindhiani Tehreek focused on protecting Sindhi culture and identity because during that time the one-unit scheme was imposed in Pakistan, which merged everything in two units, west Pakistan, and East Pakistan. Sindhiani Tehreek realized that that was the direct attack on their identity, culture, and literature. That is why Tehreek decided to advocating Sindhi language, literature, and values, strengthening regional identity in the face of national and cultural suppression.

4. Support for Women's Health, Education, and Legal Rights:

Sindhiani Tehreek advocated for women's access to healthcare, education, and legal rights, pushing for more female doctors, girls' schools, technical training centers, and healthcare facilities in rural areas where male dominant society existed, women faced various challenges related health education and legal rights.

5. Addressing Cultural Practices Harmful to Women:

The movement targeted harmful cultural practices, including Karo Kari (honor killings), forced marriages, and marriage to the Quran. The aim of Sindhiani Tehreek to campaigned for an equal society where women were protected from these abuses, emphasizing that these practices were neither just nor integral to cultural identity.

6. Facilitating Women's Leadership in Social and Political

Arenas:

One of other objectives of Sindhiani Tehreek was to encouraged women to take on leadership roles, aiming to develop female leaders who could champion causes of social justice, equality, and political participation. It created pathways for women to influence local governance and community decisions in Sindh especially rural areas, where feudal were responsible for women discrimination.

7. Resistance Against Oppressive Regimes:

During the Zia-ul-Haq era, the movement opposed anti-women laws and policies imposed under the guise of Islamization. Sindhiani Tehreek actively participated in the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD), promoting democratic rights, and standing against military dictatorship.

Empowerment Strategies of Sindhiani Tehreek

Sindhiani Tehreek is working especially for empowerment women in rural Sindh. It had two thousand members when it was created. Women travelled from village to village and house to house to mobilize women for participating in this movement and spread the message of equal status. The members of Tehreek organized meetings of women to aware them of their rights. The women of remote areas could not attend the meeting due to absence of privileges. Thus, the movement had arranged meetings in the

remote areas where they could easily participate and gain awareness about their rights. After that many women joined this movement including women of elite class. They also provided funds to support its activities. The central body of this Tehreek created a local body such as district body of women and on divisional level. Further, Tehreek have used several methods to achieve its goals. There are following strategies, tehreek implemented to reach the destination place of success.

1. Organizing Rural Women for Collective Action through protests and rallies:

Sindhiani Tehreek knew they cannot be empowered until they united with one another. Tehreek members organized the multiple groups for traveling from village to village, uniting women who had already lived in isolation and bound by social norms. These collective meetings let women speak out their problems for the first time, let them see the same situations around, and stand together to challenge whole male dominated system. After uniting, score of women arranges protests and rallies in the streets of villages against the patriarchy system. The power of these group actions lay in transforming personal struggles into a shared mission, emphasizing that women could drive significant social change when united.

2. Educational Initiatives and organized conventions to Aware women for their rights:

One of the main tactics of Sindhiani Tehreek was to develop awareness about women rights through arrange conference and convention in tehsil and district levels in the rural areas of Sindh. During the time of movement, women in rural Sindh especially those in the male dominated society where majority of women had little education of no education at all it was important to organize workshops, sessions on legal, health and education rights. These educational programs aimed to raising awareness of women rights, and the empowering understanding that could be developed that enabled woman to counter things such as forced marriages and domestic violence. This process Sindhiani Tehreek built the basis for individual and community power by providing women information and making them familiar that education was not an individual asset but also a tool for creating change in society. For instance, women have woken up to the fact that they have legal rights to land and the attempt has seen the development of several noticeable cases where rural women have been able to secure their land rights through the issuance of titles. Besides, education, the Sindhiani movement forms partnership with other civil society actors to reaffirm the protest of rural women for their fundamental rights.

3. Building Alliances with National and Global Women's Movements:

Realizing the importance of unity, Sindhiani Tehreek linked up with other national and global movements to expand the support system. Through

the alliance tehreek has achieved lots of attention at global level for the empowerment of women. women learnt new thing from other women movements. For instance, the women in the western countries, organized feminist movement in 1980. Their focus on important issues such as sexual harassment in the workplace and the fight for legal access to women health. Those movement also showed resistance for increasing political rights to women. Sindhiani Tehreek learnt from other movements and the alliance had a more positive impact on rural women as they knew that they were not alone in surviving in a male dominated society, but also women had faced discrimination, less opportunity as compared to man globally. Tehreek also collaborates with progressive organizations in Pakistan to strengthen its advocacy work and thereby ensure that the demands of rural women reach in the legislative bodies, national and international level.

4. Advocating for women Healthcare and Social Services

Access

Sindhiani Tehreek demanded the urgent need for women healthcare and social services in rural areas of Sindh. women in rural areas faced basic health challenges from maternal health problems to reproductive health issues. The tehreek advocated for better health services through pressing the local government for increasing the availability of female doctors, clinics, and public health resources in rural areas of Sindh. Thus, through raising these concerns, Sindhiani Tehreek emphasized that the right to healthcare as part of the woman's rights is a crucial aspect which cannot remain limited to the privileged women only but must be provided to all to ensure the overall strength of the society.

5. Political Mobilization and Democratic Participation

Sindhiani Tehreek worked for involvement of rural women in the political field and highlighted that only political participation was the key for long-term social transformation. The tehreek encouraged women to engage in rallies, protests, and democratic movements, making their voices heard at the national and international level. Participation in such political actions helped rural women build confidence in their ability to effect change, emphasizing that their perspectives were critical in shaping policies that would affect their lives. The political mobilization of Sindhiani Tehreek laid the rural women to more participation in politics. For instance, the biggest achievement of this was the women of urban areas of Sindh also motivated from this activity.

Outcomes and Impact of Sindhiani Tehreek

Imagine women in rural Sindh breaking free of a monotonous life where they were forced to accept whatever the society and the male members of their families have allocated to them and becoming independent. The grass-roots movement of Paliyo did not limit itself to door-knocking but it was bold

and unapologetically created space for sharing the voices of women. The direction of the journey was humble in the beginning, it was only accompanied by the first few thousand members who saw them quickly grow. At first, these women visited house after house where they spread the message and, for the first time, met with the sisters who had never had such opportunities before. They were quite straight-forward in dealing with the most challenging problems, such as the honoring of killings, forced marriages, and other practices which had been hidden for a long time. The following are the points of analysis of the outcomes and impact of Sindhiani Tehreek.

1. Breaking Barriers: Women's Rise in Sindhi Society:

Sindhiani Tehreek was changed the life of rural women through broke down the societal barriers created by traditional people. Despite being limited to the homes in the past, rural women found themselves engaging in social and the political arena. By organizing village-level meetings and arranging awareness conventions about women's rights. Women who once thought of themselves solely as caregivers and homemakers began to see themselves as change agents, challenging the status quo in their communities.

2. Promoting Voices: Political Empowerment of Rural

Women:

Sindhiani Tehreek has broken the political domination of the male population in rural Sindh through raising awareness for the rural women of Sindh about their political rights and by mobilizing them to exercise their franchise. Indeed, this shift was revolutionary and empowered many women to stand and air issues of importance to the society including land ownership, education and health. These women not only voted, but they also got empowered by active participation in the politics, and in addition to that they acquired political knowledge that enabled them to fight for their rights and know how to go about it. This move towards political representation is a change from the past where women were actively locked out from decision making in governance and other societal issues. Today, due to the hard work of Sindhiani Tehreek for empowerment of rural women, many of these empowered and they are played significant role in the authoritative positions of local and federal government. Where they have the authority to make policies for their communities, especially for rural women of Sindh.

3. Health, Education, and Economic Freedom for women

Sindhiani Tehreek's movement played positive roles in important areas of life and resulted in rights to health, education and the economic aspect of freedom to rural women. The movement advocated for better healthcare facilities for rural women, female doctors in rural areas, and increased access to educational institutions in the conservative society. Therefore, through fulfilling these needs Sindhiani Tehreek positively had an impact in the standard of living of the rural women. Improved maternal health resulted

from gaining access to healthcare while education access helped in improved personal skills. This in turn paved way to economic independence because women were empowered to be financially productive especially to support themselves and lessen their reliance to the male members of the family.

4. The Traditional Shift in the System of Patriarchy in

Rural Sindh:

One of the major success stories of Sindhiani Tehreek was the traditional shift against the patriarchal system. Tehreek opposed all such Practices that create obstacles for women in rural Sindh, karo kari, polygamy, and forced marriages. This advocacy helped in redrawing the social narrative in the male-dominated place and encouraged communities to question the traditions' norms, which oppressed women. Over time, this eventually led to the establishment of respect for the freedom of women, thus making the women take more personal decisions without much criticism from society.

5. Inspiring Future Movements: A Blueprint for Grassroots Organizing

Sindhiani Tehreek has set precedence beyond the immediate gains it achieved in rural and urban Sindh, giving impetus to other grassroots movements in Pakistan and similarly located rural settings around the world. The Tehreek offered a strategic model for rural women's movements by focusing on local issues, mobilizing women at the ground level, and fostering unity among women. For instance, the Sindhiani Tehreek's approach is akin to that of global movements like the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, initiated by Wangari Maathai. She empowered rural women through environmental activism, relating women's rights to land and community issues. Thus, the strategy of Sindhiani Tehreek reflects the possibility of culturally sensitive localized mobilization approaches that can mobilize marginalized peoples. In this way, other movements can appropriate and adapt those strategies to their context for their own struggle.

6. Education as Empowerment: Changing Generational

Mindsets

The activists of Sindhiani Tehreek believed that education would be the best weapon that could empower women in the rural Sindh because traditional norms did not let the girls go to schools there. Tehreek left long term impressions in promoting literacy as a means of empowerment of the society specially the womenfolk. Tehreek played its pivotal role through demanding education for girls, school for girls, technical education, and literacy and through this brought about orientation change of generations toward education generally and girls particularly. The movement came to realize that education will make a person transform not only their lives but also those of their communities. It is, therefore, this better education of a

generation of Sindhi women, as well as the future elimination of the cycle of poverty and dependence.

Challenges to the Sindhiani Movement

Many people mostly the men had criticized this Sindhiani Tehreek and gave misinterpretation of its work and objectives. But the members of Tehreek managed to convince many men that Sindhiani Tehreek is not anti-men or anti Islam, but this movement is for Sindhi's peasant's poor people and creating awareness about women issues. Mostly, the members were able to attract many men who then joined this movement and became its members of Tehreek. The movement was considered as anti-Islamic movement by the half-literate mullahs. The maulvis had threatened the members of Tehreek to stop it. Even some had decree against those women who had joined this Tehreek and called them as a kafir and blamed that these women are exploiting Islam. They argued that this movement is against the teachings of Islam. They claimed that this movement was supported by western countries. They blamed the members of this Tehreek are getting funds from the western world. They consider West as the enemy of Islam and a threat to their religion. The concept of gender discrimination strengthened during the time of Zia-ul-Haq. He suppressed the women on the name of Islamization. He imposed Islamisation which largely marginalized women's freedom. Women were suppressed and were not allowed to go outside of the home without hijab or pardah and without their male family member. Sindhiani Tehreek was first movement of Pakistan women at that time which started struggle against military dictatorship. It also opposed the discriminatory laws against women passed in the name of Islam by Zia regime. Sindhiani Tehreek supported the issues of Sindhi men who were arrested by state of Pakistan. And recorded protest in Sindh and demanded to release Sindhi people who were illegally arrested. But police started sheeling on the peaceful protestants of Sindhiani Tehreek and arrested them. Sindhiani Tehreek opposed those army officers who had harassed the women and raped them during Martial Law period. During that time many members of Sindhiani Tehreek have been arrested on false allegations.

Additionally, Sindhiani Tehreek faces significant challenges, particularly in its efforts to challenge the feudal and patriarchal structures that continue to dominate rural Sindh. Feudal lords, who wield considerable economic and political power, have consistently resisted the movement's attempts to reform land ownership laws and promote gender equality. The deep-rooted cultural conservatism in rural communities also makes it difficult to change societal attitudes toward women's rights and roles. These factors slow the pace of change and limit the movement's ability to fully achieve its goals. For instance, many feudal lords in Sindh continue to control vast tracts of land, using their power to resist reforms that would grant women land ownership. This resistance is often reinforced by

patriarchal attitudes that view women as subservient and unworthy of political or economic power.

Sindhiani Tehreek supported the restoration of democracy and participated actively in this MRD movement against Zia's regime. The members of this movement acknowledged the rights of Sindhi people in a democratic setup with proper representation which could bring justice to Sindhi men and women. Women recorded historical rallies against Zia-ul-Huq.

Sindhiani Tehreek raised voices on every forum. Hundreds of women had participated in long march against Musharraf regime and PMLN regime on the illegal construction of Kala Bagh dam. But unfortunately, this movement started declining when Rasool Bux Palijo died. Now this movement is divided into different sections. Palijo has always believed that women, if organized, can play a leading role in socio-economic development of the society. Awami Tehreek was a unique development in Pakistan whose public meetings had a sizable participation of its female cadres mostly they belonged to rural regions, lower and middle class of the society. In his viewpoint, if Sindh had to progress and to get rid of feudal vestiges, the women should be equally organized, educated, and streamlined in the society.

Like many grassroots movements, Sindhiani Tehreek operates with limited financial and organizational resources. This limitation affects the scope and reach of its activities. While the movement has achieved much with its available resources, it faces constraints in expanding its influence and scaling its programs. The movement's reliance on volunteer efforts and donations means that it cannot always sustain long-term campaigns or expand into new regions. For example, Sindhiani Tehreek's outreach is largely confined to specific districts in rural Sindh, and expanding its influence across the province or countrywide has been a challenge due to limited funding and logistical support.

Critical Analysis

The Sindhiani Tehreek is the one of Pakistan's progressive women's movements, that challenging the patriarchal structure which eradicated the women's freedom in rural Sindh. The tehreek not only safeguard the women rights but also protected the Sindhi nationalism, class issues, and political freedoms during the dictator period. Additionally, tehreek emerged as a interest group of young women belonging to marginalized families in rural Sindh. These women faced countless challenges within a male-dominated society but managed to achieve remarkable successes. They educated women of rural areas about harmful practices like karo kari and forced marriages, fighting for women's rights to make decisions for themselves. This work was like Latin American women's movements, as the Sindhiani Tehreek often confronted feudal lords and the government despite the inherent threats. Moreover, one of the most strategic moves of tehreek was to frame men's rights and women's rights as inter-related so that the

movement gained more support of men who would otherwise have felt left out. Sindhiani Tehreek also focused on the issue closest to home: the rights of land for poor farmers, which made it easy for the community to see how women's empowerment and many others benefited.

However, the tehreek faced considerable opposition, especially under General Zia-ul-Haq, who had strictly imposed laws that confined the lives of women in the public. Religious groups also labeled them as "anti-Islamic" or "Western-influenced," and more doors were closed against the flow of women's empowerment movements. Wisely, Sindhiani Tehreek was part of Movement for the Restoration of Democracy, and it put them in a strategic position that was not only championing women but also stood as champions of the general interest of Sindh to receive wider support and democracy to be restored in the country. The death of the founder Rasool Bux Palijo was another blow to the movement, serving as a lesson on the hazards of relying on one, centralized figure. This underscores the need for structured leadership training to ensure continuity.

Sindhiani Tehreek won them many of the things they wanted for women and especially for women in rural Sindh. It declared confrontation against the norms of patriarchal society; it demanded women's right to vote as well, allied with campaigns from other organizations who wanted democracy. This grass-root movement had proved that the ground-up organizations were also capable of bringing about social change, even in a society as rigid as that of structural gender inequalities. Sindhiani Tehreek is a testimony to the fact that the gender equality without many obstacles though is very crucial for the advancement of Pakistan. The struggle shall continue for gender movements and its milestones should be used to remember the contribution in shaping up Pakistan's development agenda. Sindhiani Tehreek's struggle in empowering women reflects a profound complex struggle against a deeply patriarchal society in the rural Sindh.

The movement achieved outstanding grassroots mobilization by focusing on the fact that education and engagement in legislative institutions, which they were essentially relegated to obscurity because of male supremacy, was directly in line with the greater interest of other socio-political issues at stake. Engaging upon those issues overlap like land rights, access to healthcare, economic empowerment for women, etc., these rights were introduced as integrally connected to the further betterment of Sindh society. Despite these great strides, the movement resisted fiercely against the traditional norms of the society and the machinery that looked at women empowerment with an eye of skepticism. Especially during Ziaul Haq's regime, the Islamic scholars of Pakistan portrayed Sindhiani Tehreek as anti-Islam or foreign funded.

It also proved its centralization of power by being weak after the death of the leader of the movement, Rasool Bux Palijo. But Sindhiani Tehreek helped set a precedent for women's movements in Pakistan-that

their collective mobilization and organization was enough to build sustainable transformation. It is relevant even today as an organizational development model that might come in handy for the analysis of strategies by other movements that seek to occupy the empowered position in societies that are conservative and resistant to change.

Conclusion

Sindhiani Tehreek is a great example of social change and resistance by an organized protest by women despite the ordinary patronizing structure of patriarchal in rural society. Beginning at a time when political freedom was suppressed, the Tehreek offered not only a means for Sindhi women to voice themselves but also called them to struggle for their fundamental rights. By addressing gender inequality, social injustice, and political marginalization under the shadow of Sindhiani Tehreek, it enabled many women to overcome what they once saw as unchangeable societal wrongs. As a women's wing of the Awami Tehreek, Sindhiani played significant role as like an interest group for rural women's rights, confronting male dominance in rural Sindh. Many members of Tehreek, who campaigned from the grassroots level, were arrested and suffered a lot, but were also a testimony to their zeal for the cause.

The Sindhiani Tehreek strategies, and struggle for women's empowerment have made a permanent mark in rural society. The movement has reformed public discourse by taking up issues like women's education, healthcare, and political representation into the everyday concerns of rural areas. The advocacy of the movement for pro-democracy efforts and resistance to discriminatory laws proved that rural women are not only stakeholders but also leaders in national struggles for justice. Although Tehreek no longer exists as a movement due to the death of its founder, the Tehreek is still a reality. It set the course for subsequent gender and social justice-oriented campaigns to empower the following generation to do similar work. The history of Sindhiani Tehreek demonstrated that if provided with the opportunity, the rural women truly have the potential to bring realization of socio-political changes needed to make a society more equal.

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