

Education and Empowerment: How Educating Women Shapes Socioeconomic Development in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Gender disparities in education persist as a significant obstacle in the face of socioeconomic advancement in Pakistan. The primary objective of this review article is to examine how the education of women catalyzes empowerment while also contributing to economic, health-related, and governance outcomes on a national level. The review focuses on the impact of female education on earnings, labor participation, reproductive health, mental and physical health, personal autonomy, as well as social and political engagement. The review uses data gathered from studies and research articles conducted on the impact and significance of educating young girls and women on the socioeconomic development of the Pakistani state, using databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, Research Gate, and Europe PMC to include literature published between 2013-2025. Studies included in the literature for this article highlight findings such as an increase in earnings yielded by each additional year of schooling for young girls and adult women, while also enhancing labor force participation. Positive correlations between female literacy and labor participation and negative associations with fertility and child mortality. A significantly strong link between maternal education and lower child and maternal mortality as well as improved postnatal care utilization rates are reported. Female education has also been linked frequently with enhanced decision-making autonomy and a noticeable shift in sociopolitical beliefs and attitudes in women. Pakistan's investment in female education underpins inclusivity in national development. In order to actualise its full potential, a multidimensional strategy is crucial—a strategy that integrates access to schooling from primary to college level, access to healthcare, livelihood support, safe mobility, women's legal rights, as well as community-level awareness. Policy efforts must be sensitive to various contexts, addressing intersectional barriers while simultaneously building resilience against social as well as institutional constraints. Opportunities such as future scholarships should prioritise mixed-methods and longitudinal research to further elucidate the causal mechanisms that link education, development, and overall empowerment.

KEYWORDS

Female education, empowerment, gender equality, socioeconomic development, fertility rates, educational attainment, Pakistan

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INTRODUCTION

Female literacy and empowerment are two cornerstones of equitable and inclusive national development. The education of women does not limit itself to only teach women how to read and write, but rather also encompasses the capacity of women to access, interpret, and utilise information in a way that actually matters and is meaningful in various aspects of life. Empowerment, on the other hand, is a multidimensional pattern that enables women to gain control and power over their own lives by expanding their sense of autonomy and agency, their self-confidence, as well as their decision-making skills, on a social, economic, and political level. Female literacy is intrinsically linked to empowerment, and educated women tend to be mentally and physically healthier, earn higher incomes, participate more in the formal labor market, and provide better healthcare and educational practices to their future generation¹. Literacy could be considered a gateway to empowerment by giving women the leverage to make informed decisions about their reproductive health, financial independence, as well as community engagement. It is also essential in dismantling patriarchal and gender-stereotypical roles and norms within society as a whole, as literate women are more likely to assert their own, as well as other women's, rights and advocate for gender equity. In a way, female literacy is not simply a personal achievement, but rather a transformative societal force that has effects that ripple across multiple generations. Unfortunately, Pakistan faces one of South Asia's most definitive gender gaps in terms of educational development. Female literacy in the country stands at 46%, which is significantly lower than the country's male literacy standing at 71 percent with rural areas such as Baluchistan lagging even further behind². In Pakistan, an estimated 16 percent of children and adolescents, aged 5 to 16, remain out of school, with a disturbing majority being young girls³. These out-of-school children, and especially the girls, due to socio-economic and cultural reasons, are deprived of their fundamental right to education and face bleak economic and social prospects throughout their life. Structural disparities such as these exacerbate entrenched cycles of consistent poverty, limited agency, and poor overall health within numerous households as well as communities, hindering the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) linked to health, economic abundance, and gender equality. Governmental-level efforts like the constitutional Article 25-A of Pakistan, as well as numerous other education policies have attempted to shorten this gap in the past, but the patterns of implication remain inconsistent and therefore unpromising⁴. Furthermore, drawing on Naila Kabeer and Amartya Sen, empowering women can be defined as the literal expansion of autonomy, agency, and especially capabilities, through easy access to resources and the liberty and luxury to make choices⁵. Education acts both as an enabler as well as the outcome of ultimate empowerment. It imparts knowledge, self-efficacy, critical thinking skills, and also the capacity to navigate constraints of the sociocultural kind. For women in Pakistan, education can reduce chances of child marriage, enhance health and self-care practices, encourage participation in the labor force, while also simultaneously fostering social and political engagement, which in turn disrupts structures of patriarchal roles and belief systems at societal and familial levels. In Multan, the educational attainment of women aligns with greater workforce entry, albeit the entries are moderated by household and spousal factors⁶. Similarly, female literacy is proven to have helped labor participation skyrocket while simultaneously reducing reproductive dysfunction such as infertility and child mortality⁷. On a healthcare level, educated mothers tend to exhibit utilization of maternal healthcare, contraception use, child immunization, and reduced under-five mortality in a more improved and refined way than mothers who are not⁸. Each additional year of schooling that a mother has, the levels of district-based maternal and child mortality rate significantly diminish. Multiple studies consistently prove that educational attainment delays and even diminishes patterns of child and adolescent marriages while reducing fertility rates, and lowering maternal mortality. It is important to note here that a reduction in fertility rates isn't always a bad outcome. Lower fertility rates can also mean fewer pregnancies, especially in teenagers, which can reduce health-related risks in young women associated with childbirth, which can improve cognitive and⁹. A cognitively stable and healthy woman is also able to efficiently participate in and contribute to psychosocial and political forums. Education and income significantly increase a sense of political and personal autonomy as well as democratic values and ethical

belief systems in women, with less religious conservatism¹⁰. In more rural regions of the country, such as Khanewal, women with a secondary level education or higher tend to exercise more autonomy and personal decision-making related to health, household finances, and their children's education. However, it is important to note that factors such as social norms, domestic expectations, safety concerns, conservative cultural beliefs, and limited mobility are frequently limiting public and labor participation even for women who are graduates in most areas of Pakistan. Rural and marginalized regions tend to face significant levels of structural deficits, such as a lack of schools, cultural and social resistance to getting young girls educated, lower financial wealth levels, and weak legal frameworks, for instance, harmful ideals like child marriages and lack of enforcement. Other marginalized populations, including ethnic minorities and the disabled female community, also experience added pressures, injustice, and cruelty in the form of compounded exclusion from workplace and educational institutions, spotlighting the necessary need for equity-focused interventions made at a private, as well as public level. This study aims to explore the impact of women's education on socioeconomic development in Pakistan by examining how increased access to education enhances women's empowerment, improves household income, reduces poverty, and promotes community well-being. The research seeks to highlight the critical role of female education in achieving sustainable national progress and gender equality.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To investigate the relationship between female literacy and socioeconomic development in Pakistan, a systematic review was conducted in accordance with PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis) guidelines. The review aims to synthesize the current available literature on the positive outcomes of educating young girls and women and how the impact goes viral in various dimensions of national development and overall empowerment. To ensure an extensive, comprehensive, and academically progressive review, multiple databases were searched exhaustively including PubMed, Google Scholar, Research Gate, and Europe PMC. The search for the literature targeted studies and research articles published from 2013 to 2025 in order to gather the most recent and relevant evidence reflecting Pakistan's modern-day educational and social landscape as a state. Keywords included various combinations of terms such as "Female education", "Empowerment", "Gender equality", "Socioeconomic development", "Fertility rates", "Educational attainment", and "Pakistan". Search filters were also utilized in order to filter out any irrelevant or outdated literature according to the predefined criteria. Inclusion criteria was predefined: Studies published in English, within the given yearly timeframe, and strictly limited to various aspects of how female education affects economic and social outcomes within the Pakistani context. Each selected article and study was thoroughly analyzed for relevance, methodological soundness, and contribution to understanding dynamics at play between female literacy and socioeconomic empowerment outcomes such as delayed marriage, improved cognitive and reproductive health, increased financial stability, reduced poverty, and improved maternal health. A qualitative analysis was conducted, due to the diverse methodologies used in individual studies in the literature. All sources are carefully cited—active hyperlinked DOIs are included in the references in order to ensure academic integrity, accessibility, and served crediting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings induced from the relevant literature and comparative analysis revealed a strong and consistent link between women's education and socioeconomic development and advancement in Pakistan. Additional insight was gathered from neighboring South Asian countries such as Bangladesh and India. Educational attainment is positively correlated to increased labor participation, financial wealth, and healthcare practices in women in Pakistan. Multiple studies within the literature emphasise the fact that educated women are consistently more likely to opt towards employment, choose smaller nuclear family systems, and engage with healthcare practices more proactively, which spotlights the fact that the impact of education ripples far beyond academic spaces and directly influences crucial aspects of development

on a national level. To be specific, women with a higher education level in Pakistan have been reported to have a much lower fertility rate, averaging around 2.3 children when compared to 4.5 children among those who do not have a formal education. This contrast is particularly striking and paints an obvious bond between literacy and fertility, a consistent pattern that reflects across other South Asian countries as well, albeit in varying numbers. The comparative analysis with Bangladesh depicts how a commitment to implementing policies on a national level, compared with a strong civil society can further these outcomes. Bangladesh, despite lower economic resources, has been reported to have achieved an expansive labor market integration for women, improved maternal health indicators, and equitable reproductive healthcare accessibility across varying literacy levels. The country's targeted national family planning programs and investments in women-centered employment domains such as the garment industry have yielded significant improvements in social metrics and healthcare. In contrast, India presents a conflicting paradox: the female literacy rates have increased, however workforce participation and maternal health standards remain uneven and insignificant. A stagnance in advancement is noted in many rural areas, pointing towards structural shortcomings that education cannot fully remedy on its own. Within Pakistan, the data suggests that there are higher chances of educated women engaging in family planning services, ensuring timely vaccinations and immunization of their children, as well as attending antenatal care visits. However, significant gaps can be located in contraceptive use and health service outreach among women who have little to no access to education. Even among women who do have an education, external factors such as workplace bias, patriarchal and stereotypical norms, and sociocultural expectations continue to pose grave hurdles in the pathway to exercise personal and sociopolitical agency. Even in the presence of apparent advantages of female literacy, the actual manifest translation of educational achievement into personal autonomy as well as financial growth and social agency is not always linear. Many women, including those with a relatively higher education, tend to have hesitations when engaging in political discourse or leadership roles due to deep-rooted societal structures of cultural stigma, fear of social alienation, and internalised misogyny based in traditional cultural norms. The findings conclude that while education creates a cornerstone-like foundation for uplifting women, it also needs broader structural changes and societal reconditioning in order to foster a holistic sense of empowerment. Overall, the findings underscore a visible pattern of female literacy in Pakistan as a catalyst for potential change and growth, which functions within a plethora of social, political, and cultural forces that can either enhance or inhibit the overall impact. Consistent research based evidence from Pakistan demonstrates that promoting female education significantly enhances the chances of financial earnings and labor participation. A well-known South Asian proverb states that educating a man educates only an individual, while educating a woman educates an entire nation. Women tend to simultaneously perform multiple roles and responsibilities at the same time which makes them especially important to a nation's overall growth. It is of great significance that concerns regarding gender equality and other issues linked to it—especially in rural and underprivileged areas—are addressed by policy-makers in order to create an ongoing atmosphere of awareness initiatives being carried out on a national level¹¹. In comparison to India and Bangladesh, Pakistan's overall female educational gains appear more constrained and limited. Bangladesh, despite having lower per capita income than Pakistan, has proven to achieve a larger labor participation of women, in part, because of the success of its ready-to-wear garment-making sector and an overall cohesive civil society initiative pattern. On the contrary, India has seen a brutal stagnation as well as decline in the participation of women in the workforce¹². Despite the economic growth, the decline raises a major red flag and highlights a potential gap in the available literature spotlighting the importance of studying the impact of enabling economic structures, as education alone can inevitably fall short and render itself insufficient. On a healthcare level, In Pakistan, educational attainment is inversely correlated with fertility rate: Pakistani women that have not attained an education tend to have 4.5 children on average, while those with a higher education average at about 2.3 children¹³. This indicates a considerably great difference of nearly 50 percent reduction in birthrates and also cascades in ripples across other South Asian countries as well. In Bangladesh, educated women with a secondary level

schooling have been reported to have a fertility rate of 2.2 versus a fertility rate of 2.6 for those that do not have an education—Contrarily, In India, the average fertility rate for women who have attained a secondary education is about 3.1 compared to those without an education, averaging at 5.0¹⁴. Bangladesh's increasing success is particularly noteworthy: despite their lower average literacy rate and income in comparison to Pakistan, their national family planning programs and a strong civil society engagement have actually reduced fertility rates a lot more efficiently and equitably across educational strata¹⁵. On the contrary, contraceptive prevalence remains low among illiterate women comparatively in Pakistan, however, it increases drastically among women who have attained a secondary level education and above secondary level education. This exposes major concerning gaps in efforts towards outreach and accessibility. It is quite evident at this point in the context of all of the available literature regarding female literacy and overall empowerment in a nation, that there is a sizeable interrelationship between proper, well-planned maternal education and ameliorated antenatal visits, child immunization rates, reduced child mortality, as well as even skilled birth attendance, within Pakistan. Well-educated women are more likely to opt for adopting children and adolescents, which reduces the number of children in orphanages and foster care systems, lean towards family planning strategies, and healthcare practices, especially when colliding with household finances and exposure to media. Comparably, Bangladesh advocates similar physical, mental, and especially reproductive health outcomes with a more consistent and lasting impact throughout the income levels. This is a vivid reflection of government-level interventions proving to be fruitful, reaching women of varying literacy backgrounds and foundations. In India, despite an apparent rise in female literacy rates, maternal health education and gains remain uneven and inconsistent, especially in underprivileged, rural areas such as villages and small towns where education could be considered a huge commodity to invest in for the majority of the population, as well as a clear negatively correlated relationship between education and easy access to health services. When speaking of personal autonomy as well as sociopolitical agency being impacted by higher or lower rates of literacy in women, the interrelationship seems to be a confusing, and at times misleading blur. The relationship between women having at least a secondary level education or even above, with factors such as personal bodily autonomy, having finance-related opinions, and a sizable contribution to sociocultural or sociopolitical conversations and decision making, seems convoluted. On the one hand, the positive correlation is major between female literacy and the certainty of stronger democratic and ethical values as well beliefs, and also lower religious conservatism among women who are educated and employed. This signals board sociopolitical rifts in the status quo. However, on the other hand, other obstacle-like factors such as misogyny, sexism, and sex-typical biases in atmospheres of workplaces, social circles, family norms, and relationship dynamics play a huge part in creating a sense of hesitation in women who find themselves in the midst of political conversations¹⁶. This pause between the formation of an opinion based on political or ethical beliefs and the actual physical or verbal manifestation or expression of said opinion could lead to cognitive and especially emotional complications such as feelings of self-betrayal, a lack of autonomy, as well as a fear or insecurity of lacking true intellect within social forums. In workplaces, men are encouraged to take up leadership roles by both female and male employees because men are deemed to be more suitable to lead. Currently, on a global level, women hold only 29% of senior management positions as of 2020¹⁷. Patriarchal structures such as a preference for men in assertive and agentic roles due to a misogyny rooted bias stressing women's "innate inability to lead groups on technical forums" in workplaces are also huge contributors to the reluctance women in Pakistan feel when faced with discussions centering politics and autonomy. This is also, in part, the reason why so many women have such visceral reactions to notions of feminism and feminist ideologies, and instead conform to misogynistic principles and practices¹⁸. Adhering to socially familiar norms by exhibiting stereotypical behaviors for women in society—such as refraining from participating in political and social commentary in order to maintain the picture of a traditionally acceptable woman due to constant pushback aimed at women who are "too opinionated", and therefore not deemed worthy of respect—is just one of various ways women not only conform to, but also contribute to sexist, stereotypical, and misogynist structures

in society in fear of having to sacrifice the comfort and “peace” that comes with being by pertaining to ideals of gender inequality¹⁹. So, in order to empower women to their full potential on a literacy level, or an employment level, or in dynamics as simple as family gatherings and daily conversations, it is customary to keep in mind the external factors that actively play the role of hurdles or obstacles in the academic, occupational, financial, and personal lives of all women. To drive real-life, impactful, and sustainable implementations on a large-scale forefront, policy-makers must work towards diminishing gender-stereotype-based biases and inequities by running educational campaigns on a national level centering and focusing on women's education, their basic human rights, as well as their abilities and capabilities regardless of what society may hold on to be true. Teaching gender studies as a school subject from middle school, introductory classes on feminist principles, and implementing visual and auditory cues in the form of infographics and charts, can lead to a colossal change in overall attitudes towards women and the roles they play, as well the value they hold in society, which could inturn, lead to the deterioration of sexist, gender biased, and misogyny-rooted societal structures. To construct systems of academic and economic growth on a national level, it is crucial to the potential soaring of the nation to uplift and empower their women—and empowerment can not coexist with solidified structures of inequality and injustice. The socioeconomic growth or development of Pakistan, as well as any other nation given the current political climate of the world, relies heavily on an immediate, effective, potential empowerment of its women desperately needed not only as an external idea that is up in the air or lies on the surface in order to create hollow impressions of progressivism under an international spotlight, but on a deep, multu-layered, intricately detailed plan including educational opportunism, personal autonomy, sociopolitical agency, and financial and occupational stability with a consistent, unshakable pattern of actively deconstructing and dismantling glaciers of cultural, traditional, social, and societal barriers and roadblocks constantly downsizing and sabotaging young girls as well as adult women collectively.

CONCLUSION

While women's education in Pakistan has shown promising outcomes in health, economic participation, and decision-making, it alone is insufficient for true empowerment. Deep-rooted social, cultural, and institutional barriers continue to limit the transformative potential of education. For meaningful and sustainable development, Pakistan must pair educational initiatives with systemic reforms, gender-sensitive policies, and long-term efforts to dismantle patriarchal norms across both public institutions and private life.

SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT

This study identified the multifaceted relationship between women's education and socioeconomic development in Pakistan, which could be beneficial for policymakers, educators, and gender equity advocates aiming to improve national progress. The findings underscore that education, when supported by structural reforms, can lead to meaningful empowerment and societal transformation. This study will assist researchers in uncovering critical areas of gender-based policy intervention and systemic barriers that have remained unexplored by many. Consequently, a new theory on the intersection of education, empowerment, and structural reform in South Asian contexts may be developed.

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