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Women's Empowerment: A Qualitative Study of Structural Barriers and Changing Societal Attitudes

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Abstract

The concept and practice of women's empowerment have gained significant importance in the present-day world. This is intended not just for women's personal growth but also for the development of society as a whole. However, women face many challenges on this journey. This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the challenges faced by women lecturers and the social perceptions of their role as working women. This paper is part of a broader study conducted to investigate the empowerment dynamics of female lecturers. For this purpose, a total of 12 female lecturers were selected using a purposive sampling technique and were subsequently interviewed to share their experiences. Two main themes emerged under the study objectives: 1) Structural challenges faced by female lecturers on their empowerment journey and 2) Societal shifts towards women's empowerment. It was found that women lecturers encounter constraints mainly because of patriarchal gender norms, leading to many difficulties in maintaining a work-life balance. Married women feel more burdened as a result of this structure compared to unmarried females. However, it was also discovered that general perceptions of these employed women are gradually changing, and some people in their surroundings look up to them as role models. It is recommended that policies be formulated to support women on this journey and to reduce the social stigma associated with women working outside the home to earn a living.

Keywords: empowerment challenges, gender equality, gender roles, women's empowerment, women's employment, work-life balance

Introduction

The notion of women's empowerment holds immense importance, as their autonomy is integral not just to their personal growth but also to that of their family and society as a whole. Women's empowerment can drive economic

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development, improve health and education for females as well as their families, and advance gender equality by challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes (Reshi & Sudha, [2023](#)). According to Kabeer ([2012](#)), empowering women economically is crucial for alleviating poverty, particularly in developing areas.

Raeburn and Rootman ([1998](#)) suggest that empowerment largely involves enhancing an individual's sense of personal agency or influence. Alternative definitions of empowerment not only emphasize an individual's freedom to take action but also stress the tangible material, social, and institutional prerequisites necessary for exercising agency (Ibrahim & Alkire, [2007](#)).

However, women are faced with a plethora of challenges on their way to empowerment, especially in the context of patriarchy. A patriarchal structure includes the establishment of gender norms and institutions that are often unquestioned (Pateman, [2016](#)). These norms play a crucial role in shaping gender roles, which in turn influence individuals' life choices and experiences. In Pakistan, similar to other patriarchal societies, decision-making authority is usually held by male figures (Farooq & Kayani, [2014](#)). Traditional patriarchy describes a patrilineal system where the male is the primary earner and the female is responsible for homemaking duties (Kandiyoti, [1988](#)). In broader society, this results in the belief that males are better suited for roles of influence and authority (Spierings, [2014](#)). Similarly, the duty of earning an income traditionally falls onto adult men, while women are generally expected to focus on raising children, caring for family members, and looking after domestic matters (Spierings, [2014](#)). The patriarchal norms systematically disadvantage women compared to men, reinforcing male dominance in various facets of life in Pakistan (Ali et al., [2010](#)). These norms challenge the empowerment of women in various ways.

However, there is also a trend in changing attitudes towards the goal of women's empowerment. Changing views on gender roles are shaped by greater awareness promoted through educational efforts and media representation, as highlighted by Brewster and Padavic ([2000](#)). An essential aspect involves analyzing the evolving trends in women's education across different periods (Farooq & Kayani, [2014](#)). The advancements in women's education also impact various institutions (Siddiqui, [2005](#)), influencing their employment opportunities and enhancing their autonomy (Abbas et al., [2021](#); Mahsud & Ali, [2020](#)).

More women are being encouraged to take up formal jobs to earn income. This shows a change in gender roles, though men's roles have not changed as much. However, while women are now working more in the economy, they still mostly do traditional household tasks (Farooq & Kayani, [2014](#)). Women joining the workforce, which men used to dominate, is mainly because people's views on gender roles have changed (Nadeem & Khalid, [2018](#)).

Against this background, this study is aimed at exploring the hurdles experienced by female lecturers in government colleges of Bhakkar during their employment and empowerment journey. Understanding the underlying challenges is important to encourage women to be empowered. The study also examines the community's perceptions of these women, the way participants have experienced them.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses intersectionality theory as the guiding framework for analysis. According to this theory, various factors such as race, gender, class, ethnicity etc. intersect to marginalize certain groups (Cole, [2009](#)). Some groups enjoy privileges at the expense of exploiting the vulnerable groups (Van Herk et al., [2011](#)). The power dynamics in the society are maintained and reproduced by the powerful groups, and this exacerbates disparities for certain vulnerable populations (Raza, [2017](#)). This study uses this framework to explore how the socio-cultural patterns of district Bhakkar, which is a male-dominant region, affect the employment journey of female lecturers.

The two hypotheses for the study are:

H1: Socio-cultural norms in male-dominated societies limit women's opportunities for personal and professional growth, hindering their empowerment (Burfat et al., [2019](#)).

H2: Paid jobs are not only economically empowering women in Pakistan but also increasing their social status and influence in decision-making (Mahsud & Ali, [2020](#)).

Literature Review

Most of the definitions of women's empowerment interpret it as a process by which women succeed in achieving agency (Santoso et al., [2019](#)). Agency is the ability of an individual to freely pursue and accomplish goals

or values they deem significant (Sen, [2017](#)). The second concept, process, highlights the transition over time from gender inequity to gender equity (Malhotra & Schuler, [2005](#)). However, the road to empowerment is not easy for Pakistan even if they have the necessary means and resources to achieve this.

Sarwar and Farid ([2024](#)) analyzed that Pakistan demonstrates considerable gender disparity because of various challenges, including barriers to education and employment, gender-based violence, cultural norms, and constraints in healthcare access. In terms of their employment status, women encounter various limitations due to their gender. These limitations consist of oppressive hierarchical management systems, lack of respect from male colleagues, insensitivity towards women's cultural constraints, clashes between domestic and work obligations, and insufficient infrastructure support (Mumtaz et al., [2003](#)).

Patriarchal norms designate male household members as gatekeepers that affect women's access to education, employment, and mobility freedom, and limit their opportunities for agency and empowerment (Becker, [2019](#); Prillaman et al., [2015](#)). On the other hand, employment helps women gain participation in decision-making at household and social levels by increasing their earning power and making them contributors to the family income (Habib et al., [2019](#)). This statement highlights that when women are employed, their economic contributions enhance their status within the family and community.

There are also some contentious debates around women's empowerment which explain its transformative potential while acknowledging the challenges and discourse that surround its implementation and understanding. In South Asia, working women are faced with the struggle of work-life balance, issues of sexual harassment at work, and threat of violence because of their public presence (Nazneen et al., [2019](#)). In the field of international development policy, the concept of women's empowerment is often portrayed in an overly simplistic manner, emphasizing harmony and prosperity while overlooking the inherent power struggles; empowered women are frequently idealized, expected to excel in both motherhood and careers, benefiting society as a whole (Cornwall & Anyidoho, [2010](#)). Feminist scholars and development economists recognize the contentious nature of this issue, given its potential to shift gender power dynamics

(Nazneen et al., [2019](#)). Nonetheless, the pursuit of women's empowerment remains a core goal of the feminist movement (Nazneen et al., [2019](#)).

Research Method

This study is a part of wider research (Fatima et al., [2024](#)), employing a phenomenological qualitative design to investigate the challenges faced by female college lecturers during the course of their empowerment and employment. Phenomenological approach is best suited for studies in which the lived experiences of the participants are attempted to be explored. Furthermore, before starting the research, bracketing was ensured where the researcher put aside their prior assumptions regarding the phenomenon to be studied.

12 women lecturers, working at two government colleges in the Bahkkar district of Punjab, were selected for the study through a purposive sampling method. Following this method, those women lecturers were selected for the study who held a full-time teaching position at the college. Data collection took place over two weeks. The data was analyzed manually using the thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke ([2006](#)). The analysis involved familiarizing with the data first by reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain a deep understanding. Key points were identified and coded systematically to capture important patterns. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflected the core ideas within the data.

Ethical approval for the study and data collection was received from the institutional review board of Forman Christian College (A Chartered University), Lahore. The study followed all the research ethics, and the consent of the participants was taken before their participation. In addition, their anonymity was ensured and proper measures were taken to maintain confidentiality. The interviews were audio-recorded and the tapes were destroyed after data transcription and analysis. To preserve anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms have been utilized in this study.

Table 1

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Age	Marital status	No. of children	Type of family	Residence area	Rank/grade
Ayesha	36	Married	3	Nuclear	Rural	18
Khadija	39	Married	2	Joint	Urban	17

Participant	Age	Marital status	No. of children	Type of family	Residence area	Rank/ grade
Amina	29	Married	1	Nuclear	Rural	17
Naila	27	Married	-	Joint	Urban	17
Hania	30	Unmarried	-	Joint	Rural	17
Anam	23	Unmarried	-	Joint	Rural	17
Areeba	39	Married	3	Nuclear	Urban	17
Uswa	45	Married	3	Joint	Urban	18
Samra	27	Married	-	Nuclear	Urban	17
Muneeza	31	Unmarried	-	Joint	Rural	17
Alisha	27	Unmarried	-	Nuclear	Urban	17
Sadaf	23	Unmarried	-	Nuclear	Rural	17

Results

Table 2

Structural Barriers and Changing Societal Attitudes towards Empowerment of Women Lecturers

Category	Sub-category
Structural challenges faced by female lecturers on their empowerment journey	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Difficulties in maintaining work-life balance 2. Patriarchal barriers 3. Challenges encountered by married working women because of the prevalent social setup 4. Envy from relatives and peers 5. Travelling constraints
Societal shifts towards women's empowerment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. People finding inspiration in empowered women 2. A positive shift in the behavior of people within community following employment 3. Husbands' acceptance of wives' empowerment due to economic gains

Structural Challenges Faced by Female Lecturers on their Empowerment Journey

The first part of this study (Fatima et al., [2024](#)) unveiled that women lecturers feel empowered because of their current employment status;



however, they continue to encounter structural hurdles which include the systemic barriers rooted in the societal frameworks. They encounter challenges in the form of patriarchal stigmatization, envy from people around them, difficulties in maintaining work-life balance, and commuting barriers.

Difficulties in Maintaining Work-Life Balance

It was mentioned by most of the participants that despite having an enhanced level of empowerment after getting employed, they faced challenges while maintaining work-life balance. This struggle exhausts them, leaving little time to spend with their family or on themselves. Amina shared:

Balancing work and personal life is a significant challenge for me. This exhausts me a lot to manage time in a way that I can spend it with my family, or take care of home, or complete job related tasks. I try to maintain a balance between work and home but sometimes I fail to get the desired results.

Areeba stated:

Maintaining work-life balance is undoubtedly a challenge for working women. Speaking from my own experience, I have to give my best at the workplace and also take care of home and children's schooling because I live in a nuclear family. This is why I often say that ours is a 24-hour struggle and we are supposed to balance all this. There is no relaxation either at the college or at home.

In Samra's words:

I find it challenging to maintain a work-life balance. For instance, I have to fulfill my work-related duties, cook a good meal, attend family functions on time, give proper attention to my job, and try my best not to let work-related problems affect my mood at home, or vice versa.

Sadaf also expressed the same challenge as: "I face issues while balancing home and work. I find it difficult to demarcate free time for my home."

Patriarchal Barriers

When discussing the challenges faced by the women lecturers, they revealed that they struggled with obstacles stemming from patriarchy. They encountered mean remarks about their choices. Their families were criticized for supporting employment of females. Many could not receive necessary support from their families or husbands to manage these barriers. Even those with supportive husbands faced societal stigma for their involvement. Participants also noted that working women are often perceived as domineering in their marital relationships.

Amina expressed: “Some people occasionally make unkind remarks, saying that she earns her own money and spends it however she wants. I think this attitude is typical for people in my area, so it does not surprise me.”

According to Anam, her family does not allow her to talk to men for work-related matters:

I encounter numerous challenges living in this patriarchal society. For example, my family restricts me from visiting the accountant's office or interacting with male clerical staff. Additionally, at work, we have to deal with various men, some of whom are challenging to interact with.

Anam further shared that the men in her community perceive female empowerment as a threat:

I belong to a place where most of the people have narrow mentality. They are not supportive of women and believe that a female cannot be empowered. In this patriarchal society, when a woman attains a status equal to men, it is often perceived as a threat. I have heard people, particularly men in my neighborhood, make negative comments about my dressing sense, suggesting that now I feel empowered and can dress as I please, disregarding cultural norms. They believe that because I hold a high position, I aim to change our cultural values and lead our daughters astray. This mindset, I believe, is rooted in the fear that achieving gender equality will harm the existing patriarchal structure.



Uswa mentioned the challenges of residing in an extended family system, along with the lack of economic help from her spouse for their children's education:

Working women face numerous societal hurdles. For instance, in an extended family system, when a husband assists his working wife by carrying the child or doing domestic chores, he is often derogatorily labeled as "zan-mureed" (henpecked). I have encountered this issue frequently. Moreover, I did not receive much economic support from my spouse for our children's education.

Uswa also discussed how working women are often perceived as domineering in marital relationships: "People around us often make mean comments, suggesting that a woman who earns her own money would not care about her husband's opinions. They believe that a working woman is likely to be authoritarian and self-centered."

Muneeza shared how her family faced stigma as a result of her education first, and then her job:

At the start of my career, my father faced significant criticism from people in our community. At that time, even educating boys was uncommon, so my father's decision to educate his daughters was highly unconventional. Our extended family expressed disapproval, stating that educating girls was inappropriate. People in the village also criticized us, claiming it was against social norms for girls to attend academies or other institutes outside the home. Despite this, my father consistently supported us, showing his trust in his daughters. When I secured a job, they further criticized my family. They alleged that my family relied on the daughters' earnings for sustenance and that my brothers lacked shame. Additionally, they pressured us to marry early, fearing that our leaving the city would lead to moral decline.

Challenges Encountered by Married, Working Women because of the Prevalent Social Setup

The married participants indicated that they encountered numerous difficulties in achieving a work-life balance, as well as other issues. These challenges arise due to their in-laws' concerns about household responsibilities in a joint family setup. They are expected to excel in both their professional tasks and household chores.

Ayesha shared the mental strain she experiences because of the work demands: “I am an executive. Even when I am with my children, my mind remains preoccupied with work-related issues. These include managing finances, employees, and the maintenance of the college.”

Khadija shared that working women are expected to be good at multitasking which exhausts them:

Women face a lot of obstacles. We are supposed to take care of home and then manage the employment responsibilities as well. There is an aunt of mine who says that we, as working women, have created dilemmas for ourselves; women used to be considered as *sinf-e-naazuk* (English meaning: feminine, weaker sex) but now we have to fulfill double duties at home as well as outside. In addition, larger expectations are held from an empowered woman in terms of multi-tasking.

A married participant, Naila, shared:

I face numerous challenges in my married life. For instance, when I leave the house, it inevitably impacts household conditions negatively. Despite my efforts to manage both home and work responsibilities, I struggle to do either efficiently. While I am at work, household duties are often neglected, leaving my in-laws to handle them. My family is concerned and expects me to manage both home and work on my own.

Uswa expressed her challenge with regard to a lack of support from her in-laws:

When I got my job, I was posted to a college that was far away from my home. My in-laws did not like that because they thought that now she would have to live in another area, so, they did not cooperate much and I knew that I would have to survive there on my own.

Envy from Relatives and Peers

Some participants mentioned experiencing jealousy from their peers and relatives due to their employment status. They felt socially isolated because of this envy from their peers.

Ayesha discussed the jealousy she faced from her cousins and some men in less prestigious jobs:

My cousins and relatives of similar age felt insecure due to my job. They made me feel isolated during family functions and gatherings, showing little happiness in their interactions with me. While I aimed to maintain positive relations with them, their attitude remained indifferent. Moreover, some men envied me for having a more prestigious job and earning more than them.

Alisha shared her experience of envy from peers regarding her job: “Some individuals are envious of me because of my employment status. Perhaps this is because they do not hold such a position. These are people whose children are not pursuing education and engage in less productive activities.”

Sadaf expressed: “My cousins and other relatives sometimes make me feel as though they have been left behind. They believe that despite being younger than them, I have achieved more progress. I am not sure if this is because of their jealousy or something else.”

Travelling Constraints

Some of the participants mentioned that they face several constraints because of their commute to the workplace and are, hence, dependent on men.

Khadija shared her experience as:

I feel like I have faced a lot of challenges as a working woman. The foremost issue is that of conveyance. We cannot travel on bikes like males; the way they take their bikes whenever they feel like going out. This makes me realize that despite being empowered, we still need the help of men. When we have to move outside or send children to school, we need our men to do this job.

Amina mentioned how she overcame her conveyance challenge:

In the beginning I faced issues in terms of traveling to college, and my brother or father used to drop me. Later, I made them realize that this situation couldn't continue as my job wasn't temporary, and managing my transportation would become increasingly

burdensome for them. Later I hired a rickshaw for the pick-and-drop service and this problem was resolved.

According to Anam, she sometimes wished to be a male to not face the traveling obstacles: “I also faced transport issues while traveling to the college. This made me wish at moments that if I were a male then I would not be facing such barriers.”

Societal Shifts towards Women's Empowerment

People Finding Inspiration in Empowered Women

Some participants shared that their relatives draw inspiration from their job status and empowerment, and they earn respect from both neighbors and outsiders.

Khadija described: “My relatives and neighbors show a positive attitude towards me. They find my job and empowerment inspiring, and they aspire for their daughters to achieve similar success. There is a growing admiration for empowered women in our community.”

Naila explained: “I receive respect from neighbors and others because of my position. They acknowledge my role as a lecturer in the 17th grade and appreciate me for this.”

Hania reflected: “When it comes to my job, my neighbors are very supportive and appreciative. Their trust in me to guide their children on subjects and choosing educational paths significantly boosts my confidence.”

A Positive Shift in the Behavior of People within Community, following Employment

Some participants highlighted how their employment positively influenced how others perceived and treated them in their communities. They noticed more respect due to their elevated status.

Ayesha noted: “I have been lucky not to face criticism for my job because teaching is highly respected in our community, especially for women. People appreciate women who teach, and I have received positive feedback because of my career choice.”

Samra explained:

Having a job changes how people see you. It is not just family; others treat you differently based on your financial standing. I have seen how attitudes towards me shifted once I started working. People who once treated me differently now show me a lot of respect.

Alisha shared a similar experience, saying:

Since I started working, I have noticed a change in how people interact with me. In my neighborhood, those who used to criticize my education without a job now treat me with respect. This shift in behavior is directly linked to my employment.

Husbands' Acceptance of Wives' Empowerment due to Economic Gains

Some married participants noted that their husbands accept their empowered status because of the financial benefits they gain. However, they also believe that these men are exploiting their wives financially.

Khadija shared:

I believe that men today appreciate that their wives are earning money, which leads them to accept women's empowerment. Naturally, they acknowledge this because it benefits them financially. As a result, they are not affected by the patriarchal power imbalance due to women's economic stability.

Ayesha shared the same sentiment, stating:

I believe that the dynamics of earning are changing nowadays. Men prefer their wives to earn money. During discussions with my colleagues and other lecturers, we often conclude that the men in our households are quite greedy and are mainly interested in the money we earn.

Discussion

Regarding the challenges faced by working women, this study explored that freedom of mobility is a serious obstacle. This aligns with previous researches. Mahmood (2002) found that a persistent issue is the restriction on females' mobility freedom because of social norms, which impede their participation in employment and education, leading to isolation and a lack of power in both political and social spheres. Traditional gender norms use strict surveillance of women in public spaces to reinforce societal norms,

limit women's freedom, and maintain unequal power dynamics, thus perpetuating their marginalized status (Zulfiqar & Kuskoff, [2024](#)).

Furthermore, employed women face pressure to maintain work-life balance as has been explored in the present study. Zaman and Shahid ([2023](#)) concluded that in the case of dual-earner couples, women are the primary caregivers and face more pressure to complete the domestic chores than men. In Pakistan's patriarchal society, females are usually expected to look after their homes, children, and husbands. Zulfiqar and Kuskoff's ([2024](#)) findings also show that highly educated Pakistani women face complex challenges, as they are expected to manage all domestic duties along with their jobs, making them feel more pressure despite having access to education and employment.

Regarding the general societal attitudes towards women's empowerment, some of the previous researches (Chaudhary et al., [2012](#); Qureshi & Shaikh, [2007](#)), found that men in the community have negative perceptions of women's empowerment. Socio-cultural norms significantly impact women's empowerment, as traditional customs and norms pose substantial barriers, especially in highly patriarchal societies (Parveen & Leonhauser, [2004](#)). The findings of the present study found two perceptions regarding women's employment and their empowerment. One is the patriarchal challenges that limit these women's choices, and the other set of perceptions reveals that people are now finding inspiration in empowered women. The study also found some positive feedback from working women regarding their husbands' perceptions of their status as these women now earn money so they are respected more.

The overall findings of this study support the two initial non-testable hypotheses: that socio-cultural norms in patriarchal societies limit women's opportunities for empowerment, and that paid jobs empower women and enhance their social status. The findings also support the intersectionality approach that working women, especially those who belong to rural areas, are married, living in extended families, and residing far from the workplace leads to more challenges due to the intersection of all these factors.

Conclusion

There is a dire need to address the challenges faced by working women in Pakistan to ease their empowerment journey. Although there has been a gradual shift in the perceptions towards working women, especially towards

lecturers because of their socially approved job status, these women still face various systemic constraints. The policy-makers need to devise strategies to promote a positive attitude towards working women which is not only beneficial for the individual members but also for the families and the society at the macro-level. This can be achieved through the media industry or awareness campaigns. Women comprise almost half of the population of Pakistan, and their meaningful contribution in the employment sector is important not only for them but for the whole country as well. It will also help Pakistan get a step closer to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 of gender equality.

Limitations

Like any research, this study has its limitations. To begin with, the number of participants was limited, and most of them came from almost a similar background: working women in the education sector, many from rural or semi-urban areas. This means the findings might not reflect the experiences of women in other professions or those living in very different settings.

The study also used an intersectional lens to understand the multiple challenges these women face, but it was not always possible to fully capture the complexity of each individual's situation. Factors like workplace dynamics, mental health, or external support systems were not explored in much depth and could be important areas for future research. Despite these limitations, the study offers a meaningful look into the everyday struggles of working women and highlights important areas for further exploration.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Data will be provided by corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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