

# BARRIERS TO EMPOWERMENT: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF WOMEN'S CHALLENGES IN PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION IN GOVERNMENT COLLEGES OF BAHAWALPUR, PAKISTAN

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## ABSTRACT

In Pakistani Society, mostly male hold the leading role in the family and is responsible for making decision regarding the women in his family, including their education, choice of career and other matter the society which is deeply rooted in tradition and male dominance. For centuries, women were limited to the household and solely tasked with domestic or uncompensated labor. In recent times, there has been a significant increase in the number of women pursuing higher education and entering the workforce but still their numbers are very low. The objectives of this study were to explore the challenges faced by women in pursuing higher education for career development; to examine the role of higher education department in fostering women's access to higher education and career development. The present study was qualitative in nature and this type of research is primarily exploratory in its purpose, aiming to gain a comprehensive understanding of a specific phenomenon. The present study was conducted in Government Colleges of Bahawalpur, Pakistan. Total numbers of 12 Principles were selected for the Focus Group Discussion from the targeted colleges. These discussions aimed to gather administrative and institutional viewpoints regarding the support systems in place, the cultural and structural obstacles female students face, and the role of colleges in enabling or hindering women's academic and career advancement. Collected data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The Focus Group Discussion explored the experiences of women in higher education and career development within the Saraiki cultural context. The discussion identified the major challenges women faced, such as early marriage, patriarchal traditions and societal expectations that prioritize household roles over education. Participants highlighted that in many cases, families discourage women's education due to fears of liberal influence and a desire to preserve family honor. Despite these barriers, the availability of educational institutions, qualified teaching staff and access to practical and research opportunities play a vital role in enhancing women's academic growth.

**Key Words:** Challenges, Women pursuing Higher Education, Career Development Bahawalpur, South Punjab

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education is the foundation upon which a country can build a sustainable economy and faster development, providing skilled and competent professionals essential for this growth. Higher education institutes in the country equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to complete and stay up-to-date with the rest of the world (Barnet,

1990). Viewing the issues from a female perspective, higher education is an essential factor in the advancement of women and the promotion of gender equality. If women are given equal access to educational resources, they can be an integral part of economic growth and development, representing a large portion of the population (Klasen, 2002).

Higher education gives females the opportunity to understand their rights and responsibilities, as mothers are the core of the family, educated mothers are able to bring up children who are knowledgeable, well-mannered and soundly conscious. A mother with an education is better equipped to make decisions for her family. Educated women are most self-assured and pass this assurance on to their children, resulting in sounder choices within the family (Lager, 1999). They understand the importance of educating girls and are determined to provide equal educational opportunities to the children (Mughal & Manzoor, 1999).

Pakistan is the male-dominated society, women are perceived to be weaker and less worthy than men, leading to gender inequality. The severity of gender inequality that women experience in Pakistan varies based on their social and economic status, as well as the degree to which tribal, feudal, religious and other social structures have an impact on that life. Pakistan has a long history of subjugating women, even before gaining independence over a half a century ago as part of the Indian subcontinent. According to UNESCO's 2012 survey, Pakistan is a 113<sup>th</sup> most literate nation out of 120 registered UN Members, with a literacy rate of 49.9%. The low ranking is due to multiple sectors, with gender discrimination being a major factor. In Pakistan, as in many other developing nations, the unequal treatment of women is a result of pervasive societal and cultural norms that place women at a lower standing than men (Aly, 2007). The disturbing effects of deep-rooted prejudice still show up today in the form of inequality in educational opportunities. The gender gap, poor health status of women and a lack of awareness of their rights women's progress in the work place has made notable headway during the last of century (Carr et al, 2015; Oltmann 2009; O, Meara 2015; Sehwanke 2013; Weiss 2012). The lack of women's in position of power or authority at universities and colleges worldwide is a longstanding issue (Avin). Women make up nearly half of the world's population. The value of education has been recognized as an indispensable factor for social development and welfare in any society around the world. Education introduces new ideas and skills to people. Without educating women, it is impossible to think about harmonious development. Education is the key to empowering women in any society of the world.

Moreover, education is an important step in the empowerment of women because women can respond to problems, face traditional rules and groom their lives. It helps reduce questions and functions as a way to improve their family. Be a feminist with strong belief in gender equality, which brings prosperity, sustainable development, love, hope, honor, sincerity and devotion through education in society. The developed countries of the entire world pay the same precautions for higher education between men and women, but in developing countries higher education has been ignored and same with Pakistan. Education should create enhances for individual to achieve their goals and realize potential; at best a rich and stimulating environment can be created that encourages each person to explore and learn in their own way (Barskay, 1998). It is clear that the success and well being of a nation is largely dependent on educational opportunities available to its citizens. Education is the foundation of any nation's infrastructure. It is the most potent tool for transformation (Khan, 2007). In a social context society has a responsibility to ensure that educational resources are available to all members of the population (Shahzad, 2011).

The availability of higher education for females is a major concern in Pakistan due to the cultural norms that largely restrict women from accessing educational opportunities. In Pakistani culture, patriarchal households are prevalent, with males typically taking on the role of breadwinners and having the primary say in decisions made in the home. Men and women, who are both distinguished by their biological sex, from the basis of civilization and can be found all over the world. Men have always been integral to society and will remain so in the foreseeable future (Mujahid et al., 2015). Women face serious difficulties from the individuals they encounter when attending colleges and universities. Most people view them with suspicion, obstruct their path and heckle them on a daily basis. These circumstances make it difficult for them to attend college and university, even if their parents permit them to pursue higher education. As a result they stay at home and leave.

Some female students and their families are extremely concerned about the safety and security of their daughters. Especially when college and university transport is not accessible for female students. A female student encountered a lot of challenges in getting to college and university in the

time of morning, as well as many other issues. Female students experience a lot of difficulty in public transport and due to the high cost of private transportation; parents are unable to afford the additional expenses.

In the educational progress parental illiteracy has become a significant barrier for girls. The parents who are illiterate are not aware of the importance of women education and do not value their children investing time in various educational activities. They expressed that girl's education is not as important as boy's education, showing a lack of interest in passing it. Most of them believed that after completing high school, their daughters had fulfilled their duties to their family and did not feel the need for them to pursue education after matriculation. Most families from the middle class face financial constraints when it comes to the children's higher education, as they are unable to pay the expensive fees associated with it. This especially burdens females, their parents' income is often limiting factor. The custom of engaging in marriage at an early age appears to be a significant impediment to female education. Girls are expected to meek, humble and compliant in their behavior. Girls' mobility is typically restricted as they age, while boys are encouraged to be more assertive. The typical expectation that after marriage, women must take on domestic duties and care for their husband and children often results in them being assigned outdoor tasks. They need to receive adequate preparation so that they can transition into married life without any issue.

#### **Objectives of the study**

1. To explore the challenges faced by women in pursuing higher education for career development
2. To examine the role of higher education department in fostering women's access to higher education and career development.

#### **Review of the Relevant Literature**

Education is an essential factor in developing a woman, as it provides women with the knowledge and skills needed to become empowered. Educated women are more aware of their rights and are more likely to seek out paid employment, which in turn leads to increased women's empowerment of the nation (Khan et al., 2010). The system of higher education plays a pivotal role in nurturing human capital and contributing to the development of social and cultural progress. Any community that has a large population of college graduates typically

enjoys the highest social respect and involvement in activities (Yousefy & Baratali, 2011).

Kakar et al. (2011) demonstrated that the importance of women's education acknowledgeable globally, as it improves women's earning potential, grants them autonomy in making decisions about family size, marriage and employment prospects and provide more opportunities for them to take on different roles in their respective countries. A woman who is educated and chooses to marry later in life can use family planning methods to have smaller family. This results in a reduction in population, which helps families to control expenses, receive better health care and be able to access education facilities, as well as reducing child labor in countries like Pakistan. Parveen and Leonhauser (2005) suggested that providing instructions on skill development and access to all forms of media could help empower women. Shah et al. (2016) conducted a study looking at the relationship between women's education and social status in Balochistan, Pakistan. Their findings suggested that there is a highly significant correlation between the two factors. The study concluded that higher education empowers women in various socio-economic aspects, such as parents and NGOs, should make concerted efforts to equip young girls with the skills and knowledge needed to ensure equality in Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan. Kabir (2001) stated that women are essential for creating social change from a feminist perspective and empowering them is an important step in fostering agent of social transformation. He identified three key aspects to this empowerment: resources, agency and achievement. He explained that agency drive and intention individuals put in to their own actions, their individual sense of empowerment and control. The power of self-determination can be cultivated through targeted development initiatives which promote female empowerment and provide women the opportunity to assess challenges, make informed decisions and gain practical knowledge. Achievements are the fruits of one's labor, the rewards of having invested their time, energy and resources into something, resulting is an increase in their resources and a feeling of empowerment. To achieve empowerment, it is essential to consider multiple domains, including women's lives at home and in the community, as well as society's structure at the national and international level.

Education women play a crucial role in enhancing productivity and utilizing resources more efficiently. Furthermore, by considering the broader impact of education on women beyond just economic productivity, the benefits of investing in female education far surpass those of male education (UNDP, 1998). Numerous investigations have been carried out to examine the connection between education and the empowerment of women and discoveries of some scholars have been referenced here. Education may play a crucial role in empowering women (Sundarman, Sekar & Subburaj, 2014, p. 76).

Stromquist (1995) stated that the formal education, particularly, plays a critical role in achieving women's empowerment objects. Literature, particularly, in text books and curricula, has the potential to challenge and debunk sexual stereotypes, thus growth and development of diverse gender identities. Formal education can have significant impact on creating guidelines for teachers to avoid sexism. These academic institutions effectively nurture individuals to impartially consider the language used for individuals of all genders, particularly women. Leaving these academic institutions with equal opportunities training can greatly contribute to the growth of women's empowerment.

According to Achunine (2004), the educational curriculum in Nigeria plays a crucial role in preparing women for specific roles. In the beginning the curriculum focused on training women solely for particular roles such as nursing, clerical work and teaching. However, this backfired when there was a lack of women in areas like politics, engineering, medicine, law and other fields. In Nigeria, most women are still not receiving proper training to become leaders in top positions and other important fields, which hinders that abilities to compete with men on equal terms and ultimately limits their opportunities for empowerment (Ojobo, 2008:94). Gaus (2013) conducted a structured questionnaire with a total of 16 women in management from fewer public and four private universities in Rawalpindi and Islamabad in order to determine the obstacles that females managers face in higher education in Pakistan and to break down the barriers, the research revealed in that women in private sector universities are faced with more significant family and work place obstacles than in other type of universities. The finding of Khan (2013) showed that society's

attitude in towards women in higher education management was unfavorable.

Nagaraja (2018) argues that education is an essential factor in helping to empower women. The study focused on education as an important way for women and young girls to improve their lives, with an emphasize on quality and equality the government of India has taken step to enhance women's access to education, such as implementing open and distance learning models, providing skill-based training in engineering, offering scholarship to both poor and academically talented students, buildings, hostels for women and offering postdoctoral fellowships to women. The author recommends that policy makers prioritize providing skill based training to women, establishing intuitions in remote areas and arranging bank loan facilities to make higher education accessible to those with the aptitude for it.

Qureshi & Rarieya, (2007) argue that land of democracy in a feudal system can lead to inequality, resulting in powerlessness for large section of the population including women feudalism creates a cancerous setting in which the disadvantaged, particularly young girls are subjected to abduction abuse and even murder-a practice which has historically been accepted and tolerated by the security. The above attitude is often used to justify a narrow, regulated and, arguably deceptive reading of women's right in Islam, which then secure as a means to limit women's access to both familial and social resources. A socio-cultural constraints restrict girls from participating in productive activities, leading to decrease enrollment rates of girls in a educational institutions in the society.

Ismail (2019) revealed that female education is often hindered by a variety of issues such as the lack of educational institutions in remote areas and the lack of separate institutions, fears of extremist's groups and frequent alterations to educational policies. Education is not only essential for personal advancements but also for society's growth. Education is intimately connected to society and it's advancements, therefore, without education a society cannot progress. An incredible powerful force for progress and its role for contributing to the advancement of society in widely acknowledged. Education is a fundamental right for everyone in ant given society. Education is utmost importance for growth and development of a society, thus it is essential for both men and women required a high level of education in order to contribute to

advancement of society. Investing in female education is key to the development process and not doing so can limit the potential benefit that can be achieved. Female literacy is urgent priority to that needs to be addressed.

Based on study conducted by Baki (2004), it has been observed that women make up the majority of 58% of the population in Saudi Arabia. Despite this majority woman has not been able to secure employment opportunities after completing their education. In the same way, their opportunities may be limited to only a small set of traditional fields such as education, medicine and nursing because these professions are seen as a complement to their household duties. As noted by Sabbagh(1996), the conservative view promoted the notion that society and education should prioritize traditional female qualities in order to capitalize on the stereotypical roles of women as caretaker, nurtures and servants. Cordesman (2003) argues that the cultural and occupational climate has instilled a mentality among Saudi women to maintain a continuous involvement in the education system for a long period of time than males. In a study conducted by Galor & Well (1996), it was discovered that there may be a correlation between gender equality, education, fertility rates and economic development. The research suggests that a vicious cycle of poverty can occur, as a result of gender inequality, high fertility rate, and lower investment in children leading to limited economic growth in a specific region. All the elements support and promote each other, with the country as a whole falling into this cycle.

### Research Methodology

The present study was qualitative in nature and this type of research is primarily exploratory in its purpose, aiming to gain a comprehensive understanding of a specific phenomenon. It assists in comprehending the phenomenon and generating ideas. Qualitative research employs a subjective approach, allowing the researcher to acquire extensive knowledge about the issue at hand. The typical size of sample is typically quite limited. As per Johansson & Onwegbuzie (2014) the research must maintain a certain level of detachment during the research due to being the sole source of truth throughout the entire process. The Qualitative data of this research was collected through non-probability sampling technique. Total numbers of 12 Principals were selected for the Focus Group Discussion from the targeted colleges. Qualitative

data was analyzed and presented through thematic analysis. Total numbers of two focus group discussions were held with the principals of the respective colleges. These discussions aimed to gather administrative and institutional viewpoints regarding the support systems in place, the cultural and structural obstacles female students face, and the role of colleges in enabling or hindering women's academic and career advancement.

### Results & Discussion

#### Theme 1 Challenges in Higher Education

The question was asked whether early marriage restricts women's higher education. In response all the participants agreed that after marriage, young female students find it difficult to continue their education. Participant 1 stated that many bright students are unable to continue their education because they must deal with their family, culture, economic issues and health problems related to progeny all at once. Another participant added a few strong young girls who take a stand for their education, first face resistance from their in-laws. In Saraiki cultures household responsibilities are prioritized over education. Therefore, to continue their education, they must face challenges on multiple fronts and manage several responsibilities at the same time. Another participant stated that many families believe that since they do not intend for women to work, therefore, there is no need to continue their education. Another participant said that in Saraiki culture, girls' engagement is often decided in childhood. Therefore, there is a general agreement that girls should be married early. As a result, many girls barely make it to higher education. The next question asked to the participants was whether they agreed that the propaganda of liberalism discourages women to pursuing higher education. In response to the question. The participant 1 stated that after the Islamia University scandal, many people believe that people women should not receive higher education because it promotes liberal thinking and moral deviation, which can put the horal of parent at risk.

Another participant mentioned that it depends on the region. In rural areas, compared to urban areas, the trend of not providing higher education to woman is more common. The belief is that higher education fosters liberal thinking in women, making them less controllable. They believe that highly education women start making their own decisions and disregarded the choices made by their elders.

Another participant added that Saraiki culture is a patriarchal culture where women are rarely granted personal freedom. Educated families who understand the importance of education prioritize girl's education and respect that personal freedom. "The majority of the families perceive women's higher education as a threat to family's honor and customary practices. Sometimes, women face character assassination, with causes many talented individuals to be deprived of higher education." The next question asked to the participant whether traditional role of women hinder their higher education? All the participants agreed that traditional especially higher education role of women acts as a barrier to progress in that career formation especially higher education. They stated that in our society, girls encourage them to adopt traditional roles rather than become educated. They are expected to focus more on household responsibilities and fulfill their domestic duties efficiently.

### **Theme 2 Opportunities For Higher Education**

Almost all the participants from both groups agreed that the availability of higher education institutions impacts a lot on women's education as well as their career. Participant 1 stated that due to availability of sufficient teaching staff in gout in colleges of rural areas students must move to big cities. Participant 6 added that there are many colleges in Bahawalpur district, where that teaching staff is still incomplete, in rural areas, newly appointed teachers often do not stay of the college for long and get themselves transferred back to their respective cities. As a result, the positions remain vacant. A question was asked how does practical work contribute to improving women's potential for higher education. In response participant 7 stated that practical work enhances girls' ability to think and understand. Secondly, it develops critical thinking in them and thirdly, it helps clarify their concepts, which are helpful for them in understanding the subject. Participant 8 added that practical and empirical work not only clarify the concept of the students, it also is an excellent means of learning new things, experimenting with them and shaping their own ideas. Participants 2 stated "the establishment of higher education after leads to better job prospects for higher salaries and improved career opportunities."

Another participant added "the establishment of higher education institutions expands opportunities

for women to pursue advanced degrees when higher education is accessible, more women can participant which increase overall enrollment later and educational attainment for women." Participant 5 expressed her view "Increased participation of women in higher education creates role models for younger women, seeing women in advanced educational setting can inspire and motivate the next generation to pursue higher education." Participant 7 express her view when she was asked that how research seminars and conferences help women areas to career development opportunities? In its response she said: "Participating in such forum raises their professional profile and may lead to invitations for speaking engagements." Another participant added that presenting research or participating in discussions boosts self-confidence and public speaking skills, which are essential for career development. Participant 5 "Conferences provide inform after and grants scholarships and fellowships, which can support further education or research work."

### **Theme 3 Challenges in Career Development And**

Participants were asked to give their view on whether limited job opportunities affect women's career progression. In its response participant 11 expressed her views "Yes it affects a lot. Fewer available optional mean women may remain in the same role for longer periods without advancement." Another participant added women have to accept jobs below that qualifications and skill levels hiding their professional development." This highlights the issue of underemployment among women where despite having qualifications and skills, they are forced to take jobs that do not match their capabilities. This may be due to limited job opportunities, gender bias or family responsibilities. As a result, their career progression and professional growth are significantly stunned potentially affecting their confidence and future prospects. Participant 12 stated "I know many talented women who left their regions or professions altogether in search of better opportunities. Career uncertainty can affect personal decisions such as marriage, family planning or relocation." The statement of participant 12 draws attention to the geographic and sectorial disparities in opportunities for women. The lack of career growth certain regions or professions compels women to migrate or change career disrupting personal life decisions. The unpredictability of career success not only affects professional life but deeply influences critical life

choices illustrating the intersecting between career and personal domain in a woman's life.

All the participants asked a question. What was your experience with family support while joining the job? In its reply to the participant 4 expressed has a view. "I secured my job 2 years before getting married and my father gave me his full support throughout the process. My first posting was in another city and I stayed there. Participant 6 stated that family support matters a lot in women's career development. The views of participants 4 and 6 clearly demonstrated the pivotal role of family encouragement in shaping women's professional journeys. The participants highlighted how father and husband played essential roles enabling them to pursue this career independently. This not only reflects in practical support any receive but also challenges the stereotype that women must compromise on career aspirations after marriage. The emphasis on family support as determining factor validates. The idea that when women are backed by their families, they are more likely to thrive in their professional lives.

Participant 1 expressed her views. "Being a principal of the collage, I have not faced much injustice. However, one thing I have observed is that our higher authorities tend to be strict with female principals compared to male ones. Their behavior in noticeably softer towards male principals, while women often face a tougher attitude. Additionally, women principals are not granted the same rights or authority to implement decisions. This is because males are dominant and stand up strongly for their rights, where women are not given such space or support."

Another participant 2 stated, "I think male principals do not comply with the official instructions of higher authorities as we female do. That's why they are not dealt with as strictly as we are." The responses of participants 1 and P2 shed light on subtle yet significant gender disparity in leadership treatment with academic institutions. Although women in leadership roles often display greater discipline and adherence to roles, they paradoxically face more rigid behavior from their senior. In contrast male are handled with more tolerance and flexibility. The observation highlights a deep-rooted bias where assertiveness in men is respected or overlooked, while women are expected to comply without complaint. It also reflects how power dynamics favor men not necessity because

they perform better, but because they push back more forcefully and is granted more autonomy.

Participant 3 expressed her view while she was asked a question that how does maternity and casual leave influence women's career growth? "Maternity and casual leave help women manage family responsibilities, reducing stress and enable better focus at work." Another Participant added, "Supportive leave policies increase job satisfaction, loyalty and encouraging long term career commitment." Participant 4 stated, "Casual leave for short term needs prevent burnout and allows women to maintain career continuity rather leaving the workforce entirely." Participant 6 pointed a negative impact of leaves on women careers she said. "Time away from work can sometimes result in missed promotions, slower skill development, or exclusion from major duties." Participants' views on leaves indicate that maternity and casual leave are essential for supporting women's health and family responsibilities, they can unintentionally slowdown career growth if not backed by inclusive policies and unbiased workplace cultures.

When asked a question about workplace harassment participants stated that they face a lot of pressure and workplace harassment especially at the time of recruitment, which involves both bureaucracy and political figures. Participant added, "Those certain situations force women to think that proper they are not suitable for the administrative jobs compared to men. Even now, women in our society are not given the same respects as men. Even though, they work in the same grade and in the same positions."

#### **Theme 4 Government Role In Empowering And Developing Women**

Participant I expressed her views "We are all seeing a positive shift in faculty development. The Government is encouraging female leadership and professional training, which uplifts not just the staff, but the entire atmosphere." Participant 3 added "Initiatives like smart classrooms and laptop distribution have helped bridge the digital divide for our students. These tools are crucial in preparing them for today's competitive world." Another participant P5 expressed her views "The Government of Punjab has significantly improved the infrastructure of our colleges from modern science labs and transport facility.

The participants collectively highlighted a positive transformation in government colleges, emphasizing improvements in faculty development, digital access

and infrastructure. According to the participants government support for female leadership and professional training has not only enhanced individual growth but also uplifted the overall academic environment.

Participant 7 expressed her views “Legal protection in the workplace plays a very important role in empowering women by unseeing safety, equality and opportunities for our professional growth” Participant 8 add “Legal frameworks such as anti-harassment laws and labor sights ported women from abuse, discontinuation and exploitation.” Participant 9 expressed her view “With the passage of frame many things have been changing. The existence and enforcement of workplace laws promote a culture of respect, accountability and inclusion.” The views of P7, P8 and P9 reflects that legal protection don’t just shield woman from harming actively enable them and lead empowerment through law fosters confidence, equality and long-term participation of women in the higher education institutions.

Participant 10 expressed her views “Baby care creations and massing services at the workplace are essential for supporting the health and in wellbeing of working women, especially mother of young children.” Another participant 11 added “These facilities reduce stress and anxiety for mothers, as they know their child is nearby and in safe hands. This support helps maintain mental peace, emotional stability and overall physical health, resulting in the risk of postpartum depression and burnout. The views of P10 and P11 reflect that baby care and nursing services are not just conveniences. They are fundamental aim points of a supportive workplace that promotes women’s health, wellbeing and career continuity. Participant 3 expressed her views on the importance of technological skills for career development. “Technological skills boost self-confidence and reduce on clerks for digital desks. Specially these skills enable a principal to arrange all the documents in her office.” Another participant stated, “With digital tools and online platforms, we can continue learning and upgrading our skills at our own pace, which is crucial for staying relevant in a fast- changing work requirement.”

Study leaves play a significant role in women’s career advancement, especially in academic, government and professional rectors. Participant 3 expressed her view about study leaves. “Higher education builds subject expertise, critical thinking and decision-making abilities.” Another participant added “I have

availed study leave during my M. Phil degree. I think women who use avail study leave to enhance there their qualification are more likely to remain in the work force and become role models for other.” Although study leaves are meant to support professional growth, women in higher education particularly in college cadre face several challenges when they availed study leave.

Participant 4 stated, “The major issue after the completion of study leave is returning to the same post, because after availing one year of leave the concerned post is automatically becomes vacant. During this period if someone else is appointed to that post, the concerned lady officer must be dislocated in case of no vacant post in the college.” Participant 5 said “Many women who want to avail study leave do not do simply because they fear being dislocated from their current position.”

Participant stressed that to support a women’s career development, polices must be ensure job security during study leave and grantee smooth reintegration, erecting a more encouraging environment for women to upgrade their career without fear of displacement.

### **Theme 5 Impact of Higher Education on Women's Career Development**

The Focus Group Discussion explored the experiences of women in higher education and career development within the Saraiki cultural context. The discussion identifies major challenges women face, such as early marriage, patriarchal traditions and societal expectations that prioritize household roles over education. Participants highlighted that in many cases, families discourage women's education due to fears of liberal influence and a desire to preserve family honor. Despite these barriers, the availability of educational institutions, qualified teaching staff and access to practical and research opportunities play a vital role in enhancing women’s academic growth. Career development is also affected by limited job opportunities, workplace discrimination, lack of family support and harassment, all of which restrict professional advancement. Government initiatives such as improved infrastructure, legal protections, digital tools and childcare facilities have helped, but issues remain particularly around job security during study leave. Ultimately, the discussion concludes that higher education not only improves career prospects but also empowers women to make independent

decisions, know their rights and inspire others in their communities.

## 6. Conclusion

This study investigated the challenges and opportunities associated with women's access to higher education and its influence on career development and empowerment, with a focus on South Punjab. The findings clearly demonstrated that higher education plays a pivotal role in promoting women's empowerment across social, economic and political spheres. Women who attain higher education are more likely to make autonomous decisions, participate in the workforce, understand and demand their rights and serve as active agents of change within their families and communities. However, the study also identified numerous barriers that persistently hinder women's educational and professional advancement. Cultural norms, early marriages, financial constraints, patriarchal family structures and religious misinterpretations remain significant obstacles. Moreover, many women continue to face discrimination and gender-based inequalities in the workplace, including limited access to leadership roles, workplace harassment, and unequal pay and lack of mentoring opportunities. In conclusion, while progress has been made in enhancing women's access to higher education in Pakistan, systemic barriers and socio-cultural constraints continue to limit their full participation and empowerment. Addressing these issues requires sustained efforts through inclusive policy reforms, cultural transformation, educational investment and gender-sensitive institutional practices. Only by creating an enabling environment can women realize their full potential and contribute meaningfully to national development.

## Recommendations

The study proposed the following recommendations to address the challenges faced by women in pursuing higher education and for career development in District Bahawalpur Southern Punjab:

- The government should establish more women's universities and colleges, particularly in rural and underserved areas, to reduce cultural and mobility-related constraints on female students.
- Strengthen enforcement of laws against workplace harassment, gender

discrimination and early marriage. Legal aid cells dedicated to women should be created at local levels to provide timely assistance.

- Introduce and enforce maternity leave, childcare facilities and nursing services in educational and professional institutions to support working mothers and female students.
- Increase the availability of need-based and merit-based scholarships for female students, especially from low income and rural backgrounds.
- Implement vocational and technological training, leadership workshops and refresher courses aimed at enhancing women's employability and professional capacity
- Revise textbooks and teaching content to challenge gender stereotypes and promote positive representations of women. Ensure secure transportation, adequate hostel facilities and female-friendly campus environments to improve access and retention of female students.

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