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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**Female Volunteerism and Community Development in Multan, Pakistan****Ahmad Nadeem Khalid**

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Corresponding author: ahmadnadeemkhalid@gmail.com**Abstract**

This qualitative study examines how, why, and under what conditions women in Multan, Punjab, participate in community development through volunteer roles, and how such participation affects their agency, identity, family relationships, and community standing. The study focuses particularly on women associated with non-formal education and related community development activities operated by non-governmental and local community organisations. An interpretivist qualitative case-study design was used, drawing on fourteen in-depth case studies supplemented by three key-informant interviews and field observation. Participants were selected purposively, with snowball sampling used where community access depended on established trust. Data were collected over eight months through semi-structured interviews conducted in Urdu and Saraiki and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach. Five interconnected themes emerged: motivations for volunteering; domestic negotiation and family approval; community perception and social acceptance; agency, identity and personal transformation; and institutional challenges affecting retention. The findings show that female volunteerism simultaneously functions as a community resource and a culturally negotiated pathway to agency. Religious and moral meanings can legitimise women's public participation, while volunteering also expands social networks, develops skills, and strengthens confidence. At the same time, inadequate training, unclear compensation, safety concerns, weak infrastructure, and limited career pathways create structural precarity. The study argues that sustainable community development requires treating female volunteers as contributors with rights, skills, and developmental potential rather than merely as low-cost project inputs.

Keywords: Female volunteerism; community development; gender and agency; social capital; volunteer participation; qualitative case study; Multan

1. Introduction

Community development in developing societies frequently depends on forms of participation that operate beyond the formal state. Volunteers contribute time, skills, local knowledge and social relationships to services that formal institutions may not adequately reach. In Pakistan, this role becomes particularly important in low-income and socially conservative communities where local organisations often work through community members who can establish trust and negotiate everyday social realities.

Volunteerism, however, cannot be understood simply as an individual choice to help others. Women's participation is embedded in family authority, gender norms, mobility restrictions, domestic responsibilities, religious meanings, economic pressures and community expectations. International scholarship has

established volunteering as an important social activity, but much of the dominant literature has developed from Western settings and does not fully capture the negotiated character of women's participation in traditional South Asian contexts (Wilson, 2000; Musick & Wilson, 2008).

In Multan, female volunteers contribute to non-formal education, community mobilisation, centre management and related grassroots activities. Their contribution is especially significant because women can often enter households, communicate with mothers and children, and build trust in ways that male workers may find difficult. Yet the social conditions under which women undertake this work remain insufficiently documented. Volunteering may create opportunities for agency and recognition, while simultaneously reproducing unequal expectations that women should provide labour without adequate compensation, safety or career progression.

The present study therefore examines female volunteerism as a socially situated process. Rather than treating participation as a simple outcome of individual motivation, it asks how women negotiate permission, respectability and domestic obligations; how communities respond to their public visibility; and how volunteering changes women's identities and perceived authority. The study contributes an empirically grounded account from Multan and highlights the simultaneous empowering and constraining dimensions of volunteer participation.

2. Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Community development programmes are widely associated with welfare improvement, yet the volunteer workforce sustaining many interventions is frequently treated as an assumed resource. This is particularly problematic when the workforce is predominantly female and operates within patriarchal social arrangements. Women may face restricted mobility, domestic workloads, safety risks and scrutiny over their public behaviour while still being expected to maintain reliable participation.

The central problem addressed in this study is therefore how women in Multan enter, sustain and experience volunteer roles under these conditions. The study is guided by four questions: (1) What intrinsic, socio-cultural and institutional factors motivate women to volunteer in community development? (2) How do female volunteers navigate family authority, mobility restrictions and community perceptions? (3) In what ways does volunteer service shape identity, agency, self-efficacy and social standing? and (4) What operational, institutional and environmental challenges affect volunteer performance, well-being and retention?

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Gender Empowerment and Agency

Kabeer's (1999, 2005) framework conceptualises empowerment through the interconnected dimensions of resources, agency and achievements. Resources include education, social networks and institutional access; agency concerns decision-making, negotiation and the ability to act; and achievements refer to the outcomes of those processes. This framework is useful for examining volunteering as an entry point through which women can convert education, social relationships and organisational exposure into practical forms of agency.

3.2 Social Capital Theory

Drawing on Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988), the study treats volunteer participation as a mechanism for generating social capital. Bonding ties among volunteers may provide emotional support and practical assistance, while bridging ties with organisational staff, community leaders and other institutions can connect women to resources and opportunities beyond kinship networks.

3.3 Volunteer Motivation and Structuration

Clary et al.'s (1998) functional approach identifies values, understanding, social, career, protective and enhancement motives as distinct but overlapping functions of volunteering. These dimensions help interpret the combination of altruism, learning, social connection, skills development and self-growth reported by participants. Giddens's (1984) structuration perspective further highlights that women act within existing structures while their repeated practices can also modify how those structures operate. Together, these perspectives allow the study to analyse both constraint and agency without assuming that empowerment necessarily requires direct confrontation with patriarchal authority.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Setting

The study employed an interpretivist qualitative case-study design. This approach was selected because female volunteerism is embedded in everyday relationships and meanings that cannot be adequately understood through numerical indicators alone. The research was conducted in selected urban and peri-urban localities of Multan, South Punjab, with particular attention to women working in non-formal education centres and related community development settings. A prominent operational context included centres associated with the Roshni Welfare Organisation alongside independent local community centres.

4.2 Sampling and Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, supplemented by snowball sampling where access depended on prior trust-building. Inclusion criteria required participants to be women aged 18 years or above, to have volunteered continuously for at least six months in a community development role, and to reside within the local catchment communities covered by the study. Fourteen case studies were selected, with data collection continuing until thematic saturation. Three supplementary key-informant interviews with institutional administrators and community elders provided contextual information about volunteer deployment and organisational support.

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted using a flexible guide translated into Urdu and local Saraiki dialects. Questions covered motivations, family negotiation, daily volunteer experiences, community interaction, barriers, identity change, institutional support and future aspirations. Interviews averaged approximately 75 minutes and ranged from 45 to 120 minutes. Observation during visits to community centres documented the physical setting, interactions, volunteer activities and spatial environment. Data collection occurred over eight months as part of the author's MSc fieldwork.

Data were analysed through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarisation, initial coding, development of candidate themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the final analytic narrative. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Urdu and Saraiki transcripts were translated into English and back-translated by an independent translator to check accuracy. Preliminary interpretations were shared with three participants for member checking, and all three confirmed that the interpretations reflected their accounts.

4.4 Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant departmental research ethics committee at Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through pseudonyms/case identifiers, participants were informed of their

right to withdraw without consequence, and data were securely stored with a stated five-year destruction period.

5. Participant Profile

Case	Age	Marital status	Education	Volunteer role	Service
CS-01	22	Unmarried	FA	Volunteer teacher	1.5 y
CS-02	27	Married	BA	Lead volunteer	3.0 y
CS-03	19	Unmarried	Matric	Assistant volunteer	8 mo
CS-04	34	Married	FA	Centre facilitator	4.0 y
CS-05	24	Unmarried	B.Sc	Volunteer teacher	2.0 y
CS-06	41	Widowed	Middle	Community mobilizer	5.0 y
CS-07	21	Unmarried	F.Sc	Volunteer teacher	1.0 y
CS-08	29	Married	MA	Head volunteer	2.5 y
CS-09	23	Unmarried	BA	Volunteer teacher	1.2 y
CS-10	38	Married	Matric	Centre coordinator	6.0 y
CS-11	20	Unmarried	FA	Assistant volunteer	10 mo
CS-12	26	Divorced	BA	Volunteer teacher	2.0 y
CS-13	31	Married	FA	Lead volunteer	3.5 y
CS-14	25	Unmarried	M.Sc	Volunteer supervisor	1.8 y

Table 1. Profile of the 14 qualitative case studies.

6. Findings

6.1 Motivations for Volunteer Engagement

Participants described volunteering as a combination of moral commitment, personal purpose, social connection, skill development and, in some cases, modest economic independence. Religious and moral reasoning was especially important because it provided both intrinsic motivation and a culturally legitimate explanation for women's public participation.

"I saw children playing in open sewage drains all day while their parents worked as daily wage labourers. Helping them is not just social work; it is my moral responsibility before God. If I have the ability to help, I must do so." — CS-02, 27, married

For some younger and educated unmarried women, volunteering addressed the frustration of remaining socially and professionally inactive after education. It supplied routine, purpose and an identity extending beyond daughterhood and marriage. Married participants similarly described volunteering as a way to maintain skills and engage beyond domestic routine. Modest stipends were not the primary motivation, but several participants valued the limited independence they provided.

"Sitting idle at home after completing my B.A. felt suffocating. Volunteering gave my morning a clear purpose. I am no longer just a daughter waiting to get married; I am someone who contributes to my community." — CS-05, 24, unmarried

Career and learning motives were also visible. Participants saw volunteer work as a practical training environment where they could develop communication, record management, leadership and community interaction skills. Thus, motivation was not static: altruistic reasons were reinforced when volunteering produced personal, social or skill-related benefits.

6.2 Domestic Negotiation and Family Approval

Women's participation was strongly shaped by the terms on which families considered public activity acceptable. Locality mattered. Volunteer roles located close to home were easier to negotiate because they reduced concerns about mobility, safety and family reputation.

"My father would never allow me to travel to a distant location. But because the center was just three streets over in our own neighborhood, my brother personally verified the venue and agreed." — CS-01, 22, unmarried

For married women, the central condition was often that volunteer work should not disrupt domestic responsibilities. Participation was fitted around cooking, cleaning, childcare and other household expectations. This pattern demonstrates that volunteering could expand women's roles without necessarily redistributing domestic labour.

"I wake up at 5:00 AM, finish all cooking, cleaning, and laundry before 9:00 AM, and then manage the center until noon. The day my home responsibilities lag, my in-laws will ask me to stop." — CS-13, 31, married

Family resistance was not always permanent. Several participants reported that sceptical relatives became more supportive after observing improvements in community standing, communication skills and family reputation. In this sense, visible social outcomes helped women convert potentially contested public participation into an accepted activity.

6.3 Community Perception and Social Acceptance

Participants commonly described an initial period of suspicion, particularly in conservative neighbourhoods. Young and unmarried women were more likely to experience gossip and scrutiny concerning their presence outside the household. Volunteers responded by maintaining consistent behaviour, demonstrating tangible service outcomes and developing relationships with respected community members.

"At first, neighbors whispered that I was roaming around under the pretext of volunteering. They assumed the organization had hidden agendas." — CS-07, 21, unmarried

Over time, practical results could transform perception. As residents observed educational or community benefits, volunteers moved from being viewed with suspicion to being treated as legitimate community contributors. Older women often possessed greater room to operate because established family and community reputations reduced scrutiny.

“Now, when community members see the difference we are making, their perspective changes completely. The same elders who questioned me now consult me on community matters.” — CS-10, 38, married

6.4 Agency, Identity and Personal Transformation

The strongest evidence of personal change concerned communication, confidence, leadership and household participation in decision-making. Women reported that managing volunteers, communicating with residents and interacting with officials made them more willing to speak and negotiate. This change is consistent with Kabeer's concept of agency and with Kandiyoti's (1988) notion of bargaining within patriarchy: women can expand practical authority through negotiation without directly confronting the structures governing their lives.

“Earlier, I hesitated to speak in front of my husband's elder brothers. Managing volunteers, speaking to community members, and coordinating taught me how to articulate my thoughts. Now, my opinion is sought on family decisions.” — CS-04, 34, married

Psychological empowerment was equally important. Participants described increased self-efficacy and a new ability to address groups, explain programmes and communicate with officials. Volunteering also expanded social networks beyond kinship, creating peer support and access to organisational relationships.

“I have made friends with other volunteers who face similar struggles. We support each other, share ideas, and discuss how to handle difficult situations.” — CS-08, 29, married

Several women described the emergence of a public identity distinct from being known only through family roles. This identity was particularly meaningful for women whose opportunities for formal employment or public participation were limited.

“Now people know me as a volunteer who helps the community. This identity is different from just being someone's daughter or wife. I have my own standing now.” — CS-06, 41, widowed

6.5 Institutional Challenges and Volunteer Retention

The empowering dimensions of volunteerism were accompanied by substantial institutional weaknesses. Participants reported inadequate training, limited materials and insufficient guidance. Some felt that organisations relied on volunteer dedication to perform tasks that might otherwise require paid staff. The boundary between genuine volunteering and low-paid or unpaid labour was therefore unclear.

“They call us 'volunteers' to justify modest stipends, yet they expect full-time commitment. Passion alone cannot sustain a household indefinitely.” — CS-02, 27, married

Career progression was another concern. Some participants had accumulated years of experience but felt that volunteer service was not adequately recognised when applying for formal employment. Safety concerns were particularly significant for outreach workers visiting unfamiliar households alone. Inadequate infrastructure, including poor working facilities and basic amenities, also reduced comfort and effectiveness. Finally, the absence of certificates or other formal recognition contributed to feelings of being undervalued.

“Visiting unknown households alone is frightening. We never know who might be there or what their intentions are. There should be safety protocols.” — CS-06, 41, widowed

“We give our time and energy, but no one formally recognizes our contributions. A certificate or some official acknowledgment would mean so much.” — CS-11, 20, unmarried

7. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that female volunteerism in Multan is neither purely altruistic nor simply instrumental. Participants combined values of service with the pursuit of purpose, social connection, skills, confidence and limited economic independence. This supports the multidimensional understanding of volunteer motivation proposed by Clary et al. (1998), while showing how motivation is shaped by local cultural meanings. In particular, moral and religious framing can legitimise women's public activity and reduce family resistance.

The findings also complicate simplified understandings of empowerment. Kabeer's framework directs attention to the resources women bring to volunteering, the agency they exercise through negotiation, and the achievements that follow. In this study, resources included education, organisational access and social networks; agency appeared through negotiation with family members and community actors; and achievements included greater confidence, recognition and participation in household decisions. Yet these achievements did not necessarily remove structural constraints.

Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of bargaining within patriarchy is especially useful for interpreting the domestic dimension. Women often secured permission by locating volunteer work within accepted spatial and moral boundaries and by demonstrating that household responsibilities remained intact. Such strategies should not be interpreted simply as evidence of passivity. They represent practical forms of agency under conditions in which direct confrontation may be costly or ineffective.

Social capital theory further explains why volunteer participation mattered beyond the immediate tasks performed. Bonding relationships among volunteers supplied emotional and practical support, while bridging connections to organisational staff, community leaders and officials expanded access to information and opportunities. For women whose everyday networks may be concentrated within kinship and neighbourhood relationships, these new connections represented meaningful resources. This pattern is consistent with evidence from rural Pakistan showing that social capital and community support can shape women's access to education and services in similarly conservative settings (Zakar, Zakar, & Fischer, 2016).

At the same time, the findings reveal a critical tension: the same volunteerism that creates agency can also facilitate institutional exploitation. Organisations benefit from women's commitment and local legitimacy, but weak compensation, inadequate safety measures, limited training and absent career pathways can transfer organisational costs onto volunteers. Empowerment therefore cannot be measured only by confidence or public visibility; it must also be assessed in relation to material security, recognition and opportunities for progression.

Retention is consequently an organisational responsibility rather than merely an individual matter. Volunteers are more likely to remain when their contributions are recognised, their working environments are safe, their skills are developed and their time is respected. Sustainable community development requires institutional arrangements that protect the people who sustain grassroots programmes.

8. Policy and Practice Implications

First, volunteer service should be formally recognised. Government and NGO employment procedures can create mechanisms through which verified volunteer experience and service certificates count as relevant experience. Second, organisations should establish minimum standards for long-term volunteers,

including reasonable honorariums where responsibilities are substantial, structured training, adequate materials and clear role descriptions.

Third, female outreach workers require practical protection systems. Community-backed protocols, emergency contacts, buddy systems for field visits, transportation support and clear reporting procedures can reduce risks. Fourth, organisations should create transparent pathways through which experienced volunteers can compete for paid positions. Fifth, professional development should include communication, leadership, project management and relevant technical skills so that volunteering strengthens employability rather than becoming a prolonged substitute for employment.

Finally, recognition should be institutionalised through certificates, awards and public acknowledgment. Such measures are relatively low-cost but can strengthen motivation, community legitimacy and women's sense that their contribution has formal value.

9. Limitations

The study has several limitations. The sample was restricted to female volunteers associated with selected community development initiatives in Multan and therefore should not be generalised to other sectors or regions without caution. The analysis relied mainly on participants' accounts, which may be affected by recall or social desirability bias. The cross-sectional design cannot establish how volunteering changes women's lives over longer periods. Perspectives of non-volunteers, family members, community elders and organisational leaders were only partly captured, and there was no male comparison group. Future research should therefore use longitudinal, comparative and mixed-method designs and include multiple stakeholder perspectives.

10. Conclusion

Female volunteerism in Multan is a dual-purpose social process. It supplies important human resources for community development while providing women with a culturally negotiable route into public participation, social networking, skill development and identity formation. Participants demonstrated agency through negotiation with families and communities rather than through direct rejection of prevailing norms. Over time, tangible community contributions could convert suspicion into respect and domestic hesitation into support.

However, empowerment remained incomplete when institutional structures failed to provide safety, recognition, adequate resources, fair compensation or career pathways. The central implication is therefore that female volunteers should not be treated as low-cost project inputs. Sustainable and ethical community development requires investment in the women whose labour makes grassroots programmes possible. Formal recognition, protection, training, career bridges and appropriate organisational support can help ensure that volunteering expands women's opportunities without reproducing the structural precarity it seeks to overcome.

Declarations and Author Note

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