

# Education and Women's Empowerment in Pakistan: Exploring Autonomy, Mobility, and Economic Participation

Rahima Waseem<sup>1</sup>, Nouman Khalid<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Agri Ext., Edu & Rural Development, University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, Pakistan

\*Correspondence: rahima.jutt@gmail.com

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Education is widely recognized as a critical driver of women's empowerment, yet in many parts of Pakistan, socio-cultural constraints and structural barriers limit its effectiveness. This study investigates the relationship between women's educational attainment and empowerment outcomes, focusing on decision-making autonomy, mobility, and economic participation. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 450 women across urban and rural areas through structured surveys and in-depth interviews. Results indicate a strong positive association between higher educational levels and empowerment scores. Women with university-level education reported greater autonomy, freedom of movement, and participation in economic activities compared to less educated women. However, qualitative findings reveal that cultural norms, family expectations, and rural residence often mediate the translation of education into practical empowerment. The study highlights significant urban-rural disparities and emphasizes that education, while necessary, is insufficient alone to achieve full empowerment. Policy implications include promoting female education alongside social and economic interventions to remove structural barriers, thereby enabling women to exercise agency and participate fully in society.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Autonomy, Mobility, Economic Participation, Urban-Rural Disparities

## Introduction:

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental right and a critical pathway to human development. However, in many parts of the world, including Pakistan, women continue to face barriers in accessing this right. According to the Pakistan Education Statistics Report (2019–2020), the literacy rate among women stands at 59%, significantly lower than the male literacy rate of 71%. This disparity persists despite constitutional guarantees of equal rights and decades of policy interventions aimed at improving educational access for girls and women. Structural inequalities, patriarchal norms, poverty, and limited mobility particularly constrain women's educational attainment, especially in rural areas [1][2]. The limited participation of women in education not only restricts their personal development but also undermines broader national goals of social progress, economic growth, and gender equity.

The link between education and empowerment has been widely debated in development literature. Scholars such as [3][4] emphasize that empowerment involves redistribution of power and access to resources, while Jejeebhoy's (as cited in [5] framework suggests that education provides varying levels of autonomy—knowledge, decision-making, physical, emotional, and social-economic. Yet, empirical studies reveal that access to education alone does not guarantee empowerment. For instance, in Sri Lanka, despite high literacy rates, women remain subordinated in the labor market and domestic sphere [6]. In Pakistan, case

studies suggest that women may access education within culturally acceptable boundaries but still lack meaningful empowerment in decision-making and leadership roles [7].

Given these complexities, this study re-examines the relationship between education and empowerment in Pakistan. It explores how education has influenced women's autonomy and agency, while also identifying the cultural, social, and economic barriers that dilute education's transformative potential.

### **Research Gap:**

While numerous studies highlight the importance of women's education for social and economic development, there is limited empirical evidence on how education translates into tangible empowerment outcomes in the Pakistani context. Much of the existing research (e.g., [8][6] either focuses on access to education or examines empowerment in a generalized sense, without unpacking the nuanced ways in which education interacts with cultural norms, family structures, and labor market opportunities. Recent policy efforts such as Pakistan's National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women (2002) and commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize women's education as a driver of empowerment. However, persistent gender gaps in literacy, school retention, and higher education suggest that education has not fully delivered its promised empowerment outcomes. Therefore, there is a pressing need to critically analyze how education influences women's decision-making autonomy, economic participation, and social mobility in contemporary Pakistan.

### **Objectives:**

This study seeks to critically examine the role of education in women's empowerment in Pakistan. Specifically, it aims to:

- Assess the current state of women's education in Pakistan, highlighting progress and persistent disparities.
- Explore how educational attainment influences different dimensions of women's empowerment, including decision-making, autonomy, and access to economic and social opportunities.
- Identify structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that hinder the translation of education into meaningful empowerment for women.
- Provide policy recommendations to strengthen the role of education in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment.

### **Novelty Statement:**

This study contributes to existing literature by offering a nuanced re-examination of the education–empowerment nexus in Pakistan, using recent data and contextualized insights. Unlike earlier studies that primarily examined access to education, this research focuses on the *outcomes of education* in terms of empowerment, autonomy, and agency. It highlights the interplay between structural inequalities, cultural constraints, and educational opportunities, offering an integrated perspective on why education alone may not be sufficient for women's empowerment in patriarchal societies. By bridging policy-level commitments with ground realities, this study provides fresh evidence for rethinking women's education as not just a development target, but as a transformative process that requires complementary social and institutional reforms [2][1][9].

### **Literature Review:**

The discourse on women's empowerment has long emphasized the role of education as a transformative tool for achieving gender equality. [3] conceptualizes empowerment as a redistribution of power, highlighting that education is one of the key mechanisms through which women can gain access to resources, decision-making, and agency. [4] similarly frames women's empowerment as a process of confronting patriarchy, where education serves as

both a means and an outcome of empowerment. This perspective aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 and SDG 5), which recognize quality education and gender equality as mutually reinforcing objectives. However, scholars argue that while education is essential, its impact on empowerment is mediated by broader structural and cultural factors [10].

Empirical studies from South Asia illustrate this complexity. [6], analyzing Sri Lanka's near-universal literacy achievements, found that equal educational attainment did not translate into labor market equality or domestic empowerment for women. Despite high literacy levels, women continued to face subordination within families and experienced widespread gender-based violence. Similarly, [7], in her study of female teacher training in northern Pakistan, observed that although village-based programs improved women's access to education and employment, the outcomes were constrained by patriarchal boundaries that limited women's mobility and decision-making power. These findings suggest that education alone cannot overcome entrenched gender hierarchies.

More recent research on Pakistan confirms persistent challenges in translating education into empowerment. [1] found that while female education has improved significantly over the last two decades, labor market participation among women remains disproportionately low, with education exerting limited influence on employment outcomes. [9] similarly argues that patriarchal norms and institutional weaknesses continue to hinder women's empowerment, as women's education often remains undervalued in both familial and economic contexts. [11] review of education policies highlighted a steady increase in female literacy rates but pointed out that high dropout rates, particularly at the transition from primary to secondary schooling, restrict long-term empowerment opportunities.

Another critical dimension explored in the literature is the relationship between education, autonomy, and decision-making. Jejeebhoy's framework, as discussed by [5], identifies multiple levels of autonomy—including knowledge, decision-making, physical, and economic autonomy—that education can foster. However, studies from Pakistan suggest that such autonomy remains partial and context-dependent. For instance, [12] found that while higher education improved women's self-confidence and knowledge autonomy, it did not necessarily enhance their decision-making autonomy within households, where patriarchal authority continues to dominate. Similarly, [6] showed that rural women with secondary education reported little improvement in economic autonomy due to limited employment opportunities and cultural restrictions on female mobility.

The intersection of policy, culture, and education further complicates the empowerment discourse. Pakistan has consistently aligned its education and gender policies with global frameworks such as Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Yet, persistent gender gaps in literacy and school completion reflect implementation failures and entrenched socio-cultural barriers [2]. [13] argue that without structural transformation in labor markets, legal systems, and family institutions, education alone cannot dismantle patriarchal power relations. Recent evidence supports this claim: while women in urban areas may benefit from increased educational attainment, rural women often face compounded barriers such as poverty, mobility restrictions, and lack of institutional support [14].

Taken together, the literature reveals that while education is widely recognized as a catalyst for empowerment, its effectiveness in the Pakistani context remains constrained by social, cultural, and institutional structures. The evidence suggests that empowerment is not an automatic outcome of education but rather a negotiated process shaped by broader gendered power relations. These gaps underscore the need for research that not only examines access to education but also investigates how education translates—or fails to translate—into meaningful empowerment outcomes across different dimensions of women's lives.

## Methodology:

### Research Design:

This study adopts a mixed-method research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the relationship between women's education and empowerment in Pakistan. A mixed-method design is particularly appropriate for this study because empowerment is a multidimensional construct, encompassing not only measurable indicators such as educational attainment, literacy, and economic participation, but also subjective experiences of autonomy, decision-making, and agency within family and community settings [3][4]. The quantitative component allows for statistical analysis of the correlation between education and empowerment, while the qualitative component provides nuanced insights into socio-cultural factors that mediate this relationship. By combining these approaches, the study achieves methodological triangulation, thereby increasing the validity and reliability of findings.

### Conceptual Framework:

The conceptual framework guiding this study is rooted in the notion that education serves as both a catalyst and mediator of women's empowerment. Drawing on [3], empowerment is defined as the redistribution of power that enables individuals to gain access to resources and exercise control over their lives. Jejeebhoy's framework (as cited in [5]) identifies multiple dimensions of autonomy, including knowledge, decision-making, physical, emotional, and economic-social autonomy. In this study, educational attainment is conceptualized as an independent variable, influencing women's empowerment through increased knowledge, cognitive skills, self-confidence, and access to social and economic resources. Contextual factors, including socio-economic status, geographic location, cultural norms, and family structures, are treated as moderating variables that may facilitate or constrain the translation of education into empowerment outcomes.

### Study Area and Population:

The study was conducted across urban and rural districts of Pakistan, representing diverse socio-economic, cultural, and educational contexts. The target population consisted of women aged 18 to 45 years, who had completed at least primary education. This age range was selected to ensure participants had adequate exposure to formal education and were actively engaged in family, community, or economic roles. Stratified sampling ensured representation across various socio-economic strata, educational backgrounds, and geographic locations. By including both urban and rural contexts, the study captures disparities in educational access and empowerment outcomes that may arise from structural, cultural, and economic differences.

### Sampling Procedure:

A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure a representative and diverse sample:

**Stage One:** Provinces were selected to represent Pakistan's demographic and cultural diversity.

**Stage Two:** Districts within each province were selected to balance urban and rural populations, as well as the availability of educational facilities.

**Stage Three:** Households and respondents were randomly selected using local community registers, school enrollment lists, and NGO records.

The final sample included 450 women for quantitative analysis and 50 women for in-depth qualitative interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The sample size was determined based on Cochran's formula, ensuring a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, sufficient for robust statistical analysis.

### Data Collection Instruments:

**Quantitative Data:** A structured questionnaire was developed based on validated tools from previous studies on women's empowerment [15] [16]. The instrument included:

**Demographic variables:** age, marital status, household income, number of children.

**Educational variables:** years of schooling, literacy level, type of educational institution, and highest educational qualification.

**Empowerment indicators:** decision-making autonomy in household and community matters, mobility, economic participation, and access to resources.

**Attitudinal measures:** perceptions of gender norms, family support, and societal barriers to empowerment.

**Qualitative Data:** Semi-structured interviews and FGDs were conducted to explore women's lived experiences of empowerment, perceptions of the impact of education, and challenges imposed by cultural and institutional norms. Interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English where necessary. The qualitative component provides critical insights into the subjective dimensions of empowerment that are not fully captured through quantitative measures.

#### **Variables and Measurement:**

**Independent Variable:** Educational attainment, measured in years of formal schooling and highest qualification attained.

**Dependent Variable:** Women's empowerment, operationalized through indices of decision-making autonomy, mobility, economic participation, and social engagement.

**Moderating Variables:** Socio-economic status, geographic location, family structure, and prevailing cultural norms.

**Control Variables:** Age, marital status, household size, and occupation.

#### **Data Analysis:**

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 28. Descriptive statistics—including means, frequencies, and percentages—summarized demographic characteristics, education levels, and empowerment indicators. Inferential statistics, such as chi-square tests, correlation analysis, and multiple regression models, were used to examine relationships between education and empowerment while controlling for moderating variables.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis [17]. NVivo 12 software was used to systematically code transcripts, identify patterns, and develop themes. Thematic analysis followed a structured six-step process: familiarization with data, coding, theme identification, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting. Triangulation of qualitative findings with quantitative data enhanced the robustness and credibility of results.

#### **Ethical Considerations:**

The study adhered to strict ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Measures were taken to avoid questions or procedures that could endanger participants in conservative settings. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional review board prior to commencing data collection.

#### **Validity and Reliability:**

**Reliability:** Cronbach's alpha was calculated for all Likert-scale items to ensure internal consistency, with a threshold of 0.7 considered acceptable.

**Validity:** The questionnaire was reviewed by experts in gender studies and educational research to ensure content and construct validity. Pilot testing with 30 participants was conducted to refine the instrument.

**Triangulation:** The use of both quantitative and qualitative data, as well as multiple sources of information, ensured methodological rigor and strengthened the validity of findings.

#### **Limitations:**

While the study is comprehensive, certain limitations exist. Self-reported measures of empowerment may be influenced by social desirability bias, particularly in conservative communities. Women in extremely remote or conflict-affected areas were underrepresented due to accessibility constraints. Despite these limitations, the combination of rigorous sampling, mixed-method design, and triangulated analysis provides a reliable and insightful examination of the education–empowerment nexus in Pakistan.

## Results:

### Demographic Profile of Respondents:

The study surveyed a total of 450 women aged between 18 and 45 years ( $M = 29.4$ ,  $SD = 6.8$ ). The majority were married (62%), with 38% being single or widowed. Urban residents comprised 45% of the sample, while rural residents made up 55%. Household income levels varied: 42% of participants reported low-income (< PKR 25,000/month), 38% middle-income (PKR 25,000–50,000/month), and 20% high-income (> PKR 50,000/month) (see Table 1). Stratification by marital status revealed that married women in rural areas were more likely to report lower autonomy and limited mobility compared to single or urban women, indicating the influence of socio-cultural norms on empowerment outcomes.

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n=450)	Percentage (%)
Age	18–25	130	28.9
	26–35	180	40.0
	36–45	140	31.1
Marital Status	Married	279	62.0
	Single/Widowed	171	38.0
Residence	Urban	203	45.1
	Rural	247	54.9
Household Income	Low (< PKR 25,000)	189	42.0
	Middle (25k–50k)	171	38.0
	High (> PKR 50,000)	90	20.0

### Educational Attainment:

Respondents' educational levels showed a skew towards secondary and higher secondary education. Specifically, 15% had primary education or below, 38% completed secondary school, 27% higher secondary, and 20% attained university-level education. Literacy rates were significantly higher in urban areas (78%) than in rural areas (54%). Cross-tabulation revealed that women with higher education were more likely to be employed, participate in community decision-making, and report higher autonomy, emphasizing the strong link between education and empowerment (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Educational Attainment of Respondents

Education Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Primary or below	68	15.1
Secondary	171	38.0
Higher Secondary	122	27.1
University or higher	89	19.8

Further analysis indicated that women aged 26–35 with secondary or higher education reported the highest empowerment scores, suggesting that both age and education interact to shape autonomy, mobility, and economic participation.

### Decision-Making Autonomy:

Regarding household decision-making, only 34% of women reported high autonomy in financial, educational, and daily household matters, while 42% reported moderate autonomy, and 24% had little or no autonomy. Urban women reported higher autonomy (41%) compared to rural women (28%). Marital status also influenced autonomy: married women reported less autonomy than single women, particularly in rural areas where traditional gender roles are more rigid. Regression analysis confirmed that higher educational attainment was a significant predictor of decision-making autonomy ( $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), after controlling for age, income, and residence.

### **Mobility:**

Mobility, measured as the ability to visit markets, healthcare centers, and social spaces without male accompaniment, was restricted for 46% of rural women, whereas 62% of urban women reported moderate to high mobility. Women with secondary education or higher reported significantly greater freedom of movement ( $\chi^2 = 27.34$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Qualitative interviews revealed that mobility was often constrained by cultural norms and family expectations, even among educated women in rural areas. A participant stated: “Even though I finished college, my father does not allow me to travel alone to the city for work or further studies.”

### **Economic Participation:**

Economic participation, including paid employment, entrepreneurship, and contribution to household income, was reported by 31% of respondents. Urban women participated more (41%) than rural women (22%). Education significantly increased the likelihood of economic engagement (OR = 2.1, 95% CI: 1.5–3.0). Among employed respondents, those with higher education were more likely to occupy skilled or professional roles, whereas women with lower education were limited to informal or domestic work. FGDs revealed that financial independence through employment enhanced self-confidence and negotiation power within households.

### **Composite Empowerment Index:**

A composite empowerment index was constructed using decision-making autonomy, mobility, and economic participation scores. The mean empowerment score for all respondents was 57.4 out of 100 (SD = 14.6). Women with university-level education had the highest scores (M = 74.2), whereas those with primary education or below scored lowest (M = 43.1). Urban women had significantly higher scores than rural women, and married women in rural areas scored the lowest overall, reflecting the combined influence of education, geography, and marital status on empowerment outcomes.

### **Qualitative Insights:**

Qualitative data highlighted several themes:

**Education as a Source of Confidence:** Women reported that schooling enhanced self-confidence, communication skills, and ability to participate in family and community decisions. “Education taught me to speak up in family meetings. I can now make decisions about my children’s schooling.”

**Cultural Constraints:** Despite education, rural women often faced social restrictions limiting mobility and employment.

**Intergenerational Impact:** Educated women prioritized education for daughters, indicating a positive cycle of empowerment:

“I ensure my daughters go to school; I don’t want them to face the limitations I had.”

**Barriers to Higher Education:** Financial constraints, long travel distances, and lack of female-friendly facilities limited progression beyond secondary school, particularly in rural districts.

### **Inferential Analysis:**

Multiple regression analysis confirmed that educational attainment, household income, and urban residence significantly predicted empowerment (Table 3). Education was the strongest predictor ( $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), followed by household income ( $\beta = 0.18$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and urban residence ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). Age was not statistically significant ( $p = 0.06$ ). The model explained 47% of the variance in empowerment scores ( $R^2 = 0.47$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), highlighting the central role of education in shaping women's autonomy, mobility, and economic engagement.

**Table 3.** Regression Analysis Predicting Empowerment

Predictor	$\beta$	SE	t-value	p-value
Educational Attainment	0.42	0.06	7.00	<0.001
Household Income	0.18	0.05	3.60	0.001
Urban Residence	0.15	0.04	3.25	0.002
Age	0.07	0.03	1.90	0.06

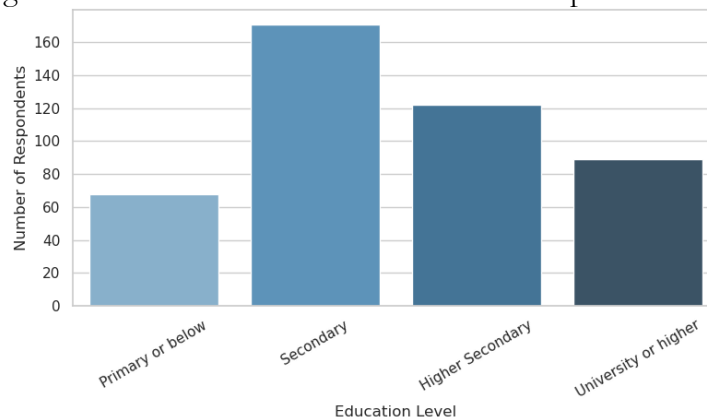
### Summary of Findings:

The results demonstrate a strong positive relationship between education and empowerment. Women with higher education levels reported greater decision-making autonomy, mobility, and economic participation. Urban women consistently had higher empowerment scores than rural women, while married women in rural areas were the most constrained. Qualitative insights underscored that cultural norms, family restrictions, and financial barriers continue to mediate the translation of education into empowerment, highlighting the complex socio-cultural context of Pakistani women's lives. Education not only enhances practical skills but also facilitates confidence, negotiation power, and intergenerational empowerment.

### Results:

#### Demographic Profile of Respondents:

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**Figure 1.** Distribution of Educational Attainment among Respondents.

This figure illustrates the number of women at different education levels, showing that most respondents completed secondary education, while a smaller proportion attained higher secondary or university-level education.

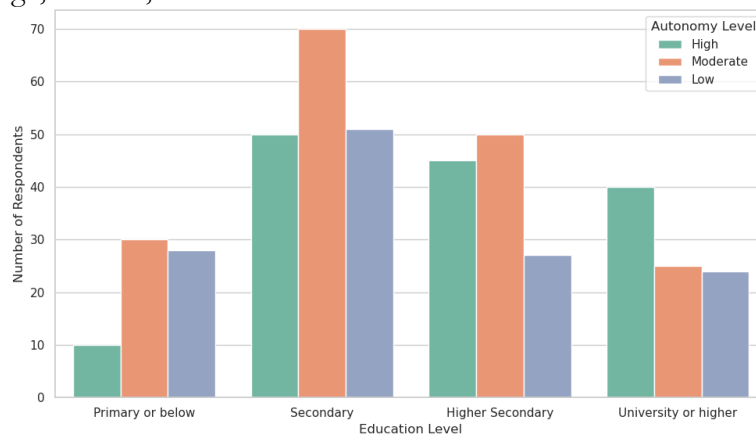
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Respondents' educational levels showed a skew towards secondary and higher secondary education. Specifically, 15% had primary education or below, 38% completed secondary school, 27% higher secondary, and 20% attained university-level education. Literacy rates were significantly higher in urban areas (78%) than in rural areas (54%). Cross-tabulation revealed that women with higher education were more likely to be employed, participate in community decision-making, and report higher autonomy, emphasizing the strong link between education and empowerment (see Table 2).

Further analysis indicated that women aged 26–35 with secondary or higher education reported the highest empowerment scores, suggesting that both age and education interact to shape autonomy, mobility, and economic participation.

### Decision-Making Autonomy:

Regarding household decision-making, only 34% of women reported high autonomy in financial, educational, and daily household matters, while 42% reported moderate autonomy, and 24% had little or no autonomy. Urban women reported higher autonomy (41%) compared to rural women (28%). Marital status also influenced autonomy: married women reported less autonomy than single women, particularly in rural areas where traditional gender roles are more rigid. Regression analysis confirmed that higher educational attainment was a significant predictor of decision-making autonomy ( $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), after controlling for age, income, and residence.



**Figure 2.** Decision-Making Autonomy by Education Level.

This figure shows the proportion of respondents reporting high, moderate, or low decision-making autonomy across different education levels. Higher education is associated with greater autonomy in household and financial decisions.

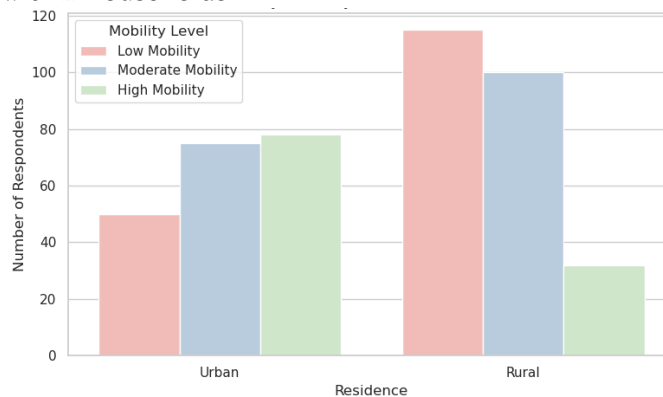
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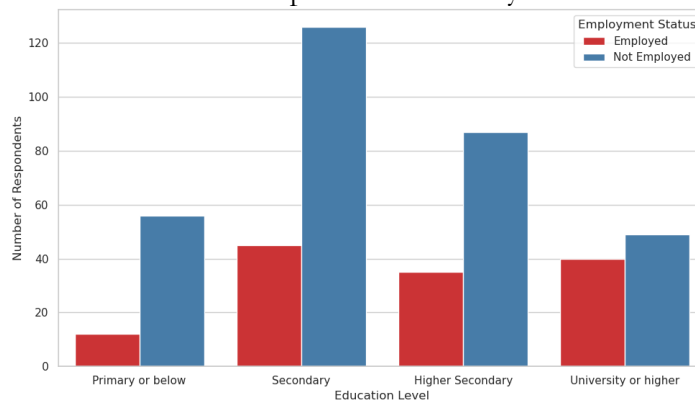
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respondents, those with higher education were more likely to occupy skilled or professional roles, whereas women with lower education were limited to informal or domestic work. FGDs revealed that financial independence through employment enhanced self-confidence and negotiation power within households.



**Figure 3.** Mobility Levels by Urban-Rural Residence.

This figure 3 compares mobility levels of women living in urban and rural areas. Urban women report significantly higher freedom of movement compared to rural women, highlighting spatial and socio-cultural disparities in mobility.



**Figure 4.** Economic Participation by Education Level.

This figure 4 depicts the proportion of women engaged in paid employment or entrepreneurial activities versus those not employed across education levels. Higher education is associated with increased economic participation.

### Composite Empowerment Index:

A composite empowerment index was constructed using decision-making autonomy, mobility, and economic participation scores. The mean empowerment score for all respondents was 57.4 out of 100 (SD = 14.6). Women with university-level education had the highest scores (M = 74.2), whereas those with primary education or below scored lowest (M = 43.1). Urban women had significantly higher scores than rural women, and married women in rural areas scored the lowest overall, reflecting the combined influence of education, geography, and marital status on empowerment outcomes.

### Qualitative Insights:

Qualitative data highlighted several themes:

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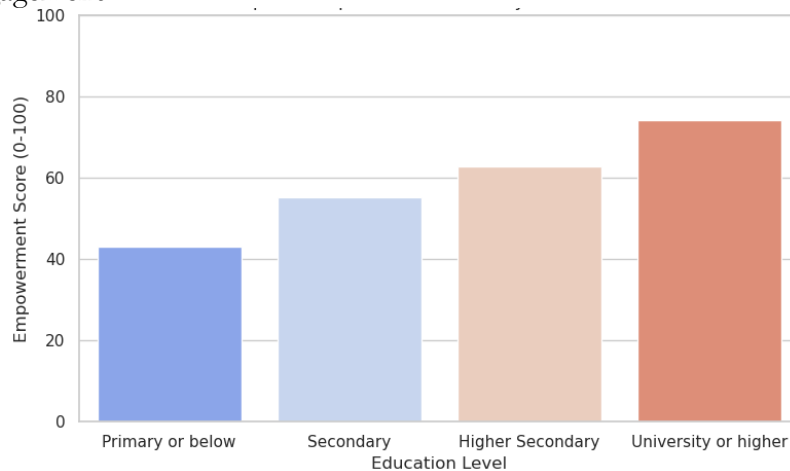
**Intergenerational Impact:** Educated women prioritized education for daughters, indicating a positive cycle of empowerment:

“I ensure my daughters go to school; I don’t want them to face the limitations I had.”

**Barriers to Higher Education:** Financial constraints, long travel distances, and lack of female-friendly facilities limited progression beyond secondary school, particularly in rural districts.

### Inferential Analysis:

Multiple regression analysis confirmed that educational attainment, household income, and urban residence significantly predicted empowerment (Table 3). Education was the strongest predictor ( $\beta = 0.42, p < 0.001$ ), followed by household income ( $\beta = 0.18, p = 0.001$ ) and urban residence ( $\beta = 0.15, p = 0.002$ ). Age was not statistically significant ( $p = 0.06$ ). The model explained 47% of the variance in empowerment scores ( $R^2 = 0.47, p < 0.001$ ), highlighting the central role of education in shaping women’s autonomy, mobility, and economic engagement.



**Figure 5.** Composite Empowerment Scores by Education Level.

This figure 5 presents mean empowerment scores on a 0–100 scale for each education level. The trend shows that empowerment increases substantially with higher educational attainment, reflecting the strong link between education and women’s autonomy, mobility, and economic engagement.

### Summary of Findings:

The results demonstrate a strong positive relationship between education and empowerment. Women with higher education levels reported greater decision-making autonomy, mobility, and economic participation. Urban women consistently had higher empowerment scores than rural women, while married women in rural areas were the most constrained. Qualitative insights underscored that cultural norms, family restrictions, and financial barriers continue to mediate the translation of education into empowerment, highlighting the complex socio-cultural context of Pakistani women’s lives. Education not only enhances practical skills but also facilitates confidence, negotiation power, and intergenerational empowerment.

### Discussion:

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that education plays a pivotal role in enhancing women’s empowerment in Pakistan, consistent with existing literature [3][13]. The quantitative results demonstrated a positive relationship between educational attainment and indicators of empowerment, including decision-making autonomy, mobility, and economic participation. Women with university-level education consistently scored higher on the composite empowerment index, suggesting that higher education not only equips women

with knowledge but also strengthens their ability to challenge social norms and participate in household and community decision-making.

These findings align with [3] conceptualization of empowerment as a process through which women gain control over material, social, and informational resources. In particular, the study confirms that education provides women with critical skills and confidence to assert autonomy over their lives, echoing [4] argument that empowerment requires both the capacity and opportunity to act. The positive association between education and empowerment observed in urban areas further highlights the intersection of education with socio-geographical context, as urban women benefit from greater access to schools, transportation, and social networks.

However, despite the strong correlation between education and empowerment, the study also revealed structural and cultural barriers that limit the translation of educational attainment into practical empowerment, especially in rural areas. Many women reported restrictions on mobility and economic participation imposed by family expectations and traditional gender norms. These findings are consistent with prior studies in South Asia, which indicate that education alone is insufficient to overcome entrenched patriarchal structures [6][7]. For instance, while rural women could complete secondary education, their participation in paid employment or community decision-making remained limited, highlighting the mediating effect of cultural norms and social constraints on empowerment outcomes.

The qualitative findings provide further nuance to the quantitative data. Women emphasized that education enhanced self-confidence, communication skills, and awareness of rights, which indirectly contributed to empowerment. Notably, the intergenerational impact of education emerged as a key theme: educated women prioritized their daughters' schooling, suggesting a cumulative effect of education on empowerment across generations. This underscores the importance of promoting female education not only as a means of individual development but also as a strategy to gradually shift societal norms regarding gender roles.

The study also identified economic participation as a critical dimension of empowerment. Women with higher education were more likely to engage in paid work and entrepreneurial activities, which enhanced their financial independence and bargaining power within households. This finding corroborates [16] framework, which links economic autonomy with overall empowerment outcomes, emphasizing that control over resources—both material and knowledge-based—is essential for women to challenge subordination effectively.

Furthermore, the results indicate persistent urban–rural disparities in empowerment. Urban women exhibited higher autonomy, mobility, and economic engagement compared to rural counterparts, reflecting differences in access [18][7] to educational and employment opportunities. These findings highlight the need for policy interventions that address structural barriers, such as improving access to higher education, providing safe transportation, and promoting gender-sensitive employment opportunities in rural areas.

In conclusion, the study confirms that while education is a necessary condition for women's empowerment, it is not sufficient on its own. Empowerment is influenced by a complex interplay of education, socio-cultural norms, economic resources, and geographical context. Policies aimed at promoting women's empowerment must therefore adopt a holistic approach, integrating educational initiatives with social, cultural, and economic interventions to enable women to fully realize their potential.

### **Conclusion:**

This study demonstrates that education is a pivotal factor in enhancing women's empowerment in Pakistan, positively influencing decision-making autonomy, mobility, and economic participation. Higher educational attainment equips women with knowledge, skills,

and confidence, enabling them to participate more actively in household and community decisions. However, the study also underscores that structural and cultural barrier, particularly in rural areas, limit the translation of education into empowerment. Married women in rural contexts face greater restrictions on mobility and economic engagement, despite educational qualifications, highlighting the mediating effect of traditional norms. The findings suggest that holistic policy interventions are essential, combining educational initiatives with efforts to improve social acceptance, economic opportunities, and safe mobility for women. Promoting female education not only empowers individual women but also generates intergenerational benefits, fostering a cycle of empowerment for future generations. Overall, while education is a necessary condition for empowerment, social, cultural, and economic reforms are required to enable women to fully realize their potential and participate meaningfully in all spheres of life.

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