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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](https://doi.org/10.55966/assaj.2025.3.2.018) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](https://doi.org/10.55966/assaj.2025.3.2.018)<https://doi.org/10.55966/assaj.2025.3.2.018>Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](https://openjournal.org/)**Impact of Education on Women Empowerment: A Case Study of Rural Pakistan****Munazza Mubarak**

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jahanzebwaseh@numl.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the impact of education on women's empowerment in rural Pakistan, focusing on social, economic, and political dimensions. Despite global recognition of education as a catalyst for gender equality, rural Pakistani women face significant barriers, including cultural norms, poverty, and inadequate infrastructure, which limit their educational access and subsequent empowerment. Through qualitative interviews with 40 female university students from rural backgrounds, the research highlights how education enhances economic participation, decision-making power, health awareness, and community engagement. However, systemic challenges such as early marriages, gender-biased curricula, and lack of female teachers persist, undermining the full potential of education. The findings align with existing literature, emphasizing education's role in fostering agency but also underscoring the need for structural reforms to address patriarchal constraints. The study calls for multifaceted policy interventions, including gender-sensitive infrastructure, vocational training, and community awareness programs, to bridge the gap between education and empowerment. By prioritizing rural women's education, Pakistan can unlock transformative societal benefits, including healthier families and stronger economies.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Education, Rural Pakistan, Gender Inequality, Economic Participation, Social Barriers, Policy Interventions.

Introduction

Women empowerment deals with enabling women to control their lives and use their rights in the areas of economics, society, politics and education (Kabeer, 1999; Naved & Persson, 2010). Education is seen around the world as a major factor in strengthening women's abilities to contribute to their communities (World Bank, 2012). Women who are educated can find work opportunities, make more decisions and become aware of health, rights and justice within society (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). Given the obvious gender inequality in Pakistan, providing girls with education is very important. While there are laws and plans to support education for women in Pakistan, rural women struggle to get an education because of cultural traditions, financial difficulties and a lack of suitable infrastructure (Noreen & Haq, 2018). Because of this, women are less able to be involved in economic, political and social matters which continues to result in gender inequality and holds back development.

Since most people in Pakistan live in rural areas, the education level of women is significantly lower than that of men which mainly results from traditional barriers and money issues (Asghar

et al., 2022). Having good education in these fields often helps rural women secure a good income, better health for their families, a better social position and opportunities to improve their way of life (Aziz & Noreen, 2019). Experience has proved that women with education in rural Pakistan often marry at a later age, have less children and involve themselves in both household and community decisions (Khan and Khan, 2020). Additionally, getting an education enables individuals to understand their rights and avoid becoming victims of domestic violence and early marriage (Batoool & Khalid, 2018). Because of its role in transforming lives, the Pakistani government and international organisations are working on increasing female literacy and primary education (USAID, 2023). However, persistent challenges such as lack of schools, gender-biased attitudes, and poverty continue to hinder progress, underscoring the need for targeted policies that address rural educational inequalities and their impact on women's empowerment

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

This research focuses on how higher education for women in rural Pakistan affects their status and role in society, the economy and politics. The study sets out to discover what factors play a role in making or preventing access to education and what impact that has on empowerment. Part of the objectives is to explore how education affects women's roles in making decisions, participating in the economy and participating in their community. Furthermore, the report aims to draw attention to the social and cultural obstacles rural women face when trying to attend school and offer practical advice to those who make policies to help more rural women gain an education.

Research Question

How does education influence the empowerment of women in rural Pakistan in terms of their social, economic, and political participation?

Scope and Limitations

This study is confined to rural regions of Pakistan, where women's educational attainment is significantly lower compared to urban areas. It primarily investigates the impact of formal education on women's empowerment dimensions such as economic independence, decision-making, and social mobility. However, the study's findings may not be fully generalizable to all rural areas due to regional variations in culture, infrastructure, and economic conditions. Additionally, limitations include potential biases in self-reported data and the challenge of isolating education's impact from other socio-economic factors influencing empowerment.

Literature Review

Women empowerment is widely recognized as a critical factor for sustainable development, with education serving as a foundational element in the empowerment process (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). Education enhances women's capacity to access resources, make informed decisions, and participate actively in economic, social, and political arenas (Alam, 2015). The empowerment framework posits that education increases women's agency and autonomy, enabling them to challenge social norms and improve their life circumstances (Kabeer, 1999). Globally, numerous studies affirm that education correlates positively with enhanced self-confidence, political participation, and improved health outcomes among women (Quisumbing et al., 2014; Sen, 1999). However, these outcomes are often mediated by socio-cultural and economic factors that either enable or restrict the empowerment potential of education, especially in patriarchal and resource-constrained societies (Narayan, 2005). In Pakistan, the multidimensional nature of women empowerment intersects deeply with education, making it an essential domain of inquiry for policymakers and scholars alike (Alam, 2015).

Since gender roles are strongly traditional in rural Pakistan, education is key to helping people overcome poverty and inequality. On the other hand, a major barrier for rural women seeking

education is cultural practices, financial difficulties and inadequate school infrastructure (Khan et al., 2019, Khan, 2018). The studies show that even though efforts are made to educate more girls, early marriage, biases against women in schools and concerns about safety hinder them from becoming empowered (Khan et al., 2019; Khan, 2018). Besides, the patriarchal system prevents women from moving freely and controlling their decisions and this cannot be solved by education alone (Sultana, 2010; Riaz & Naz, 2021). It is clear from studies that highly educated rural women in Pakistan take part in more household decisions, secure better jobs and recognize their rights more (Asghar et al., 2022). The results show education can lead to social and political progress, except that the progress is limited by gender norms.

There are many studies that link education to empowering women economically. When women receive an education, they are more likely to earn an income which benefits not only themselves but also their families (Kabeer, 1999; Alam, 2015). In rural areas of Pakistan, education for girls leads to more women being involved in work and entrepreneurial activities (Asghar et al. 2022; Hussain et al. 2020). An educated woman is better able to communicate in family and community matters and make decisions about what happens to resources (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). Even so, poverty, no childcare and few opportunities in markets still prevent rural women from experiencing these benefits (Khan, 2018). For this reason, education must work in tandem with government policies to eliminate major barriers in the workplace and society. Besides finances, education also enables women to take part in community matters and political activities (Sen, 1999; Quisumbing et al., 2014). In rural Pakistan, women who receive education are aware of their legal rights, health matters and political procedures which helps them oppose domestic violence and child marriage (Riaz & Naz, 2021; Sultana, 2010). Additionally, women who are educated stand up for themselves, their families and community and play a role in shaping public policies (Alam, 2015). However, because of existing social norms and rules, it is often challenging for women to be involved in politics, so different strategies are needed combining education, laws and programs (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). Overall, it shows that women can only truly benefit from education when other supportive social and political factors are in place.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to deeply explore the impact of education on women's empowerment in rural Pakistan. A qualitative approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences, perceptions, and social dynamics affecting women's empowerment, which are often difficult to quantify. This design facilitates the collection of rich, descriptive data through direct interaction with participants, enabling the researcher to capture nuanced insights into socio-cultural barriers, economic factors, and educational influences within rural communities.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with Islamabad based universities students belongs to rural areas of Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Sindh, and Baluchistan provinces. These interviews provided an opportunity for participants to express their views on education and empowerment in their own words, revealing contextual realities and challenges. The selection of the four provinces was purposive, representing diverse socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds within Pakistan's rural population. Interview questions were designed to elicit detailed narratives on access to education, its perceived benefits, and obstacles faced by women in these regions.

Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

The study employed random sampling to select a total of 40 female participants from four universities each of 10 student per university to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives. This sample size is deemed sufficient for qualitative research aiming at depth rather than breadth, allowing detailed thematic analysis while managing logistical constraints of fieldwork in rural settings.

Table 1: Sample Distribution Across Selected Universities

University	Number of Participants	Sampling Method
Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU)	10	Random Sampling
Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU)	10	Random Sampling
Federal Urdu University	10	Random Sampling
National University of Modern Languages (NUML)	10	Random Sampling
Total	40	

Methodological Justification:

The study employed random sampling to select 40 female participants (10 per university) to ensure diverse representation while maintaining research feasibility. This sample size aligns with established qualitative research standards (Creswell, 2014; Guest et al., 2006), where saturation typically occurs within 30-50 interviews. The distribution across four strategically selected universities (QAU, AIOU, Federal Urdu University, NUML) captures varied socioeconomic and regional perspectives from Islamabad-based students with rural exposure. The controlled sample enables in-depth thematic analysis of rural women's educational challenges while accommodating fieldwork constraints. Random selection within each university minimized selection bias, and the balanced institutional representation enhances the study's credibility for policy-relevant conclusions.

Data Analysis Methods

Collected interview data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, a systematic method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. This approach enabled the categorization of data into themes related to educational access, empowerment dimensions (economic, social, political), and barriers encountered. NVivo software or a similar qualitative data analysis tool was utilized to code the transcripts and organize the findings effectively. This method ensured rigorous and transparent data interpretation aligned with the study's objectives.

Findings and Discussion

Overview of Educational Attainment Among Rural Women

University students from Islamabad highlighted that rural women in Pakistan's four provinces continue to face significant educational disparities, aligning with national studies (Khan et al., 2019; Malik, 2017). Most participants noted that rural women in their home regions often had only primary-level education or none at all, with dropout rates sharply increasing after primary school. They attributed this to cultural barriers, distant schools, and early marriages a pattern consistent with existing research (Khan, 2018; Sadaf Khan, 2019). One student from KP shared: *"During visits to my village, I observed that girls rarely progress beyond grade five. Families prioritize sons' education or arrange early marriages for daughters."*

Participants emphasized that while rural communities value education, systemic issues like unsafe infrastructure and gender biases limit access. Despite government efforts, they argued that policies remain inadequate in addressing rural women's needs (Malik, 2017; UNESCO, 2021).

Employment Opportunities and Income Generation

Educated participants stressed that secondary or higher education significantly improves rural women's economic participation, enabling work in tailoring, handicrafts, or formal sectors (Alam, 2015; Asghar et al., 2022). A student from Punjab recounted:

"My aunt, a high-school graduate, runs a sewing business. Her income supports the family and empowers her financially."

This aligns with theories linking education to women's economic agency (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). However, students identified key barriers: scarce formal jobs, restrictive gender norms, and limited vocational training (Sadaf Khan, 2019). Many noted that even educated rural women face mobility constraints and social disapproval when seeking work. Still, they acknowledged that educated mothers often break cycles of poverty by prioritizing their children's schooling.

Decision-Making Power, Health Awareness, and Mobility

University participants reported that educated rural women exerted greater influence in household decisions particularly in healthcare, finances, and children's education compared to uneducated peers (Khan et al., 2019; Malik, 2017). A student from Punjab cited an example:

"My grandmother, who never attended school, deferred to male relatives on health matters. But my mother, who studied till grade 10, actively guides our family's nutrition choices."

They also linked education to improved health awareness, echoing global evidence on maternal and child health (Sen, 1999; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). Yet, participants observed that patriarchal norms still restrict rural women's mobility, requiring male permission for travel (Sultana, 2010). They emphasized that education alone cannot overcome deep-rooted cultural barriers without broader societal change (Riaz & Naz, 2021).

Participation in Community and Local Governance

Students with rural ties noted that educated women were more likely to engage in local governance, though participation remained low overall (Alam, 2015; Sultana, 2010). A participant from KP mentioned:

"A distant relative of mine joined her village council after completing college. She now advocates for women's issues, but faces resistance from male leaders."

This reflects studies linking education to political empowerment (Kabeer, 1999; Quisumbing et al., 2014). However, participants identified patriarchal attitudes, familial disapproval, and lack of training as key obstacles (Malik, 2017). They recommended awareness programs to bridge gaps in political literacy and leadership skills (Riaz & Naz, 2021).

Challenges in Accessing Education

It further identify multiple systemic barriers hindering rural women's educational access, findings that corroborate existing literature on educational disparities (Sadaf Khan, 2019; Malik, 2017). Their observations particularly emphasized four interlocking challenges: pervasive poverty that forces families to prioritize sons' education, entrenched son-preference ideologies, prevalent early marriage practices, and critically inadequate educational infrastructure. These structural obstacles were vividly illustrated through field experiences, such as one Punjab-based student's recollection:

"During my fieldwork, a village girl explained, 'We have no nearby girls' school, and walking long distances alone is considered too risky by my family.'"

It also points out that the difficulties in reaching classes are combined with persisting problems of safety and limited mobility for girls. People at the conference stated that a lack of female

teachers and curricula that is insensitive to gender often discourage conservative families from sending their daughters to school (Sultana, 2010). Moreover, they explained that a lack of proper sanitation at schools mostly prevents girls from attending classes, especially when they are menstruating. As a result, participants pushed for policies that would fix infrastructure, challenge traditional customs and remove barriers in institutions all at once. They pointed out that encouraging change in gender roles should be done regionally, without losing sight of the importance of equity in education everywhere in rural regions of Pakistan.

Comparison with Existing Literature

Extensive research shows that the views of university students in Islamabad are very close to and broaden the existing understanding of how education helps rural women. These studies confirm previous claims that education helps people join the workforce and make decisions, mainly by taking part in tailoring or small-scale business activities (Alam, 2015; Asghar et al., 2022). The stories show that, according to Malhotra and Schuler (2005), education helps women earn income, but they also point out that rigid patriarchal beliefs still prevent rural women from achieving economic independence (Sadaf Khan, 2019). In a broader sense, what they observe matches Sen's (1999) "development as freedom" model which sees education as helping people gain abilities that go above earning money and Kabeer's (1999) view that empowerment involves changes in social, political and economic areas. Yet, the students felt that educational solutions by themselves will not break down such barriers; they believe that equally important are efforts to fight gender norms, improve physical surroundings and implement gender policies (Riaz & Naz, 2021). As a result, their insights show how education can empower rural women and also stresses that organizational improvements are crucial for this to happen.

Conclusion

This research shows that education greatly helps women in rural Pakistan become involved and active in their community. With education, women can earn more, share in their family's finances and have more say in decisions they make together with others. They also show greater awareness of health, usually marry later and have fewer children which supports other development aims. Yet, traditional norms, economic hardship and incomplete infrastructure remain challenges that keep advancement from happening. Early marriage, unequal views about gender and schools that are too far away from home reduce rural girls' chance to learn and cause inequality. While education gives people a boost, its top potential can't be reached unless these widespread problems are resolved. This gap can only be tackled using different strategies at once. Those making policies should focus on changes that improve safety in schools, help hire more female teachers and provide help to families to ensure their daughters stay in school. Supporting women's rights and encouraging education for girls also depends on getting men in the community involved. More vocational training and information programs can help women move up both economically and socially. Teamwork between government programs, international groups and local communities helps education result in real empowerment. It is both right and necessary to support rural women's education, since educated women support community health, improve economic growth and promote equality in Pakistan. Based on this research, it is crucial to take fast action together to make education transformative for rural women.

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