

CULTURAL ATTITUDES AND THEIR IMPACT ON FEMALE SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN SHAHEED BENAZIRABAD AMID FLOOD RECOVERY

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the cultural attitudes towards female secondary school teachers of District Shaheed Benazirabad and their influence on the roles taken up by female teachers during the flood recovery efforts. In the wake of the disastrous floods of 2022, the role of female educators became critical in supporting disaster recovery initiatives. However, cultural attitudes often confine their participation and leadership. This exploratory qualitative research involved focus group discussions with 24 female teachers. According to the findings of this study, societal norms prioritise the domestic roles of female teachers over professional responsibilities and this limits the engagement of women in recovery activities. Participants recounted that they feel constrained by cultural expectations and safety concerns hindering their ability to contribute effectively. There are dual pressures (educational responsibilities and community expectations) faced by the female teachers which result in intensified emotional stress and burnout. This study underscored the need for targeted interventions that empower female teachers by recognising their potential contributions to community resilience during disaster contexts. Finally, this study informed the policy decisions to support female teachers in flood-affected areas which will foster a more inclusive approach to disaster management and recovery.

Keywords: Cultural Perceptions, Female Teachers, Flood Recovery, Gender Inequality, Disaster Management.

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is considered a disaster-prone country that frequently faces severe natural disasters, particularly flooding and Pakistan is also ranked among the countries with the highest levels of disaster risks. According to the World Bank (2019), Pakistan is fifth in ranking on the Global Climate Risk Index. This highlights the country's vulnerability to climate change and its associated impacts. Furthermore, this vulnerability to disasters is intensified by many prevalent social challenges including high poverty rates and gender inequality.

The 2022 floods were devastating in particular as they affected approximately 33 million people. The devastating impacts were evident from the

widespread destruction of infrastructure, homes, and livelihoods (United Nations, 2022). These floods swamped approximately one-third of Pakistan with children making up approximately half of those affected. Apart from this, women and children were severely affected by this disaster because of existing socio-economic inequalities and cultural norms that limit their movement which result in poor access to resources (Peterson, 2018). These floods severely damaged the majority of water infrastructure in the regions hit, leaving over 5.4 million people dependent on contaminated sources like ponds and wells for their water supply (Disaster Philanthropy, 2022; World Bank, 2022; UNICEF, 2023)

In the aftermath of flooding events, teachers can play a crucial role in supporting young individuals who have experienced trauma, particularly in disaster contexts. This can improve the results of disaster recovery efforts. They assist students throughout the phases of disaster preparedness, response, and recovery (Mutch, 2014). Teachers are tasked with conveying vital information regarding disaster readiness and risk mitigation, as well as conducting emergency drills (Ronan et al., 2015). In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, when the emergency phase occurs, teachers must make critical decisions that can save lives if an event occurs during school hours (Fumiaki, 2012). Additionally, educators often facilitate the conversion of schools into evacuation centres or relief hubs (Oktari, Shiwaku, Munadi, & Shaw, 2015), 2015). During the recovery phase, which focuses on reinstating conditions before the crisis, continuous social support from classmates and teachers can serve as a protective buffer against the adverse effects of disasters (Bikar et al., 2021; Masten, 2021). Teachers have dual responsibilities: they are not only responsible for maintaining educational continuousness but may also serve as community leaders. This second function can help in mobilizing resources and support for affected families.

Women and men experience the impacts of climate shocks and extreme weather differently (Ali, 2013). These gender-specific vulnerabilities arise from socially constructed roles and responsibilities. Typically, women face inequality, earning less, having restricted access to information and support services, limited control over resources, and reduced access to credit and decision-making power (Jost, Hennes, & Lavine, 2013)). Women are often more susceptible to the effects of climate change due to lower educational attainment compared to men, lack of property rights, and challenges in accessing financial resources or agricultural extension services (Gurung et al., 2010). However, the effectiveness of female teachers especially in these roles can be affected greatly by attitudes and barriers prevalent in our society. It is essential to have a comprehensive understanding of these cultural perceptions to develop strategies focusing on empowering female teachers ultimately enhancing their contributions towards a more resilient community.

Cultural attitudes and perceptions of people towards female teachers are not the same across different regions and communities of Pakistan. For example, in some areas, the participation and mobility of women are restricted because of different cultures requiring different participatory roles and of course, this reduces their full engagement in recovery activities and initiatives (Khan, Ali Shah, & Khanum, 2016). This is highlighted well by societal expectations that prioritize the domestic roles and responsibilities of women over professional duties. This also hampers their involvement in community recovery initiatives and efforts. Moreover, these cultural perceptions and beliefs relating to the roles of women may also result in abnormal feelings and difficulty in taking not only leadership positions but also in participation in decision-making processes concerning recovery from disasters.

Recent disasters in the form of floods have augmented the already prevalent disparities within the education sector of Sindh. According to Peterson (2018), there are additional pressures and concerns faced by female teachers during times of crisis including augmented workloads. But these pressures are not confined to just these but are extended towards emotional stress caused by being the witness of sufferings and difficulties of their students and communities (Peterson, 2018). This psychological levy can turn into more serious problems like burnout and reduced efficiency negatively affecting their roles as teachers and leaders of the community during disaster recovery efforts. It is therefore important for stakeholders to understand how the cultural norms and attitudes towards female teachers interconnect with wider problems like gender inequality.

Secondary school teachers' role is not limited to just the classroom and they can also be very productive in the promotion of a resilient community in times of disaster recovery. According to Khan et al (2016), having a very unique position, they can lend emotional support to their students by addressing educational continuousness during the chaos. But, of course, this is not possible in the absence of a supportive environment. An environment that not only acknowledges their contributions but also takes care of the barriers they face which hinder them fulfill their potential as leaders within their communities.

Additionally, we also cannot ignore the negative impacts of flooding on the already weakened infrastructure of educational institutes. According to UNESCO (2021); and Rajput et al, (2020) the impacts of disasters are multidimensional: they result in the disruption of learning by the destruction of schools and also have variable impacts on girls' education. There are certain cases where families prefer the education of boys over the education of girls when facing a scarcity of resources or when there are safety concerns. This further worsens the already prevalent gender disparities by limiting the opportunities for women and leaving long-lasting effects.

It is not possible to address these issues without having a comprehensive understanding of cultural attitudes amid which female teachers are expected to work with flood-affected communities during disasters. So, this research investigated the cultural attitudes towards female teachers during participation in flood recovery activities.

The findings from this study will have a two-dimensional significance. On one dimension, it contributes to a growing body of literature on gender and disaster management and on the other hand it also informs policy decisions meant to support female teachers in flood-affected areas. The comprehensive picture of how cultural attitudes mould and shape the experiences of female educators can help stakeholders develop targeted interventions. Ultimately this will promote gender equity within disaster response efforts by empowering women. This is expected to be done by achieving the following objective of the study:

1. To investigate the prevailing cultural attitudes towards female teachers in flood-affected communities and how these perceptions influence their roles in disaster recovery efforts.

This objective was achieved by answering the research questions given below:

RQ1. How does the community view the role of female teachers in the context of recent floods?

RQ2. What cultural beliefs or norms influence the perceptions of female teachers?

RQ3. How do cultural attitudes affect different roles taken up by female teachers during disaster recovery efforts?

RQ4. What are specific experiences of female teachers highlighting how cultural perceptions impact their work?

To conclude, this study explored the important role played by female secondary school teachers during flood recovery efforts through the investigation of cultural attitudes. Through the achievement of the above objective, the study aimed to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers so that the contributions of female educators during times of crisis can be enhanced. It will ultimately promote a supportive environment beneficiaries of which will be both the individual teachers and enhanced community resilience.

Materials and Methods

This exploratory study was based on qualitative methodology and focus group discussions (FGDs) with female secondary school teachers in District Shaheed Benazirabad were conducted.

Research Design

To gain deeper insights into the cultural attitudes and experiences of female secondary school teachers regarding their roles during flood recovery initiatives, a qualitative research design was used. The Qualitative methods suit the exploration of complex social phenomena because they help researchers capture the nuances of participants' thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences (Creswell & Poth 2018).

Participant Selection

The participants for this study were female secondary school teachers. These female secondary school teachers belonged to various schools in District Shaheed Benazirabad and have been involved in teaching and community recovery efforts following the recent floods. These participants, having relevant experience and expected to be able to provide rich information about the cultural perceptions were selected using a purposive sampling technique.

Sample Size

The sample comprised 24 female secondary school teachers. Four FGDs were conducted each consisting of 6 participants. According to Morgan (1997), this sample size is appropriate as it helps in achieving diverse perspectives while at the same time maintaining manageable group dynamics.

Data Collection Methods

FGDs were employed as the primary data collection method. Each of the four sessions was guided by a semi-structured interview protocol which was designed to achieve the objectives of the study. Following were the key areas of inquiry which were part of the interview protocol:

1. Views of the community on female teachers with a special focus on the context of recent floods.
2. Cultural beliefs or norms impacting these perceptions.
3. Cultural attitudes impacting their roles during disaster recovery initiatives.
4. Specific experiences and instances of cultural perceptions having an impact on their work.

Facilitation of FGDs

The FGDs were facilitated by a trained moderator who was very much familiar with the local context. The said facilitator was also sensitive to gender dynamics. The moderator created a conducive and comfortable environment to encourage an open dialogue among participants. To ensure accurate data capturing all the discussions were audio-recorded. This recording was done with the participants' consent.

Duration and Setting

Each focus group discussion lasted for approximately 90-120 minutes and was conducted in a neutral location such as a local school within the community. This was done to ensure accessibility for all participants.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data collected from the FGDs was analyzed using thematic analysis with the help of NVivo software.

Ethical Considerations

Whenever human subjects are involved in research, ensuring ethical considerations becomes paramount. This is particularly important in sensitive contexts such as this study (disaster recovery). All participants received detailed information about the study. This included the purpose of the study, procedures to be used, and potential risks and benefits before participating. Informed consent was also obtained in writing. Moreover, the anonymity of the respondents was maintained throughout the research process. This

was ensured by assigning unique identifiers rather than using personal names in publications. Finally, the Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. This also would have no consequences for the participants.

Findings

The section given below gives a research question-wise analysis of the cultural perceptions of female secondary school teachers in flood-affected communities of District Shaheed Benazirabad. The analysis is based on views which were drawn from the data collected through focus group discussions (FGDs). These focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with female teachers and these addressed how they perceive the views of the community, the cultural beliefs of the community that influence those views, and the potential impacts of these perceptions on their roles during the times of disaster recovery initiatives.

RQ1. How does the community view the role of female teachers in the context of recent floods?

In response to the question about the views of the community about these female teachers, the majority of participants expressed an amalgamate of both respect and disbelief. The cultural norms of a particular society can obscure the contributions of female teachers as they are only seen as important to education. In the words of a participant: "Although we are we are appreciated in our community for teaching, some people still consider that we should mainly stay at home." This sentiment in the above quotation reflects a broader cultural belief that gives priority to the domestic roles of women and neglects their professional ambitions. Yet another participant highlighted the dual nature of their roles: "They expect us to help in recovery efforts and initiatives after the floods, but according to many the teaching only comes after household duties which are the primary responsibilities" The tension between societal expectations and the professional responsibilities of female educators are evident according to the above statement. It means the views of the community are moulded by traditional gender roles of females and these confine the appearance and influence of women in other spheres of life other than just domestic roles.

RQ2. What cultural beliefs or norms influence the perceptions of female teachers?

According to the participants, several cultural beliefs influence and shape the perceptions of female teachers. Appropriate behaviours for women are dictated by societal norms. Many respondents pointed out this point. In the words of one teacher: “There is a strong belief of the People that women are not supposed to be involved in decision-making during crises.” The above belief puts hurdles in the way of female teachers so that they cannot take roles during recovery initiatives and efforts. This also further reinforces already prevalent gender inequality. Another belief pointed out which was associated with those women who were stepping outside traditional roles was the disgrace as one participant voiced: “Whenever it is noticed that any woman is leading the community meeting, some people may taunt that she is going beyond her boundaries” Beliefs like this are detrimental not only to individual’s confidence but these also hamper the teamwork among women during educational and recovery initiatives.

RQ3. How do cultural attitudes affect different roles taken up by female teachers during disaster recovery efforts?

There is a great impact of cultural attitudes on the roles taken up by female teachers during disaster recovery efforts and initiatives as many participants reported a feeling of constrained due to societal expectations. One teacher shared: “I cannot help my students and community more actively because often feel vulnerable by what people think” This is an illustration of cultural perceptions inhibiting the proactive engagement of female teachers during recovery initiatives. Also, some participants highlighted the cases according to which cultural attitudes directly impacted their ability to participate in relief efforts as in the words of a teacher: “When I wanted to arrange a support group for affected families during the floods but could not do so as I was told it was not my place as a woman.” From the above recount, it is highlighted that cultural norms impose certain barriers on female teachers who are willing to contribute meaningfully during times of crisis.

RQ4. What are specific experiences of female teachers highlighting the impact of cultural perceptions on their work?

Various experiences were shared by the participants highlighting how cultural perceptions influenced their work as teachers during disaster recovery initiatives. An incident was recounted by one participant in which she faced resistance while trying to provide educational resources to displaced children: “I tried to set up a temporary school in the relief camp but was met with resistance by certain community members claiming that being a woman it was inappropriate for me to lead such an effort” The specific experience narrated in through above incident underscores that female teachers face many challenges when they attempt to assert their agency during the disaster recovery contexts. This was reflected by another teacher regarding her struggles with community support in the following words: “Many a time I feel like I’m continuously fighting against some fixed mindsets. Whenever I attempt to raise my voice for the needs of my students, I’m bluntly reminded that my basic role is just at home” It means there is an ongoing struggle of female teachers within their communities for recognition and respect.

It is evident from the above analysis that cultural perceptions have a significant influence on the roles of female secondary school teachers within flood-affected communities. It is also underscored that these views also affect the roles of female secondary school teachers during disaster recovery efforts and initiatives. It means traditional gender norms are continuing to impose certain limitations on participation and leadership of female teachers and this is happening even in the presence of an acknowledgment of the importance of female teachers. It is important to address these cultural attitudes for the empowerment of female teachers and the enhancement of their contributions to community resilience during times of crisis. If these dynamics are well understood, the stakeholders can develop targeted interventions for the promotion of gender equity and supporting female teachers in fulfilling their energetic roles in disaster recovery initiatives.

Limitations

Bias may be introduced as the purposive sampling method was used to select the respondents who

may fail to represent all perspectives within the community. It is possible that the respondents provided socially desirable responses rather than their true feelings or experiences. This can be because of the social pressures or fear of negative evaluation. Lastly, the findings from one district only may fail to represent other regions or contexts within Pakistan. This may be due to the differing cultural dynamics of different regions and areas.

Conclusion

This study offered valuable insights into cultural attitudes towards female secondary school teachers of District Shaheed Benazirabad and their influence on the roles taken up by female teachers during the flood recovery efforts. It was underscored by the findings from focus group discussions that even though female teachers are known for their contributions to education and fostering community resilience traditional gender norms and societal expectations are still hampering their roles in disaster recovery initiatives and efforts. According to the findings, the majority of participants had a strong desire to engage in recovery efforts more actively but they often feel constrained by such cultural attitudes as giving priority to domestic responsibilities over professional engagement. The insights received from this research highlighted the need to take care of the cultural perceptions to provide targeted support for fully empowering female teachers in their vital roles during times of crisis.

Recommendations

- Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to enhance the participation of female secondary school teachers in flood recovery efforts:
 - Implement community awareness programs to modify the societal perceptions regarding the roles of female teachers as leaders in recovery efforts and promote gender equity in community decision-making.
 - Provide pieces of training to female teachers on disaster management, leadership skills, and community mobilization. This will enhance their confidence and effectiveness in participating in recovery initiatives.
 - Foster a strong partnership between schools and NGOs working on disaster recovery as such collaborative efforts can not only enhance

resource availability but also provide female teachers with the necessary tools to engage meaningfully in recovery initiatives.

- Advocate for policy changes at local and national levels to recognize and support the roles of female educators in disaster management initiatives. Policymakers should consider gender-responsive approaches when planning disaster response strategies.

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