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Original Article

Empowering women through education and employment opportunities: a cross-sectional study in urban Pakistan.

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Abstract

Background: The intersection of education, employment, and empowerment remains underexplored in Pakistan, particularly in urban settings where opportunities for women are relatively higher but still constrained by systemic challenges. This study explored the relationship between education and employment opportunities in fostering women's empowerment in urban Pakistan.

Methodology: A cross-sectional study was conducted to survey 400 women from Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad to assess empowerment levels. Data collected through structured questionnaires focused on education, employment, and decision-making autonomy.

Results: The results highlighted the diversity of the sample, showing that 40% of participants were aged 26–35 years, 65% were married, and 40% had attained secondary education. A majority belonged to middle SES (45%), and 55% were unemployed. A significant positive association was shown between women holding tertiary education and higher levels of decision-making autonomy (65%), financial independence (75%), and awareness of legal rights (80%). The results underscore the importance of employment as a driver of empowerment, with all reported differences being statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). The results indicated that tertiary education ($OR=2.8$, $p<0.001$), employment ($OR=2.5$, $p<0.001$), and higher socioeconomic status ($OR=2.2$, $p<0.001$) significantly contribute to women's empowerment.

Conclusion: The results indicated that higher education and employment significantly enhance women's roles in household and societal decision-making. The findings emphasize the need for targeted interventions to reduce gender disparities in education and employment.

Keywords

Empowerment, Women Education, Employment, Pakistan.

Introduction

Women's empowerment is a crucial factor in achieving gender equality, fostering economic growth, and driving sustainable development globally. Empowerment involves enabling women to make informed choices and exercise their rights, participate actively in decision-making processes, and gain access to opportunities that allow them to reach their full potential¹. Despite progress in various countries, gender disparities persist, particularly in developing nations, where traditional patriarchal norms often restrict women's autonomy and participation in social, economic, and political spheres².

In Pakistan, the situation is no different. Women constitute nearly half of the population but face significant barriers to accessing education, employment, healthcare, and other essential services³. Cultural norms, societal expectations, and structural inequalities have historically marginalized women, limiting their contributions to the nation's development. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2024, Pakistan ranks among the lowest in terms of gender equality, with significant disparities in economic participation, educational attainment, and political empowerment⁴.

Education and employment are widely recognized as transformative tools for women's empowerment⁵. Education equips women with knowledge and skills, fosters critical thinking, and boosts their confidence to challenge societal norms. Similarly, employment provides financial independence, enhances decision-making autonomy, and broadens social networks⁶. Studies show that educated and employed women are more likely to participate in household decisions, invest in their children's education, and contribute to community development^{7,8}.

However, the intersection of education, employment, and empowerment remains underexplored in Pakistan, particularly in urban settings where opportunities for women are relatively higher but still constrained by systemic challenges⁹. Addressing this gap, this study aimed to assess the impact of education and employment

on women's empowerment in urban Pakistan, focusing on key indicators such as decision-making autonomy, financial independence, and awareness of legal rights.

By identifying the barriers and enablers of empowerment, this research seeks to inform policymakers, educators, and civil society organizations to design effective interventions. The findings aim to contribute to ongoing efforts to bridge the gender gap and create a more inclusive society where women can thrive as equal stakeholders.

Methodology

Study Design

This study was designed as a cross-sectional investigation to examine the relationship between education, employment, and women's empowerment in urban Pakistan. A cross-sectional design was chosen because it allows for the collection of data at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of the factors associated with empowerment. The study was conducted over four months, from July to October 2024, enabling the researchers to gather comprehensive data within a defined timeframe and population. This approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of the associations between education, employment, and empowerment in a diverse urban context.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Malir University of Science and Technology under approval number MU-IRB/14062024/009, dated June 20, 2024. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, with data securely stored and only accessible to the research team.

Setting

The study was conducted in three major urban centers of Pakistan: Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad.

These cities were selected due to their diverse socio-economic and cultural profiles, as well as their higher concentrations of employed and unemployed women. The urban setting allowed the researchers to capture the experiences of women from various backgrounds in terms of education and employment opportunities, thereby ensuring a robust analysis of empowerment dynamics within urban Pakistan.

Participants

The target population consisted of women aged 18 to 50 years residing in Karachi, Lahore, or Islamabad. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across different educational levels, employment statuses, and socioeconomic strata. Women were divided into strata based on educational attainment (primary, secondary, or tertiary), employment status (employed or unemployed), and socioeconomic status (low, middle, or high). Participants were randomly selected from each stratum to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Inclusion criteria required participants to be residents of the selected cities, capable of understanding and responding to survey questions in Urdu or English, and willing to provide informed consent. Women who resided outside the selected urban centers, could not communicate effectively in Urdu or English, or declined to participate were excluded from the study. The final sample included 400 women, with the sample size calculated to ensure a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and sufficient statistical power to detect significant associations.

Variables

The study examined the relationship between education, employment, and women's empowerment. Independent variables included education level, employment status, and socioeconomic status, while the dependent variable was empowerment. Empowerment was assessed through indicators such as decision-making autonomy, financial independence, and awareness of legal rights.

Data Sources/Measurement

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire developed on Google Forms. The questionnaire was available in both Urdu and English to accommodate participants with varying language preferences. It comprised four sections: demographic information, education and employment details, empowerment indicators, and social and political participation. Demographic questions covered age, marital status, education level, socioeconomic status, occupation, and monthly income. Questions related to education and employment focused on the highest level of education completed, employment status, and type of occupation. Empowerment indicators were measured using a Likert scale, with responses capturing decision-making autonomy, financial independence, and awareness of rights. Social and political participation was assessed through questions about voting, involvement in community activities, and engagement in social or political organizations.

The questionnaire included an introductory section outlining the study's purpose and ensuring informed consent, with participants required to check a consent box before proceeding. The survey link was disseminated through social media platforms and professional networks, while QR code flyers were distributed in workplaces, community centers, and educational institutions in the three cities. Responses were screened for eligibility at the beginning of the questionnaire, and incomplete or duplicate responses were removed during the data-cleaning process. To enhance response rates, reminders were sent through social media and email.

Bias

Efforts were made to minimize bias throughout the study. Stratified random sampling ensured a proportional representation of different demographic groups, reducing selection bias. Online data collection helped minimize interviewer bias and allowed participants to respond in a private and convenient setting, potentially improving the accuracy of responses. A pilot study was conducted with 30 women from Karachi to evaluate the clarity,

relevance, and cultural appropriateness of the questionnaire. Feedback from the pilot study led to minor adjustments in the wording of questions to improve comprehension and applicability to the target population.

Study Size

The study included 400 participants, with the sample size calculated based on an expected population proportion of 50%, a confidence level of 95%, and a margin of error of 5%. This sample size was deemed sufficient to provide reliable and generalizable findings for the population under study.

Statistical Methods

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 25.0. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants and the key study variables. Chi-square tests were conducted to evaluate associations between categorical variables, such as education level, employment status, and empowerment indicators. Logistic regression analysis was used to assess the effects of education, employment, and socioeconomic status on overall empowerment while controlling for potential confounding variables. Odds ratios (OR) and 95% confidence intervals (CI) were reported to interpret the strength and significance of associations. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results

Participants

The study analyzed data from 400 women residing in Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad. Among the participants, 40% were aged 26–35 years, 65% were married, and 40% had attained secondary education. Regarding socioeconomic status (SES), 45% of participants were categorized as middle SES, and the majority (55%) were unemployed. These demographic characteristics provided a diverse sample representing a broad range of educational, occupational, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Table 1).

Descriptive Data

The sample demonstrated a varied representation across age, marital status, education, occupation, and income levels. About 30% of participants were aged 18–25 years, while 30% were between 36–50 years. Primary and tertiary education levels were equally represented (30% each), with the largest group having secondary education (40%). In terms of income, 45% of participants reported earning between PKR 20,000 and 50,000 per month. These data illustrate the heterogeneity within the urban female population in Pakistan, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the relationships between education, employment, and empowerment.

Outcome Data

Responses to empowerment indicators revealed key insights into decision-making autonomy, financial independence, legal rights awareness, and social participation. Regarding decision-making autonomy, 70% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had a role in household decision-making, while 50% reported involvement in decisions about their children's education. Financial independence was moderate, with 56% of women expressing confidence in financial decision-making, though only 40% had consistent access to personal savings or income. Awareness of legal rights was limited; less than 50% of participants were aware of their rights related to property inheritance or workplace protections. Social and political participation remained low, with only 30% actively engaging in addressing local issues and 25% participating in community organizations. However, 70% reported voting in elections, reflecting higher participation in formal political processes (Table 2).

Main Results

The results highlighted significant associations between education, employment, and women's empowerment. Women with tertiary education displayed higher levels of empowerment compared to those with primary or secondary education. Specifically, 65% of women with tertiary education reported decision-making autonomy, 75% demonstrated financial independence, and 80% expressed awareness of legal rights. These

differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) (Table 3).

Employment emerged as another critical factor. Employed women exhibited significantly higher levels of decision-making autonomy (70%), financial independence (70%), and awareness of rights (65%) compared to unemployed participants. These findings underscore the role of employment as a major contributor to women's empowerment, with all observed differences being statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) (Table 3).

Logistic regression analysis further supported these results. Tertiary education ($OR = 2.8, p < 0.001$), employment ($OR = 2.5, p < 0.001$), and higher socioeconomic status ($OR = 2.2, p < 0.001$) were significant predictors of overall empowerment. Women with secondary education also demonstrated higher odds of empowerment compared to those with primary education ($OR = 1.8, p < 0.01$). Employment status and higher SES consistently showed strong associations with empowerment indicators, highlighting their importance as policy targets for fostering women's empowerment in urban Pakistan (Table 4).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n=400).

Variables	N(%)
Age (years)	18–25
	120(30.0)
	26–35
	160(40.0)
	36–50
	120(30.0)
Marital Status	Married
	260(65.0)
	Single
	110(27.5)
	Widowed/Divorced
	30(7.5)
Educational Level	Primary
	120(30.0)
	Secondary
	160(40.0)
	Tertiary
	120(30.0)
Socioeconomic Status	Low
	150(37.5)
	Middle
	180(45.0)
	High
	70(17.5)
Occupation	Employed
	180(45.0)
	Unemployed
	220(55.0)
Monthly Income (PKR)	<20,000
	150(37.5)
	20,000–50,000
	180(45.0)
	>50,000
	70(17.5)

Table 2: Responses to Empowerment Indicators (n=400).

Questionnaire Section	Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Decision-Making Autonomy	I decide on major household purchases.	20(5)	40(10)	60(15)	18(45)	100(25)
	I decide on my children's education (if applicable).	48(12)	72(18)	80(20)	120(30)	80(20)
	I participate in family decision-making processes.	40(10)	80(20)	100(25)	120(30)	60(15)
Financial Independence	I can manage my finances independently.	36(9)	60(15)	80(20)	140(35)	84(21)

Awareness of Legal Rights	I have access to personal savings or income.	60(15)	80(20)	100(25)	100(25)	60(15)
	I feel confident making financial decisions.	72(18)	88(22)	80(20)	100(25)	60(15)
	I am aware of my legal rights related to marriage and divorce.	40(10)	60(15)	80(20)	140(35)	80(20)
	I am aware of my property inheritance rights.	80(20)	100(25)	80(20)	100(25)	40(10)
	I understand my workplace rights (if employed).	60(15)	60(15)	80(20)	120(30)	80(20)
Social and Political Participation	I participate in local community organizations or groups.	100(25)	80(20)	100(25)	80(20)	40(10)
	I exercise my right to vote in elections.	20(5)	40(10)	60(15)	180(45)	100(25)
	I actively engage in addressing local issues.	48(12)	72(18)	80(20)	120(30)	80(20)

Table 3: Empowerment Indicators by Educational Level, Employment Status & Socioeconomic Status.

Variables		Decision-Making Autonomy	Financial Independence	Awareness of Rights	p-value
Educational Level	Primary	30(15)	20(10)	25(12.5)	<0.001*
	Secondary	80(40)	60(30)	70(35)	
	Tertiary	130(65)	150(75)	160(80)	
Employment Status	Employed	140(70)	140(70)	130(65)	<0.001*
	Unemployed	100(45)	60(30)	70(35)	
Socio-economic Status (SES) level	Low SES	50(25)	30(15)	40(20)	<0.001*
	Middle SES	90(45)	80(40)	85(42.5)	
	High SES	100(50)	120(60)	130(65)	

*p<0.05 is considered statistically significant.

Table 4: Logistic Regression Results for Empowerment Indicators.

Variables	Odds Ratio (OR)	95% Confidence Interval (CI)	p-value
Education			
Primary	Ref		
Secondary	1.8	1.2–2.5	<0.01*
Tertiary	2.8	1.8–4.3	<0.001*
Employment			
Unemployed	Ref		
Employed	2.5	1.6–3.9	<0.001*
Socioeconomic Status			
Low	Ref		

Middle	1.5	1.1–2.1	0.02*
High	2.2	1.5–3.3	<0.001*

Discussion

This study highlights the significant role of education and employment in fostering women's empowerment in urban Pakistan. The results demonstrate that tertiary education and employment are strongly associated with key empowerment indicators, including decision-making autonomy, financial independence, and awareness of legal rights. These findings align with global evidence suggesting that higher education and economic participation are critical pathways to gender equality and empowerment^{8, 10-13}.

The study revealed that women with tertiary education reported higher levels of decision-making autonomy (65%), financial independence (75%), and awareness of rights (80%) compared to those with primary education. These results are consistent with national studies which found that women with advanced education were more likely to participate in household and societal decision-making processes¹⁴⁻¹⁶. Internationally, similar findings were reported in a study conducted in Bangladesh, where tertiary education was linked to increased confidence and reduced dependence on male family members¹⁷.

The transformative role of education stems from its ability to challenge traditional gender roles, enhance self-esteem, and open avenues for professional and personal growth. However, in Pakistan, systemic barriers such as inadequate access to higher education, early marriages, and societal norms often prevent women from pursuing tertiary education¹⁸. Policymakers must address these challenges by providing scholarships, promoting gender-sensitive curriculums, and creating safe educational environments for women.

Employment was another critical factor influencing women's empowerment. Employed women in the study reported significantly higher levels of financial independence (70%) and decision-making autonomy (70%) than their unemployed

counterparts. These findings are corroborated by research conducted in Bangladesh and Indonesia, where women's participation in the labor force was associated with enhanced autonomy and reduced gender inequalities within households^{17,19,20}.

Employment empowers women by providing them with financial resources, expanding their social networks, and enhancing their negotiation power within families¹⁷⁻²⁰. However, in Pakistan, women's workforce participation remains low²¹, particularly in urban areas where gender biases, workplace harassment, and limited maternity support hinder professional growth¹⁸. Addressing these challenges requires implementing workplace policies that promote gender equality, including flexible working hours, childcare facilities, and strict measures against harassment.

The study found that higher SES was significantly associated with empowerment indicators. Women from higher SES backgrounds had greater financial independence and decision-making autonomy compared to those from low SES backgrounds. This finding is consistent with global trends, as evidenced by studies in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, where socioeconomic advantages were linked to better access to resources and greater empowerment levels²²⁻²⁵.

However, reliance on socioeconomic status as a determinant of empowerment underscores the inequities that exist within societies^{22,23}. Women from lower-income households often face compounded disadvantages, including limited access to education and employment opportunities^{18,22,25}. Targeted interventions, such as microfinance initiatives and vocational training programs, can help bridge this gap and empower women from economically marginalized communities.

The findings of this study have important implications for policymakers and stakeholders aiming to promote gender equality in Pakistan.

Investments in education, particularly at the tertiary level, are essential to equipping women with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate societal and professional challenges. Similarly, creating inclusive workplaces with gender-sensitive policies can significantly enhance women's workforce participation and financial independence.

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to capture the dynamic nature of empowerment and explore the interplay of additional factors, such as technology access and political participation. Additionally, efforts should be made to include rural populations in similar studies to gain a more comprehensive understanding of empowerment across diverse settings in Pakistan.

Conclusion

In summary, this study reaffirms the critical role of education and employment in empowering women and highlights the systemic challenges that need to be addressed. While the results align with global evidence, the unique cultural and structural barriers faced by women in Pakistan require targeted, context-specific interventions. Empowering women through education and employment not only improves their lives but also contributes to the socioeconomic development of the country, paving the way for a more equitable society. Empowering women through education and employment is vital for societal progress. This study reaffirms that higher education and meaningful employment significantly enhance women's autonomy and societal roles. Policymakers must prioritize initiatives to ensure equitable access to education and employment for urban women, paving the way for gender equality in Pakistan.

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