

The Lived Experiences of Economic Empowerment among Working Women in Punjab, Pakistan: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

The economic empowerment of women is a complex notion, and it depends greatly on the social and professional status of a person. This is a qualitative semester project that examines the subjective definitions of empowerment among three different groups of people in Punjab, Pakistan including working women, housewives, and students. The study is based on the phenomenological approach, which explores the way in which the sense of agency of a woman is created by financial autonomy, household decision-making, and future aspirations. Using semi-structured interviews, the study brings out the lived experience of the empowerment beyond the income level, looking at the emotional and socio-cultural aspects of independence. Early evidence indicates that, although working women find empowerment in their financial self-sufficiency, housewives and students find their way through empowerment in the household and education, respectively, all of that going through the thick of highly ingrained patriarchal conventions.

Keywords: Economic Empowerment, Punjab, Qualitative Research, Housewives, Working Women, Students, Agency.

Introduction

It is a unanimous opinion that the economic empowerment of women is the only way sustainable and equitable development is expected to be realized. It is not only about making women work more but also about empowering them to have greater control over their lives and making more deliberate choices that would be in their own interest and benefit the world in general (D'Ignazio and Klein, 2020). Empirical studies in this area have shown that it is a sound investment into women's capacities to produce macroeconomic gains that are huge. Gender education plays a positive and significant role in the growth of GDP, as well as a comprehensive study carried out comprising 13 Islamic countries, including Pakistan. This observation underscores the fact that gender discrimination in education is a critical challenge to the economic development of a

nation. However, there is nothing like a picnic between this potential and actual life in Pakistan. The low participation of women in the labor force is caused by a lot of factors, such as deeply rooted sociocultural traditions, institutional barriers, and structural inequalities, although women constitute almost half of the population (Prieto-Rodriguez et al., 2022). Thus, to understand the idea of empowerment, we must move beyond those easy metrics and explore the complicated, subjective, and very contradictory paths women follow to gain economic independence. The phenomenological exploration of working women in Punjab, which is the most populous and socioeconomically important province in Pakistan, in this paper dwells on this landscape and attempts to unveil the essence of economic empowerment. affect the overall spillovers in sectors to the merit of clean energy, the term, with (Karlsen et al., 2021).

There are several facets to the concept of economic empowerment. Income generation, employment, and asset ownership are all concrete results, but at its heart is the more nebulous growth of agency, or the freedom to set and achieve one's own objectives (Hariram et al., 2023). Empowerment, according to scholars such as Naila Kabeer, is the means by which marginalized people gain agency over their own lives. Within the patriarchal bargain, women in Pakistani society typically devise strategies to overcome the limitations imposed on them. Women in the workforce experience empowerment not as a discrete "empowered" or "not" but as an ongoing and frequently contentious process of negotiating agency in the home and the public arena (Braithwaite & Ivec, 2022). As Part of this process, women must challenge traditional gender norms that limit them to the house, increase mobility, boost their self-confidence, and make independent decisions about how to spend their income. Empowerment is influenced both positively and adversely by characteristics such as years of schooling, access to health facilities, and social participation, according to a study on Punjab (Abegunde et al., 2019). On the other hand, unpaid chores and fear of violence have a detrimental effect. This exemplifies how empowerment is both an individual accomplishment and a product of systemic factors.

The site of this investigation, Punjab, is both interesting and critical. It is the economic and agricultural center of Pakistan. It exemplifies the gulf between modernity and conservatism, between city life and rural life, and between urban and rural traditions (Zaid et al., 2022). There has been progress in provincial programs that aim to educate and economically include women, but women still face barriers to participating in formal economic activity. A woman's level of education and her job are positively correlated with empowerment.

Research Questions

1. What are the fundamental structures of the lived experience for women in Punjab engaged in the formal or informal economy?
2. How do women in Punjab who work see, understand, and make sense of their economic power and the limits they face?
3. How do women in Punjab who work deal with and talk about the changing relationship between their own power and the patriarchal systems that are in place?

Research Objectives

- To delineate the fundamental structures and prevalent themes that characterize the quotidian experiences of economic involvement for working women in Punjab.
- To elucidate the subjective interpretations that employed women attribute to notions of empowerment, autonomy, and restriction within their distinct familial and socio-cultural frameworks.
- To develop a contextualized phenomenological understanding of the interface between individual agency and social structure in shaping the way to economic empowerment.

Literature Review

Economic empowerment of women is not a simple process, which involves merely obtaining a job. It also involves empowering women, allowing them to be freer and have the power to make key life choices. The process occurs in a complex nexus of highly patriarchal customs, structural inequalities, and shifting socio-economic situations, which Grote et al. (2021) opine dominate in Pakistan, particularly in the region of Punjab, the most populous in the country. Attempts to define the general patterns of low female labor force participation (FLFP), which is at 22 percent in the country, have been carried out successfully in quantitative research, though it tends to portray the experiences of women as statistical abstractions. This literature review will combine present scholarly studies to establish a framework for the phenomenological inquiry of the lived experience of economic empowerment among working women in Punjab. Letaief et al. (2021) explores the theoretical basis of empowerment, barriers and enablers of empowerment in Pakistan, the progressing but necessary corpus of qualitative research studies on the subject of empowerment, and outlines the gap that this research will aim to fill.

Theories on the economic empowerment of women have changed in perspective, as they had previously focused on financial factors but have now shifted to subjective well-being and agency. The contribution of Al-Munaiey (2020) is that this process of empowering individuals who lack the ability to make strategic life decisions is described, and the resources, agency, and achievements are interconnected. This perspective is fundamental to the Pakistani one, which is empowered as a negotiated product in a patrilineal bargain, in which women formulate strategies through limited forms, instead of challenging them.

This multifaceted view was supported by the empirical studies in Punjab. The research studies by Abebe et al. (2024) reveal that more years of schooling, greater access to health care, and social involvement are connected with empowerment. Conversely, housework without pays and fear of being beaten prevent one from being empowered. Moreover, phenomenological research on the topic of microcredit in Sindh shows that females perceived empowerment not only as economic stability but also, in the first place, as the status raise and increase in decision-making power in the family context as thought by Nawaz (2019). This underscores the fact that the notion of economic

empowerment is quite relational and contextual and is shaped by the surrounding social environment of the household.

There is a paradox of low participation of the female labor force in Pakistan over female education developments. According to Baqir (2023), this is because the country is ranked 153rd among 156 nations in terms of economic gender equality. Such contradiction is evident in Punjab, which is the economic hub. One of the policy attempts in the province is the Punjab Domestic Workers Act (2019). Nevertheless, the situation with enforcement is poor, and the cultural traditions that appeared long ago still complicate the situation when women have to travel and develop their careers.

They are profound and far-reaching problems. According to Abbas et al. (2021), the World Bank shows 11 significant issues, such as difficulties with transportation and mobility, safety, unequal distribution of household and childcare work, and access to job and financial networks. This is described by a policy brief on the job market in Lahore and how the barriers influence women in each job search phase. As an illustration, women are less proactive in seeking employment, they find it difficult to retrieve information via their networks, they receive low salaries, and they are employed at workplaces where they lack basic facilities, including maternity leave. Baranov et al. (2020b) researched these issues and found they are worse in the case of such a marginalized group as blind women in Punjab. They are discriminated against on the basis of their gender and their handicap, like an employer who refuses to hire them and transportation that is not readily available to such persons.

Methodology

The phenomenological approach adopted in this study was used to analyze the lived experiences of working women's economic empowerment in Punjab, Pakistan. The research will seek to understand the nature of these experiences from participants' perspectives, with an emphasis on their subjective interpretations.

Theoretical Framework

The approach is rooted in the heritage of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This strategy consists of three major concepts. First, it entails phenomenology to get a feel for experience in their own words, rather than relying on existing theories. Second, it is hermeneutic (interpretive), recognizing that the research is an active interpretive process. The researcher aims to understand participants' attempts to discern their own experiences; a process known as the double hermeneutic. Lastly, IPA uses an idiographic methodology, which focuses on an exhaustive, personal analysis of the story of each participant and then devising general conclusions about the sample.

Research Design and Protocol

We will use a purposive, homogeneous sampling technique to recruit 8-12 working women from various urban and semi-urban districts of Punjab. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews will be the primary method of data gathering to obtain rich and personal stories. Through open-ended questions that guide these interviews, important points concerning work motives, perceived changes in self and family relationships, and influence in negotiating social expectations will be examined.

Analysis of Data

The data shall be analyzed using conventional IPA techniques after transcription. This involves a process of iteration and an inductive approach where the researcher:

- Reads every transcript repeatedly in order to familiarize himself with the world of the participant.
- Is there line-by-line coding, i.e., including descriptive, grammatical and conceptual comments on the transcript?
- Identifies and clusters codes to generate emergent themes in each transcript.
- Identify the patterns of meaning in each of the transcripts and come up with a set of superordinate themes that indicate what the group shares in common about the phenomenon.

This approach to analysis is specifically deft in the context of complex emotionally charged experiences, like empowerment, since it enables one to have a profound, contextually specific knowledge of how he or she perceives and gives meaning to the surrounding personal and social world.

Results

The results of the qualitative analysis of data demonstrate that economic empowerment of women in various areas, such as housewives, students, and working women in Punjab, Pakistan, is multidimensional. Thematic analysis revealed seven major themes, under which each one of them depicts different dimensions of empowerment and how it influences the lives of women.

Economic Empowerment: The Agency Shift

Economic empowerment is not at all just about financial independence but psychological and social change since the women are no longer just passive receivers, but they are active decision-makers. This change entails acquiring power concerning life choices and attaining independence. Most of the participants stated that economic empowerment enabled them to establish their life courses and made them independent of others. As an example, one of the participants stressed that it is important to have the right to make her choices in life and finances and not rely on another person (Participant 1). It was also a change that stressed the toughness that women had to possess in order to support a home on their own (Participant 4).

Financial Independence: The Principle of Liberty

Financial independence is regarded as a major cornerstone of empowerment, which enables women to fulfill their needs without outside help. Financial independence is viewed as a freedom that enables women to fulfill their family obligations and achieve their personal desires. To most working women, it avoids manipulation and brings about self-reliance. The participants' main focus was on consistency and a definite career path toward financial independence. According to one of the participants, financial freedom was not only connected with money but also with confidence and the chance to take independent decisions without consultations (Participant 3).

Emotional Experience of Earning: The Rebranding of Self

Earned emotional change is an important element of economic empowerment. The participants mentioned a feeling of pride, confidence, and self-respect associated with the fact that they made their own money. This metamorphosis gives emotional satisfaction, particularly where women feel that their financial input is being appreciated and honored. As an example, one of the participants mentioned the internal happiness and self-esteem increase she generated when she learned the difference in the life of her family and her own (Participant 3).

Decision-Making & Authority: Voice Authentication

Economic empowerment can be an upsurge of power to decide in both personal and family affairs. The participants stated that financial independence made them feel free to express their views and have their choices taken seriously in terms of financial affairs or home choices. One of the respondents remarked that the fact that she had her own income gave her the strength to make significant decisions in her family, including the installation of solar panels (Participant 3). This capability to make decisions is a definite sign of the increased power of women in households.

Difficulties and Obstacles: The Cost of Liberty

The empowerment process does not proceed without challenges. Most of the women claimed that they experienced discrimination at work, cultural demands, and social pressures. The theme of the doubling burden of both professional and home life was widely spread, especially that of working women who were also forced to take care of the house. According to one respondent, the cultural practices of patriarchy placed more obstacles such that it was challenging to juggle both duties at work and in the home (Participant 2). In spite of these tests, there are several women who were passionate about their empowerment process.

Cultural & Gender Influences: The Two Burdens

Cultural and gender norms strongly influence women's ability to achieve economic empowerment. The notion of the so-called double burden could be observed because many women were forced to sacrifice their careers to perform the duties of a housewife. The respondents underscored the fact that the strict cultural prescriptions tended to overburden women, and thus it was difficult to become a successful woman in the workplace and at home. One participant emphasized that there was a necessity to change societal and cultural values to enable women in the work sphere and their personal life (Participant 3).

Thoughts and recommendations: The Consistency Cycle

The experiences of empowerment in women were associated with long-term development and education, and the constant learning process was the main way of maintaining empowerment. Several respondents encouraged women still at a younger age to be consistent in their ambitions in life, particularly education and acquisition of skills that will make them financially independent. One of the participants recommended, "Always be consistent, and you will always find yourself where you want to be" (Participant 1). The others added to the notion that financial freedom was not only about making money but also about instilling confidence, self-respect, and trust in one's ability (Participant 5).

These results show that the empowerment of women economically is a very dynamic process, which is both external and internal. This process questions established cultural values and fosters personal development and societal transformation.

Discussion

Qualitative analysis of economic empowerment among the people of Punjab, Pakistan, indicates the fact that economic empowerment is not a fixed goal to be attained but a process that occurs and evolves at different stages of life. These results are in line with the theory of feminist economics that highlights the transforming dependency to self-rule (Knott et al., 2022). The respondents, especially the working group, noted that empowerment is not a change only financially, but it is also a psychological and social change. This is in line with the ecological systems approach by Easterbrook and Hadden (2020) that perceives women's empowerment as a decision-making process rather than a financial indicator.

Financial independence was one of the major themes and represented freedom and life control. There were, however, conflicting issues, like the fact that women saw their income as discretionary income, whereas the income of their partners was perceived as a communal one (UNICEF, 2021). This is in line with the studies conducted by Bozkurt et al. (2023), who found comparable processes in Pakistan, where economic autonomy of women may be threatened by patriarchal pressures in the home. This is indicative of a larger problem in which financial independence does not necessarily mean power or control at home, as shown by the comparison of the empowerment between non-working and working women (Psaki et al., 2021).

The feeling of earning was the key issue in making women empowered, as the economic success was associated with the psychological well-being and self-respect (Navarro-Mantas et al., 2022). Such inherent worth of work correlates with the ideas of the feminist economic theory in which satisfaction of earning is the same in importance as the financial gains (Dwivedi et al., 2019). It is also the case in the study that financial independence may enhance the ability to make decisions, especially regarding the family (Lire et al., 2023), but it also indicates that the ability to make decisions established due to deep-rooted cultural beliefs may come with restrictions, as women continue to be expected to excel in their careers and take care of the home at the same time (Okolie et al., 2022).

Last, the results support the life-course perspective of economic empowerment, taking into account the special problems and needs of students, housewives, and working women (Barbulescu et al., 2023). The policy interventions should be multidimensional, where structural barriers and personal development of women are taken into consideration in order to empower women in a real sense.

Conclusion

This paper arrives at the conclusion that the economic empowerment of working women in Punjab is indeed a highly contextual and relational reality. It is not just a discrete entity but is a form of negotiation of agency continuously in the Punjabi crucible of modernity and conservatism. The lived experience lies in the nature of the authority over oneself in which a woman becomes empowered to determine her own course of life. Although education and income must be central facilitators, they cannot

work alone to bridge the gap that exists between Pakistan and the cultural patriarchy and gender norms known as the structural disparities. The real empowerment would have to involve a change in the social attitudes to make women be perceived not as mere statistical abstractions but as role models. Finally, there is a moral obligation and, more importantly, a global obligation of strengthening women's agency to achieve sustainable development of Pakistan.

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