

An Analysis of Sociocultural Barriers on Social Empowerment of Women in Sahiwal Division

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Abstract

The paper sets out to discuss impact of socio-cultural barriers on social empowerment of rural women in term of decision making related to their personal as well as social life in Sahiwal division. Pakistan is a patriarchal society characterized by patri-local residence and exclusion of women from the right of inheritance and succession, which pave ways for male-headed society. In addition, socio-cultural factors strongly favour male-dominance and an inferior status of females in all walks of life. A quantitative approach was adopted for carrying out current study. A survey instrument was designed and employed for data collection from 384 respondents from rural areas of Sahiwal division. The findings of the study revealed that less than one third (31.25%) of the respondents were consulted in decision-making about domestic matters. Likewise, more than half (51.8%) of the respondents were not independent in moving out of home for meeting any social need. Similarly, more than one third (41.4%) of the respondents were not free to visit their friends in the neighborhood. The study concludes that women in the rural areas are less empowered and still suffering socially, economically and psychologically in their day to day life. The study provides an insight for professional social workers, policy makers and stakeholders in public and private sectors for influencing policy-making and planning for revisiting and redesigning existing policies and plans intended for empowerment of rural women in Pakistan.

Introduction

Currently, social empowerment of women is one of the most discussed issues among the stakeholders of socio-economic development at international as well as national level. Globally, women empowerment and gender equality are two main objectives of the UN and other humanitarian organizations working across the world. UNESCO has termed gender equality as one of two of its global priorities¹. Women empowerment has been described as following:

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¹ UNESCO. What is it? What does it do? (UNESCO 2009), retrieved from:

Women's empowerment has five components: women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.²

For women, empowerment is a process to get them recognized, give them freedom to have their own choice and control their rights and resources by own self.³ Women are one of the disadvantaged groups in the rural areas of Pakistan in particular, because there are visible inequalities in imparting education, exercising their choice for life partner and participating in certain economic activities.⁴

The Punjab province is divided into four regions, namely northern, central, southern and western. This division has been made on the basis of geography, economic differences, cultural variation and linguistics differences.⁵ Sahiwal division is located in central Punjab and consists of three districts: Sahiwal, Okara and Pakpattan. This region is mostly characterized by agricultural activities and livestock-raising and economically it is placed at medium level.

The paper has been divided into three sections. The first section contains overview of social empowerment of women in the Pakistan, variation in status of women across the country, various dimensions of social empowerment of women and its relationship with the rural economy. Second section explains the methodology and presents data in tables and also explains them. The last section encapsulates discussions and conclusion.

An overview of social empowerment of women in Pakistan

Empowerment is the process by which choices can be made by those who have been denied such ability before this. It has three dimensions:

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001473/147330e.pdf>

² POPIN, *Guidelines on Women's Empowerment*, United Nations Population Information Network (POPIN), Department of Economic and Social Affairs, & UN Population Fund (UNFPA) (undated). Available online: <http://www.un.org/popin/unfpa/taskforce/guide/iatfwemp.gdl.html>

³ Jo Rowlands, 'Empowerment Examined', *Development in Practice*, 5:2 (1995), 101-7.

⁴ Amjad Ali, Noor Bano and Sophia F. Dziegielewski, 'Role of AKRSP on Gender Development: A Case Study in Pakistan', *Journal of Social Service Research*, 42:4 (2016), 548-55.

⁵ A. Wilder, *The Pakistani Voter, Electoral Politics and Voting Behaviour in the Punjab* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

resources, agency and achievements.⁶ In the South Asian region, Pakistan is one of the countries with acute discrimination against women prevailing in all walks of life. Generally males are holding important positions and females are at the suffering end in most of the cases.⁷ Though, owing to variance in sociocultural factors, patriarchal structure is not uniform in Pakistan, but on the whole it is a male-dominated society. Owing to a long history, gender gap is deep rooted and laws devised to bridge this gap are widely violated in the Pakistani society.⁸ As quoted above, the term 'women empowerment' has been defined differently by scholars on this subject. In the context of Pakistan, women empowerment has been defined as, 'the ability to choose to make the following choices: buying food, decision about family size, selection of school for children, selection of spouse for the children, purchase of important household items, working out of home, selling and/or purchasing livestock, running household expenditures, selection of clothes and jewelry and buying gifts (decision of minimum and maximum price) for relatives of wife.'⁹ But overall, women empowerment is a broader concept and entails several other factors such as opportunities to work, education level attained, and access to health services and media, among others.¹⁰

Since birth, women start facing multiple disadvantages in Pakistan. The birth of a baby girl is considered a sign of disappointment and sometimes the mother is held responsible for giving birth to girl and she suffers deeply on this account. Consequently, the girl child receives less education, food and health facilities. Generally, family investment in girls' education is much less because they are considered temporary

⁶ Naila Kabeer, 'Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment', *Development and Change*, 30:3 (1999), 435-64.

⁷ UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children*. South Asian edn. (New York: UNICEF, 2006).

⁸ T. Mehdi, *Gender and Violence in Pakistan* (Islamabad: The Network for Consumer Protection, 2004).

⁹ Z.A. Sathar and S. Kazi, *Women's Autonomy, Livelihood and Fertility. A Study of Rural Punjab* (Islamabad: Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 1997).

¹⁰ Imran Sharif Chaudhry, Farhana Nosheen, and Muhammad Idrees Lodhi, 'Women Empowerment in Pakistan with Special Reference to Islamic Viewpoint: An Empirical Study' *Pakistan Journal of Social Science*, 32:1 (2012), 171-83.

members of the family.¹¹ Furthermore, for the girls of rural areas primary education completion rate is three time lower than the rural boys; it is twice as low in urban areas.¹²

Variation in status of women's social empowerment

As mentioned earlier, the term women empowerment has conceptual variation in it, therefore in different societies, different statuses of women are considered as an indicator of their empowerment. It is recognized that variation lies in exclusion of the women from mainstream decision-making which results in great inconsistency in their status. There is noticeable diversity in the socio-economic status of women across social classes, geographical areas, ethnicity, urban and rural origin, culture of the tribes or castes, and social structure of feudalism or industrialization.¹³ Generally, the women belonging to the upper class have choices to pursue economic opportunities because they have access to educational opportunities and also family members in the upper class encourage women's participation in entrepreneurship.¹⁴ Moreover, across various societies, status of women is defined differently because it cannot be defined on a single scale. It can be viewed as a composite of different type of statuses; some of them are high and some of them low.¹⁵ As a girl child, she has a lower status and enjoys fewer rights than her male counterpart. In most parts of the world, right from childhood, women have to face socio economic inequality and they find it difficult to overcome it throughout their life.¹⁶ Gender bias is

¹¹ F. Rizvi, 'Background of Vocational Education for Girls', *The National Conference on Critical Issues Concerning Women in Education* (Women Division, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad, 1980).

¹² Barbara Herz, Barbara Knapp Herz, and Gene B. Sperling, *What Works in Girls' Education: Evidence and Policies from the Developing World* (Council on Foreign Relations, 2004), retrieved from: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001473/147330e.pdf>

¹³ M. Roomi and G. Parrott, 'Barriers to Development and Progression of Women Entrepreneurs in Pakistan', *Journal of Entrepreneurship*, 17:1 (2008), 59-72.

¹⁴ E.H.N. Njeru, and J.M. Mjoka, 'Women Entrepreneurs in Nairobi: the Socio-cultural Factors Influencing their Investment Patterns', in P.O. Alila, and P.O. Pedersen (eds.), *Negotiating Social Space: East African Micro-Enterprises* (Trenton (NJ) & Asmara (Eritrea): Africa World Press, 2001).

¹⁵ Nasra M. Shah, *Pakistani Women: A Socioeconomic and Demographic Profile* (Islamabad: Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 1986).

¹⁶ F. Rizvi, 'Background of Vocational Education for Girls', in, *The National Conference on Critical Issues Concerning Women in Education*, March 29-

even prevalent in the textbooks which reflect dominant role of men as compared to women¹⁷ hence it is internalized in the young minds through education. Access to information is one of the prerequisites for ensuring women's empowerment in the rural areas, because only a well-informed person can make right decisions.¹⁸

Dimensions of social empowerment of women

According to United Nations, there are five components of women's empowerment: (a) women's sense of self-esteem; (b) awareness about their rights; (c) access to opportunities and rights; (d) having power to control their own lives; and (e) power to bring social change at national and international level.¹⁹ Empowerment is also expressed through autonomy, explained as:

Autonomy can be defined as the degree of control which women have over their own lives, it also includes the level to which wives can equate their voice with their husbands in domestic matter which directly or indirectly affects their personal and their family life. These factors include access over material resources, knowledge and information, power to make independent decisions, freedom of physical mobility and equal status with rest of the family members.²⁰

Such kind of autonomy is not available to rural Pakistani women across the board. The crucial fact about the Pakistani women is their lack of knowledge about their rights given by the local laws. According to the survey of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 90 percent women of the country did not know that they have several rights enshrined in the constitution of the country.²¹ This lacking makes the rural women one of the most disadvantaged groups in the rural areas of Pakistan.

April 03, 1980 (Islamabad: Women Division, Government of Pakistan, 1980).

¹⁷ Samina Malik and Kathy Courtney, 'Higher Education and Women's Empowerment in Pakistan', *Gender and Education*, 23:1 (2011), 29-45.

¹⁸ Muhammad Asif Naveed and Mumtaz A. Anwar, 'Non-agricultural Information Needs of Rural Pakistanis', *Pakistan Library & Information Science Journal*, 45:2 (2014), 2-11.

¹⁹ United Nations Population Information Network, *Guidelines on Women's Empowerment* (1995).

²⁰ Shireen J. Jejeebhoy, and Zeba A. Sathar, 'Women's Autonomy in India and Pakistan: the Influence of Religion and Region', *Population and Development Review*, 27:4 (2001), 687-712.

²¹ National Commission on the Status of Women, *First Annual Report* (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, 2002).

because there are visible inequalities in imparting education, selection for life partner and participating in certain economic activities.²²

Politically, women are not granted their rights and roles in letter and spirit. Apparently, there is women quota in all tiers of government, from national assembly to counselor level, but in most of the cases women there are just like puppets. Pakistani cultural environment puts immense restrictions and creates innumerable hurdles in the way of women's true participation in the political process.²³

Rural economy and social empowerment of women

In the rural areas of Pakistan, there is shortage of much needed information for solution of their common problems. General problems of the rural areas include: lack of education and awareness, lack of quality health services, and little availability of income generation opportunities. Besides this, presence of poverty, high rate of health problems, ignorance and lack of basic infrastructure keeps the rural people constrained and stagnant, thus unable to utilize their potentialities and availing of the opportunities.²⁴

Just like many other developing countries, a larger proportion of population in Pakistan is also dependent on agriculture as being their major economic activity.²⁵ According to an estimate, 60 per cent of the population in Pakistan relies on agriculture for its livelihood.²⁶ Agriculture is major source of income in the rural areas of Pakistan. A greater proportion of rural population is engaged with farming and its survival is directly or indirectly linked with this occupation.²⁷ In the

²² Amjad Ali, Noor Bano, and Sophia F. Dziegielewska, 'Role of AKRSP in Gender Development: A Case Study in Pakistan', 548-55.

²³ Arab Naz and Waqar Ahmad, 'Socio-cultural Impediments to Women's Political Empowerment in Pakhtun Society', *Academic Research International*, 3:1 (2012), 163.

²⁴ Muhammad Asif Naveed and Mumtaz A. Anwar, *op. cit.*, 2-11.

²⁵ Faisal Mehmood Mirza, Noshaba Najam, Mubashir Mehdi, and Burhan Ahmad, 'Determinants of Technical Efficiency of Wheat Farms in Pakistan', *Pakistan Journal of Agricultural Sciences*, 52:2 (2015), 565-70.

²⁶ A. Khan, *Agriculture and Agri-food Sector – Pakistan*, (Canada: Agriculture and Agri-Food, 2008).

²⁷ S. Mahendra Dev, *Climate Change, Rural Livelihoods and Agriculture (Focus on food security) in Asia-Pacific Region*, Working Paper No. 14 (Mumbai: Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, 2011).

developing countries, there is thought greater dependency on agriculture because of its long-standing contribution in addressing rural poverty.²⁸

Agriculture consists of several activities, and both men and women in Pakistan partake in farming. Women are considered as backbone in the agriculture occupation as they work shoulder to shoulder with their men alongside performing domestic chores, as well. But ironically, contribution of women is least recognized, and they are not direct beneficiaries of agricultural income.²⁹ Rural women of Pakistan are facing numerous challenges such as socioeconomic and cultural restrictions which adversely affect their contribution in the process of rural development and specifically economy. Women are thought to be more vulnerable than men to poverty and insufficiency of amenities of life. Women in the rural areas have little access to resources despite their extensive contribution in the rural economy. That is why they are excluded from the process of rural development hence they remain ignored and neglected.³⁰ It has been noted that agriculture extension just targets men for raising awareness and sharing best practices, women are entirely ignored, despite having a greater contribution. Such policies and plans ignore the fact that female constitute 70% of the workforce in the agriculture sector.³¹ Women, despite having major role in the rural economy, are denied access to certain services such as loan and other financial services offered to men working in this field.³²

In South Asia, vast majority of population is living in the developing areas where the patriarchal system prevails and agriculture is major source of livelihood. In all such countries, women are left behind

²⁸ Yemisi I. Ogunlela and Aisha A. Mukhtar, 'Gender Issues in Agriculture and Rural Development in Nigeria: The Role of Women', *Humanity & Social Sciences Journal*, 4:1 (2009), 19-30.

²⁹ Iftikhar Naveed, Ali Tanvir, Ahmad Munir, and A.A. Maan, 'Training Needs of Rural Women in Agriculture: A Case Study of District Bahawalpur, Pakistan', *Pakistan Journal of Agricultural Sciences*, 46:3 (2009), 200-8.

³⁰ A.A. Khan and K. Khan, 'Women's Role in Livestock Economy of Cholistan Desert', Pakistan', *Global Journal of Human Social Science (E)*, 15(3-1), (2015), 28-39.

³¹ Muhammad Luqman, Raheel Saqib, Xu Shiwei, and Yu Wen, 'Barriers to Gender Equality in Agricultural Extension in Pakistan: Evidences from District Sargodha', *Sarhad Journal of Agriculture*, 34:1 (2018), 136-43.

³² Ayesha Riaz, Sher Muhammad, Ijaz Ashraf, and Muhammad Iqbal Zafar, 'Role of Punjab Rural Support Program in Improving Economic Conditions of Rural Women through Micro Financing', *Pakistan Journal of Agricultural Sciences*, 49:2 (2012), 211-16.

the development process by being ignored.³³ The existing gender gap in Pakistan is characterized by a number of factors including social, economic and cultural hurdles. It is well recognized that women empowerment is one of the central goals of development, yet there are number of challenges because of sociocultural and religious factors in the country like Pakistan. Although Pakistan is an Islamic state but still *Sharia* laws could not be implemented because in most cases cultural values dominate over religious ones. Although, Islam gives socially equal status to both man and woman but practically in Pakistan there is patriarchy which subjugates equal status of women. The Pakistani culture inculcates in the girl child obedience to males such as father, brother(s) and husband. That is why females have to look towards males for important decision-making such as getting education, or choosing their career, life partner, family size and also for moving out of home. This gender discrimination particularly prevails in rural and remote areas of Pakistan.³⁴

Methodology

The major aim of the current study was examining how socio-cultural barriers have impacted the social empowerment of women in Sahiwal Division. For fulfilling the study objectives, quantitative approach was adopted and a survey was conducted. Participants of the survey were adult women living in the rural areas of the Sahiwal division which consists of three districts: Sahiwal, Okara and Pakpattan. Both married and un-married women age between ages 20-50 years were recruited as respondents for the current study. As the study is quantitative by nature, the quantitative cross-sectional research design was applied. A survey questionnaire was constructed for data collection from the respondents. A sample of 384 respondents was taken proportionately from each of the districts through multi-stage sampling technique. The questionnaire was translated into Urdu for making it easy to understand for the respondents. The data collection took six months, i.e., from January-June. 2018. The data was analyzed through SPSS (Version 25) and descriptive statistics was applied for calculation of frequency and percentages.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Imran Sharif Chaudhry, Farhana Nosheen, and Muhammad Idrees Lodhi, *op.cit.*, 171-83.

Findings

Table 1
Demographic Profile of Respondents

(n=384)		
Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age in Years		
15-24	90	23.43
25-34	120	31.25
35-44	110	28.64
Above 45	64	16.68
Educational Status		
Illiterate	70	18.22
Religious education	80	20.83
Primary Level	15	3.90
Middle Level	35	9.11
Matric Level	100	26.04
Above Matric	84	21.87
Family structure		
Nuclear	160	41.66
Extended	224	58.33

Table 1 presents demographic profile of the respondents. Regarding age, 23.43 per cent of respondents had age between 15-24 years. Similarly, 31.25 per cent were of age between 25-34 years. 28.64 per cent of respondents were between 35-44 years of age. Considering educational status of the respondents, 18.22 per cent of the respondents were illiterate; 20.83 per cent had obtained religious education; 26.04 respondents got education up to matric and 21.87 per cent had qualification higher than matric. When respondents were asked about the family system, 41.66 per cent were living with nuclear family system whereas 58.33 per cent were part of extended family system.

Table 2
Measures of Social Empowerment of Women

(n=384)		
Category	Frequency	Percentage
Access to basic amenities		
Yes	160	41.66
No	224	58.33
Consideration of opinion in domestic matters		
Yes	120	31.25
No	264	68.75
Freedom to move out of home		
Yes	185	48.17
No	199	51.82
Freedom to visit parental home		
Yes	70	18.22
No	104*	27.08
Independence in interacting with neighbourhood		
Yes	225	58.59
No	159	41.40
Freedom of casting vote		
Yes	70	18.22
No	314	81.77

*This question was applicable to 174 respondents out of total 384.

Table 2 contains findings on consideration of respondent's opinion while decision making about domestic matters. It was revealed that opinion of 68.7 per cent respondents was not given importance whereas only 31.2 per cent of the respondents were listened and given consideration. Regarding freedom to move out of home in case of need, the findings highlight that almost 48 per cent of the respondents were free to move out of home whereas nearly 52 per cent reported restrictions over freely moving in this matter. About freedom to the respondents about visiting their parental home, the responses show that slightly more than 18 per cent of the respondents had the freedom to visit their parents. Contrarily, 27 per cent of the respondents reported not having such freedom. Moreover, nearly 58 per cent of the respondents reported that they can freely interact within their neighborhood and a little more than 40 per cent of the respondents reported that they were not free to maintain social relationships with the neighbours. Concerning freedom of casting vote for favorite candidate, only a small percentage (18%) of the respondents was free to vote for their favorite candidate. On the

contrary, almost 82 per cent of the respondents were not free in making any such choice.

Table 3
Socio-economic Indicators of Women Empowerment

(n=384)		
Category	Frequency	Percentage
Money for meeting household expenditures		
Yes	40	10.41
No	344	89.58
Person spending the household income		
Husband	138	35.93
Mother in law	20	5.20
Father in law	30	7.81
Brother in law	6	1.56
Father/mother	150	39.06
Participation in economic activities		
Yes	264	68.75
No	120	31.25
Opinion sought while deciding about marriage		
Yes	169	44.01
No	215	55.98
Perception about equal status		
Yes	190	49.47
No	194	50.52

Table 3 presents socio-economic indicators of women empowerment as per findings of the survey. The findings reveal that only one-tenth of the respondents have money in hand for meeting household expenditures of the family whereas the rest reported otherwise. The data shows that 69 per cent of the respondents were participating in outdoor economic activities. When respondents' opinion was sought about decision-making in marriage, only 44 per cent responded positively whereas 56 per cent response was negative to this question. Table 3 also indicates an interesting fact that 49 per cent of the rural women perceive themselves equal to the men in term of social status whereas 51 per cent believe that they are not equal human beings *viz-a-viz* men.

Discussions

The major aim of the paper was to examine the impact of socio-cultural barriers on women empowerment in Sahiwal division. The findings,

based on sample from Sahiwal division, indicate empowerment of women in term of consideration of opinion about domestic matters, freedom for physical mobility, liberty to visit parental home, independence in interaction with the neighbours and autonomy to exercise right of vote for their favorite candidate. The indicators measured cover the day to day social life on one hand and availability of right for financial spending and political autonomy.

Going back to the concept and practice of social empowerment, one would find it as: 'The degree of women's access to (and control over) material resources (including food, income, land, and other forms of wealth) and to social resources (including knowledge, power, and prestige) within the family, in the community, and in the society at large'.³⁵ When compared with the findings, it becomes evident that in case of majority of the respondents, their opinion was not sought in important decisions made at the domestic level. It is a reflection of less empowerment of women despite the fact that they were married and were supposed to be central figure in decision-making along with their husbands. Similarly, half of the sample rural women were also not free to move out of home. In the patriarchal culture of Punjab, women are not permitted to freely move because it is perceived to be socially odd and inviting shame as well. Male members of the family consider it a matter of dishonor if the females are seen publicly. That is why, in rural and remote areas of Punjab, physical mobility of the women is restricted, and they have to limit themselves within boundary walls of the home.

The findings of the study revealed that women in the rural areas were also not free to visit their neighbours. As stated by a great philosopher Aristotle; 'Man is social animal', every human needs to maintain social interaction and have some friends' circles for sharing one's feelings and worries. In the rural areas of Punjab, housewives rarely get chance to be part of social gatherings and outdoor activities, so only option left with them for interaction is neighborhood. However, in typical conservative families, women are not allowed to freely interact even within the vicinity of neighbourhood. This practice limits women to their four walls and they feel like a caged bird and powerless in comparison with male family members.

Results of the study show that larger percentage of rural women was not free in expressing their political choices while casting vote to their chosen candidates. In the rural areas, individual choices for voting are discouraged as head of the household/clan makes decision to support

³⁵ Ruth B. Dixon, *Rural Women at Work: Strategies for Development in South Asia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 6.

any political candidate; rest of the family members have to support that particular candidate. Dependent members of the family and especially the females are bound to obey what the elderly and male family members decide.

Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate that sociocultural factors have been putting barriers on empowerment of rural women in the study area. The centuries old patriarchal culture of the region excludes women from mainstream socio-economic activities of the society, though, women enjoy a relatively higher degree of power and autonomy in the urban areas. Levels and patterns of women empowerment have variation depending on the geography, educational level, participation of the women in economic activities, and cultural practices of the area. Although the government and NGOs have taken number of initiatives for making the womenfolk active and equal citizens and making them empowered. However, it is not easy to change the mindset of the people which has entrenched male dominance in all walks of life.