



Gendered Contentious Politics: Examining Women's Protest against the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in Karachi Port Fishing Communities, Pakistan

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Abstract

What conditions lead women from Karachi Port's fishing communities to participate in protest? Although a substantial body of research has examined China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Karachi Port, comparatively little attention has been paid to women's mobilization and protests. Drawing on the framework of contentious politics, the present study examines women's perceptions and lived experiences of large-scale development and how communities, and especially women, organize collectively in response to these developments. The findings suggest that women's experiences remain insufficiently documented while they support local fishing communities and the surrounding economy through multiple forms of work and have also been adversely affected by the sector's recent decline. Women frequently take leading positions in fisher-folk protests and their presence can help reduce the likelihood of violent escalation. Overall, the research extends the wider scholarship on CPEC and Karachi Port by focusing on the experiences of women of the fishing communities of Karachi Port.

Keywords: *Contentious Politics; Women's Collective Action; Fishing Communities; Karachi Port; China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); Gender; Protest Mobilization*

1. Introduction

In mid-June 2021 in Karachi Port, more than 200 women from the fishing communities assembled at construction sites of the East Express Way, with flyers and slogans calling, "This Sea belongs to us" and "We will not stop demanding our rights as the owners of this land and sea". Participants arrived from several neighbourhoods of the fishing communities (The Balochistan Post, 2021). The mobilization was coordinated by women's wing of a local fisher folk's rights organization "Karachi Port Med Itihad" and by women from local political parties. Although the area is socially traditional and conservative, this mass gathering and protest of June 2021 should not be viewed as an isolated episode. Over the preceding two decades, groups of these women had repeatedly entered the public sphere through street demonstrations, to defend the rights of the fishing communities of Karachi Port amid multibillion-dollar Chinese investment for mass construction in and around the city and the growing marginalization of local communities, especially of women (Kanwal, 2021).

Why do women in Karachi Port's fishing communities organize collectively and take part in protest? How do they respond to state actions that shape their communities? How do these women experience the marginalizing effects of large-scale development in the new "port city" which they previously knew as a quiet fishing village? Questions of this kind—concerning collective action, mobilization, and resistance—are commonly examined through the concept of contentious politics. Two of the well-known scholars (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015) who have worked extensively in the area, describe it as a situation in which a more powerful actor (e.g. government in most cases) makes claims or decisions that affect a less powerful group (e.g. masses) that affects them in some ways. To

challenge such claims and seek changes in those decisions, the affected group undertakes coordinated action. Such action may range from protests to large scale social and political movements. Contention becomes explicitly political through an interaction between three main features of social life; politics, collective action and contention with involvement of government in making claims and shaping the contention that groups of people make efforts to change. (Deller, 2016).

A substantial scholarly literature addresses this concept (e.g. et al., 2015; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015; Chenoweth & Stephen, 2011; Davies, 1962; Gurr, 1968; Kitschelt, 1986; Tarrow, 1994; Tilly, 1978). But far fewer studies examine

contentious politics that through a gender-sensitive perspective and specifically on women's collective mobilization (Murdie & Peksen, 2015) in fishing communities particularly where conflicts arise with new forms of development. Recent scholarship has therefore sought to place gender more explicitly within analyses of contentious politics (which will be discussed further in the present study).

At the same time, the recognition of women's multiple roles in the fishing communities, has emerged only relatively recently. These roles encompass contributions to local paid and unpaid economies as well as to the actions and collective mobilization of the fisher folk rights' organizations, challenging power relations (FAO, 2016) and simply standing for their gendered rights including right to fish (Weeratunge et al., 2010). Even though women often lack full access to formal participation and decision-making, they remain integral to the overall political struggles of their communities (FAO, 2016).

the present study has three principal aims; (1) to examine women's experiences in the fishing communities of Karachi Port during some of the very significant changes constantly taking place in their surroundings (2) to identify the factors that shape their protest activity, and (3) to understand how they organize collectively. These are not new questions when it comes to Karachi Port, development and collective action, but a significant gap remains in the literature. Many existing studies addressing these questions document experiences of marginalization among "fishermen" of Karachi Port, the effects of development on their lives and their involvement in the movement of fishing communities (e.g. et al., 2020; Shi et al., 2018; Manuel, 2017; Jamali, 2014). This reflects a broader tendency to render women invisible in indigenous communities; their contribution to the society and to the political struggles. The central argument advanced here is that women perform a crucial role in collective actions and mobilizing of their communities and in challenging power relations in Karachi Port. the research therefore seeks to restore women to the analytical foreground that I have seen as part of the struggle for their communities and record their distinctive experiences that have not been done so far. For this purpose, the analysis employs the theoretical framework of "contentious politics" looking at it with a gendered perspective used in some of the recent studies (e.g., Murdie and Peksen

2015; Asal, Legault, Szekely and Wilkenfeld 2013). This framework is examined further in Section 3 under the theoretical framework.

Feminist research traditions also emphasize the situated position of the researcher. Researchers are encouraged to critically reflect of their position, existing knowledge and how these may influence both the research process and its outcomes. By centering individual narratives and experiences of injustice, feminist research can also function as a powerful means to foreground the voices of the most unheard, marginalized and vulnerable segments of society and bring them forward into the policy arena (Bell, 2015). Thus, in my position having seen Karachi Port's journey from a little fishing town to an emerging port city, as a woman from Karachi Port, I make explicit my motivation for undertaking this research and my positional relationship with the women in fishing communities whom I interviewed. First, I seek to create space for women to articulate their experiences of development in their place, how these processes affect them and ways they collectively mobilize. I do not claim to speak on behalf of all women nor do I make any attempt to personally connect myself with the collective causes. Rather, I place women's perspectives in the fishing communities at the center of current debates over CPEC, development and struggles of fishing communities. Though, I do not make any commitments with the causes, yet as a resident of Karachi Port, I felt a responsibility to document the women of my place, and their struggles for social justice in times of foreign development. Being profoundly affected as part of the larger community in Karachi Port and having in mind that for both China and Pakistan, these projects are of great significance the voices of the most vulnerable especially of women from these communities are frequently absent from policy commitments, political agendas, and broader scholarship. Accordingly, to investigate the ways women of fishing communities perceive

CPEC and experience marginalization in the wake of large-scale development and to answer the questions outlined in the beginning of the present study, the article first outlines the context of the issue and then develops a theoretical framework to structure my analysis. In the methodology section, the methodology section explains the research design, and in the results and discussion section, the results and discussion section presents the findings of the present study and discuss them with the help of the theoretical framework and the conclusion considers the broader implications of the present study through conclusion.

2. Background and Context

Because this research focuses specifically on the women of the fishing communities of Karachi Port and large scale development work through Chinese investment, it is necessary to establish the contextual setting of Karachi Port by addressing several contextual questions; firstly, why was Karachi Port selected as the research setting? And secondly, why have Karachi Port's fishing communities developed a socio-political struggle? While these questions clarify the geopolitical importance of Karachi Port, they also help explain why opposition around development is unwelcomed and especially opposition coming from the fishing community's women.

2.1 Karachi Port's Importance for Pakistan and China

Karachi Port, has developed into a prominent port city in the south-west of Pakistan's western province Balochistan, although it was described as a relatively quiet fishing settlement until the early 2000s. Though, its natural harbor has long possessed strategic significance because of its geographic position in Arabian Sea at the entrance of Persian Gulf, gate to the Strait of Hormuz and its historic importance in the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, Karachi Port did not previously attract the level of international attention it has received in the recent history (Ahmed, 2016).

Discussion of its strategic importance is traced in the research to 1954, when, discussions over Karachi Port's strategic importance began. When the United States Geological Survey (USGS) published a report on the coastline of Pakistan and the surrounding regions, identifying Karachi Port, as a potentially significant location for a sea-port (Khetran, 2014). But, then this little fishing town was still part of the Omani Sultanate. For over 300 years, Oman 'owned' Karachi Port. In 1958, under a treaty between the two countries, Oman sold it to Pakistan (Jamali, 2014).

During the following three decades, Karachi Port largely remained a proposal. But, plans concerning Karachi Port re-emerged in 1990s in the federal government of Pakistan. However, implementation gained momentum with China's interest in construction of Karachi Port port during the 11th session of Pak-China Joint Economic Commission in May 2000. The port

The project subsequently became a major national priority for Pakistan. It was anticipated that the port would attract trade and industrial activity and contribute to poverty reduction in the surrounding region. The same year the Chinese government announced \$198 million financial assistance (of which \$58 million were consumer loan) for the first phase of the port construction for the total cost \$248 million. Part of the cost was shared by the Pakistani government and another part remained interest free loan. The port construction work was completed in 2007 (Ejaz & Jamshed, 2018) when its operation operations were transferred to the Port Authority of Singapore (PSA) for forty years through an international bidding process (Jamali, 2014).

In the years that followed, however, the port operated only minimally. This limited activity was partly attributed to the political instability in Balochistan province. After limited progress under the Singaporean operator, the forty years' contract was dissolved and in 2013 the port operations were transferred to a Chinese state-run firm, the China Overseas Ports Holding Company (COPHC). China's increased interest in Karachi Port now was further strengthened by its new project 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) (Abb et al., 2021).

2.2 BRI and Karachi Port

Since 2013, BRI has attracted extensive international attention. Because of its geopolitical and economic integration, BRI has become one of the world's largest infrastructure and economic initiatives. (Abb et al., 2021). Chinese companies seek access to natural resources from the Central Asian countries and to export their goods to European regions, efficient and reliable rail and road links are therefore strategically significant (Manuel, 2017). Initially, the BRI focused on expanding China's transport links with a new land-based corridor across Eurasia and few sea-ports across Indian Ocean. It

has since expanded considerably with cluster of projects reaching far beyond Indian Ocean. Pakistan joined the BRI before any other country did and hosts China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the 'flagship' project of BRI. (Haina, 2019).

China's interest in Karachi Port is linked to the strategic benefits the port is expected to provide. The western regions of China lie at considerable distance from China's coastline. For instance, Xinjiang province is 4000 kilometres away from the coast. A route through Karachi Port is presented as reducing both transport time and cost by almost half of it. In addition to offering a shorter route to China's western regions, it also gives access to the Middle Eastern markets, and landlocked central Asian countries. At present, a large share of China's trade and energy transport, many of its natural resources and especially over 80 percent of its oil imports cross the narrow Strait of Malacca, which is a disputed region and has security challenges for China (Manuel, 2017). Under CPEC, the Chinese government has committed financing for Chinese companies to build energy and infrastructure projects in Pakistan and to develop transport infrastructure in different parts of Pakistan especially connecting Karachi Port in far south around 120 kilometres from the Iranian border to the country's far northern Karakorum Highway bordering China, making ways to China's western regions (Zahid Ullah & Khan, 2019).

2.3 Changes in Karachi Port

Within Pakistan, as the centre stage of CPEC is Karachi Port. Port-related development has produced extensive changes in the former fishing settlement in the last twenty years. One early change was the relocation undertaken to accommodate construction of Karachi Port in 2001, the people of the old fishing neighbourhoods, mainly Mullah Band were resettled to the north of the town under a new housing scheme named 'Noken Mulla Band' (Shahrukh et al., 2020). Residents initially resisted leaving their houses by the beach, but following sustained pressure and persuasion from government authorities, they left their old houses and moved to the new neighborhood. Although the relocation was officially described as voluntary, many residents now report a sense of abandonment. They got a piece of land and cash to build new houses but few supporting services like water, proper electricity and sewerage and drainage system. And for those who are still engaged with fishing, living away from the beach, commuting to and from the coast creates additional financial burdens. (Jamali, 2014) At the same time those who are still living in the remaining old neighbourhoods along the beach, not too far from the port, have increasingly encountered difficulties in accessing the bay (Suleman, 2019). The increased security concerns in response to the insurgency in the Balochistan province has led to a larger security presence in and around the city and

a special naval force has been set up in the Arabian Sea. This has also created further access constraints for fishing communities to move within the city as well as to access the ocean (Khetran, 2014). Moreover in 2018, the construction work of the East Bay Express Way another project under CPEC created further access constraints for fishing communities. The East Bay Express Way is a nearly 19 kilometre, six-lane highway and rail track along the coast that links Karachi Port with the main coastal highway. But, it crosses along the fishing neighbourhoods, and has now partially limited the access for the fishing boats and may increase limitations over time (Suleman, 2019).

2.4 Collective Mobilization of Fishing Communities

Taken together, these projects and (more to come) have contributed to a strong sense of marginalization among local communities (Ijaz, 2018). Residents report reduced freedom of movement and growing constraints on their livelihoods as well as the new developments while development has produced limited improvements in everyday living conditions (Suleman, 2020). In response to perceptions of exclusion by the state government authorities, the Chinese development projects as well as the mainstream political parties in Balochistan, the fishing communities in the early stages of the development work in Karachi Port organized to establish a fishing communities' rights-based organization 'Karachi Port Med Itehad.' The organization brings together people whose livelihoods are tied to fishing and local political activists from the Med community. The word Med comes from Balochi, local language and expresses a collective identity rooted in fishing (Jamali, 2014). This coastal identity is understood as extending across gender. Although, women's individual contributions from these communities are not fully recognized in the struggles for social justice, but women participate across different stages of the struggle along with performing daily tasks in the private sphere. Despite all the barriers and difficulties, they encounter on daily basis, rather than being

understood solely as victims of development and violence, it seems to me (after having done the interviews) that they seek recognition as equal members and indigenous residents to Karachi Port, active participants of the struggle and contributors to their community's collective actions

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Contentious Politics

Since the 1970s, 'contentious politics' has developed as a broad conceptual framework to for understanding interactions in which some segments of society or groups challenge state actions or claims through coordinated action around shared interests. Such collective activity may take the form of riots, sit-ins, crowds, protests, campaigns, marches and movements (Hallgrímsdóttir & Brunet-Jailly, 2015). In these settings, governments may initiate claims or actions and actions that that social groups then attempt to contest or alter. Two of the main scholars in the area also mentioned earlier Tilly and Tarrow (2015) conceptualize contentious politics as the intersection of three main features of social life: contention, collective action and politics.

Contention is commonly understood as "one party making claims on another" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015; 8). The parties involved may include persons, groups or institutions that dominate decisions. These can be very minor everyday decisions to much bigger questions that affect society at large. Collective action emerges when a group or groups of people with a shared interest, coordinate their efforts to change the decisions and claims or to achieve a larger target (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). These concerns include; groups of students enter university, and become part of an organization that is carrying out a certain collective action or a group of citizens collectively cleaning the beach. However, not every form of collective action is contentious and particularly when government involvement is absent in initiating any claims, therefore so collective action cannot automatically be classified as political contention. Political activity itself spans everyday matters such as applying to obtain a passport, voting in elections, participating in the census or simply showing identity documents in the immigration. In all these examples, one does not make any claims on other person. For political activity to become contentious, government makes certain claims or takes actions that the members of community do not necessarily agree upon and and community members consequently organize collectively to change the direction of government actions (Deller, 2016).

In the present study, contention is situated within the context of transnational development projects that the Pakistani government is allowing in its territory, local residents mobilize in response to the government actions. The degree of state capacity shapes, it may have complete autonomy or some influence over making claims, taking actions and resisting anyone building influence within their territory (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). From this perspective, the government and their opponent contentious groups continually negotiate, adapt, and develop new strategies, often in attempts to persuade, defeat or collaborate with each other (Tarrow, 2017).

For the purposes of this article, contention refers to a the emergence of local activists and grassroots organizations, for collective challenges to their communities responding collectively to changes associated with mega-projects in their region and policy processes that exclude meaningful local participation (Silva, 2018). This representation of contention includes local protest and community mobilization of community members regardless of gender and the size of the movement.

3.2 Gendering Contentious Politics

The definition above allows for focus in this context, but when women's participation is considered specifically, apart from showing solidarity with the collective actions and mobilization, in many contentious situations, women often perform significant roles in the campaigns and protests. However, women's participation does not automatically imply that that mobilization necessarily advances gendered or women's interests. Therefore, this creates a need to examine contentious politics through a gendered analytical lens and there are several studies in line. These concerns include, Wulff, Bernstein and Taylor (2015) look at contention and social movements from a gendered and sexuality movements' perspective. These authors argue that the theories around contention and social movements are shaped by masculinist assumptions. They contend that gender and sexuality movements have encouraged scholars to take greater account of the emotions within movements, rather than relying exclusively on the excessive structural and rational models. They specifically use the concept of "masculinist assumption" to criticise the existing literature on social movements and contention.

These authors argue that across different forms of contention, gender is a significant explanatory dimension in collective actions. According to them, gender influences the formation, emergence, trajectory and outcomes of movements, yet movements, movements, political struggles and protests are still frequently analyzed from male-centered perspectives. Building on this argument, the research examines how political contention in Karachi Port in form of protests of fisher folk organization have so far been studied as a masculine subject, invisibilising women as participants of collective actions as well as simply members of the community, thereby overlooking women's experiences, contributions, and voices in the struggle.

At the same time, Murdie and Peksen (2015) and Asa (et al., 2013) have also sought to gender analyses of contentious politics by identifying some factors that encourage the mobilization of a certain segment of society; women. These studies argue that the little literature that exists of women's mobilizing, collective action, contention and movements, is concentrated largely on North American and Western European experiences. Therefore, Murdie and Peksen's study draws on global-level data on women's collective

mobilization and contentious politics whereas the latter examines women's participation in the movements in the Middle East during the Arab Spring.

Drawing on several bodies of scholarship (e.g., Davies (1962), Gurr (1968), Piazza (2011); Wimmer, Cederman and Min (2009); Brusch (1996) Cole (2012), Murdie and Peksen (2015) treat dissent as a significant precondition for contention. They consider how different types of rebellion or collective action results from certain groups being denied economic rights, especially when states do little to overcome past grievances. When governments fail to protect or enforce economic and political rights of certain groups of people, a gap may emerge in which that group's capabilities greatly differ from the expectations, especially when comparing with a reference group. In the present context, this dynamic operates in two related ways in Karachi Port's context, first as a larger group the fishing communities experience deprivation and marginalization consequently of CPEC projects because of concerns that they do not benefit from the projects as much as the revenues generated may be utilised in other parts of country, rather they will be deprived of their land and sea eventually. Second, women participating in the fisher folk's struggles fear that already occupying a weaker (in terms of political and economic empowerment) segment of society, new development may deepen their deprivation of the little they now have through the fishing economy.

Murdie and Peksen (2015) also emphasize resource mobilization in a sense that collective action and mobilization in contentious politics becomes easier when organizational resources are available. Therefore, they therefore suggest that comparatively resource-rich settings, collective action by women is more probable to occur. But, this does not imply that collective action is absent in settings with lesser resources, but but women's organizing may be facilitated when they have the resources or some kind of a support system. Looking at this from Karachi Port's context, although women are present in some protests and lead some of the all-women's protests, women remain numerically underrepresented in the larger struggle of the fisher folk forum. Given their lower levels of economic and social power, they have a subaltern role in the society and movement and their contributions often receive limited recognition.

Drawing additionally on the work of Tilly (1978), Lipset (1963) and Costain (1992), Murdie and Peksen (2015) argue that relative deprivation and resources alone do not explain for a movement explain collective action especially of women but and that favorable political conditions are equally significant. They especially emphasize on the idea of political opportunity and the idea that unless the state allows at least some space to certain group's dissent, organized protest is less likely to emerge the organized protests will occur, particularly the nonviolent protests (of the fishing communities).

Although these studies focus primarily on the questions about the circumstances under which women protest, using Tilly and Tarrow's intersection of contentious politics; contention, politics and collective action, the present analysis is structured around questions around women's experiences of marginalization, and collectively mobilizing to combat government's claims and actions of China's mega projects. Thus, the data are organized collected from the interviews and secondary sources mainly into the three main features of contentious politics. But, the themes such as masculinist assumptions around CPEC and invisibilising of women, deprivation, resource mobilization and political opportunities that were stipulated in the preceding researches by scholars on gendering

contentious politics, are also examined in the discussion of the research keeping Karachi Port in context.

4. Methodology

To generate evidence for examining the implications of the theoretical argument outlined in the preceding sections, the research combines primary material with secondary sources. Primary evidence was gathered through semi-structured interviews with informants focused on women's experiences of development under CPEC, marginalization and involvement in collective actions.

Six women participated in the interviews, each of whom was actively involved in different ways in the political struggles of the fishing communities in Karachi Port. Two participants were senior activists and are leaders of the women's wing of the fisher folk forum, three were members of the same organization, and one was social activist and educationalist in the

community. Most participants were also affiliated with one of local political parties. Pseudonyms were used of the interviewees to honor participants' request for anonymity.

All these women belong to Karachi Port's fishing community, but participants were deliberately selected to invite women from different positions within the community and organization to capture a range of perspectives. The interviews were conducted through my University Zoom account for reasons of security as well as because travel was not feasible given very limited time and the pandemic situation. One participant also assisted to reach out to the other interviewees who did not have access to Zoom on their own.

Although interviews can provide rich insight of complex realities but the method also has limitations. the research recognizes that the perspectives of the participants may intersect with the researcher's prior assumptions. Therefore, to triangulate and supplement the data gathered from the interviews, secondary literature was also consulted written on the large-scale development in Karachi Port, local resistance on similar projects and confrontations from different parts of the world.

The approach to data collection through interviews and secondary literature was guided by the broad lines of thinking on contentious politics and the ways it has been gendered. For analysis, the primary and secondary material, was organized around the three main features of contentious politics, exploring all three of the features through women's perspective.

5. Results and Discussion

In recent years, women's unique role and contributions to the fishing communities in different parts of the world have gained increasing recognition (Meryl et al., 2012). Likewise, in the present times, incorporating women's needs and roles and other genders in implementation of mega development projects is widely regarded as significant within international commitments for realizing gender equality (FAO, 2016). However, China has not yet established a gender-mainstreaming approach to implement BRI and its connected projects (Haina, 2019). With respect to fishing communities, Chinese investment, development work and collective actions in Karachi Port are concerned, women's perspectives, recognition, and needs remain weakly represented in the policies and much of the existing literature.

Because the research centers the experiences of the women in the fishing communities, the following discussion seeks to present a more realistic situation of Karachi Port. But, the discussion begins of the present study by reviewing some key existing literature on CPEC and Karachi Port that have largely been interpreted through men's or fishermen's experiences.

In a widely cited ethnographic doctoral study, Hafeez Jamali (2014) a Baloch researcher, examined how the imposition of political violence of state authorities accompanied by mega projects can push those harmed by development toward violent forms of expression. By 'political violence of state authorities' he refers to several armed insurgencies that rose with the longstanding distrust the ethnic Baloch population have had with frontier governance in Balochistan. At the same time, Jamali argues that the fishermen have historically occupied a subaltern position in the social status hierarchy in Balochistan and among other Baloch population in Karachi Port. And since the fishermen are excluded from development-related decision-making on the development projects, he suggests, such projects become arenas of contestation. This exclusion shapes the different forms through which

fishermen represent their resentment. Jamali's work is significant because it highlights the contentions in Karachi Port through 'fishermen's' perspective as a whole, but yet it does not incorporate the voices and perspectives of the women from the fishing communities.

Another research on the coastal communities of Balochistan in context of CPEC on perceptions and socioeconomic concerns, a group of Pakistani researchers (Shahrukh et al., 2020) examine the problems of the vulnerable 'fishermen.' Although the authors argue that an 'inclusive approach' is essential to regional development of the region, considering 'fishermen' as one of the most significant stakeholders, the research nevertheless overlooks an inclusive approach that considers gendered needs. the research further reports there is quite enough awareness about CPEC projects among local 'fishermen' and how local residents experience a sense of exclusion and again not having much done to improve the lives of fishermen.

Similarly, in an article addressing China's economic rush, Anja Manuel (2017) argues that China's expanding political influence in developing world may strengthen its diplomatic alliances in international disputes. The Chinese authorities emphasize on not getting involved with recipient countries' internal affairs' but he argues the 50, 000 'fishermen' living in Karachi Port, have already experienced a sudden transformation. China's plans to expand its economy, he adds, may leave massive debt-trap for the recipient counties, a mess of unpaid local 'men', while overlooking women's role in local fisheries economy.

In assessing the social effects of CPEC, another study, by a group of Pakistani and Chinese scholars (Shi et al., 2018) in one of the sections of their study, although provides only a brief and general discussion of how Pakistan has introduced an anti 'Workplace harassment law' for women and that to safeguard women's rights, local 'religious' and 'customary' measures may be taken. the research however, does not identify any law or policy for women in accordance with CPEC. Nor does it clarify if women were part of the survey conducted to evaluate the social impacts of CPEC.

Although these and related studies are valuable for understanding the contentious politics in Karachi Port, they generally overlook is women's stance, role and recognition in the fishing communities and their role in the struggles. Therefore, the following

three sections are an attempt of gendering contentious politics in Karachi Port and answering the main questions

5.1 The Process of Contention

For a group to interpret its situation as oppressive and to engage in collective action and mobilization, members must first develop a shared awareness and agreement among the group that that prevailing conditions are unjust and imposed by a more powerful authority by a powerful authority (government in this case). But, members must also believe that the condition that collective action can alter those conditions (Schock, 2005). Therefore in this section, contention is therefore understood here as grievance plus a potential for redressing the grievance. The specific form of government action shapes, there are the grievances that produce contention to begin in the first place and for conditions that develop feelings of deprivation, marginalization, and dissent. Groups experiencing these conditions may seek to influence how governments set their agendas, formulate and implement projects because these processes directly affect on lives of people on daily basis (Silva, 2018). But, the situation becomes more complex when the agenda is policy is shaped jointly by domestic and transnational actors. In this case, China's overbearing economic presence and federal government's poor handling of political situations in local levels, may undermine China's strategic and economic objectives as local opposition persists. the manner in which China had experienced resistance on local levels elsewhere for instance in Sri Lanka, she did not necessarily anticipate comparable resistance in Pakistan (Small, 2020). But with the emerging resistance by local fishing communities in Karachi Port, and a larger insurgent movement in Balochistan creates additional challenges for China with every new project.

Karachi Port's geographical and provincial context also shapes contention. Being in Balochistan province, largest by area, resource-rich yet economically marginalized. Balochistan has long contributed substantially to the overall economy of country (Ijaz, 2018). With CPEC, this economy is expected to double. But, continuing insurgency in Balochistan by Baloch separatist groups has represented a major challenge for

both Pakistan and China. A central and persistent grievance and dissent of the groups has been the state's expropriation of economy from the natural resources and limited reinvestment in the province. These grievances, together with and several other historical and political events, armed Baloch groups have contributed to armed movements seeking self-determination. In response to these movements, since 1958, there have been five military operations in the province by the central government. The most recent one in 2005, continues to the present day (Tariq, 2013). Although the port and other construction works have continued in Karachi Port since then, continuing insurgency in the province continues to shape the social and political dynamics of the region. Even when few of the projects have been allocated for Karachi Port including a coal-fire power-plant, expansion of roads and construction of railway lines, a hospital and special economic zones, fishing communities continue to express distinct grievances (Ijaz, 2018).

Participants reported that many proposed projects had not yet been implemented but and they anticipated significant problems even if implementation proceeded. These concerns include, displacement, relocation to places with no basic facilities (which has partially already taken place), ecological degradation, land erosion at the beaches affecting neighbourhoods (which has also been going on since, 2005) and loss of livelihood opportunities for local communities as the infrastructure work continues in the city. Despite these concerns, all the interviewees shared that the communities are not and did not oppose development in principle that would raise the living standards for people, but objected to development that excluded local residents from its benefits.

Amina Rasool Baksh, a senior leader of the women's wing of the fisher folk forum, a fisherwoman herself and a member of a local political party stated that there had not been any kind of an official assessment, that adequately considered community, environmental, or gender concerns prior to the port and other construction work.

"No one [from the officials] necessarily informed us [the fishing communities] about what they were going to do in Karachi Port. In the early days, we knew things were going change. We thought, our lives would become better, like the manner in which we see our Omani relatives living better lives, with the development they had. But that did not happen here. Displacement or construction close to our localities is not the worst

thing happened to us in the process, but depriving us of our livelihoods is. How we pictured development was not what we are made to see today." (Rasool Buksh, 2021)

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) strongly affirms that indigenous communities should receive adequate information before economic, political, or infrastructure development takes place in their regions. It also calls on states to establish effective mechanisms against actions that dispossess communities of their land, livelihoods, and local resources. Because women are among the more vulnerable groups within many indigenous populations, the declaration emphasizes the need for particular attention to their rights (UNDRIP, 2007). Pakistan is a signatory to UNDRIP; however, it has not formally recognized particular populations within its territory as indigenous. Although the Constitution uses the term "minority," this category is largely restricted to religious minorities rather than smaller local communities that have inhabited particular areas for generations and maintained long-standing livelihood practices (Cultural Survival, 2017).

Ayesha Baloch, one of the members of the fisher folk organization in Karachi Port describes fishing as more than an income source, but an identity and as a basis of identity and a distinctive way of life. "There are traditions of coastal communities that are different from other Balochs. We have our own songs, legends and stories. We [the women] keep these traditions going. But, with increasing uncertainties and 'developments', our legacy may not expand to the future generations" (Baloch, 2021).

All the interviewees shared the view that the fear of exclusion and a sense of deprivation has become widespread. "We no more trust the government, when even Karachi Port Development Authority (GDA) assures that the new master plan of Karachi Port includes developing fishing neighbourhoods and that water, education for children and adequate health care will be priorities of the next phases of development" (Baloch, 2021).

Since the establishment of Fisher folk forum, the fishing community has advanced several demands of fishing community but with particular emphasis on the recognition of the fishing communities as

indigenous to Karachi Port and being consulted before for any kind of changes. In 2018, as the East Express Way construction work began, members of the fisher folk forum formulated a renewed list of demands for the government authorities. This included, a 1500 x 800 metre breakwater to have their boats safely berthed, three underpass access points in three major fishing neighbourhoods, and no restrictions on accessing the bay with several other demands (Suleman, 2019).

5.2 Gendering Contention

Participants emphasized that although women share many of the demands advanced by men of the communities have put on the table, they also prioritize additional concerns that the women especially are more focused towards. These include educational opportunities for the children of the fishing communities especially for the girls who face limited opportunities, proper water facility in the neighbourhoods so women are not required to transport water from other neighbourhoods (collecting and carrying water is still meant to be women's responsibility) and adequate maternal health care. Most of these combined demands, they emphasise, if these commitments had been implemented rather than remaining on paper, many protests might have been avoided.

Examining these underlying causes of the contention and further gendering the contention in Karachi Port, provides a clearer picture of not only why people in the fishing communities protest but also why women also protest. The interviewees also confirmed that feelings of deprivation and fear of exclusion from development benefits from the development are intensifying not only among men but also among women of the community. But they also confirmed that their protests are frequently mischaracterized; either they may be portrayed as obstructing development by local administration and people are restricted to protesting in designated locations in the town or sometimes their protests are linked with the larger political conflict in Balochistan.

Najma Atta, leader of women's wing of Balochistan National Party and a member of Karachi Port Fisher Folk forum explains, "Fishing communities' protests do not represent the larger political movement in Balochistan. Instead, the larger Baloch movement might represent some of our issues as one of the many deprivations of province." She contends

that fisher folk, local political parties and the women's groups within frame their struggle around socioeconomic equality and their just rights.

The changing dynamics of the political contention in Karachi Port has also become increasingly significant. On 21st August 2021, a suicide bomb in the East Express Way construction site attacked a group of Chinese engineers, injuring nine of them and killing four children from the community playing at the site (Reuters, 2021). At the same time, on 27th of August 2021, the spokesperson of Karachi Port Fisher Folk Organization was arrested by the state forces. He has since then been missing. The organization and specially the women's wing had been protesting; (1) against security threats in their localities, (2) the death of their children in the blast (3) the enforced disappearance of one of their representatives (4) the socioeconomic deprivations and increasing concerns in the region with the CPEC developments (Sangar, 2021).

Participants interviewed before the attack spoke about Karachi Port Fisher Folk forum being only concerned with the fishing communities' concerns. But they also expressed concern that incidents involving with the state or with the foreign authorities in their neighbourhoods, local residents are often among the first to be blamed, even when they themselves are victims of the incidents. In this case, the four children killed belonged to the fishing community. However, few hours later of the attack, a separatist Baloch group, announced the responsibility of it (Aljazeera, 2021).

Before the attack, there were also several protests against illegal vessels and the manner in which they affect marine ecology (ANI, 2021). Najma Atta explains that their protests reflect deteriorating everyday conditions, "There used to be abundance of fish. Now there is hardly much left. The number of boats among the locals have certainly increased with the population but it has got worse since the large vessels first from Sindh [neighbouring province] and now from China have overtaken the sea."

Pakistan's constitution makes it clear that no vessels can enter the limit 12 nautical miles (22.22 kilometres) measured from the land to the territorial waters (MMF, 2016). However, illegal fishing by large vessels remains a major regional issue in the region.

Mahnaz Shafi, one of the leaders of the Women's Wing of the Fisher Folk Forum notes that local residents, there are often many restrictions on entering the bay now, but large vessels from elsewhere,

involved in illegal fishing remain a serious problem, and which continues to generate community protest.

“I have seen and have had many conversations with the women about the way they had been affected as the fisheries economy is declining because of the CPEC projects but also because of the illegal fishing. There is an assumption that women in our communities are financially dependent on their male family members, but that is not always true for all the women. And even if they do depend in many cases, there are certain tasks that they contribute to for the sustainability of the society and the local economy as a whole” (Mahnaz Shafi).

She further describes women's substantial contribution to the fisheries economy by making nets of different kinds with the type of net varying by fishing season of the kind of fishes especially in the suburban fishing neighbourhoods of Karachi Port. Several of these fish species have become increasingly scarce, like palwar, Talgoor, Pishik among many others. They also prepare “Chil” the oil used for polishing boats, from the bones and remains of certain kinds of fish Pagaash, Pittin, Pishikk. Now that local fisheries is declining with lower number of catches, more vessels and restrictions, many of these women now earn less from these activities. Many women also prepared food at home for sale to the fishermen who left for sea at dawn, now that is also becoming lesser popular.

Member of the fisher folk forum and a first generation educated women from the community, Aasia Anwar, argues that alternative sources of income are difficult to secure:

“little has been done to develop skills and educate people in our community so that people could start with something new that could go along the lines of new developments. There are very few exceptions though. When we wake up to hear heavy machinery just behind our homes, and have nothing to eat for days, and no opportunities to earn, the only thing we can do is to discuss our concerns and protest. Even for the lesser educated women among us, the meaning of development is

not that you would deprive local people of their only sources of income without offering an alternate” (Anwar, 2021).

Explaining why women protest requires attention to multiple overlapping conditions in complex realities, but looking at the dynamics of contentions in Karachi Port from the sources above, the evidence points to several interconnected motivations. As for the women, women participate in many broader community protests of the community demanding; (1) right to fish, (2) breakwater for boat's safety,

(3) underpasses for accessing the bay and (4) eradication of illegal fishing by vessels, (4) safety and security concerns in the region, (5) water and sanitation, (6) education and (7) proper health care facilities.

The community nevertheless remains socially traditional and strongly patriarchal and gender roles remain deeply embedded within the fisher folk forum as well as in the community. The data from the existing literature and interviewees reveal persistent inequalities in power, in terms of membership and leadership positions in local organizations and decision-making. To the growing contentions in the region and collective challenges to fishing communities, including women's voices and challenging social constraints will be necessary to strengthen the movement and taking it further (Torell et al., 2020).

5.3 Considering Political Opportunities

Contention emerges when citizens regard government decisions as unjust and respond through demonstrations, protests, petitions, boycotts, strikes, or riots (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). The political dimension is important because governments and state institutions possess authority over decisions within their territories and, in some cases, beyond them (Quaranta, 2017). In the Karachi Port context, both Pakistan and China exercise considerable institutional influence over development-related decisions. At the same time, protests by fishing communities demonstrate how citizens attempt to assert constitutional rights while facing pressure from two state actors and operating within a wider environment of regional insurgency (Hameed, 2018).

A central concept within of contentious politics is “political opportunity”

Political opportunity refers to forms of support or openings that enable protesting groups and political actors to sustain collective action, even when that support is informal or temporary (Tarrow, 1994). Such opportunities may facilitate mobilization while simultaneously exposing participants to

risks that arise from forces outside the movement itself (Giugni, 2009). In Karachi Port, these risks include attacks involving Chinese personnel, the deaths of local children, enforced disappearances of activists, and the possibility of police repression. Yet political openings can also provide important space for action. In multiparty systems, for example, opposition parties may adopt the concerns of marginalized groups when governing parties are politically vulnerable. This relationship can be mutually beneficial: communities gain access to material and nonmaterial resources, while opposition parties may expand their political support base (Murdie & Peksen, 2015).

Viterna and Fallon (2008) identify a similar pattern, noting that political parties and larger nonpolitical organizations can provide local movements with organizational assistance, material resources, and broader visibility. Participants in this study reported that support from major organizations was limited, although some local political parties and businesses occasionally assisted fishing-community protests. They also explained that such support rarely reaches the women's wing of the Fisher Folk Forum directly because women continue to hold few leadership and decision-making positions within the larger organization. Nevertheless, these resources can indirectly facilitate women's mobilization when protests are organized.

Najma Atta, as a member of the fisher folk forum as well as the women's leader for BNP in Karachi Port district, explained that to gather the community's women for the

protests, she relies on support from her political party. This support includes both financial and organizational resources:

"I would not say that my affiliation with BNP primarily influences the fishing communities' agenda or especially women's participation in the protests. Women and men of the fisher folk may be affiliated with different political parties and this in our case has been a positive move. Because through these affiliations, we have been able to sustain the organization and continue the protests (Atta, 2021)

Mahnaz Shafi, also a member of the same political party argues that the opposition party not support the protests which are mainly against the projects affecting the fishing communities but are largely the interest areas of the governing parties in the provincial and federal level. "This is how politics works anyway". Some of this support the struggle receives from BNP is also because from local council level to the elected provincial representative from Karachi Port, (although in the opposition) all belong to the same party.

Participants generally agreed that women's participation in the protests of fisher folk forum would have been far more difficult without some of the women were not affiliated with local political parties. They also confirmed that women from fisher folk who are members of parties, contribute to planning and coordinating events, campaigns, protests and call-for- action. On this point, scholars (e.g., Schock, 2005; Smith, 2001) similarly argue that along with financial support, nonviolent protests of this nature require particular organizational skills. Such skills may develop when some members especially the ones in the leadership positions are part of a larger entity either political or non-government organizations (NGOs). Nonviolent protest can involve learned practices and often develops with different affiliations with political parties and organisations or through education on protest tactics. Higher levels of education among members of a movement are therefore often considered to be a determinant of successful movements influencing political change. Over time, learning and training, can strengthen members' capacity to organize to resist the oppressors, when it is needed (Murdie & Peksen, 2015). Mahira Naeem, a local social activist and an educationalist explains:

"Most of the women from the fisher folk do not have a formal education or are members of any political party, it has therefore been more difficult to mobilise the women. But those very few of the women who help the larger fisher folk organise women's protests are often either connected with political parties or are from the younger generation and have some school education. The little education they have may help them in different way, but it is the training they receive as members of political parties that strengthens their position in community. It still requires time for more women to get into the process (Naeem, 2021).

A substantial literature on political opportunity identifies several conditions that shape contentious politics, including the openness or closure of institutions, the structure of the political system, the presence of political or elite allies, and the state's capacity for repression (McAdam, 1996). In the present case, the most relevant opportunities for women in Karachi Port are those that provide limited but usable channels of support and participation. First, opposition parties may support local struggles in

order to build alliances, while fishing communities—particularly women—may regard these parties as one of the few available support structures. Second, in a socially conservative setting with restricted opportunities for women’s public participation, membership in political parties and organizations may offer a comparatively legitimate and protected route into public life. Participants emphasized, however, that not every woman can access these opportunities. Those who do often view political participation as a serious and sensitive responsibility because their continued involvement depends partly on family acceptance.

6. Conclusion

This article began by asking how women are positioned within Karachi Port’s local struggles and political contention under CPEC and the BRI, and it concludes by returning to women’s narratives and first-hand experiences of contention, politics, and collective action. First, the article examined Karachi Port’s importance within CPEC and the forms of local activism that emerged as development-related concerns accumulated. More centrally, it explored how women in fishing communities are frequently rendered invisible in struggles for economic and social justice despite their active participation. Their knowledge and contributions remain weakly represented in scholarship and even less visible in policy debates. Recognition is also limited within fishing-community organizations themselves. During the early stages of the research, when I approached male members of the Fisher Folk Forum to establish contact with women participants, I was initially told that conversations with women might offer little value because “they [women] do not much contribute and have little to no knowledge of what actually happens at political and organizational levels”.

That response illustrates the limited recognition given to women’s political and organizational contributions. By the time this study was completed, however, a major citizens’ movement known as “Haq do Tehreeq,” or the “Give Rights Movement,” had emerged in Karachi Port. Women participated in large numbers, and one of the movement’s earliest rallies was led by women and described as an unprecedented gathering in the area. The movement’s demands reflected concerns that fishing communities had raised for years: unrestricted access to fishing grounds, development policies that extend beyond physical infrastructure, and greater emphasis on human development through adequate healthcare, education, electricity, water supply, and other basic services. The movement was led at the time by Maulana Hidayat Ur Rehman, who was also associated with a religious political party in Balochistan. This political connection generated some suspicion; nevertheless, the visible and largely voluntary participation of local citizens—particularly women—demonstrated broad support for the movement’s stated demands.

Reflecting on these developments also required careful consideration of my own position as a woman from the same locality. Conducting and writing the study involved examining my prior knowledge of the issue and creating sufficient analytical distance to document participants’ accounts responsibly. Recording women’s experiences of inequality—whether produced by patriarchal social relations or by large-scale development that restricts economic opportunity and social recognition—carried a strong sense of responsibility. During interviews, some participants expected me to express support for their activism. As a social-science researcher, however, I recognize that this study cannot resolve the crises faced by women in one of the region’s most vulnerable communities. What it can do is document their accounts in a way that may encourage greater attention to their experiences in future scholarship and policy discussions.

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