

Brave Beyond BISP
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Brave Beyond BISP aims to graduate the most vulnerable female members of society dependent on cash bails from the Benazir Income Support Program, into self-sufficient and fully functioning members of their communities.

My mentor, Dr. Lubna Tajik has spent her career working to improve the livelihoods of women in the KPK region of Pakistan. Her expertise, along with a revised and burgeoning social security system for impoverished members of society (BISP) by the Pakistani government allowed me to see the connection and need to support women beyond the governmental handouts already given to them.

Balochistan, a province of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan, has confronted the challenge of conflict and militancy induced displacement. This has resulted in the displaced and hosting communities encountering a range of vulnerabilities due to the loss of livelihood and traditional social protection systems coupled with growing competition for local resources in the displaced areas. Women have been particularly affected owing to the death or conscription of their men into militant groups. For many, this has paved the way for them to assume leading economic roles, opening opportunities to navigate public spaces. However, these leading roles are very seldom accompanied by empowerment. This is in large part due to their weak social position, which is often exploited in the workforce. Women and girls bear an unequal burden of unpaid domestic responsibilities as well as overrepresentation in informal and precarious jobs. Women also do not exercise the same rights as men owing to strict traditional norms and an extremely conservative society. This is evident from the rate of multidimensional poverty, the highest, while female literacy is one of the lowest. Additionally, women in Balochistan lack any control over productive resources like inherited land resulting in increased dependence on male family members. All these factors contribute towards women's victimization, namely, increased economic insecurity, unpaid workload, domestic violence and abuse

I chose to work in Lasbela because not only was the district a recognized site for BISP beneficiaries, who were the prime target of this project, but it also had an established NGO - WANG (Welfare Association for New Generation) that had previously worked on various projects that aimed to empower the Lasbela community through a number of youth-led initiatives. By partnering with WANG, I was able to overcome the cultural barriers between myself and women from rural Balochistan, gain their trust through a grassroots organization that had worked with the community in the past, and navigate the project with an increased understanding of the communal dynamics on ground. An example of why this was essential came forward when I was working to select my project sample, which I aimed to have elements of randomness in order to ensure a fair selection. I learnt that the community in Lasbela, however, was very close knit and it would cause conflict if I had chosen one person over the other - particularly without satisfactorily justifying it to the other party. Instead, by changing my selection strategy towards advertising the program at BISP beneficiary centers and letting the BISP beneficiaries genuinely interested in the program attend orientation sessions in which the layout of the program was explained in greater detail. An interest based approach was paramount to the project to ensure women would continue to make the journey to the training sessions and stay active participants. Therefore, it worked to combine their interests with their specific needs following a training needs assessment of their homes and current skills.

This project was initially scheduled to be implemented in the KPK region of Pakistan. Unfortunately, close to the project's beginning, COVID-19 cases in KPK began to rise to the extent that the project needed to be relocated to Balochistan. This, and also having to change my sample selection process made me question whether the project would be a success. These worries were only allayed when I saw the beneficiaries' excitement towards the project, and the prospect of learning a new skill and changing their livelihoods entirely.

I define peace as empowerment. For the marginalized women of Balochistan trapped in a patriarchal society, it requires a state of economic stability, social security, and confidence, such that one no longer gives in to abuse and exploitation. Through its goal of empowering the most vulnerable women in Pakistani society then, this project aims for sustained peace.

By enabling women with some skill in sewing and embroidery to hone their skills further through lessons on stitching and embroidery and equipment such as sewing machines, these women were able to learn to stitch and embroider kurtas (the predominant cultural dress) as well as make other cloth designs that they could later sell within their community. For women that partook in this program, being able to have a sense of economic agency in creating and selling their own designs led to a sense of economic (and social) empowerment, which was an important goal of this project. Additionally, for women in the kitchen gardening and poultry farming program, not only do the skills and lessons imparted help manage their land space more effectively, but the food produced as a result of their activities will first serve to eliminate hunger within their household, allowing them to be nutritionally secure. Thus, in addition to reducing poverty through social and income stabilization, the project also achieved short term peace through food security. To ensure the women are able to handle their new skills and resources efficiently, participants were also given financial literacy and health sessions so that they could foster their small entrepreneurial projects but also manage their health appropriately. By strengthening women's active participation in the economy, this project will eventually contribute to the region's long-term peace and resilience and ultimately aim for gender parity within Balochistan. This is critical in order to collectively achieve global commitments to women's empowerment and sustainable peace.

This project highlighted the many challenges women in rural communities face simply to survive. Travelling to and from the project site was not easy for these women, who at times had to leave their children, sit on rickshaws, and struggle to learn a new means of survival for hours at a time each day. Yet they took so much pride in their accomplishments and the lessons they learned each day. Their example motivated other women in the community to also want to learn from the program, and many other women would also visit the project site asking for lessons, even if they would not receive any equipment. This drive to learn and break a cycle of poverty taught me how everyone deserves a chance to live a dignified life and that everyone has the potential to foster their own growth. The unfortunate matter at hand is that while many of these women have a profound drive to change their predicament, they simply lack the means to change their situation profoundly. They need organizations that have the means to support them, but most importantly to do so in ways that work WITH them and not for them. To enable a sense of agency it was important for the women to own each stitch, each vegetable, and each every effort made in this project. Understanding the societal structure of Lasbela, working with an on-ground organization, and understanding the unique needs of each woman in the project allowed the project to tailor to the needs of each participant and foster their potential in the best possible way.

In light of COVID-19, it is always important to have at least two or three contingency plans ready to go in case the project begins to go awry.

"Empowerment is driven through a sense of agency. To enable a sense of agency it was important for the women to own each stitch, each vegetable, and each every effort made in this project. Owning an entrepreneurial project will allow these women to own their own livelihoods and actively seize their own space as entrepreneurial leaders in their communities."