



# STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN PAKISTAN

The Strengthening Women's Political participation initiative built on a long struggle for women's rights in Pakistan. Raising Her Voice (RHV) was one of the first global campaigns to address both invisible and visible structural causes of gender injustice. It sought to challenge social norms, empower women, increase their political participation and change government policy. In its early stages RHV benefitted over 187,000 women in Pakistan and globally reached an estimated 700,000 women in 17 countries. The initiative has contributed to transformative change at scale (a) nationally, via leadership training and mobilization of local women and influencing of government policy and (b) globally, via the coordination of diverse, locally relevant projects with a common theme of gender and governance and the influencing of intergovernmental policies and processes. This work continues today in Pakistan with subsequent initiatives building on and expanding the approach.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite some tremendous advances in societies around the world, women are still not treated equally and are not afforded the same opportunities as men. Gender inequality is a key driver of poverty and a fundamental denial of women's rights. Women often have fewer resources, less power and less influence in decision making compared with men. They are exposed to various forms of violence and exploitation and experience further inequality because of their ethnicity, age, race, class, marital status, sexual orientation or (dis)ability (Oxfam, 2020).

According to the Global Gender Gap Index 2020, Pakistan is the third worst country in the world for gender equality, ranked 151st out of 153 countries studied (WEF, 2020). Gender inequalities and poverty go hand in hand, as embedded discriminatory customary practices reinforce the low status accorded to women and other marginalized groups. Women's rights organizations have struggled for decades to address barriers to gender injustice in the country and to bring about positive change. Governments have also taken positive steps by enacting legislation to reduce the gender gap; however, various political, social, cultural, economic and religious barriers still prevent the advancement of women.

And yet, there is growing evidence - in Pakistan<sup>1</sup> and globally - about the tangible impacts of more transformative approaches to policy development and resource allocation – and the critical role of women's voices, priorities and power in these processes. This case study seeks to understand some of the approaches, principles and politics which have helped to guide and support safe and effective work to increase women's political agency, activism and leadership.

Over the past decade Oxfam in Pakistan (with funding from Australian and UK government<sup>2</sup>) has supported local partners and civil society to strengthen women's political participation across the country, as part of its Gender Justice programme. This case study examines three inter-linked initiatives aimed at helping women to reclaim public spaces, become effective leaders and decision makers and access and uphold their rights to vote and improve their lives, as well as being equal citizens of the state, as enshrined in the Constitution of Pakistan (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2012):

- **Raising Her Voice (RHV)** (2008–13): RHV was implemented by local partner Aurat Foundation and supported by Oxfam. This initiative focused on empowering poor women marginalized in the social, religious and economic spheres to increase their participation in public policy, budget setting and decision making by supporting women's leadership (Repila, 2013).
- **Leverage in Social Transformation of Elected Nominees (LISTEN)** (2013–17): Also implemented by Aurat Foundation with backing from Oxfam, this initiative built on RHV to further support the strengthening of women's capacities from a political perspective, including the voices of active citizens in social accountability and holding those elected to power to account (Oxfam, 2012/13).

- **She Can Lead (SCL) (2017–20):** Implemented by three local civil society organizations (CSOs) – Bedari, Baanhn Beli and Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation with support from Oxfam – with the aim of making electoral processes more responsive to women, promoting their political participation and leadership in terms both of casting votes and standing for election themselves (Oxfam, 2017a).

RHV was a multi-country initiative that was rolled out in 17 countries and in two regional programmes,<sup>3</sup> with 45 members, 450 coalition members and an estimated reach of 700,000 women globally (Repila, 2013). In Pakistan it established and trained local Women Leaders Groups (WLGs) that in turn supported an estimated 187,500 women to defend and promote their rights and raise their collective voice in political decision making at local, national and regional level (Repila, 2013). Between 2008 and 2012, the WLGs also helped nearly 116,000 women to obtain national identity cards, thus enabling them to vote. During this period over 100 WLG members were elected to district committees and councils, challenging traditional patterns of male control in making decisions and allocating resources (Repila, 2013).

*‘Pakistan is a difficult place to be female – I have hope, we have hope, we have to hope. I am hopeful that the challenges I have faced, my children will not. I am hopeful that the successes I have achieved will inspire my children. I think they are more confident because of my actions.’*

– Haseen Mussarat, RHV Women’s Leader, Sindh Province (Repila, 2013)

LISTEN and SCL subsequently built on and scaled up the WLG methodology. Under LISTEN the WLGs were able to mobilize and facilitate an estimated 226,316 people (140,199 females and 86,117 males) to register for national identity cards, thus enabling these citizens to register to vote and/or stand in elections. Influencing and pressure by WLGs, in alliance with other groups, contributed to a number of policy changes at provincial and national levels, including the Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Bill 2016 and the Criminal Law (Amendment) Offences relating to the Honour Act 2016 and Rape Act 2016. Empowered WLGs were also able to prevent 88 girls from becoming victims of child marriage by involving community members and law officials in their respective areas (Oxfam, 2017b). SCL intensified empowerment of the WLGs, culminating in nine women standing for seats in the 2018 general election (Oxfam, 2018).



**Figure 1: Zaibunissah Mallah demonstrates women's leadership**



Note: Zaibunissah Mallah is a member of the District Council and has done incredible things for her community; installing water pumps, tanks, solar panels, fixing roads and building drainage solutions. She is motivated to do as much as she can and to support as many women as possible. Source: Sara Khan/Oxfam in Pakistan

## Key insights

The Raising Her Voice initiative was ground-breaking for a number of reasons. It was Oxfam's first concerted global campaign to address both visible and invisible structural causes of gender injustice at scale (Beardon and Otero, 2013). It sought to empower marginalized women, increase their political participation and challenge invisible yet sensitive cultural beliefs, social norms and behaviours that perpetuate gender injustice, at a time when many campaigns were focused on changing more visible global or government policies. The subsequent initiatives LISTEN, and She Can Lead, built on the approach and methodology of RHV helping achieve greater scale. The approach was and remains important because of the way it:

- Empowered and harnessed the support of local women leaders to support marginalized women;
- Created a culturally sensitive, safe and enabling environment for men and women from diverse cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds to discuss and unite and challenge sensitive social norms and behaviours relating to gender roles and domestic violence;
- Won buy-in from powerful and influential local male role models to help champion the rights of women locally;
- Engaged with and involved a range of strategic allies at local, national and international levels;
- Combined and achieved:
  - rapid horizontal scaling both nationally, via transformative leadership training of a network of women leaders, which continues

today, and globally, via the coordination of a portfolio of diverse, locally relevant projects with a common theme of gender and governance; and

- vertical scaling, nationally and globally, by influencing government and intergovernmental political processes and policies.

All three initiatives adopted a non-confrontational approach and the principle of do no harm, to prevent women, or their advocates, being exposed to greater levels of violence or having their already narrow political space further restricted by men. In addition, partners and WLGs were trained on child protection and safeguarding.

## WHAT HAS CHANGED?

### THE CHALLENGE

Pakistan is a country that has seen a number of major milestones for women: in 1988 Benazir Bhutto became the first ever woman prime minister of a Muslim country; in 2008 Dr. Fehmida Mirza became the first woman to be elected as speaker of the National Assembly in Pakistan; and in 2013 more than 100 women members were elected to the two houses of parliament. Yet it is also a country where in 2005 activist Zubaida Begum was killed because she defied anti-women traditions by participating in local elections and raising women's awareness of their right to vote; and where, during the May 2013 elections, in violation of election rules and the agreed code of ethics, many women were barred from voting, mainly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province (Repila, 2013).

Pakistan ranks third to last (151st of 153 countries) in the 2020 Global Gender Gap Index (WEF, 2020). Gender inequality and poverty go hand in hand, as embedded discriminatory customary practices reinforce the low status accorded to women and other marginalized groups. Only 25% of women participate in the labour force (i.e. working or looking to work) compared with 85% of men (ranking Pakistan 148th of 153 countries in the Index). It is estimated that only 18% of Pakistan's labour income goes to women (148th of 153 countries), one of the lowest shares among the countries covered. Less than half of women are literate, compared with 71% of men, while the proportion of females enrolled across primary, secondary and tertiary education is systematically lower than the proportion of males (WEF, 2020).

Although the political gender gap remains wide, it has narrowed markedly over the past two years (WEF, 2020). Despite the country's low development rankings, the government has taken positive steps to improve the status of women and to reduce levels of poverty, with legislation supportive of women enacted by different political parties. In addition, women have made remarkable strides in reclaiming public

spaces, with Pakistan having its first female UN representative and first female Foreign Minister, Prime Minister and Speaker of the National Assembly. In the 2018 general elections, more women came out to vote as well as to stand for election (Dastageer et al., 2018). For the first time, five transgender candidates contested seats, and one of the participants from the RHV initiative, Krishna Kumari Kohli, became the country's first female senator from the Hindu Dalit community (Pakistan Today, 2018). As of 1 January 2019, there were three women in the 25-member cabinet (WEF, 2020). In January 2019, the local provincial government in KP appointed its very first ombudswoman to reduce the harassment of women in the workplace (Browne, 2019). And while still only 5% of senior and leadership roles are held by women (146th out of 153 countries) this is twice the rate of 2016 (WEF, 2020).

**Figure 2: Free from Fear Art Exhibition, award ceremony with Australian High Commissioner.**



Source: Sara Khan/Oxfam in Pakistan. Poster Illustrated by Shehzil Malik.

# WHAT WAS DONE

## Three initiatives to strengthen women's participation

### **Raising Her Voice (RHV): 2008–13**

RHV was a multi-country initiative rolled out in 17 countries and two regions, with an estimated reach of 700,000 women globally (Repila, 2013). In Pakistan RHV was launched in a very complex and sensitive context in relation to women's rights by building on a country-level partnership with Aurat Foundation (AF), which since its establishment in 1986 has been committed to promoting women's empowerment and citizens' participation in governance. RHV's aims in Pakistan were three-fold: to empower poor and marginalized women in the social, religious and economic spheres to stand up for their rights and make their voices heard at all political levels, from local to national; to influence decision-making institutions to be more responsive and accountable to women; and to empower women to participate in public policy, budget-setting and decision-making forums.

The initiative encouraged the emergence of new types of women's organizations and networks to increase their individual agency and collective capacity. The Women Leaders Groups (WLGs) were women-only forums, but their roots lay in village-level Citizens Action Committees (CACs), which have both men and women members, and these links were maintained and nurtured. In all, 50 WLGs were formed in 30 districts, with a total membership of 1,500 women activists. Participants were supported to effectively engage in governance at all levels through increased awareness of decision-making processes, how they worked and how to access them, as well as initiatives to increase women's voice and influence and greater institutional accountability.<sup>4</sup>

Women activists and leaders involved in RHV played an active role at the village level in voter mobilization and registration, encouraging women to stand as candidates in the 2013 general elections, and election monitoring. In addition, members of the 50 WLGs realized that in order to participate politically women needed economic independence and empowerment, and the WLGs therefore implemented a wide range of economic initiatives, including linking thousands of women to microfinance initiatives.

### **Leverage in Social Transformation of Elected Nominees (LISTEN): 2013–17**

LISTEN built on the efforts and successes of RHV to further strengthen women's capacities to participate politically and to hold to account those elected into positions of power. The project continued to be implemented by the Aurat Foundation, with support from Oxfam. It sought to:



- Further promote active citizenship among 1,200 women and youth in 30 political constituencies in targeted districts;
- Through the WLGs, track and monitor women's rights and gender justice shown by elected parties;
- Conduct policy research and budget analysis of provincial women's development directorates in Sindh, Punjab, KP and Balochistan;
- Generate evidence for influencing policy makers and citizen engagement;
- Sensitize women voters on women's political rights through mass media mobilization and engage through universities to raise awareness among youth (Oxfam, 2012/13).

### **She Can Lead: 2017–20**

SCL has run from 2017 to 2020 and has been implemented by three CSOs – Bedari, Baanhn Beli and Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation – with support from Oxfam. It also builds on the WLG methodology and seeks to further empower these groups to achieve greater gender responsiveness in electoral processes and promote women's political participation and leadership, both in voting and in standing for election themselves. In addition, it aims to develop understanding among the general public about being active citizens and holding elected officials to account on their political manifestos. It consists of three phases: the pre-election phase, during elections and post-elections.

**Figure 3: She Can Lead Inception Workshop**



Source: Sara Khan/Oxfam in Pakistan

# STRUCTURAL SOLUTIONS AND POVERTY IMPACTS

Taken together, RHV, LISTEN and SCL have contributed to the strengthening of women's voices and improved governance. As there were many stakeholders working to strengthen women's voice and build more equitable electoral processes, no one entity can claim that its efforts alone were decisive.

## Raising Her Voice: 2008–13:

**Challenging norms and strengthening voice and leadership:** The RHV initiative established and trained 50 Women Leaders Groups (WLGs), made up of 1,500 female activists in 30 districts, who organized women within their communities to defend and promote their rights, while raising their collective political voice at the local, regional and national levels. Each group had an average of 30 women members, each of whom engaged another five women, making a total of 7,500 women across the 50 groups. It is estimated that these 7,500 women each supported 25 more women, totalling an estimated 187,500 women (Repila, 2013).

Aurat Foundation supported the WLGs directly, through training, exchange visits and information sharing. Its support for women leaders enabled them to challenge norms, speak confidently, ask probing questions, collect women's views and report back on a range of issues affecting the daily lives of women in Pakistan. Given the cultural and religious sensitivities involved, they enrolled local role models who had begun the process of change themselves. The majority of WLG members surveyed in the programme evaluation reported an increased awareness of their rights and strengthened personal and organizational capacity to influence and to hold those in power to account. (Green, 2015). They also cited increased self-confidence, communication skills, courage, ability to make decisions and awareness of rights and laws. Not only were women in districts with active WLGs more aware of their rights in the workplace but women leaders were increasingly able to hold employers to account. In the final evaluation, 83% of the 1,500 WLG members surveyed reported positive changes to their home and social environments. Many reported improvements in their ability to speak to men outside of their families and being taken seriously by men in their families (Ibid.).

The symbolic power of a proud and united group of 50 women leaders in each district, working collaboratively with each other over the project's 5 years to provide a range of practical and immediate benefits for their local communities was also critical. This ranged from being guarantors on identity card or small loan applications to advocating for justice in individual cases of violence, divorce and employment rights violations. These concrete achievements, the small but invaluable differences the WLGs' work made to the lives of women in their constituencies also

served to challenge and broaden public perceptions of the very value and legitimacy of women's leadership in Pakistan.

**Figure 4: Invitation flyer from the Free from Fear for the 2019 Art Exhibition in Pakistan.**



Source: Oxfam in Pakistan. Illustrated by Shehzil Malik.

**Strengthening collective capacity:** The WLGs also became powerful pressure groups. Whether advocating for the resolution of cases of sexual abuse in local schools or custody rights and the right to a dowry after a marriage breakdown following physical abuse, the groups gained in strength and demonstrated that there was safety in numbers when challenging exclusively male arbitration bodies, such as *panchayats* and *jirgas* (village councils and traditional assemblies of leaders), who traditionally decide the fate of women and girls in family disputes. Several district-level authorities now refer disputes and cases of violence to WLGs, who then refer them on to lawyers. WLG members also successfully advocated for more public money to be better spent to improve local services. Some 70% of the 1,500 women leaders secured district-level investment for development schemes in their communities.

Most of the women leaders interviewed for the final evaluation of RHV said that the collective bargaining power and supportive environment created by the WLGs were in sharp contrast to the normal operating environment of political parties. The WLG platform provided a 'safe haven' for developing consultation, representation and advocacy skills among members in order to engage with gatekeepers, decision makers and government representatives. For communities that were traditionally divided along family, religious community and political lines, a neutral forum was a new social phenomenon.

**Political participation and governance:** Between 2008 and 2012, the WLGs helped nearly 116,000 women to obtain national identity cards, which enabled them to vote in elections. According to the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), as of 2012 over 86% of the country's female population – 40 million women – had registered for ID cards, compared with less than 50% just four years earlier (UN Women, 2012).

Additionally, this support helped over 100 WLG members to win election to district committees and councils, which challenged traditional patterns of male control in making decisions and allocating resources. The programme evaluation also records increased support for women's leadership from individuals and institutions such as healthcare professionals, schools, the police and the judiciary and legal system, though this is not systematically documented. Looking beyond the work of the WLGs, in the 2013 general elections 1,500 women leaders stood for election in 30 districts, with the result that four women were elected as members of Provincial Assemblies and one was elected to the National Assembly (UN Women, 2012).

For example, in Hafizabad District, Punjab, where previously there were no women on local *zakat* (Islamic relief fund) committees, a WLG filed a court order to enforce a legal minimum female representation of 15% and campaigned for more women to come forward to join the committees. In all, 1,200 women, including 300 RHV members, joined the 670 *zakat* committees in the district, five of which headed by women. This same pattern was spread to other provinces, led by Aurat Foundation and the WLGs. In the city of Jhelum in the Punjab, a province where there are 15 WLGs, 20 of 54 social welfare posts are now held by women. In Punjab and Sindh, women leaders joined district-level committees on education, gender mainstreaming and gender justice, and 90 WLG members ran for political office in the 2013 election.

**Policy change:** WLGs also became effective advocates, alongside Aurat Foundation, for change to both formal legislation and traditional decision-making structures to explicitly support and protect women's political representation in decision making. They contributed to the passing of ground-breaking laws such as the Women Protection Act (2009), the Anti-Sexual Harassment in the Workplace Act (2010), the Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act (2011) and the Prevent of Anti-Women's Practices Act (2011) Implementation of the Anti-Sexual Harassment in the Workplace Act has been actively monitored by WLGs.

**Economic empowerment:** RHV recognized that to participate politically women also needed to be economically empowered. The WLGs helped women to gain access to local resources, including the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), *zakat* committee social welfare grants and statutory maternity leave grants, which were not widely known about. They also promoted economic gains by strengthening women's employment rights; in one case in 2009 WLGs took part in a successful campaign to register a workers' union at a Coca-Cola factory and win reinstatement for 250 unfairly dismissed workers. (Repila, 2013; Beardon and Otero, 2013).

## **LISTEN: 2013–17**

**Collective capacity:** Empowered WLGs were able to prevent 88 girls from becoming victims of child marriage by involving community members and law officials in their respective areas.

**Political participation:** The WLGs mobilized and facilitated an estimated



226,316 people (140,199 females and 86,117 males) to register for identity cards, thus enabling these citizens to register to vote and/or to stand in elections themselves.

**Policy change:** Under LISTEN, a number of legal provisions were enacted partly as a result of pressure exerted by WLGs and other civil society stakeholders, including the Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act 2016 and the Criminal Law (Amendment) Offences relating to the Honour Act 2016 and Rape Act 2016. Oxfam and Aurat Foundation also developed a strategic relationship with the Women Development Department, part of the Punjab government, to build government capacity to develop a road map for women's empowerment and to help it meet its national and international obligations (Oxfam, 2017b).

## **She Can Lead: 2017–20**

**Political participation:** The SCL initiative has helped to strengthen the capacities of WLGs in relation to electoral processes, gender-based violence (GBV), national and provisional legal frameworks and voter registration.

Oxfam and the WLGs have engaged with the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to help mobilize more women to obtain identity cards (a prerequisite for voting) and to register to vote. During the 2018 general elections women activists, along with CSOs, observed the electoral processes and collaborated with the ECP to ensure that gender-responsive participation was achieved.

WLGs were proactive in raising awareness at grassroots level to encourage women and marginalized persons to vote and/or to stand in the 2018 elections. Rickshaws carried messages supporting women's political participation, and journalists were trained to report on gender responsiveness during the elections.

WLGs also participated in People's Assemblies to promote inclusive democracy and in consultations on a Charter of Demands (political manifesto) for each area. This resulted in 1250 women registering for identity cards, enabling them to vote, and nine women stood for election.

In addition, linkages were developed with women's rights organizations, such as the Women's Action Forum and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), to advance the women's rights agenda. Ten members of the Women's Parliamentary Caucus (WCP) were provided with technical support on national legal frameworks and pro-women legislation, which resulted in parliamentarians pledging to promote women's rights in their own parties and in the Cabinet.

**Figure 5: She Can Lead pre-election social media campaign, 2018.**



Source: Oxfam in Pakistan, in collaboration with the Election Commission of Pakistan and Oxfam Australia.

In the post-election phase the WLGs, along with civil society actors, have worked to bridge the gap between citizens and elected officials and have continued to raise awareness about the right to vote and the role of women as active citizens in electoral processes. The ECP's buy-in to the project enabled them to better understand and help address the challenges in ensuring that the most marginalized individuals can vote and/or contest elections. A roundtable post-election observation consultation was convened, hosted by the ECP and attended by CSO and WLG representatives, to plan out how to continue strengthening women's participation in democratic processes (Oxfam, 2018; Oxfam Australia, 2019).

## DURABILITY

The formation of locally led WLGs and the engagement of local stakeholders, including women, men and youth, has ensured local buy-in and ownership of the initiatives. As a former Oxfam in Pakistan project officer said: 'These women activists will continue, with or without support; this is their own vision, they are not working for any project' (Repila, 2013). The engagement of institutions such as the ECP has likewise helped to ensure buy-in from government. Both the WLGs and government have strengthened their capacity in terms of electoral processes and are better equipped to advocate for the advancement of a women's rights agenda.

The development of linkages with other complementary projects by local NGOs, INGOs, government and donors working in the same thematic area has also contributed to the initiative's sustainability. Related initiatives include, for example:

- A 2011 memorandum of understanding between UN Women and NADRA to provide technical assistance, enhance institutional efforts and support gender-responsive policies leading towards gender equality and the empowerment of women;

- The Gender Equity Programme (GEP), funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) with support from The Asia Foundation, along with local partners and Aurat Foundation, which is aimed at closing the gender gap in Pakistan by proactively supporting the development of women; and
- The AAWAZ Voice and Accountability Programme Pakistan, a five-year DFID governance programme implemented by Aurat Foundation, which also focuses on promoting stable, inclusive and tolerant democracy in Pakistan (DFID, 2019).

## CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

The three initiatives all adopted a non-confrontational approach to prevent women, or their advocates, being exposed to greater levels of violence or having their already narrow political space closed down completely. However, with a widespread deterioration of law and order and a context of rampant militancy and intolerance in Pakistan, activists, particularly women and those advocating for the rights of marginalized persons, have been targeted by anti-state actors and militants; in the final evaluation of RHV, 26% of respondents reported that they had faced security concerns (Oxfam, 2013).

Advocating for women's rights is often a sensitive area in which to work in Pakistan, especially given the patriarchal nature of society and the discriminatory status accorded to women. Throughout all the efforts to strengthen women's political participation, there has been a fine line to tread in order to avoid a public backlash that could create GBV threats for women participants. Implementing partners have also faced threats to their safety while working on such issues. Hence the approach adopted has been one of adaptive and innovative programming, following the principle of do no harm (Oxfam, 2017b). Oxfam's 2017 TWLR global programme framework emphasises the need to plan and fund strategies to minimise the risks of violence against activists as standard – including via training, signposting to support and service, spaces for peer advice and strategizing, small contingency funds and strong policy guidance (Oxfam, 2017:28).

There have also been geographical limitations in reaching excluded groups under the SCL project, and it has been almost impossible to support the rights of minorities such as transgender people. The restrictive operating environment for INGOs created by new regulations recently imposed by the Ministry of Interior have meant that implementing partners and INGO counterparts must obtain prior approval in order to work in any location or thematic area. The government has banned a number of well-known INGOs and local NGOs from working in the country, for allegedly working against the interests of the state. This restrictive environment has also meant that no interviews or data collection could take place without permission from the government. Similarly, civil society space has been shrinking, with many high-profile activists and bloggers being detained (South Asia Partnership Pakistan, 2020).

To safeguard against any harm or risks to stakeholders as a result of these initiatives, risk and mitigation assessments were carried out and updated throughout the project of She Can Lead. In addition, all stakeholders have been provided with training and awareness raising on safeguarding and child protection. In the final phase of the project, safeguarding was taken a step further to ensure that communities were able to provide feedback, with a system being developed. Oxfam has equipped partners with technical knowledge to strengthen their institutional capacity (on the gender/child protection policy) and has provided training on ethical data gathering (Oxfam, 2018; Oxfam Australia, 2019).

The holistic approach adopted, which has involved engaging with non-traditional allies and strengthening the capacities of women, men and youth both individually and collectively, has been received positively by communities and has gained support. Deliberate strategic linkages with well-connected, literate women leaders have also played an important part in WLGs and implementing partners being able to bridge the gap between grassroots communities and those elected to office and have proved to be an entry point for women to take part at some level of decision making (Oxfam, 2018; Oxfam, 2019)

An ongoing constraint is women's lack of economic empowerment, which makes it challenging on a practical level for them to be mobile or to participate politically. In addition, marginalized persons, such as transgender individuals, are often unable to afford party tickets or to campaign, as they lack economic stability (Oxfam, 2018; Oxfam, 2019).

## HOW CHANGE HAPPENED

### SCALING PATHWAYS

Horizontal scaling has taken place both internationally and nationally. Internationally, the RHV initiative consisted of a portfolio of diverse, locally relevant projects with a common theme of gender and governance, within the limits of DFID's funding criteria.<sup>5</sup> Globally, 17 Oxfam GB country teams and 43 staff, along with 45 partners and 450 coalition members, took part in the initiative, as well as hundreds of thousands of grassroots women activists. RHV was coordinated globally by a small team from Oxfam and its implementing partners, which identified projects, supported project management and accountability, facilitated the sharing of learning and carried out global advocacy (Beardon and Otero, 2013).

According to the RHV evaluation (Beardon and Otero, 2013), the initiative was put together from the centre, but with countries given a great deal of freedom to define their own approaches. It also prioritized



Oxfam contacts, local partnerships and programmes for project selection. This meant that the level of participation was strong, which was excellent in terms of demonstrating the breadth of possible approaches and innovation, though coherence and learning opportunities on a common theme were reduced (ibid.).

Nationally in Pakistan, RHV was scaled horizontally via the creation of networks of activists across the country, combined with transformative leadership training of women members of the WLGs and the cascading effects of these 1,500 women acting as role models for and actively supporting other women. WLG members were trained in the areas of lobbying, dialogue building, budgeting, child protection and safeguarding, GBV, electoral processes and national frameworks and also participated in People's Assemblies, interacting with other key stakeholders and hosting cultural events to raise awareness about the women's rights agenda.

Subsequently further horizontal scaling has taken place with by Oxfam and partners sharing findings and collaborating at national, provincial, district, international and regional platforms. For example: learnings and insights from a decade of practice and evidence of women's individual and collective leadership and how change happens were presented by colleagues from Oxfam in Pakistan and Bedari at the Leadership for Inclusive Development Conference, Research for Development Impact (RDI) Network in Melbourne on 12-13 June 2019. The SCL initiative was also presented at Oxfam Australia's Straight Talk National Summit where key learnings and challenges were shared with women groups from across Australia, building on approaches to strengthen women most marginalized as effective women decision-makers and community leaders.

Vertical scaling took place internationally via advocacy and influencing by the global coordination team. Nationally, WLG members and supporting CSOs and NGOs actively influenced the government and election process which had an influence on ground-breaking legislation relating to women's rights and election of women.

In terms of functional scaling (i.e. where scaling is enabled due to improvements to the original case), the theory of change was tested through a programme evaluation and the methodology and influencing strategies were adapted and strengthened in subsequent phases.

## CHANGE STRATEGIES

The following change strategies were used to achieve horizontal and vertical scaling in Pakistan (Beardon and Otero, 2013; H&H Consulting, 2013; Repila, 2013):

- **Challenging norms and strengthening voice:** Throughout the programme, the deeply rooted work around personal transformational change was facilitated with the support of local women leaders living in the communities, rather than by government or NGO staff. In the

first stage, Aurat Foundation provided capacity-building support for women who had already been publicly active in their communities about how to achieve change. The cultural and religious barriers to women's empowerment that exist in Pakistan make it very hard to organize women in public in an overt manner, but women can still talk to other women locally in ways that outsiders, especially men, cannot, and so the WLGs were the vehicle of choice. Instead of directly recruiting marginalized women to join the WLGs, the programme targeted local influential women, often educated, to serve as exemplars of personal transformation to women in the wider community and to demonstrate to them how members of civil society could interact effectively with government. This targeting of influential local women allowed the project to remain sensitive to the challenging cultural and political context and sustain political activism and strategic influence.

- **Developing a political identity:** The participation of the WLGs in the campaign for registration for computerized national identity cards was a critical first step in developing and deepening the political identity and voice of women in their communities. The groups' support for individual women to register for ID cards opened up access for previously marginalized women to a range of services and resources, including the ability to vote. With these benefits have come opportunities for women to interact and to enter public spaces, helping them to establish a direct relationship with duty bearers.
- **Developing networks:** Another key strategy was to bring women out of isolation by establishing networks. The WLGs compiled informal directories of their members' skills and contacts and formal directories of local service providers, political actors and government officials. The multiplier effect of these contacts and this information increased the potential for support and influence, and the concept of safety in numbers reduced the risk of individuals being threatened with violence. Relationships were also developed with local elders and religious scholars. At national level the campaign held events with local community, government, NGOs to raise awareness and get endorsement for the campaign which women could then bring back to enrol support from local government bodies/leaders
- **Media representation:** RHV Pakistan and subsequent initiatives worked with the media at a national level to develop common messages on key governance issues for translation and broadcast in local languages on local channels. This was complemented by collaboration with local media to raise the profile and promote the achievements of WLG members and other women activists.
- **Tactical alliances with gatekeepers and decision makers:** The stronger collective voice of the WLGs, both numerically and in terms of legitimacy, increased women's influence and made them more attractive to power holders, which in turn opened up access to decision makers. Additionally, the initiatives developed culturally sensitive strategies to 'reward' male supporters of women's empowerment, for example by helping them to benefit from positive media coverage by broadcasting recognition for their contribution and

inviting them to meetings with other influential members of the community.

- **Influencing legislation and government structures:** The WLGs and local CSOs have worked with allies to influence legislation in ways that support women's access to political spheres. They have also engaged with and influenced government and political parties to provide information, identify gaps and hold duty bearers to account on shortfalls between practice and policy regarding laws and policies to protect women's rights.

## CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS AND DRIVERS

Underpinning the lack of political voice for Pakistani women and other marginalized groups are deeply entrenched and embedded patriarchal and discriminatory customary laws and practices which reinforce the vulnerability of those most excluded. Cultural constraints restrict women's mobility and, although they contribute the majority of unpaid household labour as well as other forms of work, this contribution is often unrecognized (Repila, 2013).

There is a disconnect between constitutional rights and customary laws and practices, with the latter making it harder for women to own land, vote, travel or have equal access to justice. In the absence of a functional system of justice, women are often given as 'compensation' to resolve disputes or conflict. For example, they may be exchanged as brides or even raped, and have little redress as victims of violence. The cultural norm of threats and acts of retaliatory violence against women and girls is a long-term factor which constrains systemic change (Repila, 2013). Women's weak access to formal governance structures, formal systems of justice, informal governance, informal systems of justice and high-quality health and education services are also barriers to change (Ibid.).

Opponents of change whom the initiative sought to influence included corrupt government officials and members of the judiciary; family members committing violence against women and girls; male candidates endorsed by religious leaders and traditional village committees and opposing women in electoral contests; tribal leaders and elders sitting on *panchayats*, *jirgas* or *hujra* (an informal gathering of male elders) who are often part of local elites or are feudal lords and landowners with high-level patronage; and militant extremists and their attacks on public spaces, which can result in additional restrictions on women's mobility and genuine concerns for their safety (Repila, 2013).

### Drivers

However, there have also been enabling actors and factors. As already mentioned, despite Pakistan's low development rankings, in recent years governments have made positive efforts to improve the status of women and reduce levels of poverty, with legislation that supports women being

enacted by different political parties. This has been an outcome of decades of increased understanding of gender injustice and of influencing efforts at national and international levels. RHV and subsequent initiatives have identified and sought to engage a range of other supporters locally, including prominent members of the judiciary and legal advisers to the government; politically astute Pakistani women within and beyond the WLGs; groups of 'influential and progressive' Pakistani men, particularly those on CACs; elements of the media; progressive Islamic scholars; and traditional decision-making structures, such as *panchayats* with progressive members (Repila, 2013). International organizations and donors, such as UN Women, have also supported and funded the advancement of women's rights in the country.

Significant interest from international media<sup>6</sup>, supported by Oxfam, has also highlighted and helped to support the work done in Pakistan during the phases of SCL to strengthen women's political participation across the country, including showcasing the linkages between SCL and the previous project LISTEN (Oxfam, 2018/19).

## Specific windows of opportunity

The three linked initiatives successfully took advantage of various windows of opportunity to achieve change at scale; some of these opportunities were themselves the result of previous civil society influencing. They included:

- The passage of the Constitution (18th Amendment) Act in 2010, which reinforced the right to information, education from the age of five for girls and boys and the right to a fair trial, and prohibited discrimination based on sex;
- Gender-sensitive changes to the rules of political processes;
- The decentralization of government administration to provincial assemblies (devolution gave autonomy to provincial governments but has also left them lacking funding and institutional capacity).

These legislative changes created opportunities for RHV Pakistan and the subsequent initiatives to hold institutions to account on how well they protected women's fundamental rights and generated opportunities for grassroots women's groups to get more involved in decision making, both as active citizens holding duty bearers to account and as elected leaders. Decentralization offered opportunities for women to get closer to decision making and created opportunities for more women to enter politics, hopefully as pro-women advocates (Repila, 2013).

In addition, changes to the rules of political processes created a more level playing field for women's active and effective political participation (Gazette of Pakistan, 2018). These changes included the introduction of a 33% minimum quota for women's representation in parliament, which was accompanied by party political and civil society calls to declare elections null and void in constituencies where fewer than 10% of voters were women. During the SCL phase, the ECP reformed the Election Laws, for the first time imposing direct sanctions on political parties that



failed to ensure that at least 5% of party tickets were awarded to women and ruled that unless 10% of voters in any given constituency were women, the result for that area would be declared null and void (Dastageer et al., 2018). This was an impressive achievement by an electoral body in taking ownership and demanding accountability from political parties and ensuring that electoral processes were inclusive and participatory.

Marginalized groups were mobilized by the ECP, Oxfam and other implementing partners, such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP), in the lead-up to the 2018 elections; the ECP adopted an inclusive focus not only on women but also on transgender persons and people with disabilities. The great strides in women's political participation created opportunities at the grassroots level for women to reclaim public spaces, promote active citizenship and raise awareness on social accountability, along with key non-traditional allies for civil society such as faith allies. The SCL initiative also engaged with and obtained buy-in from the Council of Islamic Ideology and various government advisory bodies for the promotion of women at all levels (Oxfam Donor Report ANCP, 2018).

Another window of opportunity was an invitation from the government during the SCL project for Oxfam to become a member of the ECP's Gender and Disability Working Group. This strategic entry point, which itself was an outcome of previous influencing by the three initiatives, enabled Oxfam and its partners to support the strengthening of electoral processes among local government bodies (Oxfam, 2018; Oxfam Australia, 2019).

The SCL initiative used this opportunity to collaborate with the ECP and civil society actors to stage a three-day football tournament for females (aged 18 or above), which included mock polls to raise awareness about how to vote and be part of electoral processes. This public awareness event on the right to vote and the showcasing of female empowerment through sports provided an opportunity to show how cultural and societal norms restricting women's participation could be overcome (Oxfam, 2018; Oxfam Australia, 2019).

## FURTHER DETAILS

### **Justification and evidence for scaling**

The initial project design was developed via an inclusive and participatory consultative process with all stakeholders and based on feedback from partners' expertise and evidence on the ground. A mid-term review of RHV was conducted in 2011 (External evaluator, 2011). An independent evaluation was conducted in 2013 (Beardon and Otero, 2013), which included a desk review of relevant programme documents along with key informant interviews, focus group discussions and a survey of project

participants. Ongoing programme monitoring and reporting were performed by Aurat Foundation and Oxfam staff. The second phase, LISTEN, was developed and informed by the experiences and positive outcomes outlined in the RHV assessment report and by the potential for capitalizing on women's individual and collective leadership in subsequent elections (Oxfam, 2013). A gender analysis of political parties was conducted prior to the 2018 general elections to ensure that strategy designs were informed by evidence, best practices and current challenges to establish the best way forward (Oxfam, 2018; Oxfam Australia, 2019).

## Who was involved?

The three linked initiatives relied on a number of key local organizations and allies to achieve success as well as complementary programmes and initiatives. Globally, 43 Oxfam GB staff, 45 partners and 410 coalition members, as well as hundreds of thousands of grassroots women activists, participated in RHV activities and implementation. In Pakistan, the main implementing organization for RHV and LISTEN was Aurat Foundation, a local CSO which since 1986 has been building the advocacy and lobbying capacity of local women and decision makers. Three other CSOs – Bedari, Baanhn Beli and Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation – were the implementing partners for SCL. Financial support was provided by Oxfam, the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID) and the Australian government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

Another set of allies were a significant number of confident and politically astute Pakistani women, both within and beyond the WLGs, who worked with groups of sympathetic Pakistani men to collaborate at household and community levels; this broadened the WLGs' support base and helped with logistics. Although the WLGs were women-only forums, their roots lay in the village-level CACs, which have both men and women members, and these links were maintained and nurtured.

The Aurat Foundation and the WLGs engaged with traditional decision-making structures, such as *panchayats*, and built relationships with power holders, including the police and local representatives to foster attitudinal change, increase political space and provide logistical and material support to efforts to increase women's political participation.

Oxfam's role included the global coordination of RVH plus influencing at global level, and within Pakistan financial support, co-design of the programme, capacity building, convening, brokering and policy influencing, learning and consolidation, communications, monitoring and evaluation, developing safeguarding mechanisms, reporting, donor liaison and technical backstopping on project management.

## Theory of action

The theory of action underpinning RHV and the subsequent initiatives was that there must be simultaneous implementation of three spheres of work to achieve transformative change (see Figure 1):

- Political sphere: identify and work on the political opportunities and constraints facing women;
- Social sphere: support mobilizing structures (formal and informal organizations) and change makers;
- Personal sphere: support processes that help women to realise their own collective and political strength.

**Figure 6: The theory of change behind RHV**



Note: After Months sleeping 'under the sky' following a dispute with her landlord, Neetan Kohli [far left] WLG member in Hatri, Hyderabad, has returned to her home and to work in the fields, with the support of the WLGS (2012). Photo: Irina Werning. Source: 'The Politics of Our Lives, The Raising Her Voice Pakistan Experience', p.17.

The theory of Change was subsequently further developed to incorporate the economic sphere. This was based on project learnings and feedback from beneficiaries about how women's care responsibilities and lack of financial autonomy constrain their ability to participate in project activities, and their ability to take up positions of community or political leadership. The costs involved, for community groups and national coalitions alike, in convening meetings, running activities and supporting women's

participation and attendance also impact heavily on the likelihood of these spaces continuing to function once funding comes to an end.

## **Funding**

The RHV initiative was funded by DFID and LISTEN and SCL were funded by the Australian NGO Cooperative Program (ANCP) of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) of the Australian government the home donor of Oxfam Australia.



# ANNEX: CASE AT A GLANCE

<i>Main organizations</i>	<p><b>Globally:</b> 17 Oxfam GB country teams, 45 partners and 450 coalition members.</p> <p><b>In Pakistan:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raising Her Voice (RHV): Aurat Foundation</li> <li>• Leverage in Social Transformation of Elected Nominees (LISTEN): Aurat Foundation</li> <li>• She Can Lead (SCL): Bedari, Baanhn Beli and Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation.</li> </ul> <p>Support from Oxfam, DFID (UK government), DFAT (Australian government).</p>
<i>Geographical location</i>	<p>RHV and LISTEN were part of multi-country initiatives, with RHV rolled out in 17 countries and two regions.<sup>7</sup> The three projects in Pakistan took place in the following locations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RHV: three provinces (Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Sindh)</li> <li>• LISTEN: 30 districts in four provinces (Punjab, Sindh, KP and Balochistan)</li> <li>• SCL: 15 districts in three provinces (Punjab, Sindh and KP).</li> </ul>
<i>Country indicators</i>	<p><b>Pakistan</b></p> <p><b>Income:</b> lower-middle-income economy; income poverty rate 24.3% (national poverty line) (World Bank, 2020).</p> <p><b>Inequality:</b> Palma ratio of 1.37 in 2016 (UNU-WIDER, 2019).</p> <p><b>Human Development Index:</b> ranked 152<sup>nd</sup> of 189 countries (UNDP, 2019).</p> <p><b>Gender gap:</b> ranked 143<sup>rd</sup> of 153 countries (WEF, 2020).</p> <p><b>Civic space:</b> rated as 'Repressed' (Civicus, 2020).</p> <p><b>Fragile States Index:</b> 'Alert' (Fund for Peace, 2019).</p> <p><b>Climate Risk Index:</b> ranked 5<sup>th</sup> of 181 countries for 1999–2018 (Eckstein et al., 2020).</p> <p><b>Ecological threat</b> – High exposure, ETR count:4 (Ecological Threat Register, 2020).</p>
<i>Time period</i>	<p>RHV: 2008–13.</p> <p>LISTEN: 2013–17.</p> <p>SCL: 2017–20.</p>
<i>Systemic challenges</i>	Gender injustice (and economic inequality).

<i>Type(s) of poverty reduction and structural changes <sup>8</sup></i>	<p>Strengthened:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women's individual voices and leadership</li> <li>• Women's collective capacity</li> <li>• Women's political participation in decision making</li> <li>• Gender responsiveness and accountability of government institutions</li> <li>• Gender-just government legislation and policy</li> <li>• Women's economic empowerment.</li> </ul>
<i>Reach and scale of poverty reduction</i>	<p><b>RHV globally:</b> 19 projects across four continents in 17 countries, reaching over 700,000 women.</p> <p><b>In Pakistan, RHV</b> established 50 Women Leaders Groups (WLGs) in 30 districts, reaching an estimated 187,000 women in total, and helped nearly 116,000 women to obtain national identity cards, and thus register to vote; and over 100 WLG members were elected to district committees and councils, challenging traditional patterns of male control in making decisions and allocating resources.</p> <p><b>LISTEN</b> mobilized and facilitated an estimated 226,316 people (140,199 females and 86,117 males) to register for national ID cards, and thus register to vote and/or contest elections; contributed to a number of policy changes; and prevented 88 girls from becoming victims of child marriage.</p> <p><b>She Can Lead</b> continued empowering the WLGs, culminating in nine women contesting seats in the 2018 general election.</p>
<i>Routes to scale</i>	A mix of vertical, horizontal and functional.
<i>Types and quality of evidence</i>	There is relatively strong evidence about outcomes, impacts and the contribution of RHV initiative, as an independent evaluation was conducted. Information about SCL and LISTEN outcomes is mainly self-reported taken from internal project and donors.

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# NOTES

- 1 Women constitute 20% of the Parliament with 19 seats in the Senate and 70 in the National Assembly. These women parliamentarians contributed 36% of the business transacted by both Houses of the Parliament in their respective parliamentary years. See <https://fafen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/FAFEN-Women-Legislators-Performance-Report-2017-18.pdf>
- 2 Funding came from the Australian Government's NGO Cooperative Programme of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) and the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID).
- 3 Armenia, Albania, Honduras, Guatemala, Chile, Bolivia, Pakistan, Nepal, Indonesia (Papua and Aceh), Nigeria, Liberia, The Gambia, Tanzania, Uganda, Mozambique, South Africa and two regional programmes promoting the rights of domestic workers in the Mercosur member countries – Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela.
- 4 The powerful short video 'Empowerment through Inclusion: Women in Decision-Making' documents the efforts of WLG members in Hafizabad to successfully strengthen the way in which local Zakat Committees responded to the needs of the most marginalized women in their communities <https://raisinghervoice.ning.com/video/empowerment-through-inclusion-1>.
- 5 2008 DFID fund to explore issues linked to the UK government's White Paper on Governance and Transparency.
- 6 See, for example, S. Heanue. (2018). Pakistani women aspiring to become politicians fight oppression, prejudice and dirty tricks. ABC News; and S. Heanue. (2018). First ever lower-caste Hindu woman elected to Pakistan's Senate. ABC News. <http://www.abc.net.au/radio/perth/programs/correspondentsreport/pakistan-elects-first-lower-cast-hindu-woman-to-the-senate/9535100>
- 7 Armenia, Albania, Honduras, Guatemala, Chile, Bolivia, Pakistan, Nepal, Indonesia (Papua and Aceh), Nigeria, Liberia, The Gambia, Tanzania, Uganda, Mozambique, South Africa and two regional programmes promoting the rights of domestic workers in the Mercosur member countries – Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela.
- 8 The theory of change did not distinguish between outcomes and impacts.





## OXFAM

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