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WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT: EXPLORING GENDER DISPARITIES IN CONTEMPORARY PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Women's participation in higher education and employment is an important indicator of social development, economic progress and gender equality in contemporary Pakistan. Although significant improvements have been observed in women's access to universities and professional education, gender disparities continue to influence their educational opportunities, career choices and participation in the labour market. Pakistani women face several interconnected challenges, including traditional gender expectations, financial limitations, unequal household responsibilities, restricted mobility, workplace discrimination, inadequate institutional support and limited employment opportunities. These barriers are particularly significant for women belonging to rural, low-income and socially disadvantaged communities. This study explores the relationship between women's higher education and employment opportunities in Pakistan, examining the extent to which educational attainment contributes to women's economic independence and professional development. It also investigates the social, cultural, economic and institutional factors that prevent educated women from entering and remaining in the workforce. Using a qualitative, descriptive and secondary-data-based research approach, the study reviews academic publications, government reports and international institutional research published between 2023 and 2025. The discussion indicates that access to higher education alone is insufficient to guarantee equal employment opportunities. Greater attention must be given to workplace conditions, professional skills, safe transportation, childcare facilities, equal remuneration and supportive institutional policies. The study concludes that achieving meaningful gender equality requires coordinated efforts by government institutions, universities, employers, families and civil society to transform educational access into sustainable employment and economic empowerment for Pakistani women.

KEYWORDS:*Women's participation, higher education, gender disparities, women's employment, gender equality, Pakistan, female education, labour force participation, economic empowerment, workplace discrimination, social barriers, educational opportunities.*

INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in higher education and employment has become an important subject of academic discussion and public policy in Pakistan. Education is widely recognised as a fundamental human right and an essential instrument for social and economic development. Higher education enables women to acquire professional knowledge, develop critical thinking, improve their employment prospects and contribute to national development. Despite these advantages, Pakistani women continue to experience unequal opportunities in educational institutions and the labour market. Gender-based inequalities are influenced by social traditions, economic circumstances, cultural expectations and institutional practices that affect women's ability to pursue education and professional careers.Over recent decades, Pakistan has experienced considerable changes in female educational participation. Women are increasingly enrolling in universities and pursuing degrees in medicine, engineering, education, business administration, information technology and social sciences. Higher education has created opportunities for women to develop professional identities and participate in different sectors of society. However, educational participation does not necessarily translate into economic independence. Research by Ahmed et al. (2024) demonstrates that even among female university graduates, participation in the labour force remains considerably lower than among male graduates. This difference highlights the

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importance of examining the relationship between educational attainment and actual employment opportunities. Chin, J. W., Mustafa, M. J., & Nungsari, M. (2024).found that

One of the major challenges affecting women's participation in higher education is unequal access to educational resources. Although urban women generally have greater access to universities, transport facilities, digital resources and professional institutions, women in rural areas frequently experience geographical, financial and social restrictions. Families with limited financial resources may prioritise male children's education because of traditional expectations that men will become primary income earners. Girls may also face early marriage, domestic responsibilities and restrictions on travelling independently. These factors contribute to educational inequalities and limit women's opportunities to pursue higher qualifications. Fazal, A., & Mirza, F. (2024).found that

Women's participation in employment is influenced by several factors beyond educational qualifications. Cultural expectations frequently associate women with household management, childcare and family responsibilities, while paid employment is commonly viewed as a male-dominated activity. Even highly educated women may experience pressure to prioritise marriage and domestic responsibilities over professional development. Zulfiqar et al. (2024) explain that the employment experiences of tertiary-educated Pakistani women are shaped by interconnected individual, family, community and institutional influences. Consequently, women's employment decisions cannot be understood simply through their educational qualifications or individual preferences.Workplace inequalities represent another important dimension of gender disparity in Pakistan. Women who enter professional employment may experience unequal wages, limited promotion opportunities, occupational segregation, harassment and inadequate maternity-related support. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2025) identifies significant gender-based wage differences in Pakistan, demonstrating that women continue to experience economic disadvantages even when they participate in paid employment. In addition, the concentration of women in informal and insecure occupations reduces their access to employment benefits, social protection and long-term professional development.The relationship between higher education and employment therefore requires a broader examination of social structures and institutional arrangements. Educational institutions must provide women with relevant professional skills, career guidance, digital literacy and opportunities for practical experience. Employers must establish inclusive recruitment practices, safe working environments and equal opportunities for career advancement. Government institutions must also strengthen policies that address gender discrimination and improve women's access to economic resources. This research examines these interconnected issues to understand why educational progress has not produced equivalent progress in women's employment participation in contemporary Pakistan.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. How do social, cultural, economic and institutional factors influence women's participation in higher education and employment in contemporary Pakistan, and what measures can reduce the gender disparities affecting their educational and professional opportunities?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

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1. To examine women's participation in higher education and employment in contemporary Pakistan and identify the major social, cultural, economic and institutional factors contributing to gender disparities in educational access, professional opportunities and economic empowerment.

LITERATURE REVIE

Higher education plays a significant role in promoting gender equality by providing women with opportunities to develop knowledge, professional skills and social independence. In Pakistan, female participation in universities has gradually increased, reflecting changing attitudes towards women's education and growing recognition of the importance of women's contributions to national development. Women are increasingly pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in different academic disciplines. However, educational progress remains uneven across geographical locations, socioeconomic groups and educational institutions.The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2024 identifies substantial differences between men and women in Pakistan across educational attainment and economic participation. Although improvements have occurred in some educational indicators, broader gender equality remains limited. This suggests that educational access should not be examined independently of economic and social opportunities. Women may obtain university qualifications but still experience difficulties converting their educational achievements into professional careers (World Economic Forum, 2024).The Punjab Commission on the Status of Women (2024), through its Punjab Gender Parity Report 2023 and 2024, highlights continuing differences in educational participation and literacy. According to the report, Pakistan's 2023 census recorded female literacy at approximately 52.8 percent compared with 68 percent for males. These figures demonstrate that educational inequality begins well before university admission. Women who experience limited access to primary and secondary education are less likely to reach higher educational institutions.

The educational gender gap is also associated with differences in household income, parental education and geographical location. Families living in rural communities may have limited access to universities and specialised educational institutions. The absence of nearby colleges and reliable transportation can discourage parents from sending daughters to distant educational institutions. Africa, S. S. (2025). Found that In some communities, social expectations concerning women's mobility further restrict educational opportunities. These circumstances demonstrate that increasing university enrolment requires improvements in the wider educational environment.Furthermore, women's access to higher education should include equal opportunities across academic disciplines. Although women have established a strong presence in fields such as medicine, education and social sciences, they may remain underrepresented in certain technical and engineering disciplines. Gender stereotypes concerning appropriate occupations can influence subject selection and career planning. Universities therefore need to encourage female students to enter emerging professional fields, including information technology, engineering, artificial intelligence, entrepreneurship and scientific researchThe relationship between education and employment is central to understanding women's economic participation. Higher education can increase employment opportunities by improving professional qualifications, technical knowledge and individual confidence. De Gobbi, M. S., Kühn, S., Heins, G., & Malikova, Z. (2025). Explan that Educated women are better positioned to enter skilled occupations, pursue entrepreneurship and contribute to household income. However, the assumption that educational attainment automatically produces employment is not fully supported by evidence from Pakistan.Ahmed

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et al. (2024) examined the effectiveness of role models in encouraging female university graduates to enter the labour force. Their research involved 2,500 final-year female undergraduate students in Lahore and used a randomised intervention involving videos of successful female professionals. The study found that exposure to relatable professional role models improved students' growth mindsets. This research demonstrates that women's employment decisions may be influenced by social expectations, confidence and perceptions of professional opportunities.

A related study by Zulfiqar et al. (2024), titled Homemaker or breadwinner: labour force participation of Pakistani women, examines the experiences of tertiary-educated women and the factors influencing their participation in employment. The research uses an ecological perspective to demonstrate that women's employment is influenced by multiple levels of social and institutional relationships. These include individual aspirations, family responsibilities, community attitudes and workplace conditions. The study is important because it highlights the limitations of viewing women's unemployment exclusively as an individual choice.The relationship between education and employment is also influenced by the relevance of academic qualifications to labour market requirements. Graduates may experience difficulty obtaining employment when universities do not provide sufficient practical training, professional internships or industry connections. Women may also encounter additional difficulties because of limited professional networks and restricted access to employment information. These challenges indicate that universities should strengthen career counselling, internship programmes and collaboration with employers.Fazal and Mirza (2024), in their research on women's empowerment through education and employment opportunities in urban Pakistan, examine the connection between educational access, employment and empowerment. Their study highlights the importance of addressing systemic barriers that prevent women from benefiting fully from educational and professional opportunities. Education should therefore be understood as a foundation for empowerment rather than an independent solution to gender inequality.Social and cultural expectations remain among the most influential factors shaping women's participation in higher education and employment in Pakistan. In many communities, women are expected to fulfil domestic responsibilities, care for children and maintain household relationships. Although these responsibilities are socially important, their unequal distribution can restrict women's educational and professional development.

Traditional gender roles may influence family decisions regarding girls' university education, employment and career choices. Some families support female education but discourage daughters from accepting employment after graduation. In other situations, women may be permitted to work only in occupations considered socially acceptable, such as teaching, healthcare or certain administrative positions. Such restrictions reduce professional flexibility and limit women's participation in diverse economic sectors.Research on highly educated Pakistani women also demonstrates that empowerment is not always experienced as a straightforward transition from traditional values towards complete independence. A 2024 study, Developing a contextual understanding of empowerment through education: narratives from highly educated women in Pakistan, examines how women negotiate educational and professional opportunities within existing family and cultural expectations. It suggests that women's experiences of empowerment are shaped by their ability to negotiate social expectations while pursuing personal and professional goals.Family support is particularly important for women entering the labour market. Parents and spouses can influence whether women continue their education, accept employment or pursue career advancement.

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Supportive families may encourage women to develop professional identities, whereas restrictive household expectations may create additional barriers. The availability of childcare and assistance with household responsibilities can also determine whether women remain employed after marriage or motherhood.The issue of women's mobility is another important concern. In some areas, women face restrictions on travelling independently to universities and workplaces. Inadequate public transportation, concerns about harassment and the absence of secure commuting arrangements may discourage women from pursuing educational and employment opportunities. These difficulties are particularly significant for women who live far from educational institutions and employment centres.

Economic circumstances have a considerable influence on women's access to higher education. University tuition fees, accommodation expenses, transportation costs, learning materials and digital equipment can create significant financial pressure for low-income families. When household resources are limited, families may prioritise boys' education because of traditional assumptions about future earning responsibilities.Economic inequalities are also connected to differences between urban and rural communities. Urban women generally have greater access to universities, internet facilities, professional training and employment centres. Rural women may experience limited educational infrastructure, fewer employment opportunities and greater dependence on household agricultural activities. These differences contribute to unequal educational and professional outcomes.Financial independence is one of the major potential benefits of women's employment. Paid work enables women to contribute to household expenditure, support children's education and improve their bargaining position within families. Nevertheless, women who enter employment may still face unequal remuneration and insecure working conditions.The ILO's 2025 report, The gender pay gap in Pakistan: An empirical analysis and policy implications, identifies a substantial wage difference between women and men in paid employment. Its analysis indicates that women earn approximately 25 to 30 percent less than men, depending on the wage measure used. Occupational segregation, informal employment and discriminatory practices are among the factors contributing to this disparity (ILO, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative secondary research methodology to investigate women's participation in higher education and employment in contemporary Pakistan. The research relies on existing academic literature, published journal articles, government publications, international reports and institutional research to examine gender disparities and their relationship with educational and professional opportunities. The main purpose of adopting this methodology is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the social, cultural, economic and institutional factors that influence women's participation in education and employment. Relevant information has been drawn from publications released between 2023 and 2025, including research by the International Labour Organization, World Bank, World Economic Forum, United Nations agencies, the Government of Pakistan and Pakistani academic researchers. The study examines different dimensions of gender inequality, including access to universities, educational attainment, labour force participation, wage differences, workplace discrimination, occupational segregation and family responsibilities. Particular attention is given to the experiences of women belonging to rural and urban communities and different socioeconomic backgrounds. Secondary data are selected according to their relevance, credibility, publication date and contribution to the research objectives. Academic journal articles are used to understand theoretical and empirical

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perspectives, while institutional reports provide statistical information and policy-related evidence. The study also examines the relationship between higher education and employment by considering whether educational qualifications translate into professional opportunities and financial independence. Ethical research practices are maintained through appropriate acknowledgement of original authors and institutions, accurate representation of published findings and avoidance of fabricated statistical information. Since the study is based on secondary sources, no direct interviews, questionnaires or personal responses have been collected.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research follows a descriptive and exploratory design to examine the nature, causes and consequences of gender disparities in women's participation in higher education and employment in Pakistan. A descriptive approach is appropriate because the study seeks to explain existing conditions, identify inequalities and present the experiences and challenges documented in contemporary research. The exploratory dimension allows the researcher to investigate the interconnected factors that influence women's educational and professional opportunities, including cultural expectations, household responsibilities, financial limitations, institutional discrimination and labour market conditions. The research is organised around two interconnected areas: women's access to higher education and their participation in paid employment after acquiring educational qualifications. The first area examines university enrolment, access to academic resources, geographical inequalities, family support and differences between urban and rural educational opportunities. The second area focuses on employment availability, professional development, wage equality, workplace safety, career advancement and women's economic independence. The design also incorporates an institutional perspective by considering the role of government policies, universities, employers and civil society organisations in promoting gender equality. A comparative approach is used to examine differences between men's and women's opportunities and to identify the relationship between educational progress and labour market participation. The study does not attempt to establish causal relationships through original statistical testing; instead, it interprets existing empirical evidence and published research findings. The research design also recognises that women's experiences differ according to age, income, geographical location, marital status, educational qualifications and family circumstances.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis is based on a thematic examination of secondary information collected from academic publications, national reports and international organisations published between 2023 and 2025. The collected material is organised into major themes, including educational participation, employment opportunities, social and cultural barriers, economic inequality, workplace discrimination and institutional support. The first theme concerns women's access to higher education. Available research demonstrates that educational opportunities have improved for many Pakistani women, particularly in urban areas, but significant differences remain in literacy, educational access and geographical distribution. The Punjab Gender Parity Report 2023 and 2024 highlights the continuing literacy gap between males and females, demonstrating that educational inequality begins at the foundational level and can influence women's subsequent university participation. The second theme examines the transition from higher education to employment. Ahmed et al.

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(2024) provide evidence that even university graduates may experience difficulties entering the labour market. Their intervention research involving female undergraduate students in Lahore illustrates the importance of role models and professional aspirations in encouraging women's economic participation. The third theme concerns social and cultural barriers. Existing research indicates that family expectations, domestic responsibilities, marriage-related pressures and mobility restrictions can influence women's educational and employment decisions. The fourth theme focuses on economic inequality. According to the ILO (2025), women in wage employment in Pakistan earn approximately 25 to 30 percent less than men, depending on the measurement used. This indicates that employment participation does not necessarily result in equal economic benefits. Another important finding relates to the concentration of women in informal and insecure occupations, where access to social protection and employment benefits may be limited. The fifth theme concerns institutional and workplace challenges, including discrimination, harassment, unequal promotion opportunities and insufficient childcare facilities.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study indicate that women's participation in higher education and employment in Pakistan has improved in certain areas, but substantial gender disparities continue to restrict their opportunities. One major finding is that increased educational access does not automatically guarantee economic independence. Women may complete university degrees and obtain professional qualifications but remain unemployed because of limited job opportunities, family expectations and workplace barriers. This demonstrates a gap between educational achievement and labour market participation. A second finding is that social and cultural expectations continue to influence women's career decisions. Traditional assumptions regarding household responsibilities and women's social roles can restrict their ability to pursue professional careers. A third finding concerns the unequal distribution of educational opportunities. Women living in rural and economically disadvantaged communities frequently experience greater difficulties accessing universities, professional training and digital resources. A fourth finding is that economic inequality affects women's ability to participate in both education and employment. Financial limitations can prevent women from pursuing postgraduate qualifications, while unequal remuneration reduces the economic benefits of paid work. The ILO's 2025 research on Pakistan's gender pay gap provides further evidence that women continue to face substantial disadvantages in earnings. A fifth finding is that workplace conditions influence women's ability to remain employed. Inadequate childcare, unsafe transportation, harassment, inflexible working arrangements and limited career advancement can discourage women's professional participation. The research also indicates that family support and positive professional role models can contribute to women's confidence and career aspirations. Furthermore, digital employment and remote working arrangements offer potential opportunities for women who face mobility restrictions, although unequal access to technology remains an important limitation. Another important finding is that existing government policies require stronger implementation and institutional monitoring.

CONCLUSION

Women's participation in higher education and employment is essential for achieving sustainable development, social justice and economic progress in contemporary Pakistan. Although improvements in female educational participation have created new opportunities

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for women, gender disparities continue to restrict their ability to benefit fully from these achievements. The findings of this study demonstrate that educational qualifications alone cannot guarantee professional success or economic independence. Women continue to face interconnected challenges, including traditional gender expectations, financial limitations, unequal household responsibilities, restricted mobility, inadequate employment opportunities, workplace discrimination and unequal remuneration. These challenges are particularly significant for rural women and those belonging to economically disadvantaged households. The research further establishes that the transition from higher education to employment requires greater institutional attention. Universities must provide relevant professional training, career counselling and opportunities for practical experience, while employers must ensure equal recruitment, fair salaries, safe workplaces and opportunities for career advancement. Government institutions also have an important responsibility to strengthen educational policies, improve labour protections, expand financial assistance and ensure the effective implementation of gender equality measures. Family and community support are equally important because positive attitudes towards women's education and employment can help reduce social restrictions and encourage professional participation. Furthermore, digital education and flexible employment arrangements can create additional opportunities for women, provided that equal access to technology and professional resources is ensured.

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