

Organising rural women in Haripur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to investigate the impact of land grabbing and corporate control on their community

Introduction

Roots for Equity and Pakistan Kissan Mazdoor Tehreek (PKMT) led a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) on rural women's rights to land and natural resources (Land FPAR) between November 2018 and June 2020 in Hattar and Kamilpur villages of Haripur district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. PKMT is an alliance of small and landless farmers which is active in 14 districts of Pakistan. Through the initiatives of this FPAR, the PKMT Haripur chapter mobilised its women members and established a core women's group to regularly attend PKMT's district meetings — which were historically attended only by men — to raise issues around the impact of land grabbing, especially by the cement industry, on women's health, economic and environmental conditions.

Background

Hattar and Kamilpur villages have a long history of agricultural land grabbing by feudal families



facilitated by a colonial culture and neoliberal government policies. In the 1970s, the landlords in the area forced the small farmers to give up their lands which they later sold to companies. In addition to the privatisation of community land, the KP province also suffered from fundamentalisms and militarism due to being at the frontline of the Soviet-US conflict in Afghanistan since 1979. In the 1980s, the government acquired a major spate of land in Haripur for the Hattar Industrial Estate, then started a process of heavy industrialisation of the area. This process of land grabbing rendered most of the families of Haripur landless, leading to three cement factories occupying most of the community land. Moreover, new instances of land grabbing in Haripur are underway through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Agreement, which is a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In this context, the rural women of Haripur have been living under extreme patriarchal conditions, denied of their basic human rights such as right to education, mobility and choosing a life partner. Like the majority of the rural women of Pakistan, most rural women of Haripur are landless and have very little literacy. Besides taking care of intense housework, most women in Haripur work as seasonal agricultural workers.



FPAR process

The young women researchers of the FPAR, with the support of their mentor, led and facilitated a series of community consultations with the women PKMT members to discuss the purpose of the FPAR. The women discussed how the combination of patriarchy, colonialism, privatisation and neoliberal development projects impact their socio-political and economic lives and cause gender injustices in their community. The women identified the impact of land grabbing by the cement industry on their health, economic and environmental conditions as the root cause of their problems and decided to organise themselves to develop a core PKMT women's group to raise their collective voice on the issue. Using various participatory research tools such as storytelling, social mapping, drawing, ranking, power mapping and critical path analysis, the community women documented their lived experiences as an advocacy tool to advance their agenda against land grabbing and corporate control by the cement industry.




FPAR findings

Environmental damage and road safety issues

The landlords of Haripur have been providing land lease contracts to the cement corporations for exploration of mines and minerals as well as soil extraction. These extractive activities have destroyed the mountains, the forest and the biodiversity of Haripur, and left the ground uneven and roads clogged. During rains and floods, the narrow roads in the village become dangerous to travel through. The heavy vehicles used to carry rocks and other materials for cement production, as well as loaded bags of cement for distribution, regularly pass through the villages, making it unsafe for the children to walk to school alone. Therefore, the women now have to escort their children to school, which has added a new burden to their existing heavy care work.

Restrictions on women's mobility

The construction of factories have blocked the small roads and tracks in the village, and there is a constant presence of male workers and strangers in the factory areas, which are in close proximity to the villages. This restricted the mobility of the women and girls in the village and weakened their social relations in the community.

Pollution

The soot and pollution coming from the factories have impacted the living environment of the community. The homes are hard to keep clean, as right after sweeping the house, the soot comes back, turning the environment dusty again. Families cannot sleep out in the courtyard anymore — a practice common in villages across South Asia — because of the pollution coming from the factories. In the areas close to the factories (Rariyan), washed clothes put on the washing lines in the courtyards of homes are soon layered with fine particles of dust and soot. Even the washing line has to be changed every few weeks as it becomes extremely dirty from the pollution. One of the

factories, Dewan Cement Factory, is directly adjacent to a public primary school. Most of the families have taken their children away from this school due to the dust and noise from the factory. Many of the factories operate during the night causing sound pollution, disturbing the sleep of the community. The frequent blasting of the explosives in the nearby hills have also caused cracks in the home walls of the community.

Impact on health

The women also noted that the water sources have become highly polluted and are a major reason for the poor health of the community. Nearly every woman in the village reported suffering from coughing. Many community members reported having constant flu-like symptoms and are forced to take anti-allergy medicines every day. The community also reported suffering from asthma, breathing problems, cardiovascular diseases, poor eyesight, stomach problems, kidney and liver infections and ailments. According to the women, pollution was a reason for the increase of insects, which is another reason for the constant presence of diseases in the communities.

Food insecurity

The little agricultural land left with the community has lost its fertility due to the air and water pollution from the factories. Women feel that they used to have ample food stocks from their fields but are now forced to buy rations for each month. With the loss of land, the women are also no longer able to keep livestock from which they used to get milk, buttermilk, butter and cooking oil in the past.

“We used to eat healthy food for free, but now the land is covered with soot and even what is grown is of an unhealthy colour. Even the fodder for animals is polluted and even animals are suffering from the dust-ridden atmosphere.”

- A woman from Haripur

Suppression of community resistance

Despite their resistance against land grabbing for over 20 years, the community feels helpless. Those who resisted in the past have been sent to jail or persecuted through different means. The influential families and factory owners use 'goons'¹ to intimidate communities if they protest. Community men do not allow women to participate in protests both due to security issues and patriarchal reasons.

¹ Goon is a term used in Pakistan for a hired criminal.



The series of FPAR activities carried out in the community led to strengthening the community women's political education on feudalism, globalisation, patriarchy and militarism, and to a deeper understanding of the political nature of land grabbings that took place in their communities. They reflected that they had lived with the phenomenon and had understood the relationship of the feudal elites with the corporations, but had not thought that they could also play a key role in being a force against land grabbing and in mitigating the impacts of rampant industrialisation that they have been living with on a daily basis. Within a year after the FPAR began, the women demanded to have their own programmes and activities under the PKMT umbrella. The FPAR also led to building strong solidarity among a number of young women and girls who were involved in leading the research work. Young women of Hattar and Kamilpur participated in a provincial youth meeting for the first time. Two young women gave public speeches at the district convention of Haripur. The women core group members of PKMT are now regularly attending the PKMT district meetings and are working to develop an advocacy plan to advance their agenda. Most importantly, as a result of the FPAR, the women members of PKMT not only became more active but also became decision-makers in PKMT platforms.



Recommendations

- The FPAR has documented several human rights and women's rights violations. Land grabbing is an intensely increasing phenomenon, and the FPAR has laid bare how land grabbing can lead to the destruction of not only the environment but also the communities. It would be important to have national and regional platforms, which can raise these issues at pertinent governmental spaces for holding the various actors, such as corporations and capitalist institutions as well as governments, accountable to the people.

The women of FPAR specifically demand:

- Equitable distribution of land must be carried out with women farmers as key beneficiaries.
- Potable water testing needs to be carried out for chemicals and hazardous waste as there is blasting being carried out on a large scale, as well as intense pollution from the soot that is emitting from the factories.
- Industrial development must be banned around residential and agricultural areas as environmental damage impacts the fertility of the land and affects the health of all living things, especially including women's reproductive and sexual health and rights.
- Industry must be held accountable for the loss of health and environmental pollution of the communities living in the vicinity of the factory area.



About Roots for Equity and Pakistan Kissan Mazdoor Tehreek (PKMT)

Roots for Equity works with the most vulnerable and marginalised communities that include small and landless farmers, women and religious minorities in the rural and urban sector. It works towards a genuinely democratic society with its people free from inequities, marginalisation and exploitation. Formed in 1997, Roots remains committed to being an active part of communities' struggle to achieve political, economic, social and environmental justice.

PKMT is a mass-based alliance of small and landless farmers including women farmers. Formed in 2008, PKMT was a result of a series of discussions amongst small and landless farmers, social and political activists who felt that an organised platform was critical for small and landless farmers to voice their demands based on social and economic constraints that they faced.

Website: <http://rootsforequity.org/>
Email: roots@rootsforequity.org

About APWLD

Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is the region's leading network of feminist organisations and individual activists. For 35 years, we have been carrying out advocacy, activism and movement-building to advance women's human rights and Development Justice.

Email: apwld@apwld.org
Website: www.apwld.org

This publication was produced with support from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and Foundation for a Just Society (FJS).