

BARRIERS TO BREAK: CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN GOVERNMENT COLLEGES OF DISTRICT BAHAWALPUR, SOUTHERN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The present study aimed to assess the difficulties faced by women in pursuing higher education and their implications for career progression, to explore how the Higher Education Department supports educated women in advancing their careers and to investigate how educational status influences women's career growth and empowerment specifically focusing on government colleges in the Bahawalpur district of South Punjab, Pakistan. The present study was quantitative in nature, for this purpose, the researcher used the probability sampling technique, specifically the stratified random proportion allocation sampling, to select 275 senior female students and 145 faculty members from the targeted government colleges. The sample was drawn systematically, considering the total population of each college to ensure representation and proportionality. Two structured questionnaires were developed to collect quantitative data. One questionnaire was designed for the female students to capture their experiences, challenges and perceptions regarding higher education and career development. The second questionnaire targeted the faculty members, focusing on their insights into institutional barriers, support mechanisms and professional challenges for women pursuing higher education and careers. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software, applying Univariate, Bivariate and Multivariate analyses to interpret the responses statistically. The study revealed multiple challenges confronting women in Bahawalpur, including societal expectations, financial constraints, mobility issues, institutional inadequacies and limited career support mechanisms. Furthermore, the findings indicated that while higher education did open avenues for career development, the effectiveness of this process was significantly influenced by governmental policies, institutional support and societal attitudes. The government had implemented some initiatives aimed at supporting highly educated women, yet gaps remained in terms of practical implementation, awareness and accessibility of these programs at the grassroots level. The role of higher education emerged as a critical factor in building women's self-confidence, expanding their career choices and fostering social empowerment, but persistent socio-cultural barriers often hindered the translation of educational qualifications into meaningful career opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan in general and South Punjab, in particular, facing challenges in enrolling girls in higher education for the professional role of a woman to get empowered in decision making and performance. Women lag behind men in higher education and thus face problems in carrier development as well as role and status in society. Half of Pakistan's population is women but their contribution to the economy and other institutions is very low. Education plays an important role towards empowering women, if the enrolments of women in higher education get high it will give them avenues for carrier development. There are multiple challenges to women in getting higher professional education and also having challenges in professional roles and status, sometimes even a woman gets an education but she is not permitted to do any job. With time, the social structure and culture are changing which also changes the role and status of women. This study focuses on the challenges women face in pursuing higher education for career development.

Since 1947, the state of higher education in Pakistan has been far from satisfactory. Unfortunately, policy makers who could have developed a cohesive strategy to improve the education system have failed to pay attention to this sector. The education of women in Pakistan is a complex issue with repercussions in much access, including social, economic and cultural (Khalid & Khan, 2000).

The current political atmosphere does not do much to improve educational opportunities for women and the cultural attitude towards the education of females continues to be heavily prejudiced and not much has improved. Despite the various initiatives announced by successive governments to promote female educations. They have not been able to turn their words into deeds due to the entrenched social and cultural barriers that have prevented girls from accessing education. The educational level of Pakistani women is one of the lowest in the world, for below the global average. In Pakistan, the preference for sons over daughter is a deeply entrenched cultural norms that is firmly rooted in the center of the family, responsible for ensuring that in family assets are protected and maintained and for financial supporting their parents (Malik & Courteny, 2011).

Distance learning offers Pakistani women an opportunity to pursue education, even though cultural and social barriers may still exist. Factor promoting distance education for women in Pakistan are due to the lack of educational opportunities in disadvantaged areas, as well as the cultural, economic, social and family related restrictions that prevent some women from furthering their education. Additionally, the formal system often hinders women's ability to become empowered and independent (Munawar & Akhtar, 2017). The customary social organization and customs of a culture trend to impede women from obtaining higher education. Pakistan is a predominantly Muslim nation that upholds the values and traditions of Islam. The effects of Islam are pervasive in Pakistani culture and society, manifesting in the education system, laws, policies and other social and cultural dimensions.

In Islam, women have the same rights to education as men, through there are certain restrictions regarding modesty and the wearing of the Hijab. The lack of single sex-educational institutions in Pakistan is a major contributing factor to the criticism of the co-education system as it restricts women's access to higher education. In educational material and textbooks, the role of men is often portrayed as that of a strong and dominant figure, while the role of women is often depicted as a subordinate and weak one in comparison (Durani, 2008).

In Pakistan, the 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 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, specifically in physically demanding jobs, After women have effectively entered the job market and sourced a role in their preferred company, after forms of bias can surface, despite the fact that females in Pakistan have been employed in educational institutions focusing on genders for an extended period of time, complete gender equality has not been

attained. The growth of population and improvements in professional education enabled individuals to secure jobs at co-educational institutions, universities used to be dominated by a masculine cultures, resulting in a lack of female representation further information regarding academic meritocracy may also demonstrate an inherent bias towards masculinity and perpetuate masculine behaviors, as the traditional academic career trajectory is based on a male oriented standard of achievements. This includes being consistently engaged in research, studying at work for longer periods of time and confirming to the expectations of the research assessment exercise. A strong work their focused on extensive time spent on research instructing and compressing assignments was prevalent among male academics at the university (Brink et al., 2013, Remler & Perma, 2009). Through history, in various locations, women have faced barriers to receiving higher education. The availability of higher education and who can access it in different countries is strongly affected by social, economic and cultural factors. In the time of war and civil unrest, the absence of men who have gone to fight can open up opportunities for women to enter universities. However, war has also had a very damaging impact on women, not least through the increased occurrences of rape and sexual assault (Education and culture, 2007).

Women are facing a variety of obstacles when it comes to achieving social and economic empowerment. These include limited job opportunities, lack of access to valuable skills, low-paying and low-status roles and pervasive issue of sexual harassment. Poor quality education inadequate training of teachers, limitations on female mobility and the practice of early marriage among girls enrollment in schools. The values uphold by society conflict with the concept of promoting women's progress, as it confines the definitions of women's development within certain limitations. Particularly in rural areas, women's involvement in nation-building initiatives is restricted the involvement of women in strengthening their families both financially and ethically is seen as a fundamental aspect of their inherent responsibilities. However, their efforts are often undervalued and less acknowledge by their families and the idea of equal freedom for women to work like men is often met

with resistance from the male head of the household. In Pakistan, men often do not approve of their female counterparts competing with them. This mainly due to the prevailing culture of insecurity that restricts women from seeking employment opportunities outside their homes, despite their strong desire to do so. Gender is a significant factor in shaping the societal norms and values in Pakistan

Although Pakistan is a signatory of the United Nations Education for all (EFA) frame work for action (2000), which places great emphasis on the education of women, particularly the elimination of gender disparity in primary, secondary and higher education, the goal of achieving education for all in Pakistan is still far from being satisfactory. The level of education, especially for women, remains extremely poor. The female literacy rate is a clear indication that investment in human development is disproportionately favoring males over females (Shakalli, 2001). Women in particular, have limited opportunities to pursue higher education and gain professional and technical qualification (Khan, 2007).

2. Objectives of the study

- To assess the difficulties faced by women in pursuing higher education and their implications for career progression
- To explore how the Higher Education Department supports educated women in advancing their careers
- To investigate how educational status influences women's career growth and empowerment

3. Review of the Relevant Literature

Badar et al. (2014) found that there is an extremely strong correlation between female education and their empowerment. Everyone has the right to receive education; it is of utmost importance for girls and women as it can increase their ability to make better health decisions for their family leading to a healthier lifestyle. Ajuzie et al. (2012) found that female education has the potential to empower women, yet certain issues, such as favoring male children over female children, gender discrimination in education and employment, and the patriarchal practices, must be tolerated. In other words, educating women is critical since it boosts human capital, productivity,

and most notably, economic, growth, thereby leading to the nation's advancement.

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. Kabeer (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 an individual puts 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.

Jayachandran (2015) suggests that the impact of women's employment on schooling is more social than economic, as women who work have greater likelihood of enrolling and attending school regularly. She theorizes that because of women having greater access to information and resources due to their increased presence in the workforce, they will be empowered to make decisions in the home. If a woman has a source of income, she is more likely to have the financial resources to pursue higher education and become more engaged in politics and other social issues. It follows that mothers in positions of power will be more focus on their children intellectual growth. Female students whose mothers are employed full time, may be unable to go to school

due to the responsibility of looking after their younger siblings. This makes it more difficult for the girls to achieve her academic goals.

Subrahmanian (2005) identified a number of obstacles that hinder young women from advancing their studies beyond secondary schooling. The study's findings showed that there were differences in curriculum and teaching practices based on gender, as well as local cultural norms which defined the role of men and women in society. The lower educational attainment of women can be attributed to cultural influences, general preconceived notions and women own lack of confidence and concerns about their abilities.

Sumits & Hosgor (2006) argue that the huge disparities between men and women in term of educational attainment are the result of long standing cultural norms and biases that have been institutionalized. Despite the fact that economic causes have a more significant influence on the education of both boys and girls in Turkey, cultural factors tend to have a stronger effect on female education. The evidence supports the idea of human capital theory that there is no valid economic reason for difference in an academic achievement between genders.

According to the Chaudhry & Rehman (2007), despite some educated women being aware of their rights under the constitutions, cultural and social expectations stop them from asking or receiving them. The report showed that nearly half female students and 60% of working women felt that they were being denied their basic and social rights. Women often struggle to stand up to their families' wishes since they remain dependent on their help. In spite of having a level of education, women may not have the assurance needed to go without the help of their families. Whereas (Awan, 2016) asserted that societal and cultural expectations are so powerful that majority of women relinquish their basic rights. Most women do not have the liberty to make decisions regarding important life choices, such as education and marriage. Women may be forced to ask their parents or siblings for help, giving up their rights to any property in the process.

Shah (2001) conducted a study that included sending semi-structured questionnaires to all 30 female college heads, then interviewing 10 of them. The

study suggested that women primarily identified with the traditionally feminine role of a homemaker and caregiver and that the women leaders in the study responded to this by fuming their leadership activities within the context of these rules women in colleges may hold leadership rules, but they are not represented in other parts of the educational system. Even within their own colleges, male administrative/financial staff can undermine these women.

4. Research Methodology

This section discussed the method and techniques that the researcher plans to utilize in the research study, detailing how they were implemented. The sample population for this research included all women higher institutions (college wing) in Bahawalpur District of South Punjab, Pakistan. The Quantitative data of this research was collected through probability sampling technique. In probability sampling, stratified random proportion allocation sampling ($n_1 = N_1/N_i \times n_i$:A.L.Bowley:1920) was used and data was collected from 275 senior students from targeted colleges and similarly data was collected from 145 teachers of the concerned colleges according to Uma-Sekaran table. Two types of questionnaires were developed to collect

quantitative data. Firstly, a questionnaire was developed for 275 senior students who were pursuing higher education in women colleges and were facing challenges in getting education and career formation. Secondly, a questionnaire was designed for 145 teachers, who were working in these colleges and were facing many obstacles and challenges for their career development. Quantitative Data was analyzed through SPSS and was presented through Univariate and Bivariate as well as multivariate tables respectively. All the necessary steps were implemented to adhere to ethical guidelines in social sciences research. The identities of participants were kept confidential. Measures were also taken to ensure confidentiality for participants, particularly those who were involved in qualitative interviewed. They were informed about the study’s educational objectives and guaranteed that any collected data would be utilized strictly for designated research purposes. The researcher securely stored the original data.

5. Results & Discussion

H1: Higher the challenges in higher education to women, the lower would be their educational status and role in society.

Table. Effect of Challenges in Higher Education on Educational Status and Role in Society Model Summary

Sample Size (N)	850
R	0.512
R ²	0.262
Adjusted R ²	0.261
Std. Error of Estimate	0.573

ANOVA

F-value	120.467
Sig. (p-value)	0.000

Table presented the findings regarding the effect of challenges in higher education on the educational status and role in society. The model summary revealed that the sample size was 850 and the correlation coefficient (R) was 0.512, indicating a

moderate negative relationship between challenges in higher education and the educational status and societal role. The R-squared value (R²) was 0.262, showing that approximately 26.2% of the variance in educational status and role in society was explained by

the challenges present in higher education. The adjusted R^2 was 0.261, which confirmed the model's consistency with minimal shrinkage. The standard error of estimate was 0.573, which suggested a moderate level of dispersion around the regression line. The results of the ANOVA test indicated that the regression model was statistically significant, with an F-value of 120.467 and a p-value of 0.000, which was less than the significance level of 0.05. This confirmed that the model significantly predicted the dependent variable. In the coefficients table, the standardized beta value for 'Challenges in Higher Education' was -0.512, indicating a negative impact on educational status and societal role. The t-value was -10.973 with a p-value of 0.000, which further confirmed the

significance of the predictor. The constant had a t-value of 2.321 and a significant p-value of 0.021, suggesting that when challenges in higher education were absent or minimal, the educational status and societal role remained positively influenced. The analysis showed that challenges in higher education had a statistically significant and negative effect on individuals' educational status and their ability to contribute meaningfully to society.

H2: Higher the opportunities and facilities for women in higher education, the higher would be their status and role in society.

Table: Effect of Opportunities & Facilities in Higher Education on Status and Role of Women
Model Summary

Sample Size (N)	850
R	0.648
R^2	0.420
Adjusted R^2	0.419
Std. Error of Estimate	0.486

ANOVA

F-value	210.987
Sig. (p-value)	0.000

Coefficients

Coefficients	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig.
Constant	—	3.047	0.002
Opportunities & Facilities	0.648	14.527	0.000

Table illustrated the findings regarding the effect of opportunities and facilities in higher education on the status and role of women. The sample size for the analysis was 850 participants. The correlation coefficient (R) was reported as 0.648, indicating a strong positive relationship between the availability of opportunities and facilities in higher education and the improvement in women's status and role in society. The R-squared value (R^2) was 0.420, which suggested that 42% of the variance in the status and role of women was explained by the opportunities and facilities provided in higher education. The adjusted R^2 value of 0.419 confirmed the model's reliability and stability.

The standard error of estimate was 0.486, which indicated a reasonable level of prediction accuracy. The ANOVA results further validated the model's significance, with an F-value of 210.987 and a p-value of 0.000, which was highly significant ($p < 0.05$). This confirmed that the model as a whole was statistically meaningful in explaining the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable. The coefficient table showed a standardized beta coefficient (β) of 0.648 for the variable "Opportunities & Facilities," with a t-value of 14.527 and a p-value of 0.000. This indicated a strong and statistically significant positive effect of opportunities and facilities in higher education on enhancing the status

and societal role of women. The constant term also showed statistical significance, with a t-value of 3.047 and a p-value of 0.002.

In conclusion, the findings revealed that the availability of opportunities and facilities in higher education had a significant and positive impact on the

empowerment, status and societal contribution of women, as demonstrated by the strength and significance of the regression results.

H3: Higher the challenges in their professional career development, the lesser would be the chances of women's development and empowerment in society.

Table: Effect of Career Challenges on Women’s Development and Empowerment
Model Summary

Sample Size (N)	850
R	0.495
R ²	0.245
Adjusted R ²	0.243
Std. Error of Estimate	0.582

ANOVA

F-value	98.143
Sig. (p-value)	0.000

Coefficients	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig.
Constant	–	2.774	0.006
Career Challenges	-0.495	-9.905	0.000

Table presented the findings related to the effect of career challenges on women’s development and empowerment. Table presented the findings related to the effect of career challenges on women’s development and empowerment.

The analysis was conducted on a sample of 850 participants. The correlation coefficient (R) was found to be 0.495, indicating a moderate negative relationship between career challenges and women’s development and empowerment. The R-squared (R²) value was 0.245, which implied that 24.5% of the variance in women's development and empowerment could be explained by career challenges. The adjusted R² was 0.243, suggesting that the model was reliable with minimal over fitting.

The standard error of estimate was 0.582, indicating a moderate level of deviation between the observed and predicted values. The ANOVA results showed that the regression model was statistically significant, with an F-value of 98.143 and a p-value of 0.000, which was well below the 0.05 threshold. This confirmed that

the model significantly explained the impact of career challenges on the dependent variable.

The coefficient table revealed a standardized beta (β) coefficient of -0.495 for the variable “Career Challenges.” The associated t-value was -9.905 and the p-value was 0.000, indicating a statistically significant negative effect of career challenges on women’s development and empowerment. The constant had a t-value of 2.774 and a p-value of 0.006, also statistically significant, showing that in the absence of career challenges, women's development and empowerment were more positively sustained.

In summary, the findings indicated that career challenges had a significant and negative impact on women’s development and empowerment. As the level of career challenges increased, the chances for women to grow and empower themselves in professional and societal roles decreased accordingly.

H4: Higher the opportunities and role of the Government in establishing women's professional careers and protection, the higher would be the chances of women's development and empowerment.

Table: Effect of Government Support on Women’s Development and Empowerment
Model Summary

R	0.672
R ²	0.452
Adjusted R ²	0.451
Std. Error of Estimate	0.469
Std. Error of Estimate	0.582

ANOVA

F-value	224.362		
Sig. (p-value)	0.000		
Coefficients	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig.
Constant	–	3.254	0.001
Government Support	0.672	14.969	0.000

Table 4.92 reported the results regarding the effect of government support on women’s development and empowerment. The study was based on a sample of 850 respondents. The correlation coefficient (R) was 0.672, indicating a strong positive relationship between government support and the development and empowerment of women. The R-squared (R²) value was 0.452, suggesting that 45.2% of the variance in women’s development and empowerment could be explained by the level of government support provided. The adjusted R² was 0.451, confirming that the model was stable and had good explanatory power.

The standard error of estimate was 0.469, which implied a relatively low level of error in the model's predictions. The ANOVA results supported the overall significance of the model, with an F-value of 224.362 and a p-value of 0.000, indicating that the model was statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

The coefficients table showed that government support had a standardized beta (β) value of 0.672, reflecting a strong and positive effect on women’s

development and empowerment. The t-value was 14.969 and the p-value was 0.000, both of which confirmed the high statistical significance of the predictor variable. Additionally, the constant term was significant, with a t-value of 3.254 and a p-value of 0.001, suggesting that even in the absence of government support, a baseline level of women's development and empowerment existed, but government support enhanced it significantly.

In conclusion, the results demonstrated that government support played a crucial and positive role in promoting women’s development and empowerment. Increased support from the government—such as policies, programs and resources—was strongly associated with improvements in women's opportunities, status and societal contributions.

H5: The higher education of women empowers and develops them to play their role in the development of society.

Table: Effect of Women’s Higher Education on Societal Development Role Model Summary

Sample Size (N)	850
R	0.705
R ²	0.497
Adjusted R ²	0.496
Std. Error of Estimate	0.448

ANOVA

F-value	238.753
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Sig. (p-value)		0.000	
Coefficients	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig.
Constant	–	3.571	0.000
Higher Education	0.705	15.450	0.000

Table presented the results concerning the effect of women’s higher education on their societal development role. The analysis was based on a sample size of 850 respondents. The correlation coefficient (R) was found to be 0.705, indicating a strong positive relationship between women’s higher education and their role in societal development. The R-squared (R^2) value was 0.497, meaning that 49.7% of the variance in women’s contribution to societal development was explained by their level of higher education. The adjusted R^2 was 0.496, which demonstrated that the model was robust and only minimally affected by sampling variations.

The standard error of estimate was 0.448, showing a low level of prediction error. The results of the ANOVA test confirmed the statistical significance of the model, with an F-value of 238.753 and a p-value of 0.000, which indicated a highly significant relationship ($p < 0.05$). In the coefficients table, the standardized beta (β) coefficient for higher education was 0.705, suggesting a strong positive influence of higher education on women's societal development role. The t-value was 15.450 and the p-value was 0.000, both indicating a highly significant effect. The constant had a t-value of 3.571 and a p-value of 0.000, confirming its statistical significance.

In summary, the findings showed that women’s higher education had a significant and strongly positive impact on their societal development role. As women attained higher education, their ability to participate meaningfully and contribute to the progress and betterment of society substantially increased.

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 demonstrate 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. Quantitative analysis affirmed that government interventions, such as legal protection, institutional support, maternity leave policies and professional development programs, significantly contribute to improving women’s participation in higher education and their career progression. However, these policies are not always implemented effectively at the grassroots level. 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.

7. 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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