

Education–Employment Mismatch and Implications for Women’s Empowerment in Azad Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract

Education has been widely recognized as a central driver of women’s empowerment and socio-economic development worldwide. This study aimed to examine the mismatch between women’s education and employment and its implications for women’s empowerment in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). A qualitative research design was employed, involving in-depth interviews with 13 working women selected through purposive sampling. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. We found that the education–employment mismatch faced by women in AJK is deeply structural and gendered, with serious implications for empowerment. Higher education alone does not ensure meaningful employment due to weak education–labor market linkages, gender-biased employment practices, and limited institutional support. Cultural norms further shape women’s career trajectories by prioritizing family honor and domestic roles over professional growth, rendering education largely symbolic. Despite these barriers, women exercise agency through alternative work pathways and renegotiated aspirations.

Keywords: Education, Women, Empowerment, Mismatch, Gendered, Culture

Introduction

Over the past few decades, education has been widely recognized as a central driver of women’s empowerment and socio-economic development across the globe (Chompa, 2022). International development agendas, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), emphasize women’s access to education and decent employment as key pathways to empowerment. In many developing countries, including Pakistan,

Arshad (2024) argued that substantial progress has been made in expanding women's access to education, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels. Female enrolment in universities has increased significantly, and women now constitute a visible proportion of graduates across disciplines such as education, social sciences, medicine, and increasingly STEM fields (Naseem, Mushtaq, Imran, Hussain, & Yousaf, 2025). However, this educational progress has not translated proportionately into women's participation in the market, nor has it resulted in equitable employment outcomes. This disconnects between women's educational attainment and their employment opportunities—commonly referred to as the education–employment mismatch—raises critical questions about the actual empowerment potential of education for women in Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

Women's empowerment is a multidimensional concept encompassing economic independence, decision-making power, autonomy, self-efficacy, and the ability to challenge structural inequalities (Hamid & Akram, 2025; Jamal et al., 2023). While education is often positioned as a transformative resource that enhances women's capabilities, skills, and aspirations, its empowering potential remains contingent upon the availability of meaningful employment opportunities and enabling social structures. In contexts characterized by patriarchal norms, gendered markets, and institutional weaknesses, education alone may not be sufficient to empower women (Ahmad, Shaheen, & Hussain, 2024). Pakistan presents a particularly complex case, where women's educational gains coexist with persistently low female work force participation, occupational segregation, wage gaps, and widespread underemployment among educated women (Sain, 2023).

Pasha (2024) highlighted that education–employment mismatch among women in Pakistan is not merely a technical or market-based problem; rather, it is deeply embedded in structural, cultural, and gendered power relations. Educated women frequently encounter limited job opportunities that align with their qualifications, skills, and career aspirations (Khan, Sulaiman, Nazir, Khan, & Awan, 2025). Many are compelled to accept low-paid, insecure, or socially “acceptable” jobs that underutilize their education, while others withdraw from the labor market altogether due to social constraints, family pressures, or hostile work environments (Butt & Park, 2024). As a result, education often fails to deliver its promised returns in terms of economic empowerment, autonomy, and social mobility for women.

This article examines the education–employment mismatch and its implications for women's empowerment in AJK through a qualitative lens. By foregrounding women's lived experiences, perceptions, and negotiations, the study moves beyond aggregate statistics to explore how structural disconnects, gendered norms, and subjective meanings of empowerment shape women's employment trajectories. The introduction situates the study within existing literature on women, education, employment, and empowerment, while highlighting critical gaps that this research seeks to address.

Literature Review

The relationship between education and women's empowerment has been extensively theorized in development and feminist scholarship. Human capital theory views education as an investment that enhances productivity, employability, and earnings, thereby empowering individuals economically (Abdullah & Nisar, 2024; Najibi & McLachlan, 2023). From this perspective, women's education is expected to lead to greater labor force participation, improved income, and enhanced bargaining power within households. However, feminist critiques argue that such linear assumptions overlook the gendered nature of labor markets and the unequal distribution of opportunities and rewards (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025).

In Pakistan, education is often framed as a tool for women's empowerment in policy discourse. National education policies emphasize female education to enhance women's economic participation and social development (Rasheed & Nosheen, 2024; Abdullah & Ullah, 2022). However, empirical evidence suggests that the empowerment outcomes of education remain uneven and conditional. Educated women frequently face contradictions between their qualifications and the employment options available to them, leading to frustration, disillusionment, and diminished returns on educational investment (Maqbool, Maqbool, Zafeer, & Qihui, 2024).

One of the central dimensions of the education–employment mismatch for women in Pakistan is the structural disconnect between educational institutions and labor market demands. Universities and colleges often operate in isolation from labor market realities, offering programs that are poorly aligned with emerging employment sectors or failing to provide practical skills, internships, and career guidance (Abdullah, Matloob, & Malik, 2024; Iqbal, Hassan, Mahmood, & Tanveer, 2022). For women, this disconnect is further compounded by gendered segmentation of the labor market, where certain fields and professions are considered appropriate or inappropriate based on cultural norms.

Educated women frequently report being overqualified for the jobs available to them, particularly in the public and private education sectors, clerical work, and low-level administrative roles. This underemployment reflects not only labor market saturation but also the limited range of socially acceptable occupations for women (Abdullah et al., 2024; Chachar, Ullah, & Ujjan, 2023). Fields such as engineering, technology, and management remain male-dominated, with women facing barriers to entry, progression, and retention despite possessing relevant qualifications.

Moreover, labor market structures in Pakistan are characterized by informality, job insecurity, and weak regulatory frameworks. The lack of childcare facilities, flexible work arrangements, and safe transportation further restrict women's ability to translate education into employment (Abdullah, Nisar, & Malik, 2024; Anwar, Kelly, & Gray, 2022). These structural constraints undermine the empowering potential of education, reinforcing gendered inequalities in employment outcomes.

Beyond structural factors, deeply entrenched gender norms play a decisive role in shaping women's employment trajectories in Pakistan. Patriarchal values emphasize women's primary responsibilities as caregivers, wives, and mothers, often positioning paid employment as secondary or conditional (Abdullah, Nisar, & Ahmed, 2025;

Asadullah, Webb, & Islam, 2024). Even when families invest in women's education, employment decisions are frequently influenced by concerns about honor, mobility, marital prospects, and social reputation.

Educated women may be encouraged to pursue education as a form of cultural capital or status enhancement rather than as a pathway to long-term employment. As a result, education becomes decoupled from economic empowerment, serving symbolic rather than instrumental functions (Abdullah, Sultana, & Nisar, 2025; Zahid, Rafique, Khurshid, Khan, & Ullah, 2024). Women's employment is often deemed acceptable only if it does not conflict with domestic responsibilities or challenge male authority within the household.

Workplace cultures further reinforce gendered constraints. Women frequently encounter discrimination, harassment, and exclusion in professional settings, leading to job dissatisfaction and withdrawal from the labor market (Abdullah, Shoukat, Malik, Akhtar, 2025; Tohan, Islam, & Rahman, 2024). The absence of supportive policies and enforcement mechanisms exacerbates these challenges, limiting women's capacity to sustain meaningful employment.

These gendered norms not only restrict women's access to employment but also shape their perceptions of empowerment. Women may internalize social expectations, adjusting their aspirations and redefining empowerment in ways that prioritize familial harmony over economic independence.

Despite these constraints, women are not passive recipients of structural and cultural forces. Abera (2023) highlights the ways in which educated women actively negotiate empowerment, agency, and identity in the face of education–employment mismatch. Some women pursue alternative forms of work, such as home-based enterprises, informal employment, or freelance work, to reconcile paid labor with social expectations (Abdullah, Nisar, Ahmed, & Sultana, 2025). Others engage in re-skilling, further education, or delayed employment strategies as forms of adaptation and resistance.

Empowerment, in this context, is experienced as a negotiated and contested process rather than a linear outcome. While lack of appropriate employment may limit economic independence, education can still enhance women's self-confidence, awareness, and decision-making capacity within households and communities (Jabeen, Omer, & Zafar, 2024). However, the emotional and psychological costs of mismatch—including frustration, loss of professional identity, and diminished self-worth—must also be acknowledged.

This study situates women's narratives at the center of analysis to explore how empowerment is constructed, constrained, and reimagined amid structural and cultural limitations. By examining women's lived experiences, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of empowerment that goes beyond employment statistics to capture subjective meanings and everyday negotiations.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the education–employment mismatch and its implications for women's empowerment in AJK through

participants lived experiences and perceptions. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select thirteen educated women who had completed at least a bachelor's degree but were either unemployed, underemployed, or employed in positions not aligned with their educational qualifications. This sampling strategy enabled the inclusion of information-rich cases that were directly relevant to the research objectives. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to articulate their educational trajectories, employment experiences, and meanings of empowerment in their own words. The interview guide was developed around key themes, including structural barriers in the labor market, gendered norms shaping employment decisions, and strategies of negotiation and agency. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in a language comfortable for the participants. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following an inductive approach to identify recurring patterns and meanings. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the use of pseudonyms, were strictly observed throughout the research process.

Key Findings

The following section presents the key findings of the study derived from in-depth interviews with the participants. The findings are organized thematically to reflect recurring patterns in women's narratives and to address the study's research objectives. These themes illuminate how structural factors and gendered norms shape women's experiences of education, employment, and empowerment.

Theme 1: Structural Disconnect Between Education and Market Opportunities

The findings reveal a pronounced structural disconnect between women's educational attainment and the availability of market opportunities aligned with their qualifications, significantly constraining their empowerment. Most participants reported that despite completing higher education, they encountered limited job openings relevant to their fields of study, leading to unemployment or underemployment. One participant noted, "I completed my master's degree with the hope of getting a professional job, but most vacancies available were either clerical or teaching, which did not match my qualification." This reflects a broader institutional gap between universities and labor market needs, where academic programs emphasize theoretical knowledge but provide minimal exposure to practical skills, internships, or career placement support. Several women highlighted the absence of career counselling as a critical barrier, with one stating, "We were never guided about market demand or skills needed for employment; after graduation, we were left on our own." Additionally, participants pointed to gendered labor market structures that restrict women's entry into diverse sectors, particularly in technical and managerial roles. Even when opportunities existed, employers often favoured male candidates, reinforcing occupational segregation. As one respondent explained, "They assume men are more suitable for fieldwork or leadership positions, even if women have the same qualifications." Structural constraints such as limited public sector vacancies,

lack of safe transportation, and inflexible work arrangements further compounded the mismatch. These factors collectively undermine the economic returns of women's education, generating frustration and a sense of wasted potential. The theme underscores that the education–employment mismatch is not merely an individual failure, but a systemic issue rooted in weak institutional linkages, gender-biased labor markets, and inadequate employment infrastructures that restrict women's ability to translate education into meaningful and empowering work.

Theme 2: Gendered Norms and Constraints Shaping Employment Outcomes

The findings indicate that deeply entrenched gendered norms and social constraints play a central role in shaping women's employment outcomes, often overriding their educational achievements. Participants consistently described how family expectations, cultural values, and concerns about social respectability influenced decisions regarding whether, where, and how long they could work. One participant explained, "My family supported my education, but when it came to a job, they preferred something close to home and only for a short time before marriage." This reflects how women's education is frequently valued symbolically, while employment is negotiated within restrictive gender roles. Many respondents reported being steered toward socially acceptable professions such as teaching or clerical work, regardless of their field of study. As one woman noted, "Even though I studied management, teaching was considered the safest and most respectable option for a woman." Mobility restrictions, particularly related to commuting and workplace location, further limited employment choices. Several participants highlighted that mixed-gender workplaces and late working hours were viewed negatively, leading families to discourage or prohibit certain jobs. One interviewee shared, "I received a good job offer, but my parents refused because the office environment was not considered appropriate." Workplace norms also reinforced gendered constraints, with participants recounting experiences of discrimination, lack of support, and fear of harassment. These challenges often resulted in women leaving jobs voluntarily to preserve family harmony. As one participant reflected, "Sometimes leaving the job feels easier than constantly justifying your presence outside the home." Overall, this theme demonstrates that gendered norms and social constraints significantly mediate the relationship between education and employment, limiting women's ability to fully utilize their qualifications and undermining the transformative potential of education for empowerment.

Theme 3: Negotiating Empowerment, Agency, and Identity amid Mismatches

Despite facing persistent education–employment mismatch, participants actively negotiated their sense of empowerment, agency, and professional identity within existing structural and cultural constraints. Rather than perceiving themselves solely as passive victims of limited opportunities, many women described adaptive strategies to maintain autonomy and self-worth. One participant shared, "I may not be working in my field, but my education has given me confidence to speak, make decisions, and support my children's education." This highlights how empowerment was often

redefined beyond formal employment to include personal growth, awareness, and influence within the household. Several women engaged in alternative forms of work, such as home-based businesses, tutoring, or freelance activities, as a way to reconcile economic participation with social expectations. As one interviewee explained, “Working from home allows me to use my skills without upsetting family norms.” However, participants also expressed emotional tension arising from compromised career aspirations. Feelings of frustration, loss of professional identity, and diminished self-esteem were common, particularly among those who had invested heavily in higher education. One respondent noted, “Sometimes I feel my degree has no value because I am not recognized as a professional.” At the same time, education enabled subtle forms of resistance, with women gradually negotiating greater mobility, delayed marriage, or shared decision-making within families. A participant reflected, “I may not have the job I wanted, but I now have a voice in family matters.” This theme underscores that women’s empowerment amid mismatch is a complex, negotiated process shaped by both constraint and agency. While structural and cultural barriers limit economic empowerment, education continues to play a critical role in shaping women’s identities, aspirations, and everyday forms of agency.

Conclusion

This study highlights that the education–employment mismatch experienced by women in AJK is a deeply structural and gendered phenomenon with significant implications for women’s empowerment. The findings demonstrate that higher education alone does not guarantee meaningful employment or economic autonomy for women, as weak institutional linkages between education systems and markets, gender-biased employment structures, and inadequate support mechanisms continue to limit opportunities. Alongside these structural barriers, entrenched gender norms and cultural expectations strongly shape women’s employment trajectories, often prioritizing social acceptability, family honor, and domestic responsibilities over professional growth. Consequently, women’s education is frequently valued symbolically rather than as a pathway to sustained employment and empowerment. Despite these constraints, the study also reveals women’s agency in negotiating empowerment through alternative forms of work, redefined aspirations, and enhanced decision-making power within households. Empowerment emerges not as a linear outcome of education or employment but as a negotiated and contested process, shaped by compromise, resistance, and adaptation. Overall, the study underscores that addressing women’s empowerment in Pakistan requires moving beyond access to education toward transforming labor market structures, challenging restrictive gender norms, and creating enabling environments that allow women to translate educational achievements into dignified, meaningful, and empowering employment.

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