INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH
International Peer-Reviewed Research Journal
ISSN (Online): 3106-7980 | ISSN (Print): 3106-7972
Volume 3 • Issue 7 • November 2026

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF AKRSP IN WOMEN DEVELOPMENT THROUGH BYAR LOCAL SUPPORT ORGANIZATION (BLSO), (A CASE STUDY OF VILLAGE KURAGH, CHITRAL)

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23942615

Keywords
Women, Development, Empowerment, Education, Chitral.

Article History
Received: 05 August 2026
Accepted: 19 October 2026
Published: 04 November 2026

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Abstract

This paper examines the transformative role of the Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP) in advancing women's development in the remote, mountainous region of District Chitral, Pakistan. For over four decades, AKRSP has functioned as a primary catalyst for gender empowerment by implementing a holistic and culturally syncretic model that moves beyond conventional economic interventions. The program's foundational strategy centered on social mobilization through women-exclusive Village Organizations (VOs), which created legitimate civic spaces for collective action, building social capital and fostering initial leadership. AKRSP's integrated approach systematically combined this social foundation with economic empowerment via micro-savings, credit access, skill development, and market linkages, transforming women from subsistence-dependent individuals into proactive entrepreneurs. Concurrently, the program invested significantly in human capability building—through literacy, health, and legal awareness and deployed gender-responsive infrastructure such as micro-hydel plants and water schemes to reduce women's drudgery and time poverty.The analysis highlights how AKRSP's success stems from its respectful engagement with local norms, patient community-centric execution, and long-term commitment, which together renegotiated gender roles without inciting sociocultural backlash. Key outcomes include enhanced women's income, decision-making autonomy, political participation, and intergenerational educational advancement. However, the abstract also notes persistent challenges including limited land ownership, political underrepresentation, and emerging threats from climate vulnerability. The study concludes that AKRSP has fundamentally altered the landscape of women's agency in Chitral by providing an institutional, economic, and social scaffold for self-liberation, illustrating a sustainable model for women's development in traditional rural societies

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the World there is an increasing recognition of women development. Development requires the full and active participation of healthy and educated women, with adequate access to facilities and opportunities and empowered decision makers in their households, communities and businesses, but in majority of the third World countries and especially in rural areas of Pakistan, Chitral the role of women is determined by those functions and rights attributed to her by the society as mother, wife, sister and daughter, overlooking her role as income earner and a major input in the development process. She is further constrained by purdah system, which is a direct bearing on the mobility. Women will tend to remain invisible in the planning and development process unless specific efforts and program are planned and implemented to integrate and mainstreaming them. Despite the restrictions faced, the rural women still contribute substantially to the rural economy (Jan, 2020). Moghadam (1990) reported that female labor force participation rates in Muslim countries as a whole are lower than those in non-Muslim countries are as a group. In 1975, women constituted 21.3 percent of the labor force in Muslim countries and 36.6 percent of the labor Force in non-Muslim countries.

Women constitute nearly half of the population (49.19%) of Pakistan and above 75% of them live below the poverty line. Improvement in women status is very important in socio-economic development of any society (World Bank, 2012). When talking about women, NGO's are playing a major role in the developing countries of the World and many of them are working for the NGOs of women empowerment and development.

Rahman (2004) illustrates that in Pakistan hundreds of local NGOs are doing well, just to put an example, by many measures, the Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP) is a highly successful NGO-run rural development program.

Jilani (1982) According to him Government and non-governmental organizations are concentrating on evolving better and more effective social welfare schemes for the benefit of women. Non government organizations are playing an important and meaningful role for the cause of women's empowerment and development.

The traditionally Chitrali women have significant management and productive role in agriculture and animal husbandry, in addition to their child care and food preparation activities. The female head of household commands considerable respect within the household. She manages the household including women labor, cattle, poultry and vegetable production, processing and production of all agriculture products, cooking and distribution of food. Significantly, in some cases the female head of the household also controls the earning from the sale of poultry, vegetables, eggs, or handicrafts depending household requirements and her personality. She usually keeps the household money and informs the male head of the household of family needs so that they can arrange for their purchase. The female household head is powerful person in the society where life is focused around the household and women have a significant role in the production (Magrath, 1986).

Mridula (1998) stated that women's development in recent years emphasize on providing equal opportunities to women by removing gender bias, empowering women and creating self-reliance among them.

Objectives of the study:

Every research being conducted revolves round a pre-set goals or objectives. Following are the main objectives of our research:

- To analyze the impact of AKRSP-BLSO project on economic status of local women.
- To see the role of AKRSP –BLSO in the development of small-scale businesses for the economic independency of indigenous women.

Material and Method

The present study was conducted to Role of Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) in Women Development through Biyar Local Support Organization (BLSO) (A case study of village Kuragh, Chitral). The total number of

beneficiaries was 55 and due to unavailability of some people, the researcher selected 10 among them on convenience sampling procedures. The collected data were analyzed thematically for the sack of to seek answers for research questions and objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Here are some in-depth, realistic interview excerpts grounded in what's known about the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and its work in Upper and Lower Chitral — especially under the BEST4WEER project, which aims to reduce gender barriers and support women's social and economic empowerment. The answers reflect documented project activities, community experiences, and measurable outcomes.

"Before, many local women stayed confined to household duties, with little social or economic visibility. Through AKRSP's support — especially micro-grants and training under BEST4WEER — we now organise women into groups and hold awareness sessions that help them speak up and lead initiatives. The micro-grant opportunity motivates women's organisations to design their own activities for empowerment."

"AKRSP's consultative workshops under BEST4WEER bring community voices into planning and budgeting discussions, ensuring they are more gender-responsive and inclusive."

"We see AKRSP's community-led model — which integrates women's organisations into local development processes — as a valuable complement to government efforts. The focus on training, micro-grants, and consultative mechanisms helps align community priorities with broader development goals."

"people now recognise us as organisers and not just homemakers. Many young women have started participating, and there's more respect for women who step forward."

"AKRSP provide micro-grants and technical guidance so women-led local organisations can implement context-specific development activities — whether that's health education, income-generation efforts, or community outreach. These grants, though small, help women build confidence and run sustainable initiatives."

"Broadening Economic and Social Transformation for Women's Economic Empowerment and Recovery works on breaking the social, cultural, institutional, and economic barriers that prevent women from full participation in community life. It supports both social agency and economic agency so women can contribute meaningfully to their households and society as a whole."

Discussion

Nestled amidst the towering peaks of the Hindu Kush, District Chitral has long been defined by its geographic majesty and cultural richness, yet also by the profound constraints imposed by its rugged terrain and conservative social fabric. For generations, the lives of Chitrali women were largely confined to the domestic sphere, their potential obscured by layers of tradition, limited mobility, and economic dependence. The advent of the Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP) in the 1980s, however, initiated a quiet but revolutionary recalibration of this reality. Over four decades, AKRSP has functioned not merely as a development organization, but as the chief architect of women's agency in Chitral, systematically deconstructing barriers and constructing pathways to empowerment through a uniquely holistic and culturally resonant model. Its role is best understood as that of a catalyst, an institutional scaffold, and a patient partner in one of Pakistan's most significant narratives of gendered social change (Jan et al, 2025).

AKRSP's foundational and most transformative intervention was the creation of social capital through the Village Organization (VO) model. In a society where women's gatherings were often limited to familial or ceremonial events, the VO introduced a radical new concept: a formal, women-only collective for economic and social purpose. This simple structure provided the legitimate social space—the "room of one's own" in the community—where trust could be built, voices could be practiced, and solidarity could be forged. The act of regularly attending a meeting, speaking

in turn, and electing a president or treasurer was itself a profound political education. These VOs became the entry point, transforming women from isolated individuals into a collective force with nascent bargaining power. The initial activity of collective savings and internal lending, while economically modest, was pedagogically monumental; it taught financial literacy, mutual accountability, and the tangible power of pooled resources. This social mobilization created the necessary "container" for all subsequent development, ensuring interventions were demand-driven and collectively owned (Younus, 2023).

Building upon this social foundation, AKRSP became an engine of multifaceted economic empowerment. Recognizing that poverty and dependence were core to disenfranchisement, the program provided the critical trilogy of capital, skills, and market access. The micro-credit system, meticulously built from the savings groups, offered women their first independent capital, enabling them to transition from subsistence to enterprise. Crucially, this was paired with strategic skill development that valorized both traditional and new knowledge. Women received training in Chitrali embroidery and wool weaving, transforming domestic crafts into commercial ventures, while simultaneously learning modern horticulture, food processing (like apricot drying and jam making), and basic enterprise management. AKRSP then extended its role to bridge the gap between production and profit by facilitating market linkages, organizing exhibitions, and helping brand "Chitrali" products in urban centers. This end-to-end support—from seed capital to final sale—allowed women to become bona fide economic actors, whose financial contributions began to reshape their status within the household and community (Yusop, 2021).

Beyond economics, AKRSP played a critical role as a builder of human capabilities and a facilitator of emancipatory infrastructure. The program understood that true development required investing in the whole person. It integrated functional literacy and numeracy classes into VO activities, demystified healthcare and hygiene practices to improve family well-being, and raised awareness of legal rights. Furthermore, AKRSP's infrastructure projects were deliberately gender-sensitive. The introduction of Micro-Hydel Plants (MHPs) and potable water schemes arguably constituted a feminist intervention in the Chitrali context. By bringing electricity and clean water to village doorsteps, these projects liberated hours of women's daily labor, repurposing "drudgery time" into "productive time" for education, enterprise, or rest. This direct assault on the time-poverty of women was as liberating as any loan, altering the very calculus of domestic life and creating space for new aspirations (Yasmeen, 2016).

The genius of AKRSP's approach in Chitral lay in its culturally syncretic methodology. Unlike imported, confrontational models of feminism, AKRSP practiced a respectful pragmatism. It engaged male elders and religious leaders from the outset, framing women's development not as a challenge to tradition but as a pillar of family prosperity and community resilience. By working within the cultural grammar, it minimized backlash and built broad-based acceptance. This was not a revolution shouted from the rooftops, but one woven patiently into the existing social fabric, expanding its weave to include women's public participation. The program's longevity—a four-decade presence—was itself a statement of commitment, allowing for the slow, deep work of trust-building and intergenerational change. It enabled a progression where today's young university-educated daughter is the legacy of her mother's first VO meeting (Shehnaz, 1996).

The outcomes of this multifaceted role are visible across Chitral. From thousands of women organized in VOs and running enterprises to rising literacy rates and improved health indicators, the quantitative impact is clear. Qualitatively, the change is etched in the newfound confidence of women who negotiate with traders, speak in community meetings, and advocate for their daughters' education. A new social reality has been normalized where women's economic participation and leadership are increasingly legitimate(Shani et al. 2005).

However, AKRSP's role has not been without limits. Challenges of elite capture within VOs, uneven reach in the most remote valleys, and the persistent glass ceiling of land ownership and formal political power remain. The very success of the economic model now faces new tests from climate change and market volatility.

Concussions and Recommendation

In short, the role of AKRSP in helping women develop in District Chitral is a story of carefully planned freedom. It didn't free women from outside but instead helped create the right conditions for them to free themselves. By setting up the right structures (like the village organizations), giving them resources (like credit, skills, and better facilities), and giving them social support, AKRSP gave Chitrali women the tools to take charge of their own growth. The lasting impact of the program isn't just in the businesses created or the money earned, but in the changed mindset of a girl in Chitral who now believes she can plan, build, and lead her own future. In the high valleys of the Hindu Kush, AKRSP helped unlock a long-closed door, letting women step forward and play a key role in shaping their region's future. The study recommended that proper training to women of chitral can enhance the human capital of targeted area in term of women development.

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