**Defining Women’s Empowerment via Vocational Training**

**in Developing Countries:**

In order to appreciate the scope of women’s empowerment, we must first define what is meant by empowerment.  Specifically, are we referring to economic empowerment, political empowerment, or social empowerment?[[1]](#footnote-0)  Ideally in the complete spirit of the word, we are striving towards achieving female empowerment on all three platforms.  Economic empowerment of women would entail financial stability. Political empowerment advocates that women have a voice in the governmental policies of their countries and are contributing members alongside men.  Social empowerment would be achieved when ingrained cultural stereotypes and attitudes that value women’s roles and characteristics as less valuable than the roles associated with their male counterparts are finally altered.[[2]](#footnote-1)

A key note must be that the empowerment of women must come from women themselves and their own education, and not be a result of someone “giving power” to them.[[3]](#footnote-2)  As well-intentioned as individuals may be when “giving power” to women, this strategy can easily backfire because power that is gifted to someone can easily be retracted.  This imbalance can lead to the exploitation of women and distort the path to true empowerment.

The constructs of economic, political, and social empowerment are not mutually exclusive, but mutually reinforcing.[[4]](#footnote-3) Lauren Citrome from the Center for International Private Enterprise asserts that the foundation for all three forms of female empowerment can begin with economic empowerment.[[5]](#footnote-4) When a woman has a business which provides her family with income, this logically results in economic empowerment. Social empowerment ensues from women networking with one another to support policies that support their businesses. This in turn results in women having a voice in political affairs.[[6]](#footnote-5) According to a 2008 study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, "From a developmental perspective, investing in girls’ education has the highest rate of return of any possible investment in developing countries." [[7]](#footnote-6) Additionally, studies in African and South Asian countries show that women who become educated are more likely to encourage the education of their children, which is a precursor in breaking the cycle of poverty in developing countries.[[8]](#footnote-7)

**Working towards Women’s Empowerment via ILO’s 2017 Taqeem Initiative Recommendations:**

While the above analysis of empowerment seems straightforward, in reality achieving social and political equality for women is a formidable task, even when they are on the road to economic empowerment. We examine an extensive report published in September 2017 by Ahmed Elsayed and Rania Roushdy in which the International Labor Organization (ILO) analyzed the results of a large-scale intervention in rural Upper Egypt, a very conservative society much like the rural areas of Pakistan. The intervention identified marginalized women and provided them with vocational, business, and life-skills training. Elsayed and Roushdy concluded that while such intervention efforts were instrumental in empowering women economically, social conditions did not improve; women were still not seen as assets in comparison to men.[[9]](#footnote-8)

Examining Elsayed and Roushdy’s conclusions, it only seems logical that the social and political empowerment of women would come at a slower, but eventual rate in societies which have espoused opposing values for centuries. The Taqeem Initiative took place over an eighteen-month period, from January 2013 through August 2014.[[10]](#footnote-9) Welcoming women as wage earners is an easier concept to swallow than accepting social and political equality; the economic empowerment of women is not seen as a threat to traditional values. Although the duration of the Taqeem Initiative was not long enough to accurately assess the impact of vocational training on social and political empowerment, Elsayed and Roushdy provide recommendations for organizations striving to reach those objectives. HOPE applauds the takeaway recommendations of the authors; when implementing any strategy, it is always prudent to be realistic rather than overly optimistic and prepare for setbacks. Below we will enumerate Elsayed and Roushdy’s recommendations and illustrate how HOPE vocational centers can be effective in achieving economic, social, and political empowerment of women.

**Recommendation 1:** **“Improving women’s human capital in a conservative setting like rural upper Egypt is a vital step towards women economic empowerment.”[[11]](#footnote-10)**

Elsayed and Roushdy assert that a combination of business, vocational, and life-skills training is necessary to uplift women who have traditionally been sheltered.  This is particularly critical in areas such as AJK, where many women are found to be in charge of households because their spouses travel to the south of Pakistan for employment.[[12]](#footnote-11)

**How HOPE implements Recommendation 1:**

HOPE’s philosophy is that both health and education are basic human rights and are crucial to eradicating poverty and achieving women’s empowerment; women must have equal opportunities to access health and education in order to improve their socioeconomic conditions. Maternal health screenings, 24-hour access to medical care, counseling on family planning methods, and basic knowledge about health and safety are the cornerstone of HOPE’s hospitals, basic health units, and maternal and child health centers.  Communities are advised on basic health issues such as clean drinking water, the importance of handwashing in disease prevention, and maternal and child health. Families are also counseled as to the long-term value of educating their children, especially girls.  Additionally, HOPE vocational centers encourage women to choose a career path in fields such as fashion design and computers. Adult literacy classes and English proficiency classes are also offered in underserved areas. Training and mentoring are available for women who show potential to be teachers, midwives, and hospital workers.

**Recommendation 2:** **Ensuring the accessibility of classes and vocational training for women is crucial for the success of women’s economic empowerment programs in conservative societies.[[13]](#footnote-12)**

As discussed in the barriers to education section above, if education and vocational training are physically inaccessible or too time-consuming to reach, they will not be able to benefit their target audiences.  Furthermore, research has shown that few women’s empowerment programs employ a gender-sensitive approach; women are more likely to participate if training and mentoring was done by local women.[[14]](#footnote-13)  Lastly, as many women juggle domestic responsibilities, timings of vocational training must allow for some flexibility.

**How HOPE implements Recommendation 2:**

As mentioned previously, home schooling is a practical and advantageous method of schooling which has largely been underutilized in Pakistan.  The home school concept solves the physical distance barrier, the gender-sensitive issue, and employs a flexible career path for teachers. HOPE has taken advantage of the innovative home school design and has a flourishing network in Pakistan’s mountainous and rural areas.  These schools provide eager and willing children an opportunity to achieve a quality education and encourages young women in the community to generate income and contribute to the well-being of their own societies. The home schools are physically accessible and cost-effective, especially in remote areas.

Currently, HOPE has 180 home schools nationwide with community females employed as teachers.  8,380 students study in the home schools, 80 percent of whom are girls. The cost of the education is free, and textbooks and school supplies are provided as well.

**Recommendation 3:** **Promoting safe, flexible, female-friendly employment and workplaces for women.[[15]](#footnote-14)**

Ensuring that a work-family balance is maintained is critical for long-term success of these programs.  Allowance for maternity leave and flexibility in the workplace are strategies that should be encouraged by the government of Pakistan at a minimal cost to employers.

**How HOPE implements Recommendation 3:**

Although national laws can take many years to adopt and would involve the cooperation of the private sector, HOPE in the interim addresses this issue by promoting women’s businesses or careers which are flexible in nature.  For example, if a woman is self-employed in clothes design or embroidery, she is able to cater her hours to accommodate for her domestic responsibilities. Similarly, if community females are trained to be teachers, they can network and support one another in times of need.  Women that have more flexibility and family support may pursue computer training or become midwives or hospital support staff.

**Recommendation 4:** **“Engaging local communities is an indispensable factor in creating enabling environments for women’s empowerment.”[[16]](#footnote-15)**

Research has shown that participation in vocational training programs which utilize relationships with the private sector and result in job placement upon completion are higher than those without such relationships.[[17]](#footnote-16)  Therefore, community involvement in the private sector is vital for the proliferation of such programs.  When private firms invest in vocational training within communities, it is a win-win situation for all; not only are the companies preparing a future workforce, they are generating goodwill at the same time.  Furthermore, when skilled laborers are able to afford items beyond just necessities, they will in turn become future consumers and stimulate demand.

**How HOPE implements Recommendation 4:**

This is an area with much potential for HOPE.  Currently, our donors include Procter & Gamble, Asia Petroleum, Metro Bank in Germany, AGE Steel in Dubai, and Citibank.  We also have collaborated with Barclays Bank, HSBC Bank, and governmental initiatives such as USAID and the Japan Embassy.  Additionally, HOPE has long standing relationships with the Center for Disease Control and the World Health Organization. Students in vocational training programs have opportunities to network with the private sector through sponsored events. Other ideas to involve participation from the private sector include reaching out to our various contacts to foster internship programs and training that would directly be in line with a company’s needs.

**Recommendation 5:** **“There is an urgent need for intensive training on gender dynamics and social norms combined with innovative program design, to be able to enhance both social and economic empowerment of young women in rural settings.”[[18]](#footnote-17)**

Due to embedded cultural attitudes, the social and political empowerment of women must be actively encouraged.  Social and political empowerment of women should be viewed as an asset, not a threat to these communities. Categorically, women’s empowerment should be a worthwhile community goal, not one that is feared or shunned.

**How HOPE implements Recommendation 5:**

This recommendation is also addressed in the basic health/life skills education that is delivered in HOPE hospitals, community centers, and school networks. Women are encouraged to identify and hone their skills, market their own businesses, and develop themselves to their full potential.  Many times, however, especially in rural areas, this can only be achieved through permission of male family members; communication and involvement in the community is therefore vital.  Having a medical and educational presence for several years in downtrodden communities has proven critical in establishing trust between HOPE and the people it serves.  Both education and medical services are provided for free or very low-cost, so there is no economic barrier for these poverty-stricken communities. Over the years, HOPE has become a welcome presence in these areas.  As a result, when it comes to breaking down social barriers, HOPE members are able to influence the community in a way that would be impossible for an outside organization.

**Recommendation 6:** **“Long-term estimates are needed to properly assess the effect of livelihood intervention programs on the social empowerment of young women in conservative rural settings.”[[19]](#footnote-18)**

As stated above, Elsayed and Roushdy’s intervention program was evaluated too soon to accurately assess any social or political empowerment changes to women.  The authors acknowledge this issue by citing other studies that show a delayed response in positively changing gender norms.[[20]](#footnote-19)

**How HOPE implements Recommendation 6:**

HOPE has been investing in the economic empowerment of women via vocational training since 2014.  We have tracked graduates of such programs and seen how an education, followed by vocational training and economic independence have positively influenced hundreds of females and their families.  HOPE has documented in writing and by video several success stories of women who have become empowered through education and vocational programs. These women report how their lives have changed drastically since achieving an education and vocational training.  More notable is the confidence these women exhibit, the pride in their achievements, their gratitude, and their willingness to make a positive contribution to society. While an overall change in gender attitudes may not be obvious to an outsider, these individual success stories offer proof that the climate is slowly changing.  Below, we present to you one example of how HOPE has positively influenced a young woman’s life:

**Rehana Balouch’s Story in her own words:**

“My name is Rehana Balouch. I was born on 22nd October 1989 in a village named Hussain Baloch, which is located in the outskirts of Karachi. In my village, after primary schooling, girls are put to farming which is our family occupation. My father is a primary school teacher and my mother studied till 5th standard. I have 4 sisters and 4 brothers. My aim in life is to get educated so that I may teach other students of my village. When in April 1999, I started my schooling I was in class 3. We do have schools and teachers here but the teachers don’t come to school to teach us and the education is not good at all. Hence, when HOPE started its Primary school, it was like a ray of hope for us for our better future. HOPE initiated an educational revolution here in my village 18 years back which is serving till date. We used to hear about the people of the cities that they are very well educated, like there are a lot of doctors and engineers; it was disappointing to see the schools in the outskirts of Karachi in which they have vacancies only for non-teaching staff rather than the teaching staff. Till today the vacancies for teachers are not filled with the adequate staff. However, I completed my 5th standard (Primary level) with the support of HOPE. It was the motivation of the staff members of HOPE and their continuous efforts that I was able to finish my primary level with flying colors. And again it was their efforts that the Middle School was also introduced in our village and I was able to study further and pass middle school. But this was not the end yet, I wanted to do my Matric [high school] but I was unable to afford the expenses of the Matric [high school] Schooling system. It was again due to the unwavering and unflinching support of HOPE that my financial expenses were paid and they didn’t leave us hopeless. I was in 9th standard when I started teaching in the HOPE School's primary section. Due to which I was able to gather some money and I propagated my message successfully to 25 other girls of different nearby villages who along with me cleared the Matriculation [high school] exams. Out of these 25 girls, 3 girls were selected as teachers in HOPE School after the interview procedure. The news of this simple girl teaching in HOPE school was spread in the village like a fire and created further awareness in our village and encouraged other girls to go to school. I got to hear about P&G when a program in collaboration with this P&G was organized by HOPE in our village. There, I got a chance to meet Dr. Mubina Agboatwalla who really cares for the poor people and can’t see them suffering. I wish to pursue my education and complete my BA and continue to work as teacher. At this level, I can give nothing to HOPE but prayers and my services as teacher. This is all I could offer.”

In conclusion, HOPE aims to foster the economic empowerment of women in the short-term and lay the foundation for social and political empowerment in the long-run. We have employed an early intervention approach which identifies and removes barriers to girls’ education and prepares young women for the workforce through vocational training. In an effort to facilitate the development of the social and political empowerment of women and maximize results, we have implemented the recommendations of Elsayed and Roushdy.

1. http://www.cipe.org/blog/2011/03/07/what-does-it-mean-to-empower-women/#.WmZLVVQ-eL4 [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. https://www.macfound.org/media/files/UNGEI\_Gender\_and\_Skills.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. http://www.cipe.org/blog/2011/03/07/what-does-it-mean-to-empower-women/#.WmZO2VQ-eL7 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. http://www.cipe.org/blog/2011/03/07/what-does-it-mean-to-empower-women/#.WmZLVVQ-eL4 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. http://www.cipe.org/blog/2011/03/07/what-does-it-mean-to-empower-women/#.WmZLVVQ-eL4 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. http://www.cipe.org/blog/2011/03/07/what-does-it-mean-to-empower-women/#.WmZO2VQ-eL7 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed\_emp/documents/publication/wcms\_150831.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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