

Farida Yaseenzai<sup>1</sup>, Abdul Ahad<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Zarina Akhtar<sup>3</sup>**Abstract**

Pakistan, with a population of nearly 227 million people, stands in the fifth position among the world's most populous countries. This population is relatively evenly distributed between genders, with 49.2 percent being female and 50.8 percent male. According to estimates for the year 2023, Pakistan's population is anticipated to have grown to approximately 240,485,658 individuals. This number reflects Pakistan's representation at 2.99 percent of the total global population, firmly solidifying its rank among the top countries and their dependencies by population. In Pakistan, women make up approximately 49.2% of the total population. However, when we assess the current status of Pakistani women in comparison to women in other countries worldwide, it becomes evident that the situation is far from satisfactory and often falls into the category of one of the most challenging scenarios. Pakistani women often encounter a multitude of barriers on their path to success, including illiteracy, domestic violence, a lack of motivation and support, and various other obstacles. Pakistan remains a society where male dominance prevails, and achieving gender equality is crucial for the nation's overall development. Empowering women, particularly through higher education, plays a pivotal role in achieving this objective.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Higher Education

**1. Introduction**

Empowerment for women extends beyond mere dependence. It is a misconception to equate empowerment solely with a high level of education and employment. True empowerment requires women to awaken from complacency and grasp its profound meaning. It is crucial to recognize that empowering women encompasses not only technical proficiency but also acknowledges their inherent rationality, intelligence, and capacity for independent thought. Throughout history, women were often subjected to various forms of inequality compared to men. They were denied fundamental rights such as voting, property ownership, and access to various professions. This state of affairs persisted due to deep-seated cultural and traditional norms. Women exhibited patience not only for the sake of society and their children but also because they lacked the confidence to live independently and confront life's challenges.

It is imperative for women to awaken from this slumber and comprehend the genuine essence of empowerment. In contemporary times, as we emerge from those historical constraints, women now enjoy increased empowerment, granting them the freedom to shape their destinies, pursue careers, participate in the democratic process, and engage in any activity traditionally associated with men. The Oxford American Dictionary defines "empowerment" as the process of strengthening and instilling confidence in an individual, particularly in terms of controlling one's life and asserting one's rights. When discussing women's empowerment, we emphasize women assuming leadership roles, a significant shift from their historical subordination.

**1.1. Women Empowerment**

The absence of a democratic framework has hindered progress in advancing women's empowerment, particularly in South Asia. In regions ruled by authoritarian regimes that promote gender subordination and male dominance, women's empowerment movements have struggled to gain traction. In South Asia, the primary focus has been on creating opportunities and providing essential services, rather than on attaining political influence.

This approach has sometimes oversimplified the issues of gender discrimination and male dominance, primarily addressing obvious oppressive practices like domestic violence and dowry demands. For women's empowerment to have a lasting impact, it must encompass a process of raising awareness and challenging the deeply ingrained social constructs that subordinate women in various spheres, be it within the family, in terms of class, caste, religion, or society. Three experimental approaches to empowerment have been explored in South Asia: integrated development, economic empowerment, and consciousness raising. Consciousness raising efforts have involved awareness groups and educational initiatives that aim to foster a new level of awareness, self-esteem, societal and gender analysis, and provide access to valuable skills and information.

Economic empowerment strategies have revolved around enhancing women's control over economic resources and bolstering their financial security. Initiatives like Gramin Bank have organized women around savings and credit, income generation, and skill development activities.

Integrated development approaches have encouraged the formation of women's collectives, fostering their participation in community development and the resolution of social problems. Specialized activity groups have emerged as a means of mobilizing women.

It's important to note that no single approach guarantees success. Identifying the most marginalized and impoverished women in a given region has often served as a starting point for meaningful action. These efforts have also encouraged women to find dedicated time and space for themselves. The three aforementioned approaches are grounded in different assumptions regarding the root causes of women's disempowerment, including poverty and limited resource access, economic vulnerability, and subordination within patriarchal societies, as well as socioeconomic disparities.

**1.2. Higher Education**

Higher education encompasses a comprehensive body of organized knowledge and applied competencies that enable the resolution of both theoretical and practical challenges through specialized instruction. It involves the adept utilization and innovative advancement of contemporary breakthroughs in the realms of science, technology, and culture. The expression "higher education" is likewise employed to describe the instruction provided at various types of tertiary institutions, which cater to individuals who have satisfactorily completed their secondary general-education or specialized-education programs. These

<sup>1</sup> Department of Education, International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan, [farahhameed222@gmail.com](mailto:farahhameed222@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> University of Balochistan, Pakistan, [ahad\\_khan41@gmail.com](mailto:ahad_khan41@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan, [zarina.akhtar@iiu.edu.pk](mailto:zarina.akhtar@iiu.edu.pk)

institutions primarily focus on cultivating highly skilled professionals in areas such as economics, science, technology, and culture.

### **1.3. Objectives**

This research paper sets out to achieve the following key objectives:

- To ascertain the significance of higher education in the lives of women.
- To assess the imperative nature of women's empowerment.
- To pinpoint the obstacles that impede the progress of women's empowerment.
- To scrutinize the influence of women's empowerment on a nation's overall development.

### **1.4. Research Methodology**

This research paper adopts a predominantly descriptive and analytical approach. Its primary focus is to analyze the critical role of higher education for women in Pakistan. The data utilized is exclusively drawn from secondary sources, tailored to the specific requirements of this study.

## **2. Literature Review**

Duflo, E. (2011). *Women's Empowerment and Economic Development*. National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge.

Sethuraman, K. (2008). *The Role of Women's Empowerment and Domestic Violence in Child Growth and Undernutrition in a Tribal and Rural Community in South India*. Research Paper No. 2008/15, United Nations University.

Doepke, M., Tertilt, M. (2011). Does Female Empowerment Promote Economic Development? *International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies (IJIMS)*, 2014, Vol 1, No.5, 18-22.

Kingdom, G.G. (2002). *Education of Women and Socio-Economic Development. Reason and Revaluation: Studies in the Babi and Baha'i Religions*, Volume 13, Los Angeles: Kalimat Press.

Frenette, M., Coulombe, S. (2007). *Has Higher Education among Young Women Substantially Reduced the Gender Gap in Employment and Earnings?* Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series, Canada.

### **2.1. Women Empowerment in Pakistan**

In South Asia, Pakistan has the widest gender gap and discrimination against women at all levels persists. Although the world has achieved some progress towards gender equality and women empowerment, still a huge gap is persisting as reveals in the UN's working report conducted during 2018, which ranked Pakistan at 148th among 149th in terms of women's empowerment, having closed to 55% of overall gender gap (Batoool et al., 2021). In Pakistan, women's value in society is strongly affected by socio-cultural norms and values. Although, in the whole country the male dominating society is not constant, however generally society is male dominating. The damage of legal laws is well-known and the gender gap is deeply rooted. Men are more inclined to hold the power while women are unpleasantly affected in all scopes of life (Malik & Courtney, 2011; Madhani, 2007).

According to the book written by Anatol Lieven titled: 'Pakistan a Hard Country' depicted that Pakistan is a diverse country based on a male ruling culture where people value their culture more with cultural roots that cover the social, economic, and political discrimination for women. Therefore, they are deprived of their fundamental and constitutional rights due to their low level of education, illogical cultural norms, and performances (Sandhu, 2020).

The most important obstacle that Pakistan faces is that of its low standard in numerous global guides about the elimination gender gap and empowering women. Despite the low international and even regional ranking of the country, 72% women are contributing to household, food, security, through agriculture activities and similarly 22.53% in the overall civilian labour force in Pakistan (Habib et al., 2019). Their contribution to educational and economic activities is being undermined and unrecognized and therefore paid less and minimum wages to a considerable extent. The overall female literacy rate in Pakistan is 48%, and province wise the female literacy rate is as Punjab 54%; Sind 44; in KPK 36%; and in Balochistan 24% which is the lowest among all provinces (Naz et al., 2020). The province of Balochistan stands poorly against all the available educational facilities in general and the literacy rate in particular. The shortage of women's educational institutions is one of the key challenges for thousands of girls who remain illiterate their whole lives (Hassan, 2020; UNPO, 2020).

## **3. Need for Women's Empowerment**

Empowerment encompasses a comprehensive set of capabilities, including decision-making power, access to information and resources, a range of choices, the ability to assert oneself in collective decision-making, positive thinking about the capacity for change, skill development, and the ability to influence perceptions democratically. It involves active participation in ongoing, self-initiated growth and change, an increase in positive self-image, and overcoming societal stigma. Hence, the need for women's empowerment becomes apparent.

## **4. Relationship Between Higher Education and Women's Empowerment**

Higher education plays a pivotal role in elevating women's status, regardless of their contributions to family income. It positions women on par with men, breaking free from societal suppression. Education empowers women by instilling essential attributes in them:

1. Confidence enhancement
2. Heightened status in family and society
3. Strengthening women's self-worth
4. Affirming their right to make choices
5. Ensuring access to opportunities and resources
6. Amplifying their capacity to influence social change
7. Raising awareness about their rights
8. Boosting self-esteem
9. Increasing self-efficacy
10. Reducing dependency
11. Enhancing child-rearing practices
12. Promoting mobility

### 13. Opening up career opportunities

Increased knowledge, self-confidence, and awareness of gender equity, critical components of empowerment, are often cultivated through higher education.

Educated and employed women enjoy a more favorable position in society compared to their uneducated counterparts. This transformational role of education in the lives of women is widely recognized.

#### Challenges to Women's Empowerment and Higher Education

Several hindrances impede women's empowerment and access to higher education. These barriers include:

- Lack of access to education
- Financial constraints
- Family responsibilities
- Limited mobility
- Risk aversion
- Low need for achievement
- Absence of ambitions for achievement
- Social status

These challenges underscore the importance of addressing and overcoming obstacles to women's empowerment and education.

### 5. Status of Women in Pakistani Society

The status of women in Pakistan is profoundly influenced by factors such as class and regional disparities, which are closely tied to the unequal distribution of socioeconomic development. Additionally, entrenched patriarchal norms and cultural traditions have played a significant role in shaping the status of women in the country. The struggle for gender equality and the reduction of socioeconomic disparities in Pakistan has been ongoing since the inception of the nation. An influential figure, Fatima Jinnah, took pioneering steps by establishing women's organizations to address the pervasive inequities faced by women. However, despite such efforts, Pakistan continues to grapple with a stark reality, one that not only underscores the disadvantaged position of women but also reflects the overall developmental challenges faced by the nation.

Of particular concern is the persistently low literacy rate among women in Pakistan, currently standing at 45%, which remains the lowest in the region. Furthermore, the healthcare system exhibits gender-based disparities, with inadequate healthcare facilities for women. The employment rate for women in the country hovers around 48%, a figure that falls short of aligning with the development benchmarks of a nation.

While Pakistan's constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination, numerous issues persist that perpetuate gender inequality. Laws related to honor killings, domestic violence, and electronic crimes remain inadequately addressed. These unresolved issues not only hinder the country's developmental progress but also deter foreign direct investment. For research purposes, this situation highlights the multifaceted challenges and complexities that shape the status of women in Pakistan, necessitating a more comprehensive and nuanced examination of these issues.

### 6. Conclusion

In light of the comprehensive analysis conducted above, it is evident that empowering women through higher education is an imperative necessity. The study underscores that while literacy is undoubtedly a crucial foundation, it alone does not suffice. Women's education must extend beyond basic literacy to equip them with the knowledge of their rights and responsibilities, enabling them to exercise those rights effectively. Furthermore, effective implementation of policies and programs designed to foster women's empowerment, as established by the government of Pakistan, is equally indispensable. This conclusion reinforces the vital role of education in fostering gender equality and underscores the critical importance of translating policies into meaningful actions for the empowerment of women in Pakistan.

### References

- Sharma, R. (2014). Women Empowerment Through Higher Education. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies (IJIMS)*, 1(5), 18-22.
- Mammen, K., & Paxson, C. (2000). Women's work and economic development. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 14(4), 141-164.
- Batliwala, S. (1994). The Meaning of Women's Empowerment: New Concepts from Action. In G. Sen, A. Germain, & L. Chen (Eds.), *Population Policies Reconsidered. Health, Empowerment and Rights* (pp. 127-138). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Mamoon, D. (2006). Women's Empowerment through Education. *SDPI Research and News Bulletin*, 13(2 & 3), March-June 2006.
- Maslak, M. A., & Singhal, G. (2008). The identity of educated women in India: Confluence or divergence. *Gender and Education*, 20(5), 481-493.
- Stein, J. (1997). *Empowerment and Women Health: Theory, Method and Practice*. London: Zed Books.
- Verma, J. (2006). *Gender, Girls and Women Education*. New Delhi: Murari Lal & Sons.
- Gulati, S. (2006). *Women Education in the 21st Century*. Jaipur: ABD Publishers.
- Hall, C. (1990). *Women and Identity: Values Choices in a Changing World*. New York: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation.
- Hashemi, S., Schuler, M., & Riley, A. (1996). Rural Credit Programs and Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh. *World Development*, 24(4), 635-653.
- Heyzer, N. (2005). Making the links: women's rights and empowerment are key to achieving the millennium development goals 1. *Gender & Development*, 13(1), 9-12.
- Jehan, R. (1991). *The Elusive Agenda: Mainstreaming women in development*. London: Zed Books.
- Duflo, E. (2011). *Women's Empowerment and Economic Development*. National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge.