

## The women of Kech

Sajjad Hussain Changezi | Zahra Rao | Published September 25, 2021



**WORK takes us to rural communities across Pakistan. They are both beautiful and ugly. Their strong association with the land and the bonds within the communities are worthy of admiration while poverty and wretched conditions especially for children and women are ugly realities.**

According to the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report 2021, Pakistan ranks 153rd out of 156 countries on gender parity. Within Pakistan, Balochistan remains the worst region for women with the highest female mortality rate. The Pakistan Maternal Mortality Survey reports 298 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in Balochistan compared to the national average of 186. And yet, in Balochistan there is a story of hope. By continuing to ignore the case study of district Kech, however, we are missing out on so much.

Of the nine districts where the EU is implementing the Balochistan Rural Development and Community Empowerment (BRACE) Programme, Kech is the only one with a female programme manager. Increased women participation and visibility in Kech are consistent as the women staff outnumber their male colleagues across the programme structures.

Within the communities, women are making use of income-generating grants and revolving interest-free loans to support their families through livestock and small enterprises. During a recent trip to Kech, the self-confidence and active participation of rural women impressed us. Nowhere in Pakistan have we seen rural women holding such bold public sessions on sensitive topics like birth control and human rights including women's right to protection against sexual harassment. It is important to explore how this emerging oasis of empowered women has come to be in the patriarchal desert of Balochistan.

### *There is an oasis of empowerment in Balochistan.*

Education is the ultimate source of empowerment for the women of Kech. There are five factors that the rest of rural Pakistan can draw lessons from. First, Makran region has largely benefited from the absence of concentrated social power in the form of feudals and tribal sardars. Across Pakistan, tribal leaders have remained stalwarts of patriarchy and it is only through radical land reforms that the tribal feudal system can be eliminated.

Second, the first generation of Baloch university students passionately contributed to the current social upheaval. With their nationalist zeal, young graduates advocated for girls' education in the 1980s. Many of them later founded well-functioning private schools contributing to quality and equality in education.

Third, many of these student leaders went on to hold leadership positions in administrative and political pillars. As an example, Dr Abdul Malik, once a leader in the Baloch Student Organisation, held the portfolios of health and education ministries in the 1980s and 1990s. He served as the chief minister between 2013 and 2015. The region, especially Turbat city, went through immense transformation during his tenure.

Fourth, unlike other rural Baloch districts, the Makran belt has seen greater economic activity because of the port and exposure to Oman across the Gulf. We wonder if exposure to the Gulf countries have resulted in similar progressive social change elsewhere in Pakistan.

Lastly, the National Rural Support Programme has consistently engaged and empowered communities in Kech for three decades now. A community-led participatory approach to rural development has yielded encouraging results in Gilgit-Baltistan where the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme has been functioning since 1982. Non-government interventions are often neglected for their small scale, but long-term community participatory interventions must be studied for their contributions to social transformation.

For those who want to see rural women in Pakistan empowered, Kech has a lot to offer. Reforms in the land and sardari system are a must if rural

communities are to be empowered. Unfortunately, the state has historically collaborated with tribal elites to engineer a political set-up that is against the democratic aspirations of the people. The hopeful case of Kech should serve to convince us that the people's democratic representatives, even from nationalist quarters, will ultimately serve the cause of empowering communities across Pakistan. Unlike the current trend of alienating critical voices, the general population should be encouraged to celebrate victories, even when they come from critical circles such as nationalist student organisations in this case.

It is worth noting that the brave women of Kech have achieved this bit of liberty in the face of patriarchy, poverty, political instability, and deteriorating law and order situation. Balochistan's women have so much to say but for now they are calling us to acknowledge this tiny victory in an unfriendly territory. For our own sake, shouldn't we?

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