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Abstract

*Women in Pakistan face numerous challenges because of the rigid patriarchal structure. However, their economic self-sufficiency gives them autonomy in different aspects of their life. This study aimed to investigate the empowerment experiences among female lecturers in colleges in the district of Bhakkar, Punjab. Twelve participants were sampled using a purposive sampling technique and were interviewed to share their experiences. The findings were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach. Under two main themes—empowerment experiences and their impact on personal growth—the findings revealed that female lecturers feel empowered in relation to domestic decision-making and control over their salary. However, most of them face limitations in their freedom of movement. Furthermore, their increased level of empowerment has led to improved self-worth and confidence. It is recommended that policymakers devise policies to integrate women into the economic sector to enhance their well-being as well as that of society as a whole.*

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Empowerment Experiences, Personal Growth, SDGs

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### Title

## An In-Depth Exploration of the Empowerment Experiences and Their Impact on Personal Growth of Female Lecturers

### Abstract

*Women in Pakistan face numerous challenges because of the rigid patriarchal structure. However, their economic self-sufficiency gives them autonomy in different aspects of their life. This study aimed to investigate the empowerment experiences among female lecturers in colleges in the district of Bhakkar, Punjab. Twelve participants were sampled using a purposive sampling technique and were interviewed to share their experiences. The findings were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach. Under two main themes—empowerment experiences and their impact on personal growth—the findings revealed that female lecturers feel empowered in relation to domestic decision-making and control over their salary. However, most of them face limitations in their freedom of movement. Furthermore, their increased level of empowerment has led to improved self-worth and confidence. It is recommended that policymakers devise policies to integrate women into the economic sector to enhance their well-being as well as that of society as a whole.*

**Keywords:** [Women Empowerment](#), [Gender Equality](#), [Empowerment Experiences](#), [Personal Growth](#), [SDGs](#)

### Introduction

Any Pakistani society is strictly patriarchal in nature, and as Johansdottir (2009) noted, patriarchy is closely linked to the subordination of females. Women experience subjugation and encounter challenging situations in this society. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2023), Pakistan ranks 142nd out of 146 countries, in the Global Gender Gap Index. It ranks countries

across four dimensions: education, economic participation, political empowerment, and health. Given this, women's empowerment is of immense importance to address the challenge of gender inequality. The empowerment of women is also essential to the feminist agenda for sustainable and inclusive growth, as highlighted in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals are shaped by historical and political experiences that have demonstrated

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effective strategies for achieving gender equality (Htun & Weldon, 2010). Yet, the trend of the empowerment of women is not really encouraging in Pakistan as only 25 to 30 percent of the females participate in the economic sector in Pakistan (Sabir & Majid, 2023).

Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment as the phenomenon by which individuals, formerly unable to exercise agency in their lives and communities, gain the potential to make choices. This process includes accessing resources that boost their ability to make decisions and bring about significant changes. In a United Nations study (2001), it was stated that empowerment is the activity by which females achieve control over their lives by broadening their opportunities as well as choices. The two main approaches to empowering women are: empowering poverty-stricken females by building their self-esteem and equipping them with crucial skills to deal with constraints in societies dominated by men; the second one concentrates on achieving financial security for these females (UNDP, 1997).

Financial independence can significantly benefit women, allowing them to excel in society. Numerous studies have shown a direct relationship between holding a paid job and empowerment experience (Arshad, 2023; Khan & Maan, 2008). Engaging in financial processes increases women's ability to negotiate and make decisions within their households, promoting empowerment and enabling them to challenge conservative norms that restrict their options and opportunities (Khan & Awan, 2011). In a study by Sen (2001) and Agarwal (2002), employment improves females' financial status and strengthens their position within both their families and society by involving them in different income-earning activities.

It has been identified providing women with rights to property and land significantly contributes to their empowerment (Leonhäuser & Parveen, 2004). Additionally, as has been seen in the case of Bangladesh, gaining financial independence and earning money through personal efforts is likely to be more empowering for women than depending on unearned income from family labor (Anderson & Eswaran, 2009). However, merely enhancing females' salaries and their participation in the labor force does not essentially lead to empowerment, since they are frequently employed in more

oppressive and exploitative conditions. Therefore, it is important to identify females' employment status and the conditions in which they work. (Shahzad, 2021).

Various quantitative studies in Pakistan show that female who earns their own salary are more inclined to experience empowerment. (Abbas et al., 2021; Muhammad et al., 2012). Nevertheless, there has not yet been a qualitative investigation of the association between women's employment position as college lecturers and their empowerment level. Furthermore, females' involvement in household decision-making varies not only by location and type of work but also based on factors like their age, education, living situation, husband's education, job status, ownership of assets, and exposure to media (Shahid et al., 2023).

This study employs a descriptive, phenomenological design to explore the experiences and outcomes of empowerment among female, college educators. This includes examining the indicators of women's empowerment, which involve household decision-making power, control over resources, and freedom of mobility, which are explored in this study.

## Research method

This research paper is part of a wider study that used a qualitative method to investigate the association between employment and empowerment of female college lecturers. A phenomenological approach guided the methodology, allowing the researcher to interpret and explain the participants' lived experiences as they described them (Creswell, 2014). Ethical approval was received from the institutional review board of Forman Christian College (A Chartered University), Lahore, Pakistan.

Twelve women lecturers, employed in two government colleges in Bahkkar district in the province of Punjab, were interviewed following their selection through a purposive sampling technique. Data collection occurred over a two-week period in December 2023. The data was, then, analyzed manually through the thematic analysis approach by Braun and Clarke (2006).

**Table 1**

*The socio-demographic characteristics of the participants*

Participant	Age	Marital status	Type of family	Residence area	Rank/ grade
1	36	Married	Nuclear	Rural	18

Participant	Age	Marital status	Type of family	Residence area	Rank/ grade
2	39	Married	Joint	Urban	17
3	29	Married	Nuclear	Rural	17
4	27	Married	Joint	Urban	17
5	30	Unmarried	Joint	Rural	17
6	23	Unmarried	Joint	Rural	17
7	39	Married	Nuclear	Urban	17
8	45	Married	Joint	Urban	18
9	27	Married	Nuclear	Urban	17
10	31	Unmarried	Joint	Rural	17
11	27	Unmarried	Nuclear	Urban	17
12	23	Unmarried	Nuclear	Rural	17

## Results

**Table 2**

*Experiences of empowerment and their impact on the personal growth of female lecturers*

Category	Sub- Category
Experiences of empowerment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Education and employment drive empowerment</li> <li>2. Autonomy in household decision-making</li> <li>3. Independence in financial decision-making</li> <li>4. Accountability over resources, for married women</li> <li>5. Restricted freedom of movement because of socio-cultural norms</li> <li>6. Independence and mobility</li> </ol>
The impact of employment and empowerment on personal growth	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increase in confidence level</li> <li>2. Improvement in self-worth</li> <li>3. Community respect and influence</li> </ol>

### Experiences of empowerment

#### Education and employment drive empowerment

The participants shared that their current empowerment level is largely derived from their higher education and employment status. They have a greater agency because they earn their own money. According to them, they would not be empowered if they were not employed as lecturers. According to participant, aged 29 years:

If I were not employed, then my empowerment level would not be the same as it is now. For instance, if I want my children to get enrolled in a certain school, but my husband does not allow that or if I want to buy something for my little ones, then I don't have to depend on others for that sake. I can do all this for my children on my own. If I did not have this job and were a housewife, the situation would have been different because I would not have been able to do these things on my own. This is why I tell my students and other

people around me that it is important for a girl to become financially independent and especially to live a stable married life.

In the words of a participant, who is aged 39 years, her maturity level outside the home has increased because of this job, and this has also led to an increase in her empowerment level:

After having spent this many years in the teaching field, I have realized that if I were not a working woman, my stance would not be the same as it is now. My maturity level would not have improved this much which I experienced during these seven to eight years as a result of my dealings with different children (students). So, my empowerment level would have been different outside the home if I were a housewife.

According to participant, aged 27 years, financial freedom is really important for a woman to feel empowered:

I would not be empowered if I were not employed because obviously, resources are important to have the final say and how could I be empowered if I did not even have them? When you don't have financial freedom and are dependent on others, then you cannot make your own decisions.

### **Autonomy in household decision-making**

It was shared by many participants that they possess greater autonomy in domestic decision-making. Their decisions are given importance because of their increased exposure to the outside world which makes their families think that they can make wise decisions.

### **Participant, who is aged 39 years, shared**

I think I have much autonomy with regard to decision-making power within the household. This is because when you are at home or outside, you have a great impact on the people around you because of being a working lady. They think that you are empowered and you can make decisions. I also believe that I can make better decisions. If I talk about myself, my husband and other family members always prefer my decisions regarding the schooling of our children. This is because they know that I am a part of this field so I can better understand these things.

According to the participant, aged 27 years, she has the autonomy to make decisions for herself as well as her family:

I have full freedom in household decision-making. I make autonomous decisions with regard to household purchases and maintaining relationships with others. I have the freedom to make decisions in every matter that concerns me.

Participant 10, aged 31 years, mentioned that her parents and siblings always trust her decisions and acknowledge them:

I feel like my views are given significant importance at home and now all of my family is somehow dependent on me to make their choices. They know that I will not give a stupid suggestion and this is why they rely on me.

### **Independence in financial decision-making**

Many participants expressed that they have complete control over their salary and have independence in financial decision-making.

### **Participant, who is aged 27 years, shared**

I exercise full control over my income and I keep it to myself.

I have the autonomy to use it as per my will and I am not held accountable for my investment unless I overspend my money.

### **According to participant, aged 29**

I have full control over my salary; I spend it either for my children or for myself. As for the monthly household expenses, my husband gives money out of his pocket. At the beginning of this job, I used to send some money to my sisters, but now I keep it for myself.

### **Participant, who is aged 30 years and is unmarried, mentioned**

I also have full control over my salary. My brothers and father also gave me their checkbooks in case I needed extra money for household purchases or other important matters.

### **Accountability over resources, for married women**

Some of the married participants shared that they cannot spend their money freely and have to tell their husbands where they used the financial resources. While talking about mutual control over salary and resources, the participant, who is aged 27 years, mentioned:

I have 70 percent control over the ways I want to invest my money. My husband or other family members do not interfere in that. But still, I have to inform them later on as to where and how much I spent money. They find it okay if I spend my money in a reasonable way but they do not like it when I overspend my salary. I am doing an MPhil currently and I have to pay my fee out of my salary this is a justified thing for them and I am using it in an appropriate way. If I did not have this job, then I think I would not be able to pursue an MPhil. My husband would have given me money for that if I had requested him but this is also my personal decision to spend out of my own pocket for my educational expenses.

Participant, who is aged 45 years, shared that her financial autonomy is limited with accountability in expenditure:

My husband holds me accountable regarding my salary investments. I noticed that most of the working women face this very problem. Whoever I have talked to, has said the same that she is answerable to her husband for her expenditures. This happens in my family too. For instance, when I ask my husband to give me money for children's expenses, he asks me what about my own salary and where did you spend that. I

buy all the things for my children's needs with my own money.

### Restricted freedom of movement because of socio-cultural norms

Most of the study participants shared that despite feeling empowered in other dimensions, they still face restrictions in their mobility because of conservative socio-cultural norms and security concerns. This is why, they are supposed to seek their family's approval before moving out of home; and in most cases, they also need to be accompanied by some family member as they are not allowed to travel alone.

According to the participant, who is unmarried and 26-year-old, she faces hindrances in mobility because of a restrictive family background:

I do not have any freedom of movement because of a restrictive family background. I am not allowed to go wherever I want to. These decisions are made by family members and they tell me as to where I can go. They ask me to live by the societal norms in this regard.

Participant, aged 27 years and married, shared that social norms and security concerns are the main reasons why she cannot travel alone:

I think freedom of movement depends upon our culture. Stepping out of home for a woman is not considered okay for a woman as per our norms. Furthermore, we also don't have a certain kind of public transport which could make it safe for women to travel alone. This is why I travel with my family.

Participant, 23-year-old and unmarried, mentioned that she avoids traveling alone because of the negative comments made by the people in the surroundings:

When it comes to movement, my family members are very encouraging and do not impose restrictions on me. While I have permission to go out on my own, I generally prefer to go with a family member, especially my father or brother, because in Bhakkar, people are not as broad-minded as in Lahore or Islamabad, and people judge women for going out alone. I am the first woman from my village to have reached this status. So, people in my vicinity are not accepting of this notion of travelling alone (for a woman).

### Independence and mobility

Just two participants noted they could travel alone due to specific reasons. They both hold grade 18 positions at work. Participant, who is aged 45, shared that her in-laws gave her the freedom to move independently for financial reasons.

They prefer she does not always travel with her husband, so she learned to drive to address mobility hurdles. According to her:

I have to go to work-related places alone because my parents-in-law prefer that my husband does not accompany me. They understand that whatever I earn will ultimately be used for household expenses. Maybe that is why they allow me to go out alone because it benefits them. If they did not have their own financial interests, they might not have given me the freedom to move around independently.

### Participant, aged 36, mentioned

I feel like I have no barriers to moving around freely. My husband is not very interested in these matters or family affairs. He understands that these values are important to me, and he knows I can take care of myself when I am out.

### The impact of employment and empowerment on personal growth

The participants mentioned that their personalities have improved a lot because of their current employment status and a sense of empowerment. They have experienced an increase in their confidence level and an enhancement in their self-esteem. The people in the surroundings also take these women as role models.

### Increase in confidence level

All of the women in the study mentioned that they felt improvement in their confidence after getting this job and feeling empowered. The participants shared that they have this confidence because of their financial independence, and this further led them to make certain decisions that they would not have done otherwise.

### In the words of a participant, aged 27

A high empowerment level makes me feel more confident than before because I know that I am not dependent on anyone else anymore. When I am at the workplace then I feel really confident. I can interact confidently with people. I felt an improvement in my communication skills.... I have come up with some innovative ideas which helped me increase my self-esteem.

According to two participants, they now feel more at peace and satisfied. Participant, who is aged 45 and married, said:



Feeling empowered has also significantly boosted my confidence, making me feel capable of achieving many things.

### **In the words of a participant, who is aged 27 and married**

The increased empowerment level has boosted my confidence level and mental satisfaction.

### **Improvement in self-worth**

It was also found out that these women felt an enhancement in their self-worth because the people around them have now started respecting them more and this increased their confidence in themselves. They also explored their hidden potential on this journey. According to the participant, who is 27-year-old:

I feel that my self-worth has increased. I got to explore my hidden qualities because of this job. For example, if the deputy commissioner visits the college then I know how to manage that situation because I have such qualities that I can handle this scenario well.

Participant, who is 23-year-old, mentioned that society often undervalues women; however, she perceives that her value has increased due to her job:

I feel more valuable because I am empowered and financially independent now. My job gives me a strong sense of responsibility, which boosts my self-worth. This has also improved how society sees me - people respect me more. I have noticed that many women believe in their own worth, even if others don't see it. But when you are working and empowered, society starts to recognize your value too.

Participant, who is aged 39 and married, also experiences a greater sense of self-worth and feels satisfied with her personal growth.

I like to compare my current self to how I was in the past, and it makes me happy to see how much I have grown and overcome my weaknesses. It has all been positive progress, and I feel really content with these changes.

### **Community respect and influence**

Many women in the study expressed that the people in their surroundings seek inspiration from them due to their societal standing. Some people in the neighborhood even take their suggestions because of their esteemed position. This also led individuals to revere empowered women.

### **According to participant, 39-year-old**

I felt that people started respecting me more when I got this job. They also trust my suggestions because they believe that I have better knowledge about things because I am educated and a lecturer as well.

### **Participant, who is 45 years, shared**

People around me look up to me and see me as a good example. Because of this, three women in my family have become teachers because they think it is a good job. Also, every family now wants their daughters to go to university, even if it's difficult for them. They see how my job and independence are things that housewives usually do not have, and they are impressed by that.

In the words of the participant, who is 31 years old and unmarried, initially, people in her neighborhood were reluctant to accept her pursuit of higher education and employment. However, now they find inspiration from her accomplishments:

My sisters and I showed those people that we can take care of ourselves and our reputation. Over time, they realized that just because a girl leaves home doesn't mean she's doing something wrong. Now, those same people are choosing to send their daughters to school and work. Our actions changed their views. Now, our village has the highest number of educated people in the district. The villagers tell my father that they were mistaken and that he did a great job raising all six of his daughters.

### **Discussion**

This study found that the employment status of female lecturers has empowered them at home. The decisions of such women are now acknowledged more compared to their situation before they were employed. This is in line with Kabeer's (1997) analysis according to which females' economic contributions to their families enhance their empowerment by increasing their bargaining power and enhancing the well-being of their children.

This research further showed that the economic independence of women allows them to control their income and resources, which leads to their empowerment. This supports the findings of Blumberg (2005), who found that when women have their own income, they rely less on males and gain more authority over household resources, ultimately resulting in the empowerment of such women. Blumberg (2005) emphasized that women's ownership and

management of their salaries and other resources are essential for attaining equal treatment of both genders, boosting females' self-esteem, as well as enhancing societal progress.

This research explored that job position increases women's decision-making power within their households. Participants reported feeling more empowered compared to women who do not work around them. This finding is consistent with previous research that job status reduces women's economic reliance and enhances their decision-making power at home (Jones et al., 2006). Anwar et al. (2013) also discovered a significant, positive correlation between women's agency and decision-making within the household.

Zulfiqar and Kuskoff (2024) discovered that women in Pakistan are closely watched by their families and society to maintain the family's honor, which greatly restricts their freedom of movement and keeps them marginalized in the community. The current study found that women lecturers in Bhakkar, even though they are empowered in other dimensions, do not experience significant freedom in mobility. This restriction can be a result of the traditional norms of the city.

The results of this study align with previous research (Khan & Awan, 2011) which found that women's involvement in financial activities increases their ability to negotiate within households. This results in increased empowerment and a greater likelihood of questioning restrictive and rigid gender norms. Their research demonstrated a significant, positive impact of women's economic self-dependence on their empowerment across three dimensions: household decision-making, mobility, and financial autonomy.

This study also found that there are positive effects of empowerment on the personal grooming of female educators. Employment and empowerment contribute to better personal development, enhanced self-worth, and increased confidence among female educators. Enhanced decision-making authority in domestic affairs allows females to enhance their negotiating ability, autonomy, control over resources, as well as self-esteem (Parveen & Leonhauser, 2005).

## Conclusion

The study utilized a qualitative design to investigate the experiences of empowerment among female, college educators in government colleges in the Bhakkar district. It was discovered that these lecturers experienced considerably more empowered in comparison to women who do not work in their vicinity. While earning their own money has provided these women with more autonomy, they still face restrictions on their movement because of the traditional socio-cultural norms that dominate the area. Still, having their own money gives them leverage in many aspects of their life.

The findings of the present study are important as they relate to women's empowerment which is crucial, given that women constitute half of Pakistan's population. Their participation in financial activities benefits not only themselves but also society. Empowering women is also a vital step towards achieving gender equality. Policymakers need to recognize the importance of integrating women into economic activities and create job opportunities to improve their well-being.

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