

IMPACT OF CULTURAL FACTORS ON WOMEN'S ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

Women have to face many social, cultural, and financial challenges when getting involved in economic activities. The current study was organized to determine the impact of socio-cultural and economic factors on women's economic involvement. This quantitative study was carried out in Jalalabad, a city in the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan. All employed and unemployed women in this area made up the total population of the study. A sample of 400 women was taken conveniently, of which 256 were employed and 125 were unemployed. The data of 19 respondents was found to be unsuitable for analysis because of missing data. The data were collected through a self-developed questionnaire, which comprised 27 items to investigate women's lack of educational opportunities (LEO), social problems (SP), familial problems (FP), and economic engagement (EE). Based on the research hypotheses, two different statistical tests were employed. Multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the impact of independent variables on the dependent variable. In addition, an independent sample t-test was executed to identify the difference in perception between employed and unemployed women. In terms of results, the study found a significant impact of LEO, SP, and FP on women's economic engagement. Furthermore, a statistically significant difference was found between employed and unemployed women based on their perceptions regarding LEO, SP, FP, and EE. In conclusion, the study found a significant impact of social, cultural, and economic factors on Afghan women's economic engagement. Policymakers and other stakeholders may recognize the intricate connections between women's economic engagement, family difficulties, and educational opportunities in order to develop policies that completely address these interconnected issues.

INTRODUCTION

Women entrepreneurs have a critical role that goes beyond their financial contributions to include a wider influence on community resilience and job development (Abdullah et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023). Women are advancing innovation and

strengthening the fabric of social development by cultivating a varied and welcoming entrepreneurial environment (Abdullah, 2025b; Hanson, 2009). The role of women in economic involvement is a crucial factor in the complex dance of global growth and

development, influencing the course of economies and societies alike (Garduño, 2013).

A complex web of customs, social mores, and historical legacies surrounds the cultural influences on women's economic involvement, facilitating or impeding women's access to economic possibilities (Boserup et al., 2013). Cultural issues include a broad range, from deeply rooted attitudes about women's contributions and talents to traditional gender roles and expectations. These cultural factors, which are frequently firmly anchored in historical settings, interact to either function as powerful obstacles that maintain gender gaps or as accelerators for women's economic empowerment.

Comprehending the intricacies and workings of these cultural elements is crucial to appreciating the obstacles and possibilities that women encounter in their quest for financial autonomy. Recognizing that cultural influences are diverse and vary among locations, ethnic groups, and communities is at the core of the discussion. Women are shaped by various cultural frameworks to fit specific roles that influence their access to labor, education, and entrepreneurship. Afghanistan, as a country, is immersed in a multitude of religious, traditional, and historical legacies and cultural influences that have a significant impact on women's participation in the economy (Zulfacar, 2006). Afghanistan's sociocultural environment is firmly entrenched in conventional gender norms, wherein women's responsibilities are frequently prescribed by society (Nwe, 2022). Throughout history, rigid interpretations of Islamic standards and cultural customs have posed difficulties for Afghan women, sometimes impeding their ability to obtain formal education and work (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Iqbal & Abdullah, 2025a).

Even though there have been recent improvements in gender equality, particularly in metropolitan areas, widespread cultural norms still influence Afghan women's access to certain economic possibilities (Rahman, 2018). Family dynamics, which prioritize women as caretakers, frequently converge with financial decisions, influencing the decisions women make about joining the job or pursuing entrepreneurial pursuits (Abdullah, 2025a; Echavez, 2012). The complex interplay of cultural variables in Afghanistan presents opportunities as well as problems for women pursuing economic

emancipation, calling for a comprehensive knowledge of the ways in which development and tradition interact to shape Afghan women's economic environments (Junussova et al., 2019).

This study delved into the stories of women whose goals and pursuits are shaped by the cultural environments in which they live, going beyond a cursory analysis of data and economic indicators. It aimed to highlight the covert obstacles that women had to deal with when navigating cultural norms that obstruct their ability to participate in economic growth and development. Thus, in order to achieve these research goals, the following research questions were addressed:

What is the impact of culture on women's economic engagement in Afghanistan?

What is the level of difference in perception between employed and unemployed women regarding the impact of culture on their economic engagement in Afghanistan?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Factors

The cultural norms surrounding conservative regulations and restrictions on women's movement in public areas provide significant obstacles to the economic participation of Afghan women (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2006). These limitations prevent women from participating in both official employment and entrepreneurial endeavors, in addition to impeding their access to economic possibilities (Gibbs et al., 2018). The gendered division of labor in Afghanistan is well ingrained due to deeply ingrained cultural expectations that define different roles for men and women, which severely hinders women's participation in the economy (Junussova et al., 2019). Afghan women are mostly restricted by these traditional standards to household duties, which puts up significant obstacles in the way of their ability to engage in economic activity outside the home (Echavez, 2012).

Afghanistan's complex web of cultural conventions frequently places severe limitations on the liberty of Afghan women, especially when it comes to making financial decisions (Head, 2023). The studies revealed that women's decisions about their schooling, occupations, and financial situation may be greatly influenced by the expectations of their families and

communities. Though firmly rooted, these cultural norms provide significant obstacles to women's economic concerns, restricting their capacity to make autonomous choices consistent with their potential and ambitions (Gibbs et al., 2018). One important aspect influencing the abilities and credentials of Afghan women for economic involvement is the impact of cultural influences on their educational opportunities. The literature emphasizes how cultural norms that limit women to conventional duties in the home cause differences in educational chances. These restrictions have a significant impact on women's ability to participate meaningfully in the workforce as well as impeding their ability to pursue higher education (Abdullah et al., 2024; Mariel, 2022).

Economic Engagement

In addition to promoting women's self-empowerment, the many roles that women play in the workforce also serve as a significant stimulus for economic growth. The economy as a whole is significantly impacted by the growing number of women in the workforce, which emphasizes the necessity of advancing gender inclusion and equal opportunities in order to make the most of this significant group (Hedayat & Harpviken, 2014). To achieve fair and sustainable development on a global scale, it is imperative to acknowledge and promote the economic agency of women. The crucial role that education plays in advancing women's economic liberation cannot be overstated (Akbari, 2020). In addition to improving personal empowerment, societies that invest heavily in women's education also make a substantial contribution to overall economic growth (Mariel, 2022). Women with education bring a range of perspectives, skills, and innovative ideas to the workforce, fostering an environment that encourages progress. In order to provide the framework for a wealthier and inclusive future, communities and governments must prioritize women's education, as education is a major factor in economic transformation (Ganesh, 2013).

According to Beath et al. (2013), there is a favorable correlation between women's educational attainment and their engagement in the economy, indicating the potential impact of education on social transformation (Zaki & Shedenova, 2014). Investing in women's education not only gives them the

knowledge and abilities needed for fulfilling careers, but it also significantly boosts the expansion of the economy as a whole. Achieving sustainable and fair societies requires seeing education as a critical tool for removing barriers and promoting inclusivity. Women's education lays the foundation for individual empowerment as well as the greater growth of economies and communities in societies that support it (Abdullah et al., 2023). A plethora of scholarly works have been produced about women's economic participation, exploring the diverse roles that women fulfil in the labor market and their impact on economic expansion. Previous studies have consistently emphasized the importance of gender participation in achieving sustainable growth and advancing social change. The growing recognition of women's entrepreneurship as a key driver of social and economic advancement emphasizes the need for concerted efforts to foster a supportive environment. Through the creation of jobs and the promotion of community resilience, women entrepreneurs play a critical role in both economic growth and good social transformation (Bakas, 2017; Iqbal & Abdullah, 2025b).

Theoretical Framework

Women's participation in the economy is closely related to more general concerns of empowerment and autonomy in Afghanistan, a country where cultural norms frequently uphold conventional gender roles. Traditionally, women in Afghan culture were restricted to household responsibilities due to patriarchal traditions that hindered their access to formal education and work (Hassan, 2023). The analysis of cultural variables shows how Afghani women negotiate social norms and defy them in order to claim economic agency. Feminist theory also emphasizes the importance of interrelatedness, recognizing that the intersections of many social categories—such as class, race, and religion—shape women's lives (Few-Demo, 2014; Crimmins et al., 2023). This mutuality is especially evident in Afghanistan, where women from various ethnic and socioeconomic origins have differing degrees of economic possibilities and limitations. When examining how cultural elements affect institutional structures and policy frameworks, feminist researchers look for structural obstacles that support gender

inequality in the economy and attempt to remove them (Naguib, 2024). Feminist theory highlights the complex interplay between women's economic participation and the larger social and cultural settings.

that influence women's experiences, promoting a comprehensive understanding that extends beyond financial metrics (Bagheri et al., 2023).

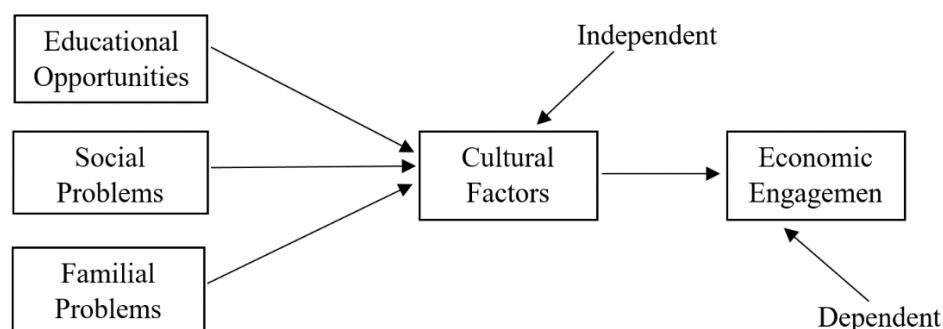


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Hypotheses

There is no statistically significant impact of culture on women's economic engagement in Afghanistan.

There is no significant difference in perception between employed and unemployed women regarding the impact of culture on their economic engagement in Afghanistan.

METHODOLOGY

Method and Design

Quantitative approach was applied through the use of a survey research design, which made it possible to gather numerical data for analysis and provide statistically meaningful results. By using surveys, it was simpler to get information from a variety of people, enabling a full examination of the research questions or hypotheses. The structured nature of the quantitative approach provided a rigorous and systematic framework for data analysis, enabling the identification of patterns, trends, and correlations in the data.

Participants and Sampling

For the duration of the study, all women who were working or jobless in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, were included in the group that was being examined. The goal of this inclusive approach was to represent the varied roles that women play in a number of fields, such as international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), health, education, the World Food Program (WFP), the World Health Organization (WHO), and

the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The researcher did not have easy access to the exact distribution of employed and jobless women in Jalalabad; thus, convenient sampling was used to choose a sample size of 400 female respondents. Out of the women in this sample, 266 had a job, while the remaining 134 did not. Despite the ease with which the data could be gathered, the study sought to offer insightful information on women's job situation, advancing a more complex comprehension of the roles and difficulties that women face across a range of industries.

Data Collection Instrument

The research did not find any standardized research tools for data collection. Hence, two self-developed tools were used for the purpose of data collection. The first scale (independent variable) was comprised of three sub-scales, i.e., lack of educational opportunities (six items), social problems (seven items), and familial problems (five items). The second scale was economic engagement (a dependent variable), which included nine items. The research scales were validated through face-to-face and content validity. For that purpose, the questionnaire was sent to a panel of five experts who were well-experienced and highly qualified. After the finalization of the questionnaire, the research scales went through a pilot testing procedure, in which the researcher distributed 40 questionnaires among women. Some required modifications were made in accordance with the results of the pilot study. Once

the pilot study is done, the data are analyzed to ensure their reliability. Cronbach's alpha method was employed to ensure the internal consistency of the research tool. Only items with a reliability coefficient of $\geq .70$ were kept in the questionnaire.

Data Collection Procedure

Given the cultural norms in Afghanistan that restrict direct interaction between male researchers and female respondents, the author tactfully addressed this challenge by engaging a female research assistant, who underwent comprehensive training before being deployed to the research sites. The ethical issues of the study were emphasized by obtaining the required authorization from local governmental authorities prior to data collection. The questionnaire included a well-crafted informed consent form attached, which emphasized the respondents' voluntary nature and ensured their privacy and confidentiality. Before gathering data, the researcher carefully developed a rapport with the participants in order to create a basis of trust and camaraderie. 381 of the 400 surveys that were sent out were returned; however, 19 of them were judged useless because they had a large amount of missing data. Notwithstanding these obstacles, the study effectively managed ethical and cultural sensitivity, setting the stage for a thorough and considerate research procedure.

Data Analysis Procedure

The raw data were fed into the Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS) 22-V. The data were analyzed with the help of descriptive and inferential statistics. In descriptive statistics, the mean and standard deviation were calculated. In inferential statistics, statistical tests are run to test the hypotheses. Multiple linear regression was done in order to determine the impact of cultural factors on women's economic engagement. In addition, an independent sample t-test was executed to identify differences in perception among employed and unemployed females regarding the impact of culture on their economic engagement in Afghanistan.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Frequency distributions of the demographic variables—employment and marital status in particular—are shown in Table 1. In terms of employment, the data shows that 32.8% of the sample population is jobless, and 67.2% of them are employed. Regarding marital status, 44.6% of women were single, and the majority, 55.4%, were married. These distributions show the percentages of respondents in various occupation and marital status categories, giving insight into the makeup of the population polled.

Table 1: Frequency Distributions of Demographic Variables

Variables	<i>f</i>	%
Employment Status		
Employed	256	67.2
Unemployed	125	32.8
Marital Status		
Single	170	44.6
Married	211	55.4

Table 2: Mean (M), Standard Deviation (SD), Factor Loading (FL) and Cronbach's Alpha (α)

Items	M	SD	FL	α
Factor 1. Lack of Educational Opportunities (LEO)	3.60	.47		.80
I am unable to join school properly because of long distance.	3.35	.35	.854	.74
I don't have support from my family to go to school/college.	3.76	.65	.734	.79
Because of security concerns, I face difficulties in getting education.	3.43	.46	.754	.86
I don't have sufficient support from government to get education.	3.76	.39	.913	.77
Lack of educational facilities prevent me to get quality education.	3.55	.49	.872	.82

Because of lack of female teachers, I cannot get quality education.	3.75	.52	.812	.81
Factor 2. Social Problems (SP)	3.68	.36		.77
Males have more opportunities in job market than females.	4.11	.21	.699	.77
Early marriages stop females to get involved in economic activities.	3.65	.38	.715	.71
Male employees are paid greater than females.	3.86	.32	.776	.74
Women are stigmatized as weaker employees.	3.39	.44	.813	.81
Limited decision-making authority discourages economic activities.	3.47	.42	.719	.85
Religious norms prevent to get fully involved in economic activities.	3.80	.37	.831	.82
I do not like to work with male co-workers because of harassment.	3.54	.40	.910	.72
Factor 3. Familial Problems (FP)	3.65	.37		.82
Patriarchal family structure is hurdle for female economic activities.	3.45	.41	.855	.84
I have lack of adequate financial support from my husband.	3.54	.43	.817	.72
I have insufficient support from family.	3.87	.31	.762	.81
Child bearing and rearing distract female's economic activities.	4.03	.28	.817	.83
Work-family imbalance distract female's economic activities.	3.36	.45	.815	.91
Factor 4. Economic Engagement (EE)	3.63	.61		.80
I encountered challenges in career selection	3.54	.79	.818	.77
I encountered challenges in career progression.	3.87	.54	.821	.72
Work-family imbalance.	3.43	.82	.813	.82
Don't have equal opportunities in labor markets.	3.59	.49	.907	.91
Lack of access over productive resources.	3.97	.64	.818	.75
Low involvement in economic decision-making.	3.45	.72	.681	.82
Harassment issues prevent females from economic engagement.	3.64	.62	.732	.81
Gendered pay gap prevents from economic engagement.	3.65	.46	.754	.88
Unavailability of maternity leaves stops from economic engagement.	3.58	.42	.664	.75

A thorough examination of the mean (M), standard deviation (SD), factor loading (FL), and Cronbach's alpha (α) for four different factors—economic engagement (EE), social problems (SP), familial problems (FP), and lack of educational opportunities—is shown in Table 2. The average reaction level for each element is indicated by the mean score, and the response dispersion around the mean is shown by the standard deviations. Factor loadings clarify the direction and intensity of the correlations between the items and the corresponding factors, while Cronbach's alpha values evaluate each factor's internal consistency and reliability. With moderate to high factor loadings and acceptable internal consistency, Factor 1 (LEO) stands out for highlighting difficulties with educational access and assistance. Factor 2 (SP) explores social obstacles;

items reveal acceptable internal consistency and gender differences in employment and harassment at work. Good internal consistency and reliability are shown by Factor 3 (FP), which tackles the limitations placed on female economic activity by their families. Last but not least, Factor 4 (EE) examines barriers to economic involvement. Its components, which show good internal consistency, represent career problems and gendered wage discrepancies.

Table 3: Linear Regression Analysis for Impact of LEO, SP, and FP on EE.

Unstandardized						Standardized				Impact
			β	SE	t				β	
EE	←	LEO	.673***	.044	15.295	EE	←	LEO	.641***	Significant
EE	←	SP	.592***	.048	12.333	EE	←	SP	.567***	Significant
EE	←	FP	.632***	.051	12.392	EE	←	FP	.609***	Significant

Note. *** $p < 0.001$.

The findings of a linear regression analysis examining the relationship between social problems (SP), family problems (FP), lack of educational opportunities (LEO), and economic engagement (EE) are shown in Table 3. The degree of change in EE for each unit increase in LEO, SP, and FP, respectively, is shown by the unstandardized coefficients (β). T-values establish the importance of these coefficients, whereas standard errors (SE) evaluate their accuracy. With high t-values (15.295, 12.333, and 12.392, respectively) and p-values less than 0.001, all three predictors—LEO, SP, and FP—show significant influences on EE, providing

compelling evidence of linkage. Furthermore, each predictor's relative significance in explaining variability in EE is clarified by the standardized coefficients (β), with LEO having the most influence ($\beta = 0.641$), closely followed by FP ($\beta = 0.609$) and SP ($\beta = 0.567$). These results illustrate the significant impact that social, family, and educational variables have on people's economic engagement, underscoring the necessity of removing these obstacles in order to encourage more economic empowerment and participation.

Table 4: Independent Sample T-test for Difference between Employed and Unemployed Women.

Scales	Employed Women		Unemployed Women		t	p	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	M	SD	M	SD			
Lack of Educational Opportunities	3.10	0.427	4.10	0.302	2.32	.00	-2.70
Social Problems	3.18	0.516	4.18	0.342	2.55	.00	-2.28
Familial Problems	3.13	0.561	4.17	0.297	3.37	.00	-2.31
Economic Engagement	3.16	0.391	4.10	0.325	2.61	.00	-2.61

The findings of independent sample t-tests comparing employed and jobless women on a number of different scales—economic engagement, social problems, familial problems, and lack of educational opportunities—are shown in Table 4. The average scores and variability within each group are shown by the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) values, respectively. The t-values evaluate the extent of variation between the two groups' means, and smaller p-values signify higher statistical significance. The findings show statistically significant differences ($p < 0.01$) between women who are employed and those who are not across all dimensions. T-values range

from 2.32 to 3.37. Cohen's *d* values also shed light on the magnitudes of these differences' impacts; values in the range of -2.28 to -2.61 denote significant effects. In particular, compared to their working counterparts, jobless women routinely report greater levels of social problems, familial problems, a lack of educational opportunities, and lower levels of economic engagement.

Discussion

In Afghanistan, where cultural norms frequently define and restrict women's participation in the economy, the study sought to examine the impact of

cultural influences on women's economic engagement. The findings demonstrated a strong correlation between these variables and economic participation. Additionally, the findings provide information on how important each predictor is in relation to the other in terms of explaining variations in economic engagement. The conclusion that familial problems are closely behind a lack of educational opportunities in terms of influence underscores the complex nature of the interaction between cultural variables and women's economic involvement. This shows that family dynamics greatly influence women's potential and limits in the economic realm, even while educational attainment plays a critical role in boosting economic involvement. All things considered, these results highlight how critical it is to remove societal, familial, and educational obstacles standing in the way of Afghan women's economic empowerment. Supporting these findings, Ahmed-Ghosh (2006) concluded that the cultural norms surrounding restrictive laws and limitations on women's mobility in public spaces provide serious barriers to Afghan women's economic involvement. At another place, Echavez (2012) had the opinion that cultural norms mostly limit Afghan women to domestic responsibilities, which creates major barriers to their capacity to participate in the economy outside the home. Bagheri et al. (2023) emphasized that feminist theory promotes thorough knowledge that goes beyond financial measures by highlighting the intricate interactions between women's economic engagement and the wider social and cultural conditions that affect women's experiences.

The study compares women who are working and those who are unemployed in a number of areas, such as lack of educational possibilities, social difficulties, familial issues, and economic involvement. In each of these aspects, the results show statistically significant differences between the two groups. This shows that women's experiences and difficulties in these areas are greatly influenced by their work position. First of all, the comparison shows that women without jobs routinely report greater degrees of social issues than women with jobs. This suggests that unemployment could make social issues worse or might be linked to situations that make life more difficult for Afghan women in terms of social issues. These issues can

include loneliness, a lack of social support systems, or an increased vulnerability to societal pressures. Second, the results also show that unemployed women report more family issues than working women do. This implies that unemployment might damage family ties or make pre-existing problems worse.

Unemployment-related economic instability may exacerbate family conflicts, which can harm relationships and general wellbeing. Furthermore, the comparison indicates that women without jobs face a greater dearth of educational possibilities than women with jobs. This shows that unemployment may make it more difficult for people to get training or education, which would prolong economic disadvantage cycles and limit women's possibilities for skill development and upward mobility. Lastly, the results show that women without jobs had lower economic involvement levels than women who have jobs. This demonstrates how important it is to encourage women's economic development and involvement in Afghanistan. Individuals' financial well-being and total participation in economic activities are both impacted by unemployment, which is critical for socioeconomic progress. The findings are consistent with those of Abdullah et al. (2023), who concluded that it is necessary to view education as a vital instrument for breaking down barriers and fostering inclusion in order to create sustainable and equitable communities. In countries where it is supported, women's education creates the groundwork for greater economic growth, community development, and individual empowerment. Akbari (2020) had the opinion that recognizing and advancing women's economic agency is essential for achieving equitable and sustainable development on a global scale. It is impossible to overestimate the significance of education in increasing women's economic emancipation.

CONCLUSION

The research carried out in Afghanistan explores the complex relationships that exist between cultural norms, women's economic participation, and job status. The results highlight a noteworthy relationship between cultural factors and women's economic involvement, with standardized coefficients providing insight into the relative significance of several

variables, namely familial issues and limited educational prospects. This emphasizes the complex relationship between family dynamics and educational access in determining women's economic prospects, highlighting the multidimensional influence of cultural elements. The contrast between women who are employed and those who are not sheds further light on the distinct experiences and difficulties that these groups encounter, exposing significant differences in a range of areas, including social concerns, family dynamics, access to education, and economic participation. Afghan women have significant challenges in their social and familial lives, which are exacerbated by unemployment, which also prevents them from participating in the economy and in school.

IMPLICATIONS

The study done in Afghanistan has significant consequences that shed light on the complex relationship between women's economic engagement and cultural norms as well as job status. First of all, the study emphasizes how important cultural variables are in determining women's economic opportunities, emphasizing the necessity of initiatives that recognize and take these cultural impacts into account. The complex relationships among family problems, women's access to education, and their economic participation may be acknowledged by policymakers and other stakeholders in order to create interventions that fully address these interrelated aspects. Second, the glaring differences between working and jobless women highlight the critical need for focused support systems for marginalized groups, especially jobless women, who face exacerbated difficulties in the social, family, and financial spheres. The negative consequences of unemployment on women's well-being and economic involvement can be lessened by programs targeted at strengthening social support networks, expanding access to education and employment possibilities, and resolving family issues.

DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The research completed in Afghanistan sheds light on several areas that warrant further investigation to enhance our comprehension of the intricate relationship among women's economic participation, cultural standards, and employment position. First,

more research should be done on the particular cultural elements that influence women's economic prospects and how these factors interact with socioeconomic dynamics to affect women's economic involvement. In order to identify the underlying assumptions, standards, and values that support women's economic positions in Afghan culture, qualitative research approaches may be used. Second, studies examining the long-term effects of unemployment on women's economic participation and well-being are needed. Studies that follow women's economic involvement trajectories across time should take into account the short- and long-term effects of unemployment on women's social, family, and financial outcomes. Furthermore, comparative research in various settings may shed light on the ways in which socioeconomic and cultural variables combine to influence women's experiences with unemployment and economic engagement. Subsequent investigations may also examine the efficacy of several interventions designed to assist marginalized populations, namely women without jobs, in gaining access to education and job prospects. In order to determine best practices and areas for development, this might entail assessing the effects of particular policies and programs intended to address the social, family, and economic barriers that prevent women from entering the workforce.

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