

Role of Higher Education in Personal, Relational, and Environmental Empowerment of Women in Balochistan

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Abstract

This study explored the role of higher education in empowering Balochistani women at personal, relational, and environmental levels. It examined how education influenced women's decision-making power, autonomy, political participation, financial independence, and involvement in household decisions. The research also investigated the barriers that still confined educated women to the domestic sphere despite their education. Data were collected from employed and unemployed women across three divisions in Balochistan—Quetta, Loralai, and Kalat—focusing on graduates from 2011–2020. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. The findings highlighted the transformative impact of education on women's economic agency and underscored the importance of promoting educational opportunities for empowerment. This research provided valuable insights for stakeholders aiming to address the challenges faced by educated women in Balochistan.

Keywords: Higher Education, Women Empowerment, Personal Empowerment, Relational Empowerment, Environmental Empowerment

Introduction

Empowerment, encompassing social, economic, psychological, and political aspects, enabled women to transform structures and contribute to decisions affecting their lives (Paterson, 2018; Pettit, 2012; Suja, 2012). While higher education was believed to elevate women's status, Balochistani women could only pursue it with male approval, significantly impacting their autonomy and opportunities (Graham, 2018; Yousefy & Baratali, 2011). Despite policies aimed at improving gender equality, Pakistan, particularly Balochistan, remained one of the least empowered regions globally, with deep-seated cultural norms restricting women's roles to the domestic sphere (Abbas et al., 2021; World Bank, 2019). This study emphasized the need for equal educational opportunities to empower Balochistani women and address these disparities.

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Statement of the Problem

Women's empowerment through education varied by context, and Balochistan presented a unique case. Women in Balochistan faced adverse socio-economic conditions, limiting their mobility, decision-making power, and access to financial resources due to patriarchal and cultural norms. Although 73 colleges and 5 universities existed, they did not significantly contribute to women's empowerment. Discrimination was evident across personal, relational, and environmental domains. Even educated women struggled against cultural norms. The researcher used Oxfam's impact evaluation framework to explore how higher education influenced the empowerment of women in these areas.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine the role of higher education on the 'Personal Empowerment of women in Balochistan.
2. Investigate the influence of higher education on promoting the 'Relational Empowerment' of women in Balochistan.
3. Explore the contribution of higher education on the 'Environmental Empowerment' of women in Balochistan.

1.1 Research Questions

The main questions of the current study were:

1. How does higher education improve the individual knowledge and opinions and attitudes on women's economic role in Balochistan?
2. To which extent the higher education is improving women's self-confidence and personal autonomy?
3. To what extent the higher education is playing its role in the non-acceptance of gender-based violence among women in Balochistan?
4. To which extent higher education is enabling women to have control over their household assets, their involvement in decision making, independent income and control over time?
5. How higher educational endeavors of women are helping them influence the community?
6. How well higher education is preparing women to deal with gender-based violence?
7. What is the role of higher education in empowering women in terms of access to services and resources and ability to influence at the political level?

Literature Review

Women's empowerment, vital for societal progress, faced significant barriers in underprivileged areas of Pakistan due to challenges like poverty and inequality (Adil et al., 2021; Stromquist, 2015). Higher education was identified as crucial for women's empowerment, offering equal opportunities and status (Bushra & Wajiha, 2015). However, socio-cultural barriers often restricted women's access to higher education, affecting their societal roles and economic independence (Batoool et al., 2021; Yousuf, 2019).

Empowerment involved enabling individuals to make autonomous decisions and control

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their lives, freeing them from oppression (Bhat, 2015; Kaur, 2018). It included increasing resources and abilities for disadvantaged groups and emphasized self-awareness and decision-making capabilities (Narayan, 2002; Gibson, 1991; Wallerstein, 1992). Power could be productive, collaborative, or self-empowering (Rahman, 2013; Oxaal & Baden, 1997). Foucault's ideas on knowledge and power explored how knowledge legitimized and altered power dynamics (Foucault, 2001; Gunaratna, 2013). Studies showed that higher education significantly enhanced women's empowerment, impacting their roles in family and professional life (Noreen & Khalid, 2012; Banerjee, 2012).

Critical consciousness aimed to transform women's self-perception and beliefs about their rights and capabilities (Kabeer, 1999; Batliwala, 1994). It encouraged women to critically evaluate societal norms, boosting self-confidence and fostering personal and societal change (Tasli, 2007). Education enabled women to engage in politics and public life, enhancing their self-confidence and decision-making influence (Akawa, 2014). It acted as a catalyst for socio-economic development, reducing poverty and improving social conditions (Singh & Singh, 2017; Varghese, 2012). Additionally, education fostered financial literacy and independence, crucial for rights and equality (Varghese, 2012). It built self-worth, helping women challenge patriarchal norms (Mandal, 2013), and supported political involvement and governance, essential for gender equality (Mandal, 2013).

The quest for women's empowerment in Pakistan began with reformers like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, continuing with Mohtarma Fatima Jinnah post-independence (Sajid, 2017). In 1947, the Pakistan Ordinance granted women voting rights, reaffirmed in 1956. Bhutto's era saw progress with reserved seats for women (Mobeen, 2018). Zia-ul-Haq's regime introduced development initiatives but enforced Islamization policies. Benazir Bhutto focused on social issues, facing challenges with Hudood laws (Mehmood, 2019). Musharraf's era brought significant reforms, including the Ministry of Women Development and the Women's Protection Bill, while Zardari's government introduced critical legislative acts.

Despite these efforts, Pakistan ranked poorly in gender equality, facing socio-cultural and legal challenges (Batool et al., 2021; Malik & Courtney, 2011). Women had low literacy rates, especially in Balochistan, and their economic and educational contributions were undervalued (Naz et al., 2020; Hassan, 2020). Vision 2025 aimed to increase female labor force participation, but barriers persisted (UNFPA, 2022). While higher education enrollment increased, women remained underrepresented in influential positions, highlighting the need for equitable educational access and challenging cultural norms (Zafar & Ali, 2018; Batool et al., 2013).

The "glass ceiling" represented hidden barriers that obstructed women from reaching top positions in workplaces and politics, reflecting deep-seated discrimination beyond overt biases (Cotter et al., 2001). Although direct discrimination may have decreased, subtle biases, such as harassment and societal pressures, continued to hinder women's advancement (Cotter et al., 2001). In Pakistan, gender disparities in education and career progression were evident due to socio-cultural attitudes and economic barriers (Malik & Courtney, 2018; Kaur, 2017). While some women succeeded in breaking the glass ceiling, their achievements often underscored rather than resolved the widespread challenges faced by most women (Global Gender Gap Report, 2021).

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In Pakistan, women faced significant imbalances in academia and politics. Benazir Bhutto's leadership highlighted progress, yet barriers to women's participation and decision-making persisted (Khan & Naqvi, 2020). Despite a notable female presence in media, leadership roles remained limited. The Election Act of 2017 aimed to increase women's parliamentary representation, but underrepresentation persisted. Economic empowerment for women could significantly boost Pakistan's GDP (Salman, 2016). Gender stereotypes, patriarchal norms, limited access to education, and economic participation, along with family obligations and unsafe conditions, restricted women's opportunities (World's Most Dangerous Countries for Women, 2018). While constitutional guarantees and international agreements like CEDAW showed Pakistan's commitment to gender equality, challenges in enforcing laws against violence and harassment and prevailing social norms continued to impede women's rights (Measuring Pakistani Women's Experiences of Violence, 2017; Rashid, 2018).

Globally, women's empowerment has been influenced by globalization, which has had mixed effects. It enhanced media access, educational attainment, and economic productivity, supporting women's roles and their ability to claim rights (Shah, 2016; King & Mason, 2020). However, the benefits were uneven, with developing countries like Pakistan facing challenges such as limited resources and increased unemployment due to liberalization (Economic Survey, 2014-15; Ortiz-Ospina & Tzvetkova, 2017). In Pakistan, shifting family structures from joint to nuclear have reflected changing gender roles and increased female pursuit of education and opportunities (Kumar & Sharma, 2014). Despite progress, traditional biases and economic disparities persisted (Deb & Sen, 2016). Women's empowerment was linked to equal access to resources and decision-making, impacting their social and economic status (Kabeer, 2005; Rao & Kelleher, 1995). While education was crucial for societal and economic advancement, job market stagnation and limited higher education opportunities contributed to social inequality and poverty (UNESCO, 2010). Community development programs, particularly in Bangladesh, effectively enhanced women's empowerment through education and employment (Pitt et al., 2003; Rahmato, 1991). NGOs played a significant role in providing opportunities and reducing gender discrimination, thus contributing to women's development (Kasali, 2006; Tauffiqu et al., 2015). Overall, women's empowerment required supportive environments and a combination of global and local insights to enhance women's roles and capabilities effectively (Singh, 2009; Sushama, 1998).

Education was a key driver of women's personal empowerment, offering essential knowledge and confidence for societal engagement (Uwakwe et al., 2008). It enhanced cognitive skills, enabling women to make informed health decisions (Chandra, 2018), and fostered political involvement and advocacy for essential services like healthcare (Mercy & Rani, 2019). Education also boosted self-esteem and efficacy (Stromquist, 2015), influenced family planning, and heightened awareness of rights, empowering women to assert these rights and advocate for gender equality (Girman, 2012; Gervais, 2011).

Research Methodology

This study utilized a mixed-method approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data were gathered using a five-point Likert scale for its clarity and accuracy (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative insights were analyzed based on Braun and Clarke's methods (2019) to ensure a thorough data overview.

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A convergent parallel design was used, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to enhance the study's robustness through triangulation (Turner et al., 2007; Airasian et al., 2012). The population included employed and unemployed female graduates from Quetta, Loralai, and Kalat (2011–2020). Snowball sampling selected a sample of 300 women, starting with alumni and expanding through referrals.

Two instruments were employed: a structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale to measure Personal, Relational, and Environmental Empowerment across demographic and empowerment statements, and a semi-structured interview guide with 30 questions to gather qualitative data from 10 women per division. Validity was ensured through expert validation, and reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha of .984 from a pilot test.

Data collection involved obtaining permissions, securing informed consent, and engaging participants via in-person and electronic methods. Questionnaires and interviews were conducted to gather quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS for statistical insights, while qualitative data were thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Gay, 2015). Ethical considerations included confidentiality, informed consent, and institutional approval.

Results

Table 1Cumulative M score of Personal, Relational, and Environmental Empowerment of Women

Main Variable	Sub-Indicator	M Score
Personal Empowerment	Self-Confidence	2.65
	Individual Knowledge	2.52
	Opinions and Attitudes on Women's Economic Role	2.91
	Attitudes Toward Non-Acceptance of Gender-Based Violence	2.89
	Empowerment and Autonomy Through Higher Education	3.03
Average M Score		2.80
Relational Empowerment	Influence on Community	3.05
	Control over Household Assets	3.29
	Involvement in Household Decision Making	3.35
	Independent Income	3.38
	Experience of Gender-Based Violence	3.64
	Control Over Time	3.74
Average M Score		3.41
Environmental Empowerment	Access to Essential Services and Resources	3.79
	Ability to Influence at the Political Level	2.84
Average M Score		3.32
Overall Cumulative M Score		3.18

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The table titled "Comprehensive Summary of Empowerment Indicators and *M* Scores" presents a detailed evaluation of empowerment across three main variables: Personal Empowerment, Relational Empowerment, and Environmental Empowerment. Each variable is broken down into specific sub-indicators, with corresponding *M* scores reflecting the average rating for each aspect.

Personal Empowerment encompasses five sub-indicators: Self-Confidence (2.65), Individual Knowledge (2.52), Opinions and Attitudes on Women's Economic Role (2.91), Attitudes Toward Non-Acceptance of Gender-Based Violence (2.89), and Empowerment and Autonomy through Higher Education (3.03). The average *M* score for Personal Empowerment stands at 2.80, indicating moderate levels of empowerment in personal domains.

Relational Empowerment includes six sub-indicators: Influence on Community (3.05), Control over Household Assets (3.29), Involvement in Household Decision Making (3.35), Independent Income (3.38), Experience of Gender-Based Violence (3.64), and Control over Time (3.74). This category has a higher average *M* score of 3.41, suggesting stronger empowerment in relational contexts, particularly in household and community influence.

Environmental Empowerment is assessed through two sub-indicators: Access to Essential Services and Resources (3.79) and Ability to Influence at the Political Level (2.84). The average *M* score for this category is 3.32, reflecting a solid foundation in access to services and resources, with room for improvement in political influence.

Overall Cumulative *M* Score for all indicators was 3.18, provided a comprehensive overview of the current state of empowerment across personal, relational, and environmental dimensions. The detailed analysis highlighted areas of strength, such as control over time and access to essential services, while identifying opportunities for further empowerment, particularly in political influence and individual knowledge.

Quantitative Analysis:

- Self-Confidence: 41.9% of respondents reported feeling confident in expressing opinions (mean scores: 2.47 to 2.80).
- Individual Knowledge: 52.2% are satisfied with the knowledge gained through education (mean scores: 2.71 to 2.88).
- Opinions on Women's Economic Role: 72.1% believe education positively influenced their views (mean scores: 2.91 to 2.92).
- Non-Acceptance of Gender-Based Violence: Respondents expressed satisfaction in recognizing and speaking out against gender-based violence (mean scores: 2.85 to 2.92).
- Empowerment and Autonomy: 67.6% feel empowered to make independent decisions due to education (mean scores: 2.95 to 3.17).

Relational Empowerment:

- Influence on Community: Education enhances women's roles in community

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development (mean scores: 2.94 to 3.24).

- Control over Household Assets: Education increases control over household assets (mean scores: 3.21 to 3.49).
- Involvement in Household Decision-Making: Education improves involvement in household decisions (mean scores: 3.32 to 3.39).
- Independent Income: Education enhances financial independence (mean scores: 3.32 to 3.54).
- Experience of Gender-Based Violence: Education helps in addressing gender-based violence (mean scores: 3.50 to 3.77).
- Control over Time: Education improves time management (mean scores: 3.65 to 3.85).

Environmental Empowerment:

- Access to Services and Resources: Education significantly improves access to essential services (mean scores: 3.73 to 3.83).
- Ability to Influence at the Political Level: Education enhances political engagement (mean scores: 2.74 to 2.90).

Cumulative Mean Scores:

- Personal Empowerment: 2.80
- Relational Empowerment: 3.41
- Environmental Empowerment: 3.32
- Overall Cumulative Mean Score: 3.18

Qualitative Analysis

Objective 1: Personal Empowerment

- Self-Confidence: Education boosted self-confidence in personal and professional contexts.
- Individual Knowledge: Respondents gained broader horizons and improved decision-making.
- Opinions on Women's Economic Role: Education shaped positive attitudes toward women's economic roles.
- Non-Acceptance of Gender-Based Violence: Education empowered respondents to challenge gender-based violence.
- Personal Autonomy: Education enhanced decision-making authority and autonomy.

Objective 2: Relational Empowerment

- Influence on Community: Education equipped respondents with the skills to address social issues and engage in community initiatives.
- Control over Household Assets: Education improved financial literacy and resource management.
- Experience of Gender-Based Violence: Education empowered respondents to address gender-based violence and support survivors.

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Stories of Overcoming Challenges:

- **Transformative Experiences:** Higher education, particularly in specialized fields like law and business, significantly boosted confidence and enabled respondents to tackle professional challenges.
- **Community Impact:** Respondents used their education to make significant contributions to their communities, such as organizing medical camps and advocating for women's rights.

Discussion

The study reveals that higher education significantly affects women's empowerment in personal, relational, and environmental aspects in Balochistan.

- **Personal Empowerment:** Education enhances decision-making and self-autonomy. Qualitative data show increased confidence and self-management, consistent with Malhotra and Schuler (2005).
- **Relational Empowerment:** Educated women report higher empowerment and better economic participation, supporting Kabeer (2001) and Hill and King (1993).
- **Environmental Empowerment:** Education improves access to services and political engagement, aligning with Stromquist (2006) and Wang and Hannum (2008).
- **Economic Impact:** Correlation between education and better economic roles, reinforcing Kabeer (2001) and Lloyd and Grant (2004).
- **Civic and Political Engagement:** Education enhances civic and political involvement, as supported by Norris and Inglehart (2001) and Putnam (2000).

Overall, qualitative data highlight significant improvements in confidence, advocacy, and community involvement, underscoring the need for comprehensive approaches to capture the full impact of education on empowerment.

Conclusions

Quantitative Data Conclusions:

1. Higher education enhances self-confidence, self-esteem, and perceptions of economic roles and gender-based violence.
2. It improves autonomy, community contribution, and financial resilience.
3. Education fosters better access to resources and political engagement.

Qualitative Data Conclusions:

1. Education boosts self-confidence and knowledge.
2. It promotes progressive attitudes on economic roles and challenges gender-based violence.
3. Education enhances personal autonomy and community influence.

Recommendations

1. **Enhance Access to Higher Education:**
 - Provide scholarships and outreach programs in rural areas.
2. **Integrate Empowerment Themes into Curriculum:**
 - Update curricula to include women's rights and leadership.
3. **Support Employability and Entrepreneurship:**

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- Establish career counseling and job placement centers for women.
- 4. Community Engagement and Awareness:
 - Conduct campaigns and workshops to shift societal attitudes.
- 5. Encourage Political and Civic Engagement:
 - Support women's involvement in political discussions and student councils.
- 6. Strengthen Support Networks:
 - Develop mentorship programs and counseling services.
- 7. Monitoring and Evaluation:
 - Regularly assess educational programs and establish feedback mechanisms.

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