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Skill Development Policies in Punjab and Their Impact on Women's Empowerment

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ABSTRACT
This study examines the skill development policies in Punjab, Pakistan, and their multifaceted impact on women's empowerment, focusing on economic, social, and psychological dimensions. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, it analyzes key provincial institutions (TEVTA, PVTC, PSDF) and initiatives including the Punjab Women Development Policy 2018, Mein Digital digital skills program, and recent Chief Minister-led trainings under Hunarmand Naujawan. Findings reveal significant enrollment growth among women (approaching 44% in some programs), with positive economic outcomes such as increased employment, income from freelancing and entrepreneurship, and reduced dependency. Non-economic benefits include enhanced decision-making authority, self-confidence, household status, and community roles, though gains are tempered by socio-cultural norms, mobility barriers, rural-urban divides, and implementation gaps. Quantitative comparisons and qualitative narratives highlight stronger impacts in urban areas compared to rural/Southern Punjab, underscoring the need for targeted reforms. The research concludes that while Punjab's policies offer a promising model for gender-responsive TVET, holistic enhancements addressing barriers and scaling successful interventions are essential for transformative, inclusive empowerment aligned with national and global gender equality goals.

***Keywords**: Women's Empowerment, Skill Development, Punjab Pakistan, Gender-Responsive TVET, Digital Skills, Rural Women*

Introduction

Women's empowerment in Pakistan continues to face profound structural barriers within both global and national frameworks. Globally, Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) prioritizes gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing discrimination, violence, and economic exclusion. In Pakistan, these challenges are evident in persistently low female labor force participation (FLFP), which reached 24.26% in 2024 according to modeled ILO estimates (World Bank, 2025a). This rate remains well below the global average and reflects entrenched gender disparities in education, economic opportunity, and labor market access. Nationally, women comprise only a small fraction of the formal workforce, often confined to informal, low-paid, or unpaid agricultural roles due to socio-cultural norms, mobility restrictions, and limited educational completion, particularly in rural areas (World Bank, 2024). Pakistan's placement at the bottom (148th out of 148 countries) in the Global Gender Gap Report 2025, with a score of 56.7%, highlights severe gaps in economic participation, educational attainment, and political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2025). These inequalities represent not only a social injustice but also a significant drag on

national economic growth, as closing gender gaps could unlock substantial GDP gains through greater female inclusion.

Skill development stands out as a transformative mechanism for women's economic and social empowerment, aligning closely with SDG 5 by enhancing women's resources, agency, and achievements in line with established empowerment models. Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) initiatives provide market-aligned skills that facilitate transitions to paid employment, entrepreneurship, and greater household influence, countering traditional barriers to formal labor market entry. In Pakistan, where patriarchal constraints often limit women's opportunities, targeted programs in areas such as digital literacy, textiles, and agribusiness have demonstrated potential to boost income, self-confidence, and social status. Notably, mobile internet adoption among women rose sharply in 2024, narrowing the gender gap from 38% to 25%, fueled by digital skills initiatives and increased rural access (United Nations Development Programme, 2025; GSMA, 2025). Such progress illustrates how gender-responsive skill training not only promotes financial independence but also yields multiplier effects, including better child nutrition, education, and community resilience. Investing in inclusive TVET thus serves as both an equity imperative and a strategic driver of sustainable, inclusive development.

Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province (over 110 million residents) and largest contributor to national GDP, offers a critical lens for evaluating gendered impacts of skill development policies. Leading institutions include the Technical Education and Vocational Training Authority (TEVTA), which maintains an annual regular training capacity of approximately 90,000 across more than 400 institutes (TEVTA, n.d.; Industries, Commerce, Investment & Skills Development Department, Punjab, n.d.); the Punjab Vocational Training Council (PVTC); and the Punjab Skills Development Fund (PSDF), funding demand-driven programs for over 80,000 youth annually through 500+ partners, with dedicated rural women-focused efforts such as digital skills training, e-commerce linkages, and content creation (Punjab Skills Development Fund, n.d.). Complementing these are collaborations with the National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTC) and the Punjab Women Development Policy 2018, who's Implementation Framework (2020–2024), developed in partnership with UN Women, promotes gender mainstreaming, quotas, and targeted economic interventions (Women Development Department, Punjab & UN Women, 2020). While these structures provide scalable models, gaps in outreach especially for marginalized rural women persist. Examining Punjab is vital because its demographic weight and policy innovations mirror and influence national trends, offering evidence-based insights to strengthen gender-responsive reforms and maximize empowerment in Pakistan's economic heartland.

Literature Review

The conceptual framework for women's empowerment draws heavily on Naila Kabeer's influential model, which delineates empowerment as a process encompassing three interrelated dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. Resources refer to the pre-conditions enabling choice, including material (economic assets), human (education and skills), and social (networks and relationships) capitals that women can draw upon. Agency constitutes the decision-making process itself, encompassing women's ability to define goals, act upon them, and negotiate power relations within households and communities. Achievements represent the outcomes of this process, manifested in improved well-being, economic security, and expanded life choices (Kabeer, 1999/2021 reprint in various platforms). Recent scholarship has refined and applied this framework to contemporary contexts, emphasizing its utility in measuring multidimensional empowerment beyond economic metrics alone. For instance,

comparative analyses of empowerment indicators highlight how Kabeer's domains facilitate robust evaluations of interventions, revealing that agency often mediates between resource access and transformative achievements (Richardson et al., 2024). In skill development contexts, the model underscores vocational training as a critical resource enhancer that bolsters agency through skill acquisition and confidence-building, ultimately yielding achievements such as employment and reduced dependency. This tripartite structure provides a rigorous lens for assessing gendered impacts, ensuring analyses capture not merely participation rates but deeper shifts in power dynamics and life trajectories.

Globally and regionally, skill development through technical and vocational education and training (TVET) has emerged as a key strategy for gender empowerment, with mounting evidence demonstrating its potential to narrow economic disparities and foster inclusion. International studies affirm that gender-responsive TVET programs enhance women's labor market entry, income levels, and entrepreneurial capacity, particularly when designed to address stereotypes and provide safe, accessible environments. In the Middle East and North Africa, initiatives have shown transformative effects on female participation in non-traditional trades, contributing to broader economic diversification (World Bank, 2025). European efforts, including national campaigns to balance gender in VET, have successfully reduced occupational segregation through targeted outreach and inclusive curricula (Cedefop, 2025). Closer to South Asia, Caribbean perspectives illustrate how integrated vocational and entrepreneurship education mitigates poverty among women by combining skills with market linkages (Springer, 2025). These global insights reveal consistent patterns: effective programs incorporate gender mainstreaming, flexible delivery (e.g., digital or community-based), and support services like childcare or mobility aid, leading to sustained empowerment outcomes. However, challenges persist in low-resource settings where socio-cultural barriers limit scalability, underscoring the need for context-specific adaptations to maximize impact on women's agency and economic autonomy.

In the national context of Pakistan, skill development policies have evolved under the stewardship of the National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTC), which coordinates TVET reforms to align training with labor market demands and promote inclusivity. NAVTTC's mandate includes establishing national standards, accrediting institutions, and overseeing certification, with recent reforms emphasizing gender equity through initiatives like the first-ever Gender Mainstreaming Strategy and women-only programs such as SheFixes, aimed at breaking stereotypes in male-dominated fields (NAVTTC, 2025). Post-2020 advancements include gender-disaggregated data collection and partnerships for demand-driven training, as highlighted in the 2024 Gender Skill Gap & Market Need Analysis, which identifies opportunities for women in emerging sectors (Skilling Pakistan, 2025). These reforms reflect a shift toward inclusive human capital development, though implementation remains uneven due to provincial devolution post-18th Amendment. Nationally, TVET contributes to reducing the female labor force participation gap by equipping women with marketable skills, yet persistent barriers like mobility restrictions and normative constraints hinder full realization of empowerment potential.

Punjab-specific literature centers on flagship policies and programs that operationalize gender-responsive skill development, including the Punjab Women Development Policy 2018 and its 2020-2024 Implementation Framework, which mandates mainstreaming gender in economic opportunities, skills access, and entrepreneurship (Women Development Department, Punjab & UN Women, 2020). The Punjab Skills Development Fund (PSDF) plays a pivotal role, funding over 80,000 annual trainings with dedicated rural women initiatives like Mein Digital for

educated females, She Threads for textile sector empowerment, and stipended digital/green skills courses yielding income opportunities up to PKR 30,000 monthly (PSDF, 2025). TEVTA and PVTC deliver women-focused vocational courses, with recent job fairs and gender-responsive reforms enhancing employability in sectors like construction and IT (TEVTA, 2025; PVTC, 2025). Empirical studies on these programs document positive impacts: increased employment rates, entrepreneurial starts, income gains, and improved household decision-making among participants, alongside reduced dependency. However, barriers such as socio-cultural norms, rural-urban divides, and limited mobility persist, constraining reach for marginalized groups (ResearchGate, 2024). Gaps in the literature are evident, including a scarcity of rigorous, quantitative impact evaluations specific to Punjab's women beneficiaries post-2020, fragmented longitudinal data, and insufficient attention to intersectional factors like class and ethnicity, necessitating updated, province-focused research to inform policy refinement and scaling.

Problem Statement

With the significant policy efforts in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous and economically dominant province, women's empowerment through skill development remains severely constrained, perpetuating deep gender disparities in economic participation and social agency. Female labor force participation in Pakistan hovers around 24-25%, with Punjab reflecting similar provincial trends amid broader national gaps where women are disproportionately relegated to informal, low-paid, or unpaid agricultural roles. Although initiatives like the Punjab Women Development Policy 2018, Punjab Skills Development Fund (PSDF) programs, TEVTA and PVTC women-focused vocational courses, and digital skills schemes such as Mein Digital have expanded access to training particularly targeting rural and marginalized women implementation reveals persistent shortcomings. Socio-cultural norms, including patriarchal restrictions on mobility, family opposition, safety concerns, and early marriage pressures, severely limit women's enrollment and completion rates, especially in rural areas where geographic isolation exacerbates access barriers. Rural-urban divides further compound these issues, with urban women benefiting more from market-linked opportunities while rural counterparts face inadequate infrastructure, awareness gaps, and program mismatches with local labor demands. Consequently, despite potential for skill development to enhance income, entrepreneurship, decision-making authority, and self-confidence, measurable empowerment outcomes remain limited and uneven, representing a critical missed opportunity for inclusive growth in Punjab's economy and society.

Research Objectives

1. To identify and analyze major skill development policies and programs targeting women in Punjab.
2. To evaluate the reach, accessibility, and participation of women in these programs.
3. To assess the impacts on key dimensions of women’s empowerment (economic independence, decision-making, self-confidence, employment outcomes).
4. To identify barriers and enablers influencing policy effectiveness.
5. To provide policy recommendations for enhancing gender-responsive skill development.

Research Questions

1. What are the key skill development policies and initiatives in Punjab aimed at or inclusive of women?
2. To what extent have these policies reached and benefited women, particularly in rural and marginalized areas?

3. What measurable impacts have these policies had on women's economic empowerment (e.g., income, employment, entrepreneurship)?
4. What socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors act as barriers or facilitators to women's participation and empowerment through these programs?
5. How can Punjab's skill development framework be improved for greater gender transformative outcomes?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods design to rigorously assess the impact of skill development policies on women's empowerment in Punjab, combining quantitative impact measurement with qualitative exploration of lived experiences and contextual barriers. Quantitative data enable statistical evaluation of outcomes such as employment rates, income changes, entrepreneurship, and multidimensional empowerment indices, while qualitative components uncover nuanced shifts in agency, decision-making, self-confidence, and socio-cultural dynamics.

Data Sources

Data sources include secondary materials policy documents (Punjab Women Development Policy 2018 and implementation framework), gender-disaggregated reports and statistics from TEVTA, PVTC, and PSDF (e.g., female participation trends), and national/provincial surveys (Pakistan Labour Force Survey 2024-25, Punjab MICS 2024) supplemented by primary data from structured surveys of women beneficiaries, semi-structured interviews with trainers and policymakers, and focus group discussions.

Sampling

Sampling follows a stratified purposive approach, targeting 400–500 women participants across urban/rural strata, diverse socio-economic profiles, and key programs (e.g., PSDF digital/vocational courses, TEVTA/PVTC women-focused initiatives). Tools consist of validated empowerment questionnaires, interview guides, and discussion protocols.

Data Analysis

Analysis involves descriptive statistics, regression or propensity score matching for impact estimation, and thematic analysis of qualitative data using NVivo. Ethical safeguards include informed consent, anonymity, cultural sensitivity, and institutional approval. Limitations such as selection bias, self-reporting, and external confounders are addressed through triangulation, robustness checks, and reflexive positioning to ensure validity and reliability.

Overview of Skill Development Policies in Punjab with Gender Focus

The historical evolution of skill development in Punjab reflects a strategic response to post-devolution challenges following the 18th Amendment in 2010, which decentralized education and vocational training to provinces, enabling Punjab to tailor policies to its economic needs as Pakistan's industrial and agricultural powerhouse. This shift catalyzed the strengthening of key institutions: the Technical Education and Vocational Training Authority (TEVTA), established earlier but expanded post-devolution to oversee diplomas and advanced technical training across hundreds of institutes; the Punjab Vocational Training Council (PVTC), focusing on short-term, community-based vocational courses; and the Punjab Skills Development Fund (PSDF), launched in 2010 as a demand-driven funding mechanism in collaboration with international partners like the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and later the World Bank, emphasizing outcome-based training through private sector partnerships. Linkages with the National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTC) ensure national standards, certification alignment, and coordination for mobility across provinces. By 2025–

2026, Punjab consolidated these under the Skills Development and Entrepreneurship Department (SDED), unifying TEVTA, PVTC, PSDF, Punjab Skills Development Authority, and Punjab Board of Technical Education for streamlined, market-aligned delivery. This institutional maturation has scaled capacity significantly, targeting over 200,000 youth annually amid rapid labor force growth, with a pronounced shift toward inclusive, gender-responsive models to address historical underrepresentation of women in formal skills ecosystems (ProPakistani, 2025; Pakistan Observer, 2025).

Major policies and programs in Punjab have progressively integrated gender considerations, building on the foundational Punjab Women Development Policy 2018 and its Implementation Framework 2020–2024, which mainstreamed women's economic participation through skills, entrepreneurship, and protection mechanisms in partnership with UN Women. Under Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz Sharif's leadership, flagship initiatives like the CM Skilled Punjab program (encompassing Maryam Nawaz Hunarmand Naujawan) allocate substantial budgets—Rs. 26 billion for 2025–26—to free vocational and technical training, prioritizing high-demand sectors. PSDF-funded trainings dominate, delivering over 80,000 annual slots through 500+ partners in trades such as textiles, agriculture processing, hospitality, and emerging digital/IT fields. Women-specific digital skills programs, notably Mein Digital, target educated rural women with 6-month courses in e-commerce, freelancing, and IT, including desktop distributions and stipends to enable home-based income generation, with recent phases training thousands in districts like Bahawalpur and Faisalabad. Vocational courses emphasize textiles (e.g., garment stitching and design), agriculture (value addition and modern farming techniques), and hospitality (chef and tourism skills), often linked to international certifications for global employability. These efforts align with broader CM initiatives promoting entrepreneurship and job placements, including international opportunities under programs like Tabeer, demonstrating a concerted push to convert skills into sustainable livelihoods (PSDF, n.d.; The News International, 2025).

Gender-specific provisions distinguish Punjab's approach, embedding affirmative measures to overcome structural barriers. Quotas ensure at least 30–40% female inclusion in many programs, with dedicated women-only batches, rural targeting (90% focus in initiatives like Mein Digital for women under 30 with 16 years education), and entrepreneurship support through schemes such as She Threads, which empowers rural females in the textile sector via specialized training, market linkages, and business incubation. Ambassador programs and community outreach amplify awareness and enrollment, while collaborations with UN Women strengthen policy implementation, monitoring, and gender mainstreaming. Private sector partnerships facilitate placements, stipends, and safe training environments (e.g., transportation allowances, hostels in select cases). Recent expansions under the 2025–26 fiscal plan include targeted allocations like Rs. 1 billion for Mein Digital to train 3,000 rural women, alongside complementary efforts for marginalized groups. These provisions reflect a transformative intent: moving beyond access to fostering agency, economic independence, and reduced dependency, positioning Punjab as a model for gender-responsive TVET in Pakistan amid persistent challenges like mobility and normative constraints (PSDF, 2025; Women Development Department, Punjab, n.d.).

Participation and Access of Women in Skill Development Programs

The enrollment trends and patterns in Punjab's skill development programs reveal a gradual but uneven increase in women's participation, reflecting targeted efforts to address historical gender imbalances in technical and vocational education and training (TVET). Across major institutions, women now constitute a significant share of trainees: the Punjab Skills

Development Fund (PSDF) reports that approximately 44% of its total graduates (over 600,000 since inception) are women, with dedicated programs boosting female enrollment in recent years through demand-driven, outcome-based trainings. TEVTA and PVTC have similarly expanded women-focused batches, with gender-disaggregated data indicating improved representation in short-term vocational courses, though overall female participation in broader TVET remains below parity in many non-traditional sectors. Post-2020 initiatives under the Chief Minister's Skilled Punjab program and Maryam Nawaz Hunarmand Naujawan have accelerated this trend, particularly in rural-targeted schemes where women's enrollment has risen due to stipends, free training, and home-based digital options. Patterns show higher female uptake in traditionally "feminine" fields like textiles, beauty, and IT freelancing, while progress in male-dominated areas (e.g., construction, mechanics) lags despite quotas and awareness campaigns. These trends signal policy success in scaling access, yet persistent rural-urban and sectoral divides highlight the need for sustained gender mainstreaming to achieve equitable representation.

Accessibility factors have been deliberately enhanced in Punjab's programs to overcome structural hurdles, with geographic coverage extending through decentralized delivery models, community-based centers, and digital platforms that reach remote areas. Eligibility criteria are often inclusive requiring minimal education (e.g., matriculation or intermediate for many courses) and prioritizing marginalized groups while awareness is promoted via community mobilization, local leaders, district administration, and media campaigns. Critical support mechanisms include mobility aids (transportation allowances), stipends (e.g., Rs. 5,000 monthly in some phases), hostels in select urban institutes, and occasional childcare provisions to enable participation amid family responsibilities. PSDF's Mein Digital program exemplifies this by distributing desktops to educated rural women from day one, eliminating technology access barriers and enabling home-based learning in e-commerce, freelancing, and digital entrepreneurship. These provisions have demonstrably increased enrollment, particularly among women aged 21-40 in rural Punjab, by addressing practical constraints and fostering safe, flexible entry points into skill acquisition.

Despite these advancements, barriers to participation remain formidable, rooted in socio-cultural norms, family restrictions, safety concerns, the digital divide, and occasional program design flaws. Patriarchal attitudes often manifest as opposition from family members to women's mobility or economic independence, with early marriage, household duties, and perceived threats to "honor" deterring enrollment, especially in conservative rural settings. Safety issues during travel to training centers and inadequate facilities (e.g., lack of separate spaces) further discourage attendance. The digital divide exacerbates exclusion for women without prior tech exposure or reliable internet in remote areas, while program flaws such as mismatched course timings, insufficient follow-up support, or limited market linkages can reduce completion rates. These intersecting barriers contribute to lower retention and uneven outcomes, underscoring that while access has improved quantitatively, qualitative transformation requires deeper cultural and infrastructural interventions.

Case examples from specific initiatives illustrate both promise and challenges: PSDF's Mein Digital has empowered educated rural women through 6-month structured training in digital skills, with success stories of participants like those in Ali Pur Chattha gaining freelancing income and economic autonomy after receiving desktops and stipends. Thousands have benefited in districts such as Bahawalpur and Faisalabad, leading to home-based entrepreneurship and reduced dependency. Similarly, broader PSDF trainings in textiles and hospitality have yielded positive impacts, with female graduates reporting enhanced

employability and confidence. However, narratives also highlight ongoing hurdles: many women face family resistance or mobility issues post-training, limiting sustained labor market entry. These profiles demonstrate the transformative potential of tailored, supportive programs while emphasizing the need for holistic approaches combining skills with norm-shifting community engagement and robust aftercare to fully realize women's empowerment in Punjab's skill ecosystem.

Impact Assessment on Women's Empowerment

The economic impacts of skill development policies on women's empowerment in Punjab manifest robustly through enhanced employment rates, elevated income levels, entrepreneurship outcomes, and diminished financial dependency, as evidenced by recent empirical evaluations. Targeted programs, such as digital skills initiatives, have catalyzed women's entry into formal and informal labor markets, where baseline business ownership among participants stood at 41%, with pilot interventions enabling 57% to establish online shops and 21% planning to do so, thereby fostering sustainable income streams in e-commerce and freelancing sectors (Sabin et al., 2024). Broader national data underscore these gains: vocational training in tailoring and related trades has positively influenced employment and earnings, contributing to closing the stark gender gap in labor force participation (23.2% for women versus 79.3% for men) and monthly earnings differentials of approximately 4,558 PKR, with education and digital access explaining 20-25% of these disparities through improved endowments (World Bank, 2024). Entrepreneurship flourishes under these frameworks, with 85% of women reporting expanded economic opportunities via digital platforms, including remote work and online businesses, leading to home-based earnings that reduce reliance on male family members (Akram et al., 2025). These outcomes not only amplify individual financial autonomy but also stimulate provincial GDP growth by integrating women's untapped potential into Punjab's agrarian and emerging digital economies, demonstrating a multiplier effect on household stability and poverty alleviation.

Non-economic impacts extend beyond material gains, profoundly enhancing women's decision-making authority, self-confidence, household status, and community roles, thereby reshaping patriarchal dynamics in Punjab's socio-cultural landscape. Skill acquisition empowers women to negotiate greater agency within households, with high agreement rates 59.7% fully endorsing and 26.4% strongly supporting that digital learning platforms bolster professional development and informed choices in education, health, and family matters (Akram et al., 2025). Qualitative narratives reveal transformative shifts: participants in vocational programs report heightened self-confidence, enabling them to challenge restrictive norms and assume leadership in community initiatives, such as local artisan collectives or advocacy groups for gender equity (Sabin et al., 2024). Household status elevates as trained women contribute economically, fostering respect and collaborative decision-making, while community roles expand through networks built via technology, with 56.9% agreeing that digital tools facilitate supportive communities and idea expression (Akram et al., 2025). These dimensions align with broader empowerment models, illustrating how skills training transcends economic utility to cultivate psychological resilience and social capital, ultimately promoting gender-transformative change in conservative contexts.

Quantitative evidence from empowerment indices and comparative analyses substantiates these impacts, revealing significant pre- and post-training improvements among trained versus non-trained women. Multidimensional empowerment scales, incorporating economic, social, and agency metrics, show marked elevations post-intervention: for instance, digital skills programs correlate with 85% improved access to resources and opportunities, contrasting

sharply with non-participants' stagnant indicators amid Pakistan's low female agency scores (e.g., only 6% independent decision-making on spending) (World Bank, 2024; Akram et al., 2025). Comparative regressions highlight training's role in reducing gender gaps, with educated women exhibiting higher earnings and employment probabilities, while untreated cohorts persist in informal, low-remunerative roles (Sabin et al., 2024). Regional variations are pronounced: urban centers like Lahore and Faisalabad demonstrate superior outcomes, with 70% internet access and 94.4% daily digital device usage driving entrepreneurship and confidence gains, whereas rural and Southern Punjab areas like Bahawalpur and Multan lag due to infrastructure deficits, yielding lower participation and muted empowerment indices (Akram et al., 2025). These disparities underscore the need for geographically tailored interventions to equitable distribution of benefits.

Qualitative insights further illuminate narratives of transformation alongside persistent challenges, painting a nuanced picture of empowerment's trajectory in Punjab. Stories from program beneficiaries highlight profound changes: rural women in digital training recount transitioning from dependency to independent earners, gaining familial respect and community influence through home-based ventures that balance cultural expectations with economic agency (Sabin et al., 2024). Yet, enduring barriers temper these successes cultural restrictions, mobility constraints, and digital divides hinder full realization, with many facing family opposition or violence tolerance norms that justify control (42.1% of women endorse such views) (World Bank, 2024). Interviews reveal ongoing struggles in Southern Punjab, where limited access exacerbates isolation, contrasting urban success tales and emphasizing intersectional vulnerabilities like low financial inclusion (only 24% bank accounts) (Akram et al., 2025). These accounts advocate for holistic policy refinements, integrating family engagement and infrastructure to sustain gains and address gaps, ensuring skill development's promise translates into enduring, inclusive empowerment.

Conclusion

The analysis of skill development policies in Punjab demonstrates a substantial yet incomplete advancement toward women's empowerment, highlighting both transformative successes and persistent systemic limitations. Initiatives such as the Punjab Women Development Policy 2018, Punjab Skills Development Fund programs including Mein Digital, TEVTA and PVTC women-focused vocational trainings, and recent expansions under Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz's Hunarmand Naujawan scheme have notably increased women's access to market-relevant skills in digital technologies, textiles, agriculture processing, and entrepreneurship. These efforts have yielded tangible economic benefits, including higher employment rates, improved income through home-based freelancing and e-commerce, reduced financial dependency, and entrepreneurial ventures that enable many participants' particularly rural educated women to achieve greater independence. Non-economic gains are equally compelling: enhanced self-confidence, stronger household decision-making roles, elevated social status, and expanded community involvement have emerged as participants challenge traditional norms and build supportive networks. By integrating quotas, stipends, desktop distributions, mobility support, and targeted rural outreach, Punjab's framework has positioned itself as a leading provincial model in Pakistan for gender-responsive technical and vocational education and training, contributing to broader goals of inclusive growth, poverty reduction, and alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality. Nevertheless, outcomes remain uneven, with rural and Southern Punjab regions lagging behind urban centers due to entrenched socio-cultural barriers, mobility constraints, family opposition, safety issues, and infrastructural gaps that limit full participation and sustained impact.

In conclusion, while Punjab's skill development ecosystem has catalyzed meaningful progress in women's economic and social empowerment evidenced by rising female enrollment proportions, income-generating opportunities, and shifts in agency the journey toward comprehensive transformation is ongoing. To maximize potential, policies must evolve through deeper gender mainstreaming, norm-shifting community engagement, strengthened monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, intersectional targeting for marginalized groups, and enhanced linkages between training, market placement, and post-program support. Scaling successful models like digital skills for rural women, while addressing persistent challenges such as the digital divide and patriarchal resistance, will be essential for realizing equitable empowerment across the province. Ultimately, sustained investment and adaptive reforms in Punjab's skill development landscape hold the promise of not only uplifting individual women but also driving provincial economic resilience, social cohesion, and long-term gender parity, serving as an exemplar for national and regional replication in fostering inclusive human capital development.

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