

# FROM SUPPRESSION TO EMPOWERMENT: THE TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN WORKING WOMEN'S LIVES

Dr Amber Ferdoos

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, International Islamic University, Islamabad.

[amber.ferdoos@iiu.edu.pk](mailto:amber.ferdoos@iiu.edu.pk)

Corresponding Author: \*

Dr Amber Ferdoos

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17090352>

Received	Revised	Accepted	Published
17 June 2025	27 July, 2025	27 August 2025	10 September 2025

## ABSTRACT

Empowering women is a crucial aspect of achieving gender equality and driving social change. This research examined the lived experiences of women's empowerment. In particular, the study explores female experience of making household decisions in their early years of marriage and how these processes changed after they obtained higher education and became independent in their economic activities. The theoretical background of this study is based on Resource Theory (Blood & Wolfe, 1960) and the views of Max Weber and Michel Foucault, who argue that control of resources is associated with the power to make decisions. The study used a qualitative research design based on an interpretivist, constructivist worldview in which open-ended in-depth interviews were the tool for collecting data. Fifteen women academicians working in Universities were selected through purposive sampling. Results indicate that the majority of interviewees got married shortly after obtaining their bachelor's degrees and initially had a restricted level of autonomy, economic reliance, and limited involvement in making significant family decisions. These limitations encouraged them to seek higher education as a means of empowerment. According to the participants, receiving advanced degrees allowed them not only to become more economically independent but also to change their role in the family, making them more involved in the decision-making process and contributing to their overall agency. The narratives of women reveal that higher education is a strong driver behind the emancipation of women, influencing the power structure in the household.

**Keywords:** Higher education, working women, empowerment, interpretive philosophy, decision making.

## INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment is considered a significant force of national development and a fundamental human right. Women's empowerment means moving from a position of weakness to exercising power. The objective of women's empowerment is to provide rights, powers, opportunities, and responsibilities to women so that they can expand their abilities, contemplate, and perform liberally with men in society. Empowerment is the development of women's proficiency and autonomy to practice maximum power over their actions. Basically, empowerment of women is the

process of development of the social, financial, and political position of women. Empowerment requires the creation of such a society where women can live without the fear of domination, mistreatment, and discrimination that women confront in a conventional patriarchal society. Women comprise half of the world's population and are a dynamic agent of social change; however, women are still being subjugated and deprived of various fundamental rights, and they endure subordinate social status not only in the home and at the workplace. The pervasive inequality and

manipulation of women's rights induce the requirement of empowerment for women. Education can help empower women (BMC Public Health, 2021; PMC, 2022; Faqeer Muhammad et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2025).

"Education of women is an important key to improving health and nutrition and also empowers them to participate in decision making". Furthermore, education empowers women to acquire knowledge and support them in attaining financial stability, self-reliance, professional and practical skills, counseling, good health, and wellbeing, as well as the courage and power to confront hardships in every field of life, thereby empowering them to perform equal tasks alongside men in nation-building. Education is considered an effective tool for reducing the inequalities between men and women, and strengthening women's position in society, so that they can utilize their strengths and abilities effectively in society. The empowerment of women in society and the family is directly associated with their control over decision-making. Conventionally, in a male-dominated society, gender roles contemplate the participation of men in commercial fields and women's involvement in the domestic field, which has prevented women from engaging in decision-making. Decision-making has been influenced by the contribution of women to home, domestic, and family duties. Education, knowledge, and awareness are considered crucial tools for women's decision-making. Ultimately, decision-making is an essential determinant of women's empowerment (BMC Public Health, 2021; GER Journal, 2024; Pakistan Journal of Law, 2024).

In Pakistan, education is a powerful tool for change. It strengthens women's capacity to challenge patriarchal norms within households. Household decision-making, access to economic opportunities, and involvement in the labour market are the fundamental components of women's empowerment. However, this process remains unequal, influenced by deep-rooted cultural expectations. A qualitative study from rural Pakistan highlights that education empowers rural women, who face restrictions due to rigid social norms and structural inequalities (Mubarak & Waseh, 2025). However, education by itself does not guarantee empowerment if women cannot turn their qualifications into real job opportunities. Family pressures and challenges at work regularly hinder this change (MDPI, 2023).

The objective of this study is to explore how married, educated women in Islamabad—despite early restrictions on autonomy—have utilised higher education and professional credentials to transform their roles within the household. It examines how education serves as a pivotal turning point in women's lives, enabling them to renegotiate power dynamics, participate in decision-making, and regain their freedom of movement. By uncovering these dynamics, this research shows that education is more than an academic goal—it is a powerful means of personal freedom and social change.

### Review of literature

The empowerment of women remained central to the development agenda in the global context, considered ever since the Nairobi Conference on Women of 1985, when empowerment was viewed as the key to gender equality and sustainable development (United Nations, 1985). It is a multidimensional issue nowadays, as both process and outcome are influenced by cultural, institutional, and socioeconomic systems (UN Women, 2018). According to Naila Kabeer (2001), empowerment can be defined as an increase in one's ability to make strategic choices in life in an environment where such options were not available previously. Such duality of capability development and structural transformation finds its reflection in the modern models, e.g., the conceptual framework of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that recognizes empowerment as the expansion of choice and the strengthening of voice through the transformation of power relations (Gates Foundation/KIT, n.d.). This model acknowledges the existence of three interconnected areas:

*Agency*- the capacity to establish and take action on objectives.

*Resources* - Material, social, and human capitals that facilitate agency.

*Institutional arrangements*- formal and informal conventions which define access and opportunity. Importantly, this model incorporates an intersectional and life-course dimension, as empowerment patterns vary by age, class, ethnicity, and the fact that involving men and boys is crucial in systemic gender change (ICRW, 2017). In an effort to define and scale empowerment in various contexts, scholars have developed multidimensional indices. The Multidimensional

Women Empowerment Index (MWEI) employs the Alkire-Foster technique and is based on statistics from 45 low- and middle-income nations. It encompasses areas of health and the environment, social networks, and physical integrity, reflecting stark rural-urban struggles (Salcedo et al., 2024). The new Twin Indices strategy, proposed by UNDP/UN Women (2025), incorporates the Women Empowerment Index (WEI) and the Global Gender Parity Index (GGPI). The framework quantifies the power and freedoms of women, as well as gender equality, in civil, economic, educational, health, and violence-related areas (UN Women/UNDP, 2023; Technical Paper, 2025). In national statistics, the Women Empowerment Metric of National Statistical Systems (WEMNS) is a simplified instrument built into national surveys developed by IFPRI to be breadth-efficient and efficient (IFPRI, 2025).

Other studies emphasize the significance of culturally specific interventions. Indicators of empowerment in Kenya have been reviewed: Costa et al. (2023) discuss that DHS, which relies on principal component analysis, has been applied, and that conceptual definitions vary significantly across studies. Medina and Herrarte (2020) developed a multidimensional index of reproductive health, economic participation, and education in 96 countries, based on factor and cluster analysis, to illustrate the variation in the pattern of empowerment. New frameworks also encompass more expansive aspects, such as environmental justice. A gender-transformative climate action framework, for instance, highlights women-led cooperatives, social safety nets, and feminist leadership in climate resilience strategies, underscoring the interplay of power structures, patriarchy, and resource access (Saigal & Srivastava, 2025). Empowerment is also increasingly seen not merely as a collective accomplishment, but as circumstantial, processual, and multidimensional, including aspects such as health, agency, structural power, and social change. Recent measures such as the MWEI and the WEI provide policymakers with practical and comparable information, whereas frameworks responsive to cultural realities and new pressures (such as climate vulnerability) increase the breadth and applicability of the empowerment research.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Women's empowerment is a complex and dynamic process shaped by the interplay of material resources, power structures, and knowledge systems within household and societal contexts. To capture this complexity, the present study integrates Resource Theory, feminist perspectives, and multidimensional theories of power, offering a unified lens through which empowerment is both understood and analyzed. Resource Theory (Blood & Wolfe, 1960) posits that power dynamics within households are influenced by the resources each member contributes—such as income, education, and occupation. Individuals with greater resources are posited to wield more influence in decision-making processes, reinforcing the notion that increasing women's intellectual and economic assets directly enhances their domestic agency (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Lundberg & Pollak, 1996). While resource-based theories focus on material leverage, feminist theories highlight the systemic and normative barriers undermining women's empowerment. Liberal feminism, as detailed in Tong's comprehensive overview (Tong, 2018), emphasizes that women's subordination stems from socially imposed educational limitations and cultural biases—not natural inferiority. Following Wollstonecraft (1792/2014), the framework acknowledges that women's education and equal participation in decision-making are vital for dismantling patriarchal structures and cultivating equitable interpersonal relationships.

### **Power Theories: Mechanisms of Influence**

To fully grasp how empowerment materializes, this framework engages with power as characterized by Max Weber's definition, which refers to the likelihood that one participant in a social relationship will be able to execute their own will against resistance (Weber, 1978, p. 53). According to this relational approach, the more women are educated and economically independent, the more they are likely to impact outcomes—especially in the face of resistance—due to empowerment. Steven Lukes (2005) extends power to three dimensions: decision-making, agenda-setting, and preference-shaping. This paradigm sheds light on the fact that empowerment extends beyond making decisions to encompass control over the environment in which those decisions are made and the cultural standards that define aspirations. Michel Foucault (1982), who views power as everywhere and inbuilt

in forms of knowledge and social practices. According to Foucault, power is relational and productive, rather than repressive, and by accessing knowledge and institutional forces, marginalized individuals are empowered to resist and subvert discourses, thereby gaining power through resistance and reformulating discourses.

### **Methodology**

The study relies on the interpretivist philosophy of research that strives to gain knowledge regarding subjective meaning, experiences, and social realities of individuals in their respective unique environments (Schwandt, 2014). Interpretivism assumes that the essence of reality is socially constructed and is concerned with the importance of studying how people perceive and interpret their experiences. This perspective also aligns with the constructivist worldview, whereby knowledge is created through interaction between the researcher and participants, and the researcher aims to uncover rich and detailed knowledge, rather than objective and generalizable facts (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

As special emphasis was laid on the issue of women's empowerment and the role of female decision-making within their families, an interpretive approach was selected. Such an approach enabled the researcher to gain insight into the subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings that respondents attribute to the concept of empowerment and power relations. It enabled the study of social phenomena in their natural setting and paid attention to the complexity of the relations between people and cultural activities. The primary data collection tool was open-ended and in-depth interviews. Interpretivist research is particularly well-suited to in-depth interviews, where participants can express themselves, their ideas, emotions, and experiences using their own language, providing detailed qualitative data (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). This methodology assists in acquiring details about women's empowerment, household decision-making, and institutional relationships as perceived by individuals residing within the same community.

Qualified 15 teachers were selected purposely. The sample population has been chosen based on their experience, skills, and involvement in higher education. The criteria used in the selection were designed to yield results that reflect the structural, social, and cultural factors influencing the

empowerment of women. To conduct face-to-face interviews, data were collected by visiting the National Public Universities (NPU) two or three times. Both sessions provided an opportunity to discuss the content and ask follow-up questions to clarify the answers of the participants. The interviews were recorded with their consent and transcribed to make them easier to analyze.

The qualitative data obtained were analyzed using thematic analysis to determine, code, and label significant themes and patterns across the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method is linked to the interpretivist paradigm, which focuses on how to make sense of and experience the world through the eyes of respondents. The analysis suggested that the transcripts of the interviews had been repeatedly read and coded into themes of repetitive concepts related to empowerment, power relations, education, and decision-making. Those codes were again subdivided into general themes that reflected not only the opinions of the participants but also the theoretical context of the research.

### **Participants Demographic**

The profile of the participants reveals that the fifteen respondents are all married, living in Islamabad, and are all highly educated, professional women who are engaged in academia as lecturers and assistant professors. They are between 31 and 41 years old and have been married between six and thirteen years and are at an age that is at a stage of life where both family and career life are well established. Most respondents had a bachelor's or master's degree by the time they were married, although some went on to earn MPhil/MS and PhD degrees during their marital period. These women are not only well integrated into the formal labour market. Still, they are also placed in some well-respected knowledge-based positions, as their professions in higher education include lecturer or assistant professor. This profile is of direct importance to the study, as it highlights the intersection of gender, marriage, and career within Pakistani society. The lived experiences of these women offer an understanding of how marriage relationships and decision-making, and family formations influence the autonomy, mobility, and empowerment of women, despite their high educational levels and professional status. With the focus on this population, the research paper

elucidates the subtle realities of educated, married working women who balance both conventional and contemporary desires in their daily lives.

limited independence. Studies show that newly married women in South Asia and beyond face

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants**  
 Data Analysis

L	Respondent Num	Age	Resident	Duration of Marriage	Marital status	Education at the time of marriage	Current Education	Profession
1	Participant 1	32	Islamabad	10 years	Married	BS Education	MS	Lecturer
2	Participant 2	31	Islamabad	9 years	Married	BS Sociology	MS	Lecturer
3	Participant 3	35	Islamabad	13 Years	Married	MS Political Science	PhD	Assistant Professor
4	Participant 4	33	Islamabad	7 Years	Married	MS Psychology	MS	Lecturer
5	Participant 5	33	Islamabad	11Years	Married	BA Economics	PhD	Assistant Professor
6	Participant 6	32	Islamabad	10 Years	Married	BS Sociology	MS	Lecturer
7	Participant 7	38	Islamabad	10 Years	Married	MS Chemistry	PhD	Assistant Professor
8	Participant 8	36	Islamabad	7 Years	Married	BS Education	MS	Lecturer
9	Participant 9	40	Islamabad	6 Years	Married	MS Physics	PhD	Assistant Professor
10	Participant 10	39	Islamabad	11 Year	Married	MS Education	MS	Lecturer
11	Participant 11	34	Islamabad	12 Years	Married	MA Sociology	PhD	Assistant Professor
12	Participant 12	36	Islamabad	12 Years	Married	MS History	MS	Lecturer
13	Participant 13	37	Islamabad	8 Years	Married	MS Chemistry	MS	Lecturer
14	Participant 14	34	Islamabad	7 Years	Married	BS Education	MS	Lecturer
15	Participant 15	41	Islamabad	13 Years	Married	MA Sociology	PhD	Assistant Professor

**Restricted Autonomy during the Initial Years of Marriage and Decision Making**

During the initial years of marriage, women often experience a significant decline in their autonomy and empowerment. Their decision-making capacity is severely restricted, as husbands and in-laws exert control over even the most personal aspects of life. From mobility to everyday choices—such as food preferences, healthcare, or household matters—women are subjected to close monitoring and

constraints where in-laws and husbands dominate household decisions, leaving them with little say in matters concerning their own lives (BMC Public Health, 2009; BMC Women’s Health, 2018; MDPI, 2021). This phase is characterized by an adjustment process in which individual desires are often suppressed to align with family expectations, creating an environment where women’s voices and agency are minimized.

Table 2: Restricted Autonomy during the Initial years of marriage

Sub-sub-theme	Key Point	Illustrative Quote
Unawareness of Mobility Restrictions	Some women were unaware, before marriage, of how severely their mobility would be restricted.	“After marriage, my mobility was heavily constrained by both my husband and mother-in-law... I noticed that my mother-in-law could go anywhere without permission, but I had to ask for everything.”
Generational and Hierarchical Dynamics	Mothers-in-law enjoyed freedom of movement, while younger women faced strict control, showing a power imbalance within households.	“While my mother-in-law enjoyed complete freedom of movement, I was not allowed to go anywhere without permission.”
Lack of Privacy in Joint Families	Living in a joint family meant women were confined to a single room with no private kitchen, leading to restricted decision-making in daily routines.	“We were given only one room with an attached washroom, and even food preparation was controlled by my mother-in-law and sister-in-law.”
Suppression of Personal Preferences	Women were compelled to adapt their likes/dislikes to fit family expectations.	“I never ate eggs in my life. When I got married, my mother-in-law and sister-in-law were surprised and told me that eggs are rich in protein, so I should eat them... Whenever I tried to assert my own preferences, they accused me of not adjusting.”
Restrictions on Rest and Personal Time	Even small choices, like sleeping late, were not respected, reflecting a lack of autonomy.	“Once I was sleeping late in the morning, and my mother-in-law knocked on my door and said I should wake up early and join the family for breakfast... I felt very depressed that I had no choice but to rest when I needed to.”
Control Over Communication	Respondents reported being surveilled during their phone conversations, which limited their freedom to maintain personal relationships.	“I received a call from my younger sister while I was cooking. I hardly spoke for five minutes when my mother-in-law knocked on the door and told me not to stop cooking to answer the phone. For me, this was very depressing and annoying.”

### Thematic Explanation and Participants' Reflection

From the interviews conducted, it was observed that out of 15 respondents, most of the participants (9/15) were initially unaware of the restrictions on women’s mobility during the early years of their married life. Among them, three women reported getting married at the age of 22. After marriage, their mobility was heavily constrained by both their husbands and mothers-in-law. Interestingly, the respondents highlighted a striking contradiction: while their mothers-in-law enjoyed complete freedom of movement and did not require permission from anyone in the household, the

respondents themselves faced strict control and constant restrictions. This reflected a clear imbalance in power relations within the household, where younger women were subjected to patriarchal authority despite the relative autonomy of elder women. The interviews reveal that many young married women were unaware, before marriage, of the extent to which their freedom of movement would be restricted. Once married, they found themselves under the dual control of their husbands and mothers-in-law. At the same time, they noticed that their mothers-in-

law had much more freedom and did not face the same restrictions. This finding highlights the generational and hierarchical dynamics in patriarchal households—where elder women often enjoy greater autonomy, while younger women are controlled more strictly. It shows how power is unevenly distributed within families, and how women’s agency is shaped not only by men but also by older women who enforce traditional norms.

10 out of 15 respondents described their experiences of living in a joint family system during the early years of their marriage. They reported being allocated only a single room with an attached washroom and having no access to a private kitchen. Consequently, even basic decisions regarding childcare, food preparation, and daily routines were controlled by their mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law. Respondents emphasized that they had little autonomy in determining what to cook, when to eat, or even what food to consume. This lack of agency was particularly distressing because, before marriage, they had not faced such restrictions in their parental homes. Many respondents expressed feelings of stress, depression, and frustration as they struggled to adapt. Attempts to communicate their concerns to their husbands were largely unsuccessful, as husbands would often dismiss their complaints, explaining that it was their parents’ home and that compromise was necessary. Respondents reflected that their small, personal desires were consistently suppressed, forcing them to manipulate their preferences to align with family expectations. One respondent recounted: *“I never ate eggs in my life. When I got married, my mother-in-law and sister-in-law were surprised and told me that eggs are full of protein, so I must eat them. Over time, I adjusted and began eating whatever they advised. Whenever I tried to assert my own preferences, they accused me of not adjusting to the family.”* This example illustrates how women were compelled to alter even the most basic aspects of their daily lives, such as food choices, to avoid conflict and demonstrate conformity.

#### **Lack of Agency in the Joint Family System**

Furthermore, four respondents explicitly stated that adjusting to the joint family system was extremely difficult. They described a lack of privacy and freedom, as even speaking on the telephone or resting in their own rooms required permission. When they attempted to retreat to their rooms, they were questioned by mothers-in-law and sisters-

in-law, who insisted that they sit with the rest of the family. One respondent narrated her experience: *“Once I was sleeping late in the morning, and my mother-in-law knocked on my door and politely said that I should learn how to wake up early, as my husband had already gone to work, and I should come outside to have breakfast with everyone. I had a headache and didn't want to sit with the family, but I felt it wouldn't look good to refuse. So I came outside and sat with them, even though I felt very depressed that I had no choice but to rest when I needed to.”* Another respondent recalled a similar struggle regarding her freedom to communicate: *“I received a call from my younger sister while I was cooking in the kitchen. I turned off the stove and went to my room to talk with her. I hardly spoke for five minutes when my mother-in-law knocked on the door and reminded me that I should not stop cooking to answer the phone. She told me that I could ask my sister to call later. For me, this was very depressing and annoying, because even a simple personal moment like talking to my sister was treated as something wrong.”*

Such accounts highlight how constant surveillance and expectations from in-laws not only restricted women’s physical space but also intruded upon their emotional and social lives, leaving them with little control over their own time, rest, and relationships. These lived experiences reflect how, in the initial years of marriage, women’s autonomy is systematically curtailed, reinforcing their dependence on husbands and in-laws for even the smallest personal choices (Ali et al., 2009; Tilahun & Liyew, 2018; Ahinkorah et al., 2021).

#### **Restricted Mobility in Nuclear Family**

Although women living in nuclear households were free from the direct control of in-laws, their mobility remained heavily constrained by their husbands. Respondents reported that husbands closely monitored their movements, often delaying or denying requests to go outside and framing women’s desire to visit markets or shops as unnecessary or irresponsible. Such restrictions created a strong sense of dependency, as women realized they could not move independently, even for necessities. The lack of trust, reinforced by husbands’ insistence that female relatives accompany them, left many women feeling disempowered despite their education. While the earlier theme highlighted restrictions within joint families imposed by in-laws, these findings

demonstrate that mobility constraints persist even in nuclear families, albeit in this case, the control is primarily exercised by husbands. Previous research similarly shows that women's mobility in South Asia is not only shaped by extended family

structures but also by the authority of husbands, who often act as gatekeepers to the outside world (Ali et al., 2009; Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Mumtaz & Salway, 2009).

**Table 3: Restricted Mobility in Nuclear Family**

Sub-sub-theme	Key Point	Illustrative Quote
Absence of In-Laws' Control	Women living in nuclear families were free from direct restrictions of in-laws, but still faced significant limitations.	"Unlike those in joint family systems, they did not experience direct restrictions from in-laws. However, they still faced significant mobility constraints imposed by their husbands."
Husbands as Primary Restrictors	Husbands maintained strict control over women's movements, questioning or delaying their requests to go out.	"When they requested to go outside, husbands often postponed the request by saying they would accompany them after returning from work."
Suspicion and Displeasure	Husbands showed displeasure at women's desire to go shopping, framing it as unnecessary or linked to spending.	"In situations where women wished to go shopping, husbands expressed displeasure and accused them of being more concerned about spending money than about their own security."
Contrast with Parental Home	Women compared their restricted mobility in marriage to the greater freedom they had before marriage.	"Before marriage, I was used to going to the market alone... After marriage, my husband imposed more restrictions on me. Even for small necessities, I was required to wait for him."
Lack of Trust	Husbands' insistence that women could only go out with mothers or sisters reinforced dependency and disempowerment.	"They highlighted the lack of trust as a central issue, as husbands frequently insisted that they could only go out accompanied by their mothers or sisters."
Impact on Confidence	Despite being educated, women felt disempowered and unconfident due to continuous restrictions.	"Despite being educated, the women felt disempowered and unconfident, recognizing that their husbands' lack of trust prevented them from exercising independent mobility."

### Thematic Explanation and Participant's Reflection

Six respondents reported that after marriage, they moved into separate households, living as nuclear families. Unlike those in joint family systems, they did not experience direct restrictions from in-laws. However, they still faced significant mobility constraints imposed by their husbands. Respondents noted that their husbands maintained a strict attitude, frequently questioning their movements. When they requested to go outside, husbands often postponed the request by saying they would accompany them after returning from work. In situations where women wished to

go shopping, husbands expressed displeasure and accused them of being more concerned about spending money than about their own security. This attitude created a sense of dependency and restriction, as women realized they were not free to move independently.

One respondent reflected on the contrast between her parental home and married life: "*Before marriage, I was used to going to the market alone. I never needed to ask my mother or my brother-in-law for permission. After marriage, my husband imposed more restrictions on me. Even for small necessities, I was*

required to wait for him. I felt more restricted in shopping and daily tasks than I had ever experienced before.”

These respondents explained that although they were part of nuclear households, they still experienced control over their mobility, this time from their husbands rather than extended family members. They highlighted the lack of trust as a central issue, as husbands frequently insisted that they could only go out accompanied by their mothers or sisters. Despite being educated, the women felt disempowered and unconfident, recognizing that their husbands’ lack of trust prevented them from exercising independent mobility.

### Gradual Empowerment through Education and Employment

For all of my participants, the years following marriage brought a gradual yet meaningful

transformation as they pursued higher education and entered the professional world. Although all respondents had completed undergraduate degrees before marriage, nine later resumed their studies—often with their husbands’ permission—and successfully obtained Master’s degrees. This educational advancement, followed by employment in teaching and eventually university positions, became a turning point in their lives. Education and professional engagement not only enhanced their confidence and social networks but also reshaped household dynamics. Husbands and in-laws gradually began to trust them more, restrictions on mobility eased, and women found themselves increasingly involved in decision-making processes. This theme illustrates how education and employment served as critical pathways to empowerment, enabling women to renegotiate power relations within marriage and the wider family structure.

**Table 5: Gradual Empowerment through Education and Employment**

Sub-sub-theme	Key Points	Illustrative Quotes (from respondents)	Supporting Literature
<b>Pursuit of Higher Education</b>	All respondents had completed undergraduate degrees; nine re-enrolled for Master’s programs with husbands’ permission; education was seen as a pathway to personal growth.	“Five years into my marriage, I realized how important it was for me to continue my education. With my husband’s permission, I enrolled for my Master’s degree. It gave me confidence and a new sense of purpose.”	Higher education is a significant source of women’s empowerment in South Asia, enabling them to enhance self-confidence and decision-making power (Malik & Courtney, 2011; Niazi, 2017).
<b>Entry into Employment</b>	Respondents initially joined private schools due to the competitive job market, gained teaching experience, and professional exposure.	“I started teaching at a private school. It was not my dream job, but it gave me exposure, confidence, and I built strong networks that helped me later.”	Teaching is often the first professional entry point for Pakistani women, providing social networks and public exposure (Shaheed & Mumtaz, 2010).
<b>Transition to University Positions</b>	After 3–4 years of continuous effort, women secured university jobs, marking a turning point in their lives; professional recognition enhanced their respect within families.	“When I got my job at the university, it completely changed how my in-laws and even my husband treated me. I felt respected and valued.”	Professional positions enhance women’s bargaining power and social status, reshaping gender relations within households (Kabeer, 2005; Ali, 2013).

Sub-sub-theme	Key Points	Illustrative Quotes (from respondents)	Supporting Literature
<b>Mobility and Autonomy</b>	Professional life increased independence: some relied on husbands for transportation, while others bought and drove their own cars; mobility restrictions lessened.	<i>“Earlier, I always needed my husband to accompany me. But after getting a car and a job, I felt like I had wings. It was a new freedom for me.”</i>	Employment contributes to women’s spatial mobility, even in restrictive cultural contexts (Roomi & Parrott, 2008).
<b>Shift in Household Dynamics</b>	With education and income, women gained more say in decision-making; husbands placed greater trust in them; restrictions eased, though not entirely vanished.	<i>“After I became financially independent, my husband started consulting me in family matters. I felt my voice carried weight for the first time.”</i>	Women’s economic participation leads to gradual shifts in intra-household decision-making and trust (Khan, 2021; Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001).

### Thematic Explanation and Participant’s Reflections

All 15 respondents reported that they had already completed their undergraduate degrees before marriage. Approximately five years into their marital life, they realized the importance of engaging in meaningful work and improving their communication skills. With their husbands’ permission, they re-enrolled in universities. Two respondents mentioned that they pursued their Master’s degrees privately, motivated by their interest in academia. Altogether, nine respondents resumed their education and successfully obtained higher degrees after their Master’s studies. This finding resonates with existing scholarship, which highlights higher education as a critical source of empowerment for women in South Asia, enhancing their confidence and decision-making power (Malik & Courtney, 2011; Niazi, 2017). Following graduation, these women encountered challenges in securing employment, given the competitive job market in Pakistan. Initially, they began teaching in private schools, which provided them with valuable experience, professional exposure, and opportunities to develop social networks—an experience consistent with findings that teaching is often the first entry point into professional life for Pakistani women (Shaheed & Mumtaz, 2010). Over time, they applied for university-level positions. Although it took nearly three to four years of consistent applications, they eventually secured employment in universities.

All 15 respondents emphasized that obtaining university positions marked a significant turning point in their lives. They described themselves as more empowered, highly qualified, and increasingly respected within their families. With higher education and professional income, they observed a gradual shift in the attitudes of both husbands and in-laws. Husbands, in particular, began to place greater trust in them, and restrictions on their mobility lessened compared to earlier years of marriage. These findings support prior research that professional positions enhance women’s bargaining power and reshape household gender dynamics (Kabeer, 2005; Ali, 2013; Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001).

Respondents further highlighted changes in their daily lives: five reported that their husbands provided transportation to schools and universities, while three were able to purchase and drive their own cars. Collectively, all 15 respondents expressed that employment enhanced their participation in household decision-making and increased their sense of autonomy. Such experiences of participants echo broader evidence that employment contributes to women’s spatial mobility and strengthens their voice within households, even in restrictive cultural contexts (Roomi & Parrott, 2008; Khan, 2021). They acknowledged that while not all traditional restrictions had disappeared, substantial change had occurred. Notably, they attributed this transformation to higher education and

professional engagement, which, after 8–9 years of marriage, significantly reshaped their social and personal lives.

### Transformative Role of Higher Education in Women’s Empowerment

Higher education has long been recognized as a transformative force in women’s empowerment, shaping not only their professional trajectories but also their roles within family and society. In patriarchal contexts such as Pakistan, higher education provides women with the skills, knowledge, and social capital necessary to challenge traditional gender norms and negotiate greater agency in household decision-making (Noreen & Khalid, 2012; Aslam, 2013). Research

highlights that educated women are more likely to participate in the labor force, contribute financially to the household, and gain respect within their families (Qureshi & Rarieya, 2007; Malik & Courtney, 2011). Moreover, higher education enhances women’s confidence, self-worth, and bargaining power, enabling them to transition from being perceived as dependents to independent contributors in both domestic and professional spheres (Batool, Sajid, & Shaheen, 2013). Thus, in South Asian societies where women’s autonomy is often restricted, advanced education plays a pivotal role in redefining marital dynamics and creating opportunities for empowerment.

**Table 5: Transformative Role of Higher Education in Women’s Empowerment**

Sub-Sub Theme	Key Points	Illustration (Respondent Narratives)
Re-engaging with Education after Marriage	Nine respondents resumed studies (mainly Master’s) after 5 years of marriage; motivated to improve skills and careers; pursued with husbands’ permission.	“After a few years of marriage, I realized that I needed to do something for myself. With my husband’s permission, I re-enrolled in university. It was not easy, but later it helped me gain respect at home.”
Gradual Entry into the Professional Sphere	Started teaching in private schools → gained experience and networks → eventually applied for university jobs. Took 3–4 years of effort.	“I worked in private schools for a long time before finally getting a university job. It took years, but when I finally got the position, I felt my life had changed.”
Shift in Household Dynamics	Employment led to an enhanced decision-making role; husbands and in-laws became more supportive, and restrictions on mobility were lessened.	“When I started earning, my husband trusted me more. Earlier, I had to ask permission for everything. Now, I even drive my own car.”
Delayed but Meaningful Empowerment	Six respondents, though financially comfortable, did not study/work initially → later pursued PhDs → secured academic jobs.	“I never thought of working because my family was wealthy. But after 10 years, I felt useless. I did my PhD and now I am a lecturer. Which gave me confidence and a voice in family matters.”
Recognition & Respect through Higher Education	All 15 respondents reported improved status in family; higher education and jobs made them independent contributors rather than dependents.	“Before, my opinion did not.

### Thematic Explanation and Participant Reflection

Out of the 15 respondents, six explained that they were initially not motivated to pursue higher education or professional work after marriage. Although they already held Master’s degrees, they did not continue their studies or careers, primarily

because they had married into financially well-off families and faced no immediate economic pressures. These women reported that, although they were not subjected to severe restrictions on their daily lives, they nevertheless experienced a

strong sense of disempowerment and a lack of agency.

As housewives, they described their role in household decision-making as limited and negative. Although they were occasionally consulted about their children's education, such as deciding which school to enrol them in, broader decisions were dominated by husbands and fathers-in-law. Several respondents highlighted that during the first 10–15 years of marriage, they were expected to comply unquestioningly with family expectations and the authority of their husbands. One respondent explained that even in matters related to children's schooling, the final decision rested solely with her father-in-law.

Over time, these women recognized their suppressed position and began seeking avenues for empowerment. All six eventually decided to pursue doctoral studies, despite the lack of financial necessity. Completing their PhDs took them approximately five to six years, after which they secured academic positions as lecturers or assistant professors at various universities.

Respondents emphasized that this transition brought a drastic change in their lives. While they had not previously faced financial dependency, the attainment of advanced education and employment enabled them to feel independent, confident, and more actively involved in household matters. They observed that their husbands began to respect their opinions and included them in smaller household decisions. Although this transformation occurred gradually—often after 15 to 16 years of marriage—they unanimously described it as a turning point in their lives, made possible through the pursuit of higher education and professional engagement.

All 15 respondents emphasised that their educational advancement brought about a significant transformation in their social status and family dynamics. They explained that attaining higher education enabled them to be recognised as more knowledgeable and competent, which in turn increased their involvement in household decision-making processes. Respondents highlighted that higher education earned them greater respect within their families, as they were no longer viewed solely as dependents but as independent contributors to their families.

With professional qualifications and income, they developed a stronger sense of autonomy and financial independence. They reported that being

able to spend their own earnings gave them confidence and a sense of economic agency. Collectively, respondents attributed these positive changes in their lives—greater respect, expanded decision-making power, and enhanced self-worth—to their higher education and the independence gained through employment.

### Discussion

The findings of this study emphasize the transformative impact of higher education on the lives of married working women. The narratives of women demonstrate that education is not simply an academic achievement; it is also an influential tool that redefines personal identity, family dynamics, and social status of women in the household.

The participants in this study stated that higher education is the first step toward women's autonomy. Initially, women faced constraints like restricted mobility, limited participation in family decisions, and economic dependence on husbands or in-laws, which is typical of patriarchal households. Women feel powerless due to these constraints and are restricted within domestic roles. Their circumstances began to change with the pursuit of higher education. Education grants them confidence and credibility within their families, which helps them to re-navigate their roles. Their husbands and in-laws respect their opinions and indulge them in household discussions.

The experiences of women also illustrate that education empowers women, and educated women challenge the belief that marriage is the end of personal growth. Those women who decided to pursue higher education after marriage reported that this decision has enhanced their knowledge and equipped them better for professional life. Higher education provided access to significant career opportunities. Women's financial independence grants them a sense of control over their lives and enables them to contribute to household income and participate fully in family decision-making. Women gain respect and acknowledgement from their spouses and in-laws. Education transforms the power relations in the household, as many participants who previously faced controlled autonomy are now actively participating in decision-making. They are autonomous to make choices regarding their finances and can project their professional futures

and face limited resistance. This transformation is consistent with the existing literature, which associates women's education with empowerment, the renegotiation of household power relations, and the gradual dismantling of patriarchal norms (Ali et al., 2009; Grosser & Tyler, 2021).

According to most participants, they were driven to engage in employment due to their financial reliance on their spouses. Higher education turns out to be a turning point, a life-changing event that not only reinforces their careers but also re-invents their personal and social identities. The results suggest that education is one of the key channels for professional growth and social transformation within families and communities. Higher education enhances both academic and economic progress; it also serves as a source of empowerment, agency, and the capacity to lead a dignified life with choice. It offers women the means to break free from the confines of norms, as well as to transform the definition of who a wife, mother, and professional are in a society where gender roles are deeply ingrained.

### Conclusion

The respondents in this research found that tertiary education was crucial in transforming their role in decision-making in the household. During the initial years of the marriage, they had limited freedom and movement and were not involved in significant decisions. It turned them into financial dependents, and they demanded change. Through higher education, they were able to change their dependency to independence and restraint to empowerment. Education not only empowered them at home but also enabled them to break the traditional power structure. They had no autonomy when they were married, but higher education provided them with confidence, respect, and a sense of agency. It enabled them to renegotiate their positions in the family and reform their lives. Their participation in the labour market also enhanced their social recognition, mobility, and participation in household decisions. This research demonstrates that education is not just a bridge to career advancement, but it is also an effective means of empowering women. It slowly breaks down the patriarchal walls and assists women in creating more equal roles in marriage and society.

### REFERENCE

- Advancing MNCH. (n.d.). Gender equity frameworks: Components of the Gates Foundation Empowerment Model. Retrieved from <https://advancingmnch.org/topics/gender-equity/frameworks-models>
- Ahinkorah, B. O., Hagan, J. E., Seidu, A. A., Budu, E., Hormenu, T., Adu, C., Osei, C. J., & Schack, T. (2021). Child marriage and its association with maternal healthcare services utilization in sub-Saharan Africa: A multi-country analysis. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(7), 3754. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18073754>
- Ali, T. (2013). Women's empowerment and social transformation in Pakistan. Islamabad: SDPI.
- Ali, T. S., Krantz, G., Gul, R., Asad, N., Johansson, E., & Mogren, I. (2009). Gender Roles and Their Influence on Life Prospects for Women in Urban Karachi, Pakistan: A Qualitative Study. *BMC Public Health*, 9(265), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-9-265>
- Aslam, M. (2013). Empowering Women: Education and the Pathways of Change. Background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2013/4. UNESCO.
- Batliwala, S. (1994). The Meaning of Women's Empowerment: New Concepts from Action. In G. Sen, A. Germain, & L. C. Chen (Eds.), *Population policies reconsidered: Health, empowerment, and rights* (pp. 127-138). Harvard School of Public Health.
- Batool, S. Q., Sajid, M. A., & Shaheen, I. (2013). Gender and higher education in Pakistan: Opportunities and challenges. *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies*, 20(2), 35-53.
- Blood, R. O., & Wolfe, D. M. (1960). *Husbands and wives: The dynamics of married living*. Free Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- Costa, J. C., et al. (2023). Measures of women's empowerment based on individual-level data: A literature review. *Frontiers in Sociology*. Frontiers.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Determiners of women's empowerment in Pakistan: Evidence from Demographic and Health Surveys, 2012–13 and 2017–18. (2021). *BMC Public Health*, 21, 11376.
- Faqeer Muhammad, Bano, K., Muhammad, K., & Baig, T. (2022). Women's Empowerment in Pakistan: Assessing the Socioeconomic Determinants. *Studies of Applied Economics*.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977* (C. Gordon, Ed.). Pantheon.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4), 777–795. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448181>
- Gates Foundation/KIT. (n.d.). Conceptual model of women and girls' empowerment. Retrieved from <https://www.kit.nl/institute/publication/white-paper-conceptual-model-of-women-and-girls-empowerment/>
- ICRW. (2017). Building blocks for women's empowerment. Retrieved from [https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/WGCD-workshop-preread\\_Building-Blocks\\_.pdf](https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/WGCD-workshop-preread_Building-Blocks_.pdf)
- Jejeebhoy, S., & Sathar, Z. (2001). Women's Autonomy in India and Pakistan: The Influence of Religion and Region. *Population and Development Review*, 27(4), 687–712.
- Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal. *Gender & Development*, 13(1), 13–24.
- Khan, S. (2021). Education, Employment, and Women's Empowerment in Pakistan: A Gendered Perspective. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 27(2), 246–264.
- KIT Institute. (n.d.). Conceptual model of women and girls' empowerment: Process and outcome. Retrieved from <https://www.kit.nl/institute/project/empowerment-of-women-and-girls-conceptual-model-and-measurement-guidance/>
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2015). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Lukes, S. (2005). *Power: A radical view* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-80257-5>
- Lundberg, S., & Pollak, R. A. (1996). Bargaining and distribution in marriage. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 10(4), 139–158. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.10.4.139>
- Majid Khan, Zaid, R., Khan, M. A., Khan, A., & Adil, M. (2025). Social impacts of education on women's decision making in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan (A case study of district Swat). *Social Science Review Archives*, 3(2), 1319–1326.
- Malik, R., & Courtney, K. (2011). Higher education and women's empowerment in Pakistan. *Gender and Education*, 23(1), 29–45.
- Medina, C., & Herrarte, A. (2020). Measuring multidimensional empowerment. *Research in Economic Inequality*, 29, 77–99. <https://doi.org/10.1108/s1529-212620200000029001>
- Munazza Mubarak & Waseh, J. (2025). The Impact of Education on Women's Empowerment: A Case Study of Rural Pakistan. *Advance Social Science Archive Journal*, 3(02), 1012–1018.
- National Academies. (2023). Framework for Women's Empowerment and Agency. Retrieved from <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/resource/27955/interactive/>
- Niazi, S. (2017). Women's access to higher education in Pakistan: Constraints and opportunities. *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies*, 15(2), 45–62.
- Noreen, G., & Khalid, H. (2012). Gender empowerment through women's higher education: Opportunities and possibilities. *Journal of Research and Reflections in Education*, 6(1), 50–60.

- Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- OECD. (2025). *Women's Economic Empowerment: A Global Pathway to Gender Equality*. Retrieved from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/55152C00AC09ECE4B67CB8E6A5C87BBB/S1035304625100276a.pdf>
- Qureshi, R., & Rarieya, J. F. A. (2007). Gender and education in Pakistan. *Oxford Review of Education*, 33(3), 283–285.
- Roomi, M. A., & Parrott, G. (2008). Barriers to the development and progression of women entrepreneurs in Pakistan. *Journal of Entrepreneurship*, 17(1), 59–72.
- Saigal, N., & Srivastava, S. (2025, May). Gender-transformative climate action framework rooted in feminist Theory & justice. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*.
- Salcedo, M., Ruiz-Bravo, P., Barrantes, N., & Clausen, J. (2024). Measuring multidimensional women's empowerment. *Social Indicators Research*. SpringerLink.
- Schwandt, T. A. (2014). *The Sage dictionary of qualitative inquiry* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Sen, G. (1993). Women's empowerment and human rights: The challenge to policy. *World Development*, 21(3), 611–624. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X\(93\)90218-D](https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(93)90218-D)
- Shaheed, F., & Mumtaz, K. (2010). *Empowering women: An assessment of policies in Pakistan*. Lahore: Shirkat Gah.
- Tilahun, M., & Liyew, B. (2018). Exploring women's decision-making autonomy on maternal health care utilization in Ethiopia: Evidence from demographic and health surveys. *BMC Women's Health*, 18(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-018-0631-z>
- Tong, R. (2018). *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (5th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429495294>
- UN Women. (2018). *Women's Economic Empowerment in the Changing World of Work*. Retrieved from [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-96-2759-2\\_8](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-96-2759-2_8)
- UN Women. (2023). *The Paths to Equality: Twin Indices on Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality*. UN Women.
- UNDP/UN Women. (2025). *The construction of a new twin set of indices on women's empowerment and gender equality*. Human Development Reports.
- United Nations. (1985). *Report of the Nairobi Conference on Women*. Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beijing\\_Declaration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beijing_Declaration)
- Uphoff, N. (1989). Distinguishing power, authority & legitimacy: Taking Max Weber at his word by using resource-exchange analysis. *Polity*, 22(2), 295–322. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3234836>
- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. University of California Press.
- Wollstonecraft, M. (2014). *A vindication of the rights of woman* (reprint). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1792).
- Women's participation in household decision making and justification of wife beating: A secondary data analysis from Pakistan's demographic and health survey. (2022). PMC.