



Power from the Margins: The Politics of Community Trust

Authored by Sofia Amir, and Dr. Ayesha Khan

“

Agency-less,
voiceless,
dependent



Agency-less, voiceless, dependent, these are terms frequently used when describing urban poor women in Pakistan. A language that assumes that power is only driven from formal authority – legally sanctioned, institutionally recognized, and visible. Through culture, institutions, and religion, men hold that power. In informal settlements, even this authority is often partial, inconsistent, or extractive, creating space for informal authority based on trust, proximity, and lived accountability. Women understand this subconsciously from their households to the communities that hold their lives. Their lived experience is built from an often-overlooked source: experience and the consequences that are both witnessed and felt.

Building Trust Cautiously

Across South Asia, ethnographic work shows that women are acutely aware of who governs their daily lives, not in theory, but in practice. In Kaula Bandar, an informal settlement in India, women often distinguish between symbolic leaders and functional ones. Rarely included in formal representations, they must form invisible networks with other women neighbors (and their male members) who act as first responders during illness, accidents, or eviction threats.

This distinction matters. Men may engage in politics and livelihood generation, but women play the role of holding it together, from forming relationships with other families, cautiously nudging their households who refuse to educate their girls to try out the local school, validating the human side of sudden evictions, and even preventing the domestic violence from escalating in their neighbor's home. This informally structured influence is continuous, insidious, and holds little recognition.



“
blind trust
runs the risk
of betrayal

Neha, a young mother of two, has lived in Dhoke Hassu for five years. In that time, she has learned the unspoken rules of survival: which neighbors can be trusted to watch her children, which shopkeepers will not exploit her illiteracy, which neighbor's husband is kind enough to intervene and pacify her husband when he goes into a rage. The young boy three doors down, who helped with her heavy shopping bag. The elderly woman next door who lent 300 rupees for a crucial iron repair.

These networks are not just informal. They are hard won, slowly nurtured in environments where resources are meager, and trust can be a double-edged sword. In Kaula Bandar, Mumbai, trust is constructed by reciprocity and careful watching. Women invest in small, reliable circles because blind trust runs the risk of betrayal. Women remember who helped and who exploited vulnerability. Trust is constantly re-assessed and recalibrated, a tangible commodity in the informal systems.

Reaching the Informal Power Dynamics

Across Pakistan, a clear pattern emerges. In wider society, and its various community pockets, where rules are elite-leaning, women construct their own sub-governance systems in parallel to vague formal ones. During crises such as gender-based violence, evictions, illness, or service breakdowns, women lean on these informal systems of carefully curated men and women. They know who can broker with the police, which NGO worker follows through, and which landlord can be reasoned with for a few more days of reprieve. In Dhoke Hassu, women may not sit on committees, but they form their own closed circles where knowledge moves quietly,

shaping collective decisions about whom to approach, whom to avoid, and when silence is safer than protest.

As such, in informal settlements, policies need to move to local engagement. Along with elected representatives, registered committees, and official intermediaries, policymakers need to create avenues for women to enter from the invisible space into the formal power dynamics. If urban planners aim to reach the most marginalized, it must start with listening to the whispers of those who already know how to keep the wheels moving forward and are not just passive recipients of their circumstances, but active pursuers of change.

Follow along for more.