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# In the Name of Riwayat: an Ethnographic Study to Explore the Notion of Women Empowerment Among BISP Recipients in Rural Sakhro-Sindh, Pakistan

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**Abstract:** *Women empowerment is a national agenda for Pakistan and, one of its manifestations is the nationwide cash transfer program namely Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP). With the help of Bourdieu methodological paradigm of “habitus” this paper analyses empowerment among BISP recipients in their social settings where various social actors such as her husband and wadera of the village dominate her agency but, at the same time, women herself submits her agency to these social actors under the veil of riwayat (social customs). This ethnographic study reveals that the performance of submission among women follows an inner drive for conformation to riwayat that becomes a significant part of their habitus. Women’s continuous physical performance of submission inscribes moral ideas onto their body and, fuses both her outer obedience and inner feelings to a point where she herself endorses submission of agency to riwayat.*

**Keywords:** *Women Empowerment, Cash-Transfer, Patriarchy, Caste System, Embodiment, Pakistan.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2008, the government of Pakistan launched a cash-transfer programme namely Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) that is still in effect. The vision of the programme is to, firstly, *eradicate* poverty and, secondly, *empower* women through the establishment of a comprehensive social protection net (Government of Pakistan 2022). The eligible candidates for BISP cash-transfer programme are women aged 18 years or older and ever married with family income less than six thousand Pakistani rupees (\$21.40) per month. Upon acceptance to



the programme, women are offered an unconditional cash-transfer of seven thousand Pakistani rupees (\$25) every quarter of the year via bank transfer.

BISP is applauded for being able to sustain as the only nation-wide social safety net programme despite many socio-political tribulations (Nawaz and Iqbal 2021); however, its success in achieving the vision could be questioned. The amount of BISP is undeniably helpful for the poor female villagers to manage immediate living expenses such as food, fuel and health incidentals (Nawaz and Iqbal 2020; Iqbal, Tehmeena, Padda, and Farooq 2020; Farooq, Arshad, and Usman 2022); but it does not enable women to escape the cycle of poverty (Mumtaz and Whiteford 2017; Afzal, Mirza, and Arshad 2019). Likewise, it is assumed that the mere cash-transfer through BISP is empowering women (Naseer et al. 2021; Ambler and de Brauw 2017; Memon 2017). The positive outputs of BISP cannot be denied, for example many women obtained an official national identification and opened a bank account (Bengali 2019) or some got independence in making financial choices pertaining to house purchases and child care expenses (Iqbal, Tehmeena, Padda, and Farooq 2020; Hafeez, Shaikh, and Qureshi 2020; Hakeem and Aijaz 2017). As the programme is expanding from cash transfers to microfinance and educational loans, it seems even more promising to give financial liberty to women. However, all these parameters of assessing BISP success reduce the understanding of the term ‘empowerment’ to mere financial independence.

Women empowerment refers to “an unfolding process of changes in consciousness and collective power” (Cornwall 2016:343) and its related to deeply rooted structural inequalities and cultural norms (Moolji 2018:104). Further, empowerment could not be bestowed to women by others in any form rather it calls for women to recognize inequalities in power, assert their rights and take actions towards bringing structural changes in favour of greater equality. Here, power refers to gaining control over one’s own agency in any form, be it material assets, intellectual resources, ideologies and etc (Batliwala 2007; Chen et al. 1994). The BISP programme appears to be blindfolded by the economic prospects and overlooks the various aspects of social culture that impede the capacity of women to recognise and exercise their agency in Pakistan.

Joining this body of critique, this article shares an ethno-methodological account on the notion of empowerment among the BISP recipients from the rural areas of Sakhro (a village of about 25,000 people in the Sindh province of Pakistan). Situating in Csordas (1990; 2011) framework of embodiment and Bourdieu’s (2004) paradigm of habitus, this study traces the contours of empowerment in which agency of a woman could not be assessed in isolation. Rather her agency is (re)formed within the existing socio-cultural moulds in which her submission to her husband and elders account for unconscious practices of *riwaj* (social customs) (Csordas 2011). In the context of Sakhro, women’s submission of agency is social in origin, acquired in infancy, embodied and reproductive of the social contexts within which it is originated (Bourdieu 2004). Where embodiment of submission impacts and affects women from the outside through constant unconscious repetition; the habitus comes from within them as social subject (Walter 2016). Women’s *unconscious* participation in *riwaj* in order to align their behaviours with social models end up instigating the established power hierarchies. Therefore, a discourse on women empowerment necessitates considering socio-cultural patterns embedded within the reflective and non-reflexive conducts of BISP women and their entire social system.



### **Literature review and theory:**

Riwaj which could be translated as social customs trace their history of fortification across different eras including colonial times (Gilmartin 1988; Postans 1843; Saxena 2022). These customs are not any ingenuous rules uninformed or unknown to its people. Rather, these are part of everyday dialects, stories and a matter of pride and tradition to the people of Sindh (Postans 1843). Riwayat, as argued by Gilmartin (1988), are intentionally (re)produced by different social actors to dominate power over a particular set of people in varying forms. In respect to women, riwayat corroborates an intrinsic aspect of power as much as extrinsic enforcement. The intrinsic notion of power is not so concerned about the identification of those who holds power or not. It illustrates the ways power is diffused and is acted out unconsciously or unreflectively by women and other social actors in accordance with underlying social structures such as customs. For example *pardah* as a riwayat in various regions of Pakistan is not only the outer physical veil (signifying obedience) but is also an inner feeling of shame continuously practiced by women themselves (Walter 2016). Likewise, women are found to be more participative and adamant to carry forward the riwayat of dowry in certain communities across Pakistan even if it goes against the overarching idea of women empowerment (Makino 2019). The riwayat of *watta-satta* (bride exchange) which, despite being criticized broadly, is still in practise in the various parts of Pakistan including Sindh and many women are found to be in support of the custom (Jacoby et al. 2016). These studies bring to surface the ways repeated practise of customs inscribe social values and codes onto the thinking and behaviours of individuals and community which in turn gives rise to disproportionate powers within the society mechanically.

### **Bourdieu framework of ‘habitus’ and riwayat in Sindh**

In view of French sociologist Prieire Bourdieu, individuals create strategies that are internalized into a bodily disposition through which social actions are learnt and performed. Strategies are often performative and visible but not always a conscious act (Winchester 2008); and over a course of time are internalised through corporeal means and turn into habitus. Habitus, as defined by Bourdieu (2004), are socially constructed structures subjected to power but, at the same time, are functioned to create subjects so that power could be exercised. The social practise of *pardah*, for instance, is a performance of women’s embodied feelings and emotions of shame (Walter 2016). The practise of fasting by Muslims is a confirmation to Islamic values but also a social demonstration of moral selves to one’s self and others (Winchester 2008). Likewise, females politicians in Pakistan use different physical and corporeal means such as dressing or certain manners of verbal communication to exercise their power while also fitting into a socially acceptable definition of a Pakistani woman (Mohsin and Syed 2021). Here, the physical ‘performativity’ of actions not only expresses women’s standing; it also etches certain ideas of morality into their body and mind. Cultural categories and ideas become reality through performance and action which actively influences their individual judgement of themselves and others. Thus, the physical or corporeal aspect becomes central to their non-essentialist view of the self.

Based on Bourdieu framework, riwayat could be seen as social categories operated directly onto the physical and corporeal realities of the women of Sakhro. Their mobility, social interactions, living conditions or decision making are the manifestations of corporeal realities that while structuring the very dispositions (i.e. their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or perceptions) generate



desired human beings that are accustomed to the traditional social system (Marcelin 2012). The framework of habitus also offers a strong ground to explore the ways customs, in the villages of Sakhro, constitute dispositions around empowerment and reorganizes women's relationship to their everyday social order.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

The current research is an ethno-methodological study conducted in the villages of sub-district Mirpursakhro (shortened for Sakhro) in the district Thatta, Sindh. The fieldwork was conducted between January to June 2021. This ethnography was a sub-project of Men Engagement in Women Empowerment (MEWE) project led by a semi-private university based in Karachi. As a sub-project it was designed to inform the MEWE project team about the nuances of the term 'empowerment' emerging from the field site in order to facilitate their on-going research and future strategies.

Prior to commencing any form of activity in any village of Thatta, it is customary to seek permission of *wadera* (feudal lord) who acts as a gatekeeper for their respective village (Siddiqi 2019). MEWE project had sought permission from the waderas of a few villages across Sakhro. Out of those villages, the current research selected four villages which were geographically closer to one another forming a geographical and social cluster. The ethnographer was well-versed in the local dialect of Sindhi language spoken by the residents of Sakhro which made it easy to interact and gather findings without any hesitation. The findings were gathered primarily through observing and joining the villagers in their routine activities such as threshing the crops, washing clothes along the riverbank, fetching water from the well or while cooking in the house. These engagements helped to observe the way domestic world of women in Sakhro unfolds and, the ways power pulsates in the social orders and unconscious expressions of women and other villagers in their routine lives (Csordas 1990).

Besides seeking consent of the wadera, the ethnographer also sought a separate consent from each of the participant. The consent is also sought for consenting the research information for publications. This article presents selective findings from the entire ethnographic study and participant's identities such as their names or village names are concealed by pseudonyms.

### **(Re)production of social subjectivities in Sakhro**

The rural site of Sakhro is organised in a number of villages, each inhabited by at least twenty to thirty households belonging to the same caste. The villagers introduce themselves and identify each other's through the cast, for example all the villagers in Jokhio village uphold Jokhio caste. The caste system draws a clear boundary of who is relative or non-relative and demarcates the private versus public spaces for the villagers (Hussain 2022). The spaces are also gendered. Female villagers in general are not allowed to go to public spaces like grocery shops or towns without a male family member. According to our interlocutors, it's their *riwaj* that women do not leave their *chaar-dari* (literally meaning four walls). The term *chaar-dari* is a spatial imagery among villagers that sometimes confines to one's residence and at times stretches to one's village depending on the context. For example, female villagers could freely hangout within village during the daytime and that's their *chaardari*. However, they are supposed to stay within their shelters after dusk or if a man from another village is on a visit.





What remains constant is that chaardari is for female villagers (not males) and females participate in maintaining the decorum of chaardari.

Waderas also enjoy the charge of decision making in villager's personal or family affairs, sets norms for them, arbitrates whenever there is a conflict and acts as a gatekeeper whenever outsiders are involved. Villagers referred wadera as their sarparast (patrons) or sarbarah (in charge). As language serves as a great lens to reflect, reinforce and transmit culture (Gay et al. 2018); it was apparent that the authority of wadera was cemented within the social conscience of the villagers. In the words of Razia, a 40-year-old female villager, "it is for wadera to decide for us (villagers)...he understands what is good or bad for us." It was clear in Razia's tone that the villagers have accepted the authority of wadera and have submitted their agency to make choices.

It was a common scene to see small congregations where male villagers gather and sits on a ground encircling their wadera who either sits on a chair or a chaarpoye (a metal or wooden bed strung with ropes or jute threads). These congregations, referred to as katcheris, are spaces where social and political decisions are discussed and announced, such as whom to cast a vote in elections, matters of inheritance or fixing marriage of their children etc. Women are in general not allowed to participate in katcheris and, it is through men that they mediate or convey their sentiments or concerns. The reason for obedience to wadera varied for each villager. Saima, a female 32 years said, "it is our riwaj and a matter of pride that we do not disobey our wadera. It's a demonstration of one's character." Contrarily, Haleema in a helpless tone complained that "it's a riwaj.... we don't want to be outcaste, so it is better to blindly follow the decision that he (wadera) makes for us." Apparently, the judgements of wadera are not always welcomed by villagers but the existing socio-political structures leave no option for villagers but to obey.

In particular to female education, young girls are allowed to pursue education if it is offered in schools within their respective village. Most of the female villagers shared that the male members of their family and wadera do not permit girls to leave their village as they fear verbal or sexual harassment from the boys of other villages. In views of Zuleikha, a 22 years old female villager, "such girls bring shame onto their family and the entire village." The fear of harassment and torment of family reputation as a collateral is an observation across various communities in Pakistan (Kirmani 2020; Moolji 2018) and could have fatal consequences (Shah 2016). What is intriguing is that girls are very easily pushed down under the label of riwaj instead of building mechanisms to avoid harassment.

However, in one of the four villages, it was interesting to note that girls were receiving secondary education. The villagers applauded their wadera for arranging teachers in girl's school within the village. Their wadera mobilised his social network in non-governmental organisations to arrange teacher's salaries. In past, he had also partnered with charity organisations to build houses and install electricity units. Even though the dynamics of this village appear differently from rest of the villagers, wadera tops the power hierarchy and villagers were submissive to following the riwaj.

### **Decision making and BISP cash transfer:**

Almost every female eligible villager was a registered BISP recipient in Sakhro. The recipients were pleased that the government support them through BISP cash-transfer funds. The funds were used for a range of activities including repaying a family debt, managing house chores,



buying woods for fuel, paying off utility bills or organising a social gathering. It also helped women to manage routine expenses such as food, shelter, clothes and healthcare. Even though female villagers shared that the BISP amount is spent as per their ‘choice,’ one may wonder what choice accounts for in an utmost poverty and desperation (Salles 2008).

The cash transfer is received in bank, however there was not a single bank in the four villages or in neighboring villages. Considering the forementioned customs around women mobility and socialization, women could not go by themselves to withdraw the amount. They rely on male members of their family and village. Samina, a 62-year-old lady whose son was not feeling well and could not go to bank to withdraw the amount complained, “there might be one or two banks in some villages... we do not know... we would not leave our village even if there was a bank in the neighboring village.” In addition, most of the female villagers didn’t have a personal bank account. Hence, they had to rely on male family members and villagers who could travel to the town and withdraw the amount for them. In many cases, male members of the village especially outside family members took commission before handing over the amount. In these intricate network of social and financial transactions, female BISP recipients appear to act as a medium where the BISP amount is not spent on or for her; rather it is through her.

### **Analysis:**

The social practices under the label of *riwaj*, from the lens of Bourdieu (2004), are the ‘strategies’ operating directly upon the corporeal selves of the villagers. Social practices such as limitations on the mobility of women or collective voting are strategies influencing the feelings and thoughts of villagers and reproducing a *habitus*- referred by villagers as *riwaj*. As a *habitus*, *riwaj* enables certain social actors such as *waderas* to keep people controlled and confined to social boundaries of their caste, gender, villages and age group. Since the *habitus* is so deeply penetrated, it does not generate any question to male or female villagers about power relations or empowerment and they unconsciously participate in carrying forward the social practices. Their political subjectivities are solidified and passed onto generations in a manner of unchangeable, unchallengeable, and ever-lasting customs. Whether in favor or against the villagers, the agency of choice and decisions remain in the hands of *wadera*.

*Riwaj* as a *habitus* turns out to be more than a complex of social customs and values. It necessitates a certain kind of orientation and a praxis of intentional systems to establish and affirm power structures (Bourdieu 1977). Subsequently, neither a recipient of BISP (a woman) nor her spouse (a man) could call themselves agents - i.e., their individual capability of consciously acting on their own behalf has been held in a collective unit, and that is governed by their leader. Referring to *wadera* as *sarparast* or *sirbarah* while hammering the notion of *sharafat* and *ikhlaaq*, villagers produce and regulates subjects through a systemic way to achieve certain discursive effects - often beyond conscious control. It is the embodiment of obedience and discipline that is being reflected in the way villagers succumb to power.

Both, male and female villagers seek their power from their caste, social affiliations, and relationships. They encourage one another to carry forward *riwaj* and give in their agency to social conscience. This makes the notion of empowerment, in the context of *Sakhro*, quite multifaceted. Nonetheless, it also explains the significance of social integration as an unnegotiable condition for the villagers to support their survival. Individuals embody submissiveness and let certain social actors or structures exercise power onto them. The



collusions are then avoided by letting go of their agency and abiding by the social norms. In an unknowing manner, they are informed that a refute or a question on riwaj even in an attenuated manner may disrupt the entire social configuration which appear to be a refuge for these villagers.

This never implies that the power dynamics in rural Sakhro could not be challenged, and villagers would always remain submissive to waderas forever. Friere's theory of conscientization suggests that in every society a small number of people exert domination over the masses, resulting in "dominated consciousness" (Rimmer 2021). From the dominated consciousness, one could attain 'critical consciousness' that would help the individuals become aware of their situation, of themselves as subject so that they may obtain the instruments that would allow him to make choices and become politically conscious (Freire 1964). Indeed by virtue of being a habitus, riwaj has potential to be restructured (Winchester 2008).

### **3. CONCLUSION**

Ethno-methodological analysis reveals several underlying socio-cultural factors that impede women's empowerment and perpetuate power relations. The power hierarchy in the villages of Sakhro descends from wadera to a household in which men as much as women give in their agency. This hierarchy is accepted and embodied within the dispositions of villagers and is solidified over generations through varying habitus such as riwaj. Power in this way is softly practiced through embodied social practices and hierarchies that create moral dispositions - such as obedience, humility, discernment, honour keeping, moderation, and respect. This study in this way criticizes the order of social actors' embodied relationship in everyday space and time and raises questions around the practical form of subjectivity within women as well as men of lower socio-economic class in Pakistan.

The case of Sakhro in which social customs mediate the lives of women and men, BISP cash transfer alone could not be seen as a collateral to their empowerment. Instead, cash transfer programmes like BISP could be read as a mechanism where women are transformed into economic actors by enrolling them in women-exclusive financial programmes (Moolji 2018); but their power to make decisions remain submissive to social customs. Such pro-economic projects, unfortunately, reduce the evaluation of human life to a very restricted understanding of empowerment which is related to financial liberty alone (Bayissa, Smits, and Ruben 2018; Roodman 2012). Women's participation (or the lack of) towards finances, either through BISP or any other means, is therefore not a direct indicator to proclaim women empowerment. Their inability to understand the power dynamics and the social complexities keeps them susceptible to exploitation by those with social power within the communities. Thus, a genuine initiative to empower women would require considering the intrinsic as much as extrinsic sources of power.

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