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## **The Impact of Higher Education on Women Empowerment, Gender Equality and Social Justice: A Comprehensive Socio-Economic Analysis (Case Study: Chitral Upper and Lower Districts)**

Prof. Dr. Ghazala Yasmeen<sup>1</sup>, Muhammad Hashaam<sup>2</sup>, Tehmina Zia<sup>3</sup> & Sumera Rehman<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Professor, College of Home Economics, University of Peshawar Email: [ghazala\\_nizam2006@yahoo.com](mailto:ghazala_nizam2006@yahoo.com)

<sup>2</sup> Planning Officer, Department of Planning & Development, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Email: [hashaam.ids@pndkp.gov.pk](mailto:hashaam.ids@pndkp.gov.pk)

<sup>3</sup> College of Home Economics, University of Peshawar. Email: [t.zia@uop.edu.pk](mailto:t.zia@uop.edu.pk)

<sup>4</sup> Lecturer, Department of Home Economics, Government College Faisalabad.

Email: [sumairarehman123@hotmail.com](mailto:sumairarehman123@hotmail.com)

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the correlation of higher education with women's empowerment, gender equality, and social justice. Applying a mixed-methods approach quantitative data was collected through a Knowledge Attitude and Practice (KAP) survey administered to 360 working women. While qualitative insights were gathered from focus group discussions with 360 mothers across 12 villages in upper and lower Chitral Districts. Statistical analysis revealed significant positive correlation between education and several key variables: women empowerment ( $r = .620, p < 0.01$ ), political empowerment ( $r = .625, p < 0.01$ ), and gender equality ( $r = .371, p < 0.01$ ), along with a correlation with income ( $r = .389$ ). These findings suggest that higher educational attainment not only enhances economic prospects but also foster increased political participation and challenges traditional norms. The study concludes that investing in female higher education is crucial for achieving sustainable development and promoting a more equitable society. Future research is recommended to adopt longitudinal designs to further explore the long-term effects of educational interventions on women's empowerment and to address enduring challenges such as early marriages and infrastructural limitations.*

### **Keywords**

Education, Gender Equality, Women Empowerment, Social Justice.

### **Introduction**

Education is widely recognized as a critical engine for women's empowerment, enabling individuals to challenge social norms, acquire leadership skills, and attain economic independence. The capabilities approach posited by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) highlights education as a mean to expend individual freedoms and choices. In this light, educational access is not merely about acquiring knowledge but about equipping women with the ability to redefine their roles in society. The United Nation Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) underscore this perspective include SDG4 (Quality Education) and SDG5 (Gender Equality), which collectively advocate for reducing gender disparities through inclusive educational opportunities (UNESCO, 2017).

### **Higher Education and Gender Equality**

Empirical studies have demonstrated that when female higher education is prioritized, societies tend to experience lower levels of gender disparity in employment, wages, and political participation (World Economic Forum, 2022). Research conducted in various context indicates that formal labour market and leadership roles (Chowdhry & Rana, 2020). Moreover, exposure to diverse viewpoints in

educational settings fosters critical consciousness and challenges traditional gender roles, as outlined in social learning frameworks (Bandura & Walters 1977). Inclusive gender-sensitive curricula and supportive institutional policies are essential to cultivating environments where equality is nurtured from early age (Siyez & Beycioglu 2020).

### **Economic Empowerment through Higher Education**

Higher Education is a powerful determinant of women's economic empowerment. Studies indicate that each additional year of education can significantly boost a woman's earning potential, thereby improving household economic stability (World Bank, 2021). Research in South Asia and other developing countries reveals that higher education often facilitates the transition of women from informal to formal employment sectors, resulting in improved financial security and increased decision making power at home (Chant, 2016). Furthermore, vocational and skills based training can open non-traditional career pathways, contribution to economic autonomy (Kabeer, 2005).

### **Higher Education and Social Justice**

Education plays an indispensable role in promoting social justice by equipping marginalized groups with the tools needed to contest systematic inequalities. Feminist critiques emphasize the necessity of reforming educational policies to remove biases that perpetuate gender discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). Initiatives such as scholarships for girls, gender sensitive teacher training, and community engagement programs have been shown to improve female enrolment and retention rates in several developing countries (Morse, 2023). Nevertheless, persistent challenges such as early marriages, socioeconomic constraints, and infrastructural deficiencies continue to hinder progress (Balioune, 2006).

### **Political Participation and Leadership**

The relationship between Higher education and political empowerment is well documented. Higher educational attainment correlates with increased political awareness, voter participation, and representation in leadership roles (Aldrich, 2019). In countries like Pakistan, enhanced educational opportunities have facilitated the rise of women in political spheres, contributing to more inclusive governance (Begum, 2023). Such trends underscore the transformative potential of education in reshaping political landscapes and promoting equitable policy development.

In Pakistani context, higher education had played pivotal role driving women's empowerment and shaping societal norms. The post-Zia era marked a turning point in recognizing the significance of women in national development, stability, and prosperity (Akram, Azhar, & Basit, 2020). The 90s decade witnessed a range of innovative projects and policy interventions in education, health, and social justice, aimed at promoting a gender-balanced society (Ahmad, Muzaffar, Javaid, & Fatima, 2015). These initiatives have contributed to transform traditional gender roles and have empowered women economically, socially, and politically.

### **Research Objectives:**

- To quantify how higher education impact women empowerment.
- To assess how women empowerment effect gender equality and ensure social justice in the society.
- To evaluate the effects of higher education on socio economic status of women.

### **Hypotheses:**

1. Hypothesis 1 (H1): Female Higher Education have positive correlation with women empowerment and gender equality that ensure justice in the system.
2. Hypothesis 2 (H2): Female Higher Education is positively correlated with income of the women that contribute to socio economic status, sustainable development, fostering peaceful societies, and promoting individual well-being.

### **Material and Methods:**

**Research Approach:** The mixed-methods research approach has been applied using combining quantitative and qualitative data for understanding of the research hypotheses, taking both quantitative tendencies and detailed qualitative observations. In depth discussions were conducted with the focused group to collect qualitative data using BRAURN and CLARLK (2012) method. The findings from the qualitative analysis were used to develop the survey to collect quantitative data.

**Sampling Strategy:**

a. **Target Population:** Working women aged 30 to 40 years who were first generation women who got university degree belonged to low income families' income less than 50 thousand (father income was less than 50 thousands) were identified as target population.

b. **Sampling Frame:** Two broad categories were identified to collect data. The working women and their mothers. The qualitative data was collected using purposive sampling technique. The quantitative data was collected using Knowledge Attitude and Practice survey (KAP) based on the findings of qualitative data. The data was collected from Upper and Lower Chitral districts.

**Sampling site:** 12 major villages were identified for collection of data. These include Drosh, Singoor, Chitral , Danin, Goldoor and Chumurkun from Lower Chitral whereas Boni, Barainis, Reshun, Kuragh, Mastug and Priet from Upper Chitral . Data is collected from 360 females from the above mentioned 12 villages across upper and lower chitral including all four tehsils. In addition, 360 mothers of the target sample were also identified for focus group discussion. Thus the total sample size both including working women and their mothers was 720 females.

**Data Collection:**

a. **Qualitative Data:** Conducted in-depth focus group discussions with mothers of the working women to gather qualitative insights.

b. **Quantitative Data:** Using KAP survey approach that is based on the knowledge, attitude and practice detailed questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data. Questions related to demographics, qualification, education level, job status, type of job, current skill levels, income level, consumption status, and the perceived impact of the education on women empowerment and gender equality and socio-economic status and social justice were incorporated. The data was collected from selected sample, ensuring ethical considerations and informed consent.

**Data Analysis:**

Education has been identified as a crucial factor in women's empowerment, enabling them to participate fully in social, economic, and political spheres.

**Focus group discussion:** In focused group discussion with the mothers of the selected first generation university graduates' women empowerment, gender equality and social justice were key point of interest. The respondents collectively emphasized the significant role of education in enhancing the contributive role of women in decision making. Participants highlighted that their daughters being educated ladies and working women are living a completely different life. Education not only contributed to transform personality traits of their daughters, contributions to the family purse but also foster a culture of respect and tolerance for females in their families. This culture of trust effected positively many other families and they are sending their daughters to colleges and universities to get higher education. Thus few educated women become able to transform and influence whole village. Thus following variables have been identified for quantitative data collection.

- Economic empowerment
- Health empowerment
- Social empowerment
- Political empowerment
- Gender Equality
- Breaking gender stereotypes

**Analysis of Correlation:**

Chi square technique is applied to quantify and assess correlation among education, women empowerment social justice and another variable. The results of correlation between education, women empowerment, social justice and other variables. The results obtained are based on the data collected through a questionnaire particularly designed for this study. The results calculated shows a strong significant positive correlation of education and women empowerment ( $r = .620^*$ ). Education and income of the respondents were also positively correlated ( $r = .389,$ ) but the impact of education on income is less than its impact on women empowerment that shows an educated woman may earn less but still she is more empowered than uneducated or less educated females. Education shows positive correlation with "Gender Equality" ( $r = .371^{**}$ ), this specifies that education improves the feeling of self-esteem that results in gender equality. Educated females are in a better position to earn. They do job or run micro businesses and earn better income level that positively impact their socio

economic status. The correlation between education and socio economic status is established ( $r = 0.313$ ). Another interesting correlation is between education and health empowerment. The results show that educated females are empowered to take health decisions for their family members, the correlation was ( $r = 0.030$ ). The most interesting feature of the collected data was political empowerment. The female of Chitral cast their vote but it was found that educated ladies cast their votes on their own likes and dislikes. In addition to this they contest election and in election 2024 the Deputy Speaker of KP Assembly belongs to upper Chitral. She contested the election on open seat. Two more ladies made possible their way to the provincial assembly and one lady to the Senate of Pakistan. The correlation between education and political empowerment is ( $r = 0.625$ ). Social justice and education were also positively correlated ( $r = 0.420$ ), higher the education, higher income level of individual promotes higher positive attitude of individual towards oneself that creates social justice. The data shows that “education” and “breaking gender stereotypes” have positive correlation ( $r = 0.338^{**}$ ). Positive correlation also found between education and gender equality ( $r = 0.132$ ). The significant positive correlation between education, gender equality and breaking gender stereotypes indicates that educated women talk about gender biasedness, discuss how gender are portrayed for stereotype roles in society help other female to become educated and empowered.

*The coefficient of correlation of all the variables were statistically significant as “p value” is less than 0.01 ( $p < 0.01$ ).*

### **Discussion**

The study’s findings underscore that education significantly contributes to women’s empowerment, gender equality, and social justice. A strong positive correlation was found between education and women’s empowerment ( $r = 0.620$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that higher educational attainment enhances self-confidence and decision making abilities. Similarly, the positive relationship with political empowerment ( $r = 0.625$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) suggests that education fosters greater political awareness and participation among women. Although the correlation between education and income ( $r = 0.389$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), it reinforces the idea that education not only improves financial stability but also drives broader social and political engagement. Additionally, education’s role in challenging gender stereotypes and promoting gender equality ( $r = 0.371$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ;  $r = 0.338$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) further demonstrates its transformative potential. These findings are consistent with the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999, Nussbaum, 2000) and previous research emphasizing the importance of inclusive, gender sensitive educational policies (UNESCO, 2017; UNICEF, 2020).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations:**

It is concluded from the findings of the study that education as a powerful catalyst for empowering women and achieving gender equality. The evidence suggests that higher educational attainment not only improves economic prospects but also enhances political participation and challenges traditional gender norms. In the context of Pakistan, as early marriages and infrastructural limitations remains. Policymakers are encouraged to invest in female higher education including vocational and skills-based training to foster economic independence and social equality. Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to further examine these relationships and address the remaining challenges. Overall, prioritizing education is essential for promoting a more equitable and just society.

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