

THE RAISING HER VOICE PAKISTAN PROGRAMME

By Duncan Green

*Before I joined the group I only knew about the boundaries of my house
Multan, from evaluation interviews with Women Leader Group members*

*Earlier we did not know the names of different Government Departments. Now we know
about them. We did not know where to refer someone need help to. Now it is easy.
Nowshera, from evaluation interviews with Women Leader Group members*

Well known for its highly articulate and influential women, Pakistan is also notorious for the severe restrictions placed on women's personal and political liberties.

The Raising Her Voice (RHV) programme started working on this very complex and sensitive issue by building a country-level partnership with the Aurat Foundation (AF), which for the past 26 years has promoted women's empowerment and citizens' participation in governance. Working together, the RHV programme and AF established 50 Women Leaders Groups (WLGs) in 30 districts across Pakistan, with a total membership of 1,500 women activists, living and working in their communities.

The aims of the WLGs are: to promote activism within their communities; to defend and promote individual and collective women's rights; to represent marginalized women; and to raise women's collective voice at local and district levels, as well as, with AF's support, at the provincial and national level.

BACKGROUND

In Pakistan, opportunities for women are restricted by multiple barriers, including misinterpretations of Islam, patriarchal institutions of both formal and informal justice and governance, complex geo-politics, and a weak economy.

With 180 million inhabitants, Pakistan is the sixth most populous country in the world. It ranks 146th out of 187 countries on the UNDP 2014 Human Development Index¹ and has slipped from 112th on the Global Gender Gap Report in 2006, when the Report was started, to 135 out of 136 in 2013 (Yemen was number 135), although it fares considerably better (64th) on political empowerment².

For many Pakistanis, the country's economic downturn is their number one priority. With annual inflation running at 11 percent per year and economic growth averaging 2.9 percent over the past four years, Pakistan is falling behind its neighbours.³ Although Pakistan was previously the second biggest exporter of textiles in the world and boasts a vibrant, innovative IT sector, its recent economic decline is reflected in its diminishing share of global trade.

Disgruntled entrepreneurs point to political instability, insecurity and corruption and policy failures as the top three disincentives for doing business in Pakistan. Domestically, the country's political leadership has seen a rising tide of dissatisfied entrepreneurs and workers.

In addition, the country's governance, economy and social fabric have had to endure a series of natural disasters. These include earthquakes in 2005 and 2008, a cyclone in 2007 and, most recently, devastating floods in 2010 and 2011, in which an estimated 20 million people were affected.

Systemic corruption, see-sawing military coups, continuing states of emergency and power struggles between the military (which consumes 70 percent of Pakistan's total budget)³ and the judiciary have proved difficult soil for equitable and inclusive governance to put down roots.

Gender rights

Pakistan is a country where, in 1988, Benazir Bhutto became the first-ever woman prime minister of a Muslim country (although she was, of course, assassinated in 2007); where, in 2008, Dr. Fehmida Mirza became the first woman to be elected as speaker of a National Assembly in the Muslim world; and where 2013 saw more than 100 women members enter both houses of parliament. Yet, Pakistan is also a country where political activist Zubaida Begum was killed because of her attempt to break anti-women traditions by participating in local elections and raising women's awareness of their right to vote.

Pakistani women are less likely to be educated, to own land or assets, to be political leaders, or to be safe in the home and workplace. They have fewer opportunities for paid employment and weaker access to justice, decent healthcare and education. They are frequently excluded from politics and decision-making.

Underpinning the lack of political voice of Pakistan's women – and other marginal groups – are deep cultural and social norms, founded in a politicization of Islam and a misinterpretation of the Koran, as seen in Sharia law, which perpetuate discrimination against them. Cultural constraints restrict women's mobility and, although they contribute the majority of unpaid household labour, as well as other forms of work, this is often unrecognized.

There is a disconnect between constitutional rights and customary or Islamic laws, 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 used as 'compensation' in grievance cases and have little redress as victims of violence.

BUDGET

DFID provided RHV Pakistan with £445,000 over five years (2008–2013).

MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING

This paper includes the results of the final project evaluation⁴, based on a desk review, primary data collection with 442 respondents (360 in a survey and the remainder in focus group discussions and key informant interviews), in addition to consultation with OGB and AF staff and data analysis. The evaluation was carried out between February and April 2013.

THEORY OF CHANGE

RHV began with a power analysis, examining the nature and origins of women's exclusion and subordination.

Women's weak access to formal governance structures:

- Although illegal, women are often prevented from voting, either through family pressure or signed agreements between contesting male candidates endorsed by religious leaders and traditional village committees.
- Disenfranchisement: In 2012 it was reported that there were 11 million fewer women registered as voters than men on the electoral rolls.

Women's weak access to formal systems of justice:

- Under the 1979 Hudood Ordinances, incorporated in the Pakistan Penal Code, most sexual assault victims are deemed guilty of illegal sex. The Pakistan National Commission on the Status of Women voted to repeal the Hudood Ordinances in 2005, but this has not yet happened.
- Since the Protection of Women Act 2006, rape (*zina bil jabr*) is now a criminal rather than a religious offence, but remains subject to different evidentiary standards and

punishment. Under evidentiary law, a woman's testimony is given half the weight of a man's.

- Under the laws of *Qisas* and *Diyat*, the sentence for murder is lessened when the victim's heir is a direct descendent of the accused, meaning that a husband guilty of murdering his wife is exempt from the maximum punishment if they have children.
- Pakistan signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1996 with a key reservation 'subject to the provisions of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.'

Women's weak access to informal governance:

- Women, and other marginalized groups, are often excluded from informal (and yet powerful) traditional systems of governance.
- *Zakat (alms)* committees often do not have the legal minimum requirement of one woman on the panel.

Women's weak access to informal systems of justice:

The panchayats are dangerous because they are not accountable to anyone; therefore they have an unlimited power and can order the practice of torture and physical abuse.

Rehman Rashin, representative for the Human Rights Commission in Multan, Southern Punjab.

- Tribal leaders and elders sitting on panchayats, *jirgas* or *hujra* (different forms of community decision-making bodies) act as arbitrators on a range of issues, from family disputes around land and property to water management. Women have no rights of representation or appeal.
- Many panchayats are run by local elites, often feudal lords and landowners with high-level patronage.

Violence against women and girls:

- There are high levels of domestic violence, early forced marriage, acid attacks, kidnap, rape, murder, and honour killings. As many as 90 percent of women in Pakistan have experienced domestic violence at least once.⁵ Pakistan is also notorious for the severe restrictions placed on women's personal and political liberties – so-called 'honour killings' being the most extreme example.
- Women are often the victims of traditional practices, such as the marrying of young women and girls to 'buy' reconciliation between parties.

Health and education:

- Limited choices exist regarding number of children born, birth control and spacing between pregnancies.
- There are lower levels of education and literacy among women. Only 34 per cent of women are literate as opposed to 64 per cent of men.

CHANGE HYPOTHESIS

AF identified two types of opportunities to further its work: allies and windows of opportunity.

Allies

As well as its work with women's leaders at community level, AF's wider networks make it able to broker a broad range of alliances among Pakistan's vibrant civil society movement and beyond.

In the field of legislative advocacy AF is well connected to both prominent members of the judiciary and legal advisors to the government, and has used these connections to advocate for the passage of new bills, such as the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Bill in 2011, which explicitly recognises practices from acid violence and forced marriage, to so-called 'honour killings' as criminal acts and offers protection and legal action for victims.

Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Bill

In the project's fourth year, AF and Oxfam sought to strengthen links with the private sector and formalise previously *ad hoc* work by individual WLG members to connect vulnerable women in their communities with local economic schemes and skills training. AF organised a number of provincial sessions to connect WLG and Citizens Action Committee (CAC) members with banks and social assistance officials, offering small loans and micro finance schemes with the aim of increasing economic independence.

It is important to note too, that many of the 1,500 women leaders themselves play influential roles within the private sector locally and provincially – both through family and independent connections including women leaders of District Chambers of Commerce who can help local women and WLG/CAC members open private sector doors and access resources.

Within the women's movement, allies include a significant number of confident and politically astute Pakistani women within and beyond the WLGs, together with groups of 'sympathetic' Pakistani men. Involving men to create an 'enabling' environment for women at household and community level was pivotal in broadening the WLGs' support base and helping with logistics. Although WLGs are women-only fora, their roots are in CACs, which have both men and women members.

The media is a powerful body in Pakistan and a strong conduit for raising public awareness and calling politicians to account. It has proven to be a valuable ally.

AF has engaged carefully with faith organizations, nurturing relationships with progressive religious scholars to build understanding and dialogue around positive calls for gender

equality, based on religious texts. But it has found working with leaders who have extreme views to be time consuming and unproductive and made a deliberate decision within RHV *not* to work with individual religious leaders, but to work alongside progressive Islamic scholars to build understanding and dialogue.

Similarly, AF and the WLGs have engaged with traditional decision-making structures, such as *panchayats*, and built relationships with other representatives of power, including the police and the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), to promote women's political participation and leadership.

Windows of opportunity

Women in Pakistan hardly interact with the state at all; the vast majority have no idea that they have rights under the law or that policies exist to support them.

Farida Shaheed, Sociologist

Legislative windows of opportunity for work on women's rights were opened up by the 18th Constitutional Amendment (2010), which enshrined the right to information, education from age five for girls and boys, and a fair trial, and prohibited discrimination based on sex.

Administrative decentralization – devolving powers and resources to provincial assemblies – has generated opportunities for grassroots women's groups to have a greater involvement in decision making, both as active citizens and as elected leaders. Budget monitoring is a new area of work for RHV and the WLGs.

Decentralisation provides significant opportunities, but also increased costs (e.g. conducting multiple parallel advocacy programmes). The key is to identify the most promising political opportunities, where energies for legislative and policy reform exist.

Changes to the rules of the political process have created a more level playing field for women's political participation. These have included the introduction of 33 percent minimum quotas for women's representation in parliament (though, in 2014 these are far from being realised), and party political and civil society calls to declare political constituencies null and void where fewer than 10 percent of women vote. (In 2012 it was reported that there were 11 million fewer women registered as voters than men on the electoral rolls.)

Whilst implementation of parliamentary quotas will no doubt be a long and bumpy road, their introduction marks an important foundational first step for increasing the political engagement of Pakistani women. It was an important element too in the AF facilitated Women's Manifesto (see Box 1). Pre-electoral phases have offered opportunities for an intensification of governance work, notably around women's active citizenship, including voter education and holding parties to account, encouraging women to stand for election, and pushing for policies that respond to women's needs.

CHANGE STRATEGY

The RHV Theory of Change (see Figure 1) identifies *three broad spheres* - personal, political and social – that influence women’s opportunities to participate in governance.

Figure 1: Raising Her Voice Theory of Change



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. Photo ©Irina Werning (2012). Source: J. Repila (2013)⁶

The power analysis in Pakistan echoes this global framework, although it used slightly different language. AF identified three key sets of factors as critical requirements to bring about transformational change for women’s political participation and leadership:

1. Identify and work on the **political opportunities and constraints** facing women. (RHV’s political sphere)
2. Support **mobilizing structures** (formal and informal organizations) and change makers. (RHV’s social sphere)

3. Support framing processes that result in and from **cognitive** liberation. (RHV's personal sphere).

AF adopts a non-confrontational approach to avoid women, or their advocates, being exposed to greater levels of violence or having their already narrow political space being closed down completely.

Pakistan's cultural and religious barriers to women's empowerment make it very hard to overtly organize women in public. But women can still talk to women in ways that outsiders, especially men, cannot, so RHV's vehicle of choice has been the WLG spaces that it established. The women in them are mainly educated, some with party political connections, but an increasing number are living in poverty.

Not unlike a 'training of trainers' approach, AF's training support for WLGs focused on developing their capacity to support CACs, and other community organizations, to develop women's empowerment and governance. AF supports WLGs through training, exchange visits and information sharing. WLGs have organized themselves into thematic sub-groups focusing on education, health, legal rights and social networking. WLGs' informal directories of members' skills and contacts, and formal directories of local service providers and assistance to support referrals are highly valued by women leaders. The multiplier effect of contacts and information increases the potential for support and influence, and safety in numbers reduces the risk of individuals being threatened with violence.

Central to RHV's impact has been replacing isolation with networks. Horizontal networking has helped to bring large numbers of women and men out in public for campaigns and protests, and to resolve specific problems, while 'upward' networking helps to link the WLGs with political actors and government officials.

Personal sphere

RHV worked in the personal sphere both in terms of supporting the personal confidence and development of women leaders, and then helping them to do likewise for larger groups of poor and marginalized women in their constituencies. Of women leaders surveyed for the final evaluation, 91 percent reported positive changes in the personal sphere as a result of their engagement with RHV.

Women leaders: Although comparatively confident, given that they have already overcome the barriers to women's participation in becoming leaders, AF still found that they needed to support women leaders to enable them to 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.

AF has helped WLG members travel to observe women members of the provincial assemblies in action, as they challenge senior government officials and civil servants. Moreover, as 'community women' gain in confidence and become more articulate, the assumptions made by 'upper echelon' women about the priorities of their 'village sisters' can be challenged.

Most of the women leaders interviewed for the final evaluation said that the political leverage and supportive environment of the WLGs are in sharp contrast to the normal operating

environment within political parties. The WLG platform provides a 'safe haven' for developing consultation, representation and advocacy skills. In communities that are traditionally divided along family, religious community and political lines, a neutral forum was a new social phenomenon.

Of women leaders surveyed for the final evaluation, 83 percent reported changes to their home and social environments, enabling them to participate more freely. The Evaluation records increased support also for women's leadership amongst individuals and institutions *'such as schools, healthcare professionals, the police the judiciary and the legal system'*, though this is not systematically documented.

Grassroots women: Helping poor and marginalized women build their 'power within' in Pakistan starts with the basics: that women are able to move about with some level of freedom, congregate and enter public spaces, but also that they have an identity card. WLG participation in the national identity cards registration campaign was a critical first step to developing and deepening the political identity and voice of women in their communities.

Social sphere

AF's work in the social sphere is primarily focused on creating an 'enabling environment' for women's political participation and leadership. The benefit of focusing on the enabling environment, rather than specific projects, is that it allows WLGs to respond flexibly according to the different needs and events in different areas. They have done this with enthusiasm, responding to floods, violence, politics and labour disputes in different ways.

AF's capacity-building support aims to enhance women leaders' capacity to:

- defend, represent and advocate on behalf of women in formal and informal political spaces, at community, district and provincial level;
- provide practical and moral support to women in their communities and act as role models;
- encourage and promote more women to become active citizens and to take up leadership positions.

From household to national level in Pakistan, men are traditionally the decision makers. AF tries to develop culturally sensitive strategies to 'reward' male supporters of women's empowerment, for example by recognizing their contribution in positive media coverage and inviting them to meetings with other influential members of the community.

As their social and political base, CACs were instrumental in putting forward women to join the WLGs. The sequence was probably important – although not planned as such. While CACs were dominated by men, WLGs are women only. Beginning with the CACs thus meant that there was less of a risk of backlash and women had already benefited from their apprenticeship in CACs.

Approximately 40 percent of CACs now have women coordinators thanks to the WLGs and an increase in broader support for women's leadership engendered by the RHV programme.

Political sphere

The work of the RHV Pakistan programme has contributed to the passing of ground-breaking legislation concerning women. This has included pushing for the approval of the Domestic Violence Bill in Pakistan, where AF has collaborated with, and often been the hub for, a network of alliances that includes the Insani Huqooq Ittehad (IHI) Network, End Violence against Women and Girls (EVAW/G) alliance, Women Action Forum (WAF), Fight against Dowry Advocacy Network (FADAN) and Dosti YAN (Youth Advocacy Network).

Legislation regarding domestic violence was not passed by law-makers because many male members privately believed – and even publicly stated – that they had the right to punish the women in their households. After it was denied success at national level, jurisdiction for the Domestic Violence Bill was devolved to individual provinces. Taking advantage of this, AF worked with women legislators, jurists, lawyers and human-rights activists at both provincial and national levels.

In March 2013, the Sindh Provincial Assembly approved the Domestic Violence Bill. The effort and contribution of AF was acknowledged by law-makers from the floor of the Provincial Assembly, when the provincial legislation was tabled and passed.

These kinds of successes are built on painstaking work at community level. The RHV programme recognizes the need to help women to engage directly with political parties in order to influence policy development. This may range from exercising active citizenship rights or party membership, to standing as a party political candidate or government office holder. Many of the WLG members were elected as Union Councillors (the lowest tier of local government) and a significant number have links to political parties.

The final RHV evaluation observed that *‘taken together, many of the outcomes of the WLG interactions indicate a deeper institutional awareness on the part of District Governments to the rights of women and to the fact that women must be taken seriously and a profound change in the traditional way things are done’*⁷

This gradual but fundamental shift in the relationship between citizens and state is a core achievement of the WLGs. The final evaluation found that *‘31% of WLG members surveyed indicated that political changes had occurred with substantial anecdotal evidence of individuals in Departments receiving them respectfully and taking them seriously. Given the rather ‘distant’ attitude of many Government Departments to members of the public, these are positive indicators of effective project outcomes.’*⁸

Where laws and policies to protect women’s rights are in place, those in power may be unaware of them, or lack the knowledge or will to implement them AF and WLGs provide information, identify gaps and highlight the gaps between practice and policy.

AF also works with national and local-level media to raise the profile and promote the achievements of WLG members and other women activists. Similarly, AF helps to increase media coverage of local WLG events by inviting parliamentarians and politicians as guests of honour.

A large window of opportunity (and test of RHV’s impact) came in the months leading up to the May 2013 elections. WLGs, in consultation with their CACs and other community

organizations, developed a manifesto listing the minimum acceptable requirements of political party engagement on women's empowerment (see Box 1). The manifesto and accompanying campaign reached both national media and inner circles of influence, achieving a high level of 'buy in' from political parties.

Box 1: Pakistan Women's Manifesto

'All mainstream political parties to ensure.....'

1. Women's political representation to be a minimum of 50 per cent in legislative structures.
2. Timely elections, 50 percent of tickets to be awarded to women candidates, and election commission to take steps to suspend elections in constituencies where women are prevented from voting.
3. Women party members to participate in all party decision-making structures.
4. Political awareness and registration of women voters in their respective constituencies.
5. Registration of repeal of discriminatory laws against women and engagement in reporting mechanisms on international commitments on gender equality.
6. Active support for approval of Domestic Violence Bill by the assembly using CEDAW legislative guidelines.
7. Gender-responsive legislation to protect the rights of women workers, including brick kiln workers, factory workers, farmer women and women in formal and non-formal sectors. Reform labour policies and protect women from violence caused by traditions such as exchange marriage (*watasata*), early childhood marriage, marriage with Quran, Karokari, honour killing and the practice of using women as 'compensation' to settle disputes.
8. Thirty three percent of District Development Funds (DDFs) to be allocated to women social groups to design gender-promotion interventions such as child-care facilities for working women, special transport for factory women workers, skills development and IT centres for women, working women hostels and women's helpline.
9. Policy regulation at federal/provincial level for minimum 30 per cent quota for senior management positions in private and public sector organizations and to raise the upper age limit for jobs for women from 45 years.
10. Needs-based community demands for health and education to be met through government flagship programmes in the education and health sectors by extending positive support of Member Provincial Assembly (MPAs) and Member National Assembly (MNAs) in their respective constituencies around Pakistan.
11. Integrated planning for formal, non-formal and technical education for women and girls and removal of gender stereotypes in curriculum.
12. Efficient use and planning of Department of Bait-ul-Mal and Zakat and Ushar in favour of women's self-reliance beyond mere welfare

The manifesto has had some limited impact. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) supported declaring election results null and void in constituencies where less than 10 percent of votes cast are from women, but this was not endorsed by parliament and so the law could not be passed.

However, in the run up to the May 2013 elections the Chief Election Commission issued a 'circular order' supporting the policy position – with dissemination support from WLG members – which in itself proved invaluable in supporting local interventions in cases where less than 10 percent of women were registered:

In KP and FATA regions... where workers of a political party were found to have stopped their women from voting, the Women Leaders Group and Community Action Committee raised it with [party] leadership who consequently took action against those party leaders/workers who had stopped women from casting votes.

In the event, six WLG women were elected to the Provincial Assemblies (five in Punjab and one in Sindh), while one has become a Member of the National Assembly.

There has also been agreement on the need to introduce minimum quotas for numbers of women in party politics – 33 percent of party members and 33 percent of leadership positions. While much remains to be done, women were included for the first time in several parties' 2013 election manifesto committees.

WHAT HAPPENED? RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

Working with AF, the activism and campaigning of the WLGs has resulted in tangible benefits for women and contributed to changing a culture that has previously often excluded women from decision making.

In each WLG, 50 women, representing different political parties and with affiliations to a broad cross-section of community and civil society organizations (CSOs), came together for the first time in order to develop mutual trust and strengthen the collective voice of local women. The WLGs are influential in their communities and have high levels of confidence and well-developed networks. Despite their ideological and party political differences, the women leaders agree on many women's rights issues. They are able to work together to resolve local problems, such as violations of women's employment rights and cases of domestic violence.

These achievements have been possible in this difficult context through AF's culturally sensitive policy of promoting personal transformation, by building the mentoring and pastoral-support capabilities of the women leaders to reach more marginalized groups of women. Equally important has been the role of women leaders and AF in creating an enabling and safe environment, in which changes in attitudes, policy and behaviour can develop. Where WLGs are present, women are daring to speak out more in public spaces, challenging politicians and holding local authorities and businesses to account.

WLGs have actively encouraged women to stand for election in decision-making bodies. In Punjab, where there are 15 WLGs, 20 of the 54 social welfare posts in Jhelum are now held

by women. In Punjab and Sindh, women leaders have joined district-level committees on education, gender mainstreaming and gender justice.

In Hafizabad District, Punjab, when there were no women on the *zakat* (Islamic welfare fund) committee, the WLG filed a court order to enforce the legal minimum female representation of 15 per cent and campaigned for more women to come forward to join. The district's 670 *zakat* committees now have 1,200 women, including 300 RHV members. Five of the *zakat* committees are now headed by women. This same pattern is spreading to other provinces, led by AF and the WLGs.

WLGs, in consultation with CACs and other community organizations, were the driving force behind the creation of a Women's Manifesto for political parties (see Box 1). Ninety WLG members ran for political office in the 2013 election.

WLGs have mobilized women to register for identity cards. Between 2008 and 2012, WLGs helped nearly 116,000 women obtain these crucial documents, a small contribution to a much broader process of enfranchisement. According to the National Database and Registration Authority, over 86 per cent of the country's female population has registered for ID Cards, compared to less than 50 per cent just four years ago.⁹

WLGs have helped women gain access to local resources, including the Benazir Bhutto Income Support (BIS) scheme, Zakat Committee social welfare grants and little-known statutory maternity leave grants.

Foreshadowing the subsequent rethink in the Global RHV programme (see 'The Raising Her Voice Global Programme' add link), the RHV programme and the WLGs recognized the important contribution that economic empowerment can make to political voice, and implemented a wide range of economic initiatives, including linking thousands of women to microfinance initiatives. Seventy percent of the women leaders supported by RHV, report having secured district level investment for development schemes in their communities.

Economic gains have also been promoted through women's employment rights, including WLGs taking part in the successful campaign to register a worker's union at a Coca Cola factory in 2009, and the reinstatement of some 250 unfairly dismissed workers.

On human rights, in tandem with AF, WLGs have been effective advocates for changes to both formal legislation and traditional decision-making structures. They have contributed to calls for changes in key laws such as the Women Protection Act (2009); the Anti-Sexual Harassment in the Work Place Act (2010); the Acid Control and Crime Prevention Act (2011); and the Anti-Customary Practices Act (2012).

Implementation of the Anti-Sexual Harassment in the Work Place Act has been actively monitored by WLGs. Not only are women in districts with active WLGs more aware of their rights in the workplace, but women leaders are increasingly holding employers to account.

At the district and community level, WLGs have become 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. Gaining strength and finding safety in numbers, they have challenged exclusively male arbitration bodies, such as *panchayats* and *jirgas*, who traditionally decide the fate – which can sometimes

mean death – of women and girls in family disputes. Several district-level authorities now refer disputes and cases of violence to WLGs and CACs, who then refer them to lawyers.

CRITICAL JUNCTURES AND COURSE CORRECTIONS

With the collapse of local government in 2009, DFID funding for the RHV programme enabled AF to reorient its work to providing support for activists and women leaders who had lost their political mandate, platform and connections.

The devastating floods that hit Pakistan in 2010 and 2011 included several areas with WLGs. Being community leaders who were readily accessible to people on ground, women leaders had to take on some new roles in terms of mobilising resources. Keeping within the RHV focus, many also helped women in camps to replace lost IDs and other documents, essential for accessing government support schemes. Women leaders also monitored levels of violence towards women in the camps.

In all five flood-hit RHV districts of Sindh, the Lady Health Workers¹⁰ who are WLG members provided free medical facilities to the victims. Other members checked the quality of food in the camps and brought problems to the attention of the authorities. Their role was that of a ‘watch-dog’ on NGOs and on Government officials, though the then Oxfam RHV programme manager believed Oxfam missed an opportunity in not investing more in this more strategic aspect of the WLG response.

One of the darker aspects of the changing Pakistan context has been the rise in violence. Many Districts have seen an increasing number of threats of violence to WLG members and NGO staff members by militant organisations. In interviews for RHV’s final evaluation 77 women (26 percent of respondents) said they had faced problems due to threats arising from security issues.¹¹

Interestingly, the final evaluation ascribed RHV’s resilience in the face of such threats down to its decentralized nature.

CONCLUSION

RHV in Pakistan shows what can be achieved in even the most apparently unpromising of contexts. This is due to the commitment, experience and expertise of the AF, the design of the programme, and to the courage and commitment of the WLG members. By focussing on women leaders, many with existing experience of how to influence local decision-making, AF found a viable point of entry for working on gender issues. By building an enabling environment based on building confidence, knowledge, skills and networks among women leaders with strong local legitimacy, rather than specific programme ‘blueprints’, it allowed WLGs to respond to the shifting tides of Pakistani life and politics.

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ANNEX: TIMELINE

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| 1973 | Oxfam GB begins work in Pakistan supporting livelihoods and providing humanitarian assistance. |
| 1986 | Aurat Foundation begins work. |
| 1997 | Aurat Foundation sets up Citizen Action Committees. |
| 2005 | Oxfam Pakistan and Aurat Foundation establish partnership under the 'We Can' campaign to end violence against women. |
| 2006 | DFID publishes White Paper, 'Making Governance Work for the Poor', http://www.bond.org.uk/data/files/DFID%20whitepaper%202006.pdf |
| 2008 | DFID Fund based on White paper announced. Oxfam wins funding for RHV, including Pakistan. |
| 2009 | Abolition of Local Government Ordinance Act triggers collapse of local government structures. Many local women leaders were suddenly left without direction. RHV offers a new framework to support women activists building on the trust between AF and CAC members. |
| July 2010 and Sept 2012 | Pakistan floods. WLGs help more than 16,000 women flood victims replace lost identity documents and register for 'Watan' cards to benefit from government welfare schemes. |
| 2010 | 18 th Constitutional Amendment creates space for greater provisional autonomy and devolution of Ministry of Women's Development. |
| April 2011 | Assassination of Osama Bin-Laden on Pakistani soil and increase in US drones and casualties due to extremist attacks. |
| 2011 | Landmark achievements for women with the enactment of some crucial laws, for example, the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices, Bill 2011, Acid Control and Acid Crimes Prevention Bill, 2011, which were passed on 12 December 2011. |

- 2011 Major setback to the women's rights movement in Pakistan as the Supreme Court upholds Lahore High Court's decision to acquit five of the six suspects in the gang rape of Mukhtar Maie.
- March 2013 Approval of the Domestic Violence Bill in Sindh province.
- March 2013 RHV Pakistan ends.
- May 2013 General Election: High levels of political violence and yet record levels of voter turnout (55 percent); 161 women ran for office – an increase of nearly 130 per cent on the previous (2008) election and an unprecedented two out of five voters are women.

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