**Women in the mainstream**

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Good decisions require good data to base them on, and this has been a challenge in the Merged Areas (MA) because historically it has been insufficiently studied and surveyed.

A lack of robust and credible data imperils billions of rupees worth of development projects because its planning and execution are based on untested hypotheses and assumptions absent of real data. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government, with the support of the UNDP’s Merged Areas Governance Project (MAGP), conducted a baseline household survey under its Accelerated Implementation Programme (AIP) so that its ambitions to develop the MA at par with the rest of KP could be underpinned with a real understanding of underdevelopment in the region. The survey is helping fill the data gaps necessary for prioritising and designing socioeconomic development schemes and interventions in the MA.

It is common knowledge that the MA are underdeveloped compared to the rest of Pakistan, but the 2021 AIP Baseline Survey assessed by how much they were lagging in several key development sectors, including gender equality. The survey enumerated the existence of massive gender disparities as women did not enjoy the same rights to healthcare, employment opportunities, education, and ownership of assets. This affects women of the MA disproportionately.

The survey indicated that around 86 percent of women in the MA were traditional housewives, remaining occupied with household chores that extended to performing hard manual labour. The burden of collecting water fell disproportionately on women as almost 85 percent of adult women over the age of 15 years spent on average 36 minutes daily to fetch water from external sources, walking in scorching heat on unpaved roads.

The survey highlights how educational attainment in MA is greatly dependent on access to distant schools, particularly for girls. The absence of local access roads contributes to widening the gender disparity where almost three-fourth of women do not receive basic education compared to 31 percent men, whereas only 22 percent women were educated up to secondary level compared to 41 percent men. The men of the MA are disadvantaged, the women more than doubly so.

What was promising was the revelation that, even though most housewives were not involved in formal employment, they had skills that could be monetised. The data revealed that almost all the women who were interviewed for the survey were taking care of domestic livestock and poultry. However, they lack scientific knowledge and are unaware about safe practices, which often leads to disease outbreaks, a decrease in production, and ultimately financial losses. Without formal training in livestock management, women’s hard work does not reap the kind of results they hope for.

Another aspect of women’s life the survey helped in highlighting was how they do not possess National Identity Cards, because of which they can neither claim property rights nor own any other kind of assets. If they want to lodge a formal complaint or access the legal justice system, they cannot do even that. Not having any kind of formal government ID strips off their agency entirely because they are invisible to the formal system.

The AIP survey has shed light on women’s life at a grassroots level. When the survey was launched in April at a virtual event, the then KP additional chief secretary Shakeel Qadir Khan reiterated the government’s priorities of investing in livestock farming and boosting the sector with a quick injection of money. “It will not only strengthen the local economy but also boost women empowerment in the region,” he had said.

Dr Samina Afridi, MAGP’s senior sector specialist on gender, also spoke about how the provincial government has been working on gender mainstreaming initiatives, incorporating the useful insights the survey has provided.

“During my engagement with the KP Social Welfare Department, I have presented data from the AIP Baseline Survey on several occasions,” she said. “Although gender-disaggregated data is required for an in-depth portrayal of ground realities, this survey has opened a window into the lives of women living in the MA.”

“This survey can play a pivotal role in designing relevant projects to improve the living standards of women in the MAs,” she added, saying that schemes designed for women empowerment under MAGP’s Special Emphasis Programme (SEP) in collaboration with the provincial government are also based on the survey.

Capacity building trainings on gender mainstreaming are being conducted for government officials working in the MA keeping the AIP in view. Local stakeholders are being educated on gender mainstreaming in legislation, for research, resource allocation, policy, planning, implementation, and monitoring. The aim is to bring women to the forefront and amplify their voice, thereby strengthening the workforce and catalysing development in the MA.

While household surveys have been conducted in the past in the MA, they did not provide a complex and wide canvas of information to guide development thinking. Previous surveys captured general trends without differentiating between the districts in the MA, some of which have different development needs. With the AIP Baseline Survey, it is clearer what is required in Bajaur compared to Kurram as it provides a district-level understanding of issues.

Developing the MA and addressing over 70 years of underdevelopment is a significant challenge. That challenge was compounded in difficulty because data was scarce, narrow in what it captured and often based on estimates. With the results of this massive data exercise – the AIP Baseline Survey – the government has created a repository of information that can guide its commitment to deploying resources effectively based on needs that are validated and correctly assessed. In this process, the data highlighted the scale of the challenge women faced and the possible solutions to improve their agency and socio-economic well-being. Better equipped with knowledge, the KP government has embarked on a decade-long process of trying to correct this.

The writer has studied business and economics, and works in the social sector in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.