

## **Preventing religious conflict amongst the poor and marginalised: The role of interfaith women peace committees in Pakistani Punjab**

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How do poor Hindu and Christian women belonging to lower-ranked caste groups prevent local disputes turning into inter-religious violent conflict that plague Pakistan? After all, these are women who supposedly lack agency as they experience several intersecting levels of marginalisation in a highly hierarchical society. In Pakistan local stratification systems are based on gender, class, caste, and religion. And these are women living in a conservative patriarchal society, poor and residing in urban slums or outside the main villages in settlements called *ghareebabad* (poor people's abode), from lower-ranked *biradaris* (caste-like kinship groups), belonging to religious minorities. Yet, despite the layers of marginalisation they suffer, some of them manage to mobilise change developing together a series of strategies to solve local disputes.

How do they do it? They work together, act quickly, use diplomacy, and work in collaboration with key actors. Collectively under Peace Committees, they try to solve issues as early as possible, fixing misunderstandings to avoid flaring up through religious tension. They use diplomacy and tactical manoeuvring, persuading parents, family members, or households through repeated interactions, gentle resolving misunderstandings, and empathically showing 'the other.' And they constantly work in collaboration with an array of like-minded influential local actors, from informal public authorities such as *panchayat* members, political brokers, religious leaders, landlords, to formal ones, such as NGOs, local public officials. Under the hat of peace committees, these women bring potential dispute cases to the attention of informal public authorities, bring these actors along when they meet the dispute parties, and even help formal actors' investigations of larger disputes.

Their secret ingredient: they rope in equally marginalised Muslim women. In fact, the first crucial step poor women of lower-ranked sub-castes from Christian and Hindu minorities do is to form alliances with other similar marginalised groups, namely Muslim poor women of lower-ranked castes living in slums and *ghareebabads*. Despite coming from different religious backgrounds, geography, class, caste, and gender binds them and allows them to build bridges across their religious differences. Instead of focusing on differences (particularly in religious differences) they focus on similarities (being poor, being women, being of lower rank within local social structures) to work together as peace committee members. Collectively they work as mediators solving local issues, preventing them from turning into disputes, or preventing disputes from turning into inter-religious violent conflict.

These Peace Committees are the brainchild of Umeed Partnership Pakistan (UPP), a Pakistani local NGO whose work focuses on empowering women and street-children through education, skills training, and rights and legal aid awareness programmes. Peace committees are the last stage of their capacity building programmes. At a first stage, UPP enlists about 25 poor and marginalised women into a 9-month adult literacy programme. Upon completion, UPP selects around 20 women to complete a 12-month skills training (usually sewing and embroidery). UPP subcontracts local teachers and tailors as trainers for these two levels of capacity building. Some of these women become factory workers, self-employed, or pool in resources and become business partners irrespective of caste, religion, or ethnicity.

During the 12-month skills training, UPP field supervisors – with the help of the teachers and tailors – identify women who are more confident and outspoken and encourage them to

participate in a 3-month training on peace committees. With the aim of forming interfaith local groups that can meet and resolve local disputes, UPP trains about 10 women on basic knowledge of rights, family laws, conflict resolution, and interfaith dialogue. Although there isn't a set selection criterion, UPP pays particular attention to women who show leadership potential, are confident, open-minded, empathic, compassionate, and related to men with some status within their localities. When assessing leadership qualities, the UPP team observes how the potential peace committee members engage outside their groups particularly with other faith groups.

Still, this is not entirely a rosy picture: many women in these peace committees face a lot of resistance from local elites, even within their minority groups who see them encroaching in what they perceive to be their 'natural' territory, that of local dispute resolution. Also, if a dispute escalates beyond a misunderstanding these women are powerless (and therefore the need for swiftness in their actions). At the end of the day though, women peace committees do exhibit some small successes in preventing inter-faith conflict, where expectation is low.