

EMPOWERMENT OF FEMALES THROUGH KNOWLEDGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This study examines the role of higher education in empowering females in Pakistan, focusing on how knowledge functions as a catalyst for social transformation and gender equality. Using a qualitative research design, the study draws on secondary data from published research articles, policy documents, and institutional reports collected through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed through content analysis, identifying recurring themes related to access, agency, barriers, and empowerment outcomes. Findings disclose that higher education significantly enhances females' confidence, self-awareness, and critical thinking, contributing to their personal and professional development. However, empowerment through education remains constrained by persistent patriarchal norms, cultural expectations, and institutional inequalities that limit women's agency and participation. The study highlights that empowerment is not achieved solely through educational attainment but through the capacity to translate knowledge into meaningful life choices and social action. Drawing on feminist theory, empowerment theory, the capability approach, and Freire (1970) critical pedagogy, the study provides a multidimensional framework of empowerment that integrates access to knowledge, agency, and transformative learning. It concludes that higher education in Pakistan must move beyond access and address systemic gender biases through inclusive policies, gender-sensitive curricula, and supportive institutional environments. Such transformations are essential for realizing higher education's true potential as a site of empowerment and social justice for females.

INTRODUCTION

Education has long been recognized as a vital instrument for individual and societal transformation (Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025; Stevens, 2012). In contemporary societies, the empowerment of females through education is considered a key driver of social progress, gender equality, and sustainable development (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman,

2025c). In the context of Pakistan, higher education serves not only as a site of intellectual growth but also as a platform for enhancing women's agency, participation, and socio-economic mobility (HEC, 2022). However, despite significant strides in females' educational attainment over recent decades, various structural, cultural, and institutional barriers

continue to hinder their full empowerment (Freire & Macedo, 2002; Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025a). The notion of empowerment through knowledge emphasizes education as a transformative force that enables females to challenge gender hierarchies, redefine their social roles, and gain control over their personal and professional lives (UNESCO, 2021). This transformative potential is particularly evident in the role of higher education institutions in Pakistan, which play a critical role in fostering empowerment by providing females with opportunities for skill development, critical thinking, and leadership (Lewis, 2011; Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025b). However, the pathways to empowerment are often shaped by intersecting factors such as patriarchy, socio-economic constraints, cultural expectations, and institutional biases (World Bank, 2023). These challenges limit women's access to, and experiences within, higher education, affecting their ability to translate educational attainment into meaningful empowerment (Grenfell, 2014; Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025). This study explores how knowledge and higher education contribute to the empowerment of females in Pakistan, examining both enabling and constraining factors. It seeks to understand the multifaceted relationship between gender and education, focusing on how higher education serves as a tool for enhancing women's autonomy, voice, and participation in public and private spheres. Through this analysis, the research contributes to broader discussions on gender justice, knowledge production, and the transformative potential of education in developing societies.

Study Context

Pakistan's higher education landscape has undergone significant expansion over the past two decades, with a growing number of females entering universities across both public and private sectors (AlWahaibi, 2020; Shoaib, Batool, Kausar, & Abdullah, 2025). This increase reflects broader efforts toward gender inclusion in education, supported by national policies and international commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 and SDG 5). Despite these advancements, female participation in higher education remains uneven across regions, disciplines, and socio-economic strata (Berger & Luckmann, 2023; Shoaib & Ullah, 2025). Rural

females, in particular, face persistent challenges related to mobility (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Iqbal, 2025), financial constraints (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025), and cultural restrictions that often limit their access to higher education (Harding, 2004; Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Ahmed, 2025). Furthermore, the institutional culture within universities is frequently shaped by patriarchal norms that influence classroom interactions (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a), faculty attitudes, and administrative structures (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025b). Such environments reproduce gender biases rather than dismantle them, thereby constraining females' educational experiences and post-graduation opportunities (Kabeer, 1999; Shoaib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025a). In addition, the translation of educational qualifications into social and economic empowerment is often undermined by limited job opportunities, societal expectations of females' domestic roles, and gendered labor market dynamics (Ahmed, Shoaib, & Zaman, 2025). Subsequently, access to higher education represents an important step toward empowerment; the actual realization of empowerment through knowledge remains a complex and contested process in Pakistan (Malik & Courtney, 2011; Shoaib, Ahmed, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025).

Research Objectives

The present study aims to explore the empowering potential of knowledge and higher education for females in Pakistan. Specifically, it seeks to:

- Examine the relationship between higher education and the empowerment of females in the Pakistani socio-cultural context.
- Identify the structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that hinder women's empowerment through higher education.
- Analyze how knowledge acquisition, skill development, and critical awareness contribute to females' agency and social mobility.
- Explore the transformative role of higher education institutions in promoting gender equality and inclusive learning environments. This includes a discussion on the role of curriculum design, faculty training, and institutional policies in creating an environment that fosters gender equality and empowers female students.

- Provide theoretical and policy insights to strengthen gender-responsive educational practices and empower females through equitable access to knowledge. This is crucial in addressing the gender disparities in education and ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their gender, have the same opportunities to learn and grow.

The Data and Methods

Study Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is most suitable for exploring complex social phenomena such as female empowerment, gendered experiences, and educational inequalities. A qualitative approach enables a deeper understanding of how higher education contributes to the empowerment of females within Pakistan's socio-cultural and institutional context. Rather than focusing on numerical measurement, this design prioritizes interpretation, meaning, and context, providing insights into lived experiences, perceptions, and narratives surrounding female educational journeys.

Data Collection

The study relies on secondary data collected from published research articles, policy reports, and institutional documents available in reputable online databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ResearchGate, Scopus, and HEC Digital Library. The selection of data sources focuses on literature published to ensure contemporary relevance. The data collection process involved a systematic search and review of relevant literature, ensuring a comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of the topic.

Sampling

A purposive sampling technique is used to identify materials that specifically address themes of gender, empowerment, and higher education in Pakistan, a country where gender disparities in education and employment are significant, and comparable South Asian contexts. Inclusion criteria include peer-reviewed research, government or NGO reports, and scholarly papers that explicitly discuss females' educational experiences, institutional practices, or empowerment outcomes. Studies that lack clear

relevance to higher education or empowerment processes are excluded.

Data Analysis

Data are analyzed through content analysis, which allows for systematic examination and interpretation of textual data to identify recurring themes, patterns, and conceptual linkages. The analysis proceeds through three stages: data familiarization, coding and categorization, and interpretation. Each stage is crucial in understanding and interpreting the data in a comprehensive manner.

- Data familiarization involves reading and reviewing selected documents to understand key arguments, contexts, and the nuances of the data. This process helps in gaining a comprehensive understanding of the research landscape and the various perspectives presented in the literature.
- Coding and categorization involve organizing data into thematic categories such as access to education, institutional barriers, empowerment outcomes, and gender-sensitive practices.
- Interpretation involves relating the identified themes to theoretical frameworks on gender, empowerment, and education to derive meaningful insights.

The results are presented thematically, emphasizing both enabling and constraining factors in women's empowerment through knowledge.

Delimitations of the Study

As this study is based solely on secondary data, it is limited by the scope and quality of existing research. The absence of primary data (e.g., interviews or surveys) restricts direct engagement with females' personal experiences. Furthermore, most available studies reflect urban or elite institutional perspectives, potentially overlooking rural or marginalized female experiences. Despite these delimitations, the study provides a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge and theoretical perspectives, offering valuable groundwork for future empirical research.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of published literature and institutional reports reveals a multidimensional relationship between higher education and female empowerment in Pakistan. The findings are organized thematically

to highlight both the empowering potentials and persistent challenges that shape female experiences in higher education.

Higher Education as a Space for Empowerment and Transformation

Higher education in Pakistan has increasingly become a site for females' personal growth, self-confidence, and intellectual empowerment (Shoaib, Kausar, Ali, & Abdullah, 2025). The acquisition of knowledge, exposure to diverse perspectives, and engagement in academic discourse collectively enhance females' critical consciousness and self-efficacy (Shoaib, Rasool, Kalsoom, & Ali, 2025). Many studies document how university education enables females to challenge traditional gender roles, make informed decisions, and envision professional careers beyond domestic boundaries (Ali, Shoaib, & Kausar, 2025; Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). For instance, female students often report enhanced self-awareness, confidence in public speaking, and the ability to negotiate personal and family expectations (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025c). University life exposes them to new social networks, mentors, and role models who encourage academic ambition and leadership (Shoaib, Ali, & Kausar, 2025). This transformative experience extends beyond the classroom, influencing females' perceptions of autonomy, identity, and social participation (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b). Despite the challenges, the transformative potential of higher education offers hope for a more empowered future for females in Pakistan (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b).

Socio-cultural Barriers and Patriarchal Constraints

Cultural norms and patriarchal values remain deeply embedded in Pakistani society, shaping females' educational experiences and post-graduation trajectories (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a). Traditional gender ideologies frequently assign females domestic and reproductive roles, often discouraging higher education beyond a socially acceptable level (Shoaib & Bashir, 2025). In many families, daughters' education is valued primarily for marriage prospects rather than personal or professional development (Shoaib, Shamsher, & Iqbal, 2025). Moreover, societal expectations of modesty and family honor often restrict females'

mobility and participation in coeducational environments (Shoaib, 2025b). In some regions, parents prefer local or single-gender universities to maintain cultural respectability, limiting access to diverse educational opportunities (Shoaib, 2025a). Even when females access higher education, they face restrictions on career choices, workplace participation, and public visibility after graduation (Shoaib, Tariq, & Iqbal, 2025b). These cultural constraints not only limit women's agency but also contribute to the reproduction of gender hierarchies within educational institutions themselves (Shoaib, Tariq, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025). For example, female students encounter gendered stereotypes in classrooms, where faculty members implicitly reinforce male dominance or discourage females from pursuing specific disciplines, particularly in science, technology, and leadership fields (Shoaib, Iqbal, & Iftikhar, 2025). It is crucial to be aware of these persistent barriers to female empowerment in order to effectively address them (Shoaib, Tariq, & Iqbal, 2025a).

Institutional and Structural Challenges in Higher Education

The structure and culture of higher education institutions in Pakistan often mirror broader gender inequalities (Shoaib, Shamsher, & Iqbal, 2025). Several studies highlight that universities provide formal access to education, but they do not always offer equitable learning environments (Shoaib, 2024e; Shoaib & Zaman, 2025). Issues such as gender-insensitive curricula, lack of female faculty in leadership roles, and inadequate mentoring structures limit the full empowerment potential of education (Ali, Zaman, & Shoaib, 2024; Shoaib & Ullah, 2021). Harassment and discriminatory practices further exacerbate the challenges faced by female students (Shoaib, Zaman, & Abbas, 2024). Many institutions lack robust mechanisms to address gender-based harassment or provide psychological and academic support to females navigating hostile environments (Shoaib, Ali, & Abbas, 2024). Additionally, limited on-campus facilities such as safe transportation, hostels, and childcare services further constrain female participation and retention in higher education (Shoaib, Rasool, & Anwar, 2021). Institutional hierarchies also reflect gender disparities

in academic employment and leadership (Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2023). Females are underrepresented in senior faculty positions, decision-making bodies, and administrative leadership, which affects their influence over institutional culture and policies (Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2024b). This imbalance perpetuates male-dominated perspectives within academia, narrowing the scope for feminist pedagogies and gender-sensitive practices (Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2024a).

Economic Constraints and Limited Translation into Socio-economic Empowerment Education theoretically enhance employability and economic independence (Shoaib, 2023c; Shoaib, Naseer, & Naseer, 2023). However, the translation of higher education into actual empowerment remains limited in Pakistan (Shoaib, 2024d). Female graduates often encounter barriers in the labor market, including discriminatory hiring practices, wage gaps, and workplace harassment (Shoaib, 2024b). Many females face familial pressure to prioritize domestic responsibilities over professional aspirations (Shoaib, 2024c). The mismatch between education and employment opportunities also constrains socio-economic empowerment (Shoaib, 2023b, 2024a). The labor market is characterized by limited openings for females, particularly in rural or conservative settings (Abdullah, Usmani, & Shoaib, 2023). Even highly qualified females experience underemployment or are restricted to gender-stereotyped professions such as teaching or social work (Shoaib, 2023a). Consequently, the economic returns of higher education for females remain uneven and context-dependent (Shoaib, Usmani, & Abdullah, 2023).

Knowledge, Critical Awareness, and Collective Empowerment

Despite these challenges, higher education fosters a sense of collective empowerment among females through social networks, activism, and knowledge sharing (Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2022; Shoaib, Usmani, & Ali, 2022). University environments often provide spaces for dialogue, debate, and critical reflection where females engage with feminist thought, human rights discourses, and global gender movements (Shoaib & Abdullah, 2021; Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2023; Shoaib & Ullah, 2019).

This exposure encourages them to question structural inequalities and envision social change (Shoaib, Rasool, Anwar, & Ali, 2023). Participation in academic discussions, research projects, and student organizations strengthens women's voices in public spheres (Shoaib, Anwar, & Rasool, 2022). For some, these experiences inspire involvement in advocacy, teaching, and policy work aimed at promoting gender equality (Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, & Abdullah, 2022). Knowledge, in this sense, becomes both a personal and collective resource for empowerment and equipping females not only to improve their own lives but also to influence their communities, inspiring hope for a more equitable future (Shoaib, Mehmood, & Butt, 2022).

Emerging Trends and Pathways Toward Empowerment

Recent reforms and initiatives within Pakistan's higher education sector show promising trends (Shoaib, Fatima, & Jamil, 2021). Gender mainstreaming policies, female study centers, and mentorship programs are being introduced in several universities (Shoaib, Tariq, Shahzadi, & Ali, 2022). Digital learning platforms and online education have also opened new avenues for females who face mobility restrictions (Shoaib, 2021). Furthermore, international collaborations and global exposure have encouraged Pakistani universities to integrate gender sensitivity into curricula and institutional policies (Shoaib, Ali, & Akbar, 2021). These developments, though still limited in scope, indicate a gradual shift toward inclusive and equitable higher education (Shoaib, Iqbal, & Tahira, 2021). Strengthening these initiatives through sustained policy support, gender-responsive budgeting, and community engagement enhances the empowering potential of higher education for females (Anwar, Shoaib, & Javed, 2013). The results underscore that empowerment through higher education in Pakistan is a context-dependent and layered process (Shoaib, Ahmad, Ali, & Abdullah, 2021). However, education expands women's horizons and fosters intellectual and social agency; its transformative potential is constrained by enduring patriarchal structures, institutional inequalities, and economic limitations (Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, Rasool, et al., 2021). True empowerment requires not only access to education but also the

dismantling of gender biases within families, institutions, and labor markets (Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, & Shaukat, 2021). To realize the full potential of knowledge as power, higher education institutions must actively promote gender-sensitive curricula, equitable participation, safe learning environments, and female leadership representation (Shoaib, Abdullah, & Ali, 2021). Only through such systemic reforms can education move beyond symbolic inclusion to become a genuine vehicle for females' empowerment and social transformation (Shoaib, Latif, & Usmani, 2013).

Theoretical Review

Understanding the empowerment of females through higher education in Pakistan requires engagement with a range of theoretical perspectives from gender studies, sociology of education, and empowerment theory (Agnou, 2004; Jayaweera, 1997; Parajuli & Enslin, 1990; Shoaib, 2024d). Several frameworks offer conceptual tools for analyzing how knowledge transforms females' lives and challenges structural inequalities.

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory provides the foundational lens for this study, emphasizing that gender inequality is socially constructed and maintained through patriarchal systems that shape access to resources, power, and knowledge (Collins, 2004). Feminist scholars argue that education is not a neutral process but a site where gendered identities are produced and contested (Harding, 2008). Liberal feminists view education as a means to achieve equality through access and opportunity, arguing that removing barriers to females' education leads to social progress (Crenshaw, 2013; Lewis, 2011). Radical feminists, on the other hand, contend that more profound structural change is necessary to challenge patriarchal ideologies embedded in curricula, teaching practices, and institutional culture (Hartsock, 2017; Narayan, 2013). Postcolonial feminists further extend this perspective by situating females' educational experiences within local cultural and historical contexts, highlighting how Western models of education intersect with indigenous gender norms in countries like Pakistan. In the Pakistani context, feminist theory helps unpack how higher education

simultaneously reproduces and resists patriarchal structures. However, universities provide females with tools for intellectual empowerment; they also remain influenced by gendered hierarchies that limit females' autonomy and voice.

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment, in the context of this research, refers to the multidimensional process by which individuals and groups, particularly women in Pakistan, gain control over their lives (AlWahaibi, 2020; Hera, 2020; Parajuli & Enslin, 1990). Scholars such as Kabeer (1999) conceptualize empowerment as the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability. This process involves three interrelated components: resources, agency, and achievements.

- Resources refer to material assets such as income and property, human assets like education and health, and social assets including supportive networks and community relationships.
- Agency denotes the capacity to define one's goals and act upon them.
- Achievements represent the outcomes of agency, such as improved social status, leadership roles, and decision-making power, which are often recognized and valued within a particular social or cultural context.

Applying Kabeer (1999) framework to higher education in Pakistan highlights how access to knowledge (resources) enhances women's agency in personal, social, and professional spheres. However, empowerment outcomes depend on whether social and institutional structures enable females to translate educational achievements into real-life gains.

Capability Approach (Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum)

The Capability Approach provides another robust framework for understanding empowerment through education. Sen (1992) and Nussbaum (2000) conceptualize development as the expansion of people's capabilities, their fundamental freedoms to live the kind of life they value. Education plays a critical role in expanding these capabilities by enabling individuals to acquire skills, critical reasoning, and social recognition. For females in Pakistan, higher education expands capabilities such

as decision-making, mobility, self-expression, and participation in civic life. However, socio-cultural barriers limit the translation of educational capabilities into actual functioning. For example, even educated females face restrictions on employment or mobility due to patriarchal expectations. The capability approach thus provides a nuanced understanding of how empowerment is not merely about access to education but about the ability to convert that education into valued life outcomes.

Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy

Freire (1970) concept of critical pedagogy emphasizes education as a practice of freedom rather than domination. It challenges traditional teacher-centered models and promotes dialogue, reflection, and critical consciousness (Freire & Macedo, 2002). For Freire, true empowerment occurs when learners develop the capacity to question existing power relations and act toward social transformation (Boyd, 2012). Applying Freirean principles to the Pakistani higher education context implies that empowerment is fostered when females are encouraged to engage critically with knowledge, challenge patriarchal norms, and participate in transformative learning processes (Stevens, 2012). Universities, therefore, are not merely transmitting information but cultivating environments where females articulate their voices and agency (Ho & Tseng, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

Drawing upon these theoretical perspectives, this study constructs an integrated framework to understand female empowerment through knowledge in higher education in Pakistan.

- Feminist theory provides the macro-level lens for analyzing how gender relations, patriarchy, and social norms shape females' access to and experiences in higher education. It explains the structural and cultural barriers that reproduce gender inequality within academic spaces.
- Empowerment theory offers a meso-level understanding of how access to education (resources) enhances females' agency and achievements. It situates empowerment as both a process and an outcome, emphasizing women's decision-making power and ability to influence their environments.

- The capability approach contributes to a micro-level focus on individual freedoms and opportunities, analyzing how higher education expands women's potential capabilities and the constraints that prevent these from being realized.
- Freire's critical pedagogy informs the transformative dimension of the framework, emphasizing how education cultivates critical consciousness and collective empowerment when pedagogical practices encourage dialogue, reflection, and resistance to oppression.

Conceptual Integration

This integrated framework views empowerment as a dynamic, multi-layered process involving:

- Access to Knowledge (Resources): Ensuring equitable opportunities for females to enter and succeed in higher education.
- Agency and Voice: Enhancing women's ability to make informed choices, challenge inequalities, and assert autonomy.
- Transformative Learning: Encouraging critical reflection and social action through feminist and dialogical pedagogies.
- Structural Change: Addressing institutional and societal barriers that limit the translation of education into empowerment.

By synthesizing these theoretical approaches, the framework situates female empowerment not only in terms of individual achievement but also within broader struggles for gender justice, institutional reform, and social transformation. It underscores that empowerment through knowledge is both a personal journey and a collective process shaped by historical, cultural, and structural forces.

Conclusion

This study explores the empowering potential of higher education for females in Pakistan, examining how knowledge functions as a tool for social transformation within a patriarchal and socio-culturally constrained society. The findings indicate that higher education plays a significant role in enhancing females' self-confidence, intellectual capacity, and social awareness, thereby contributing to their personal and collective empowerment. Through exposure to diverse ideas, academic networks, and critical thinking, females gain a stronger sense of

agency and the ability to challenge traditional gender roles. This aspect of education's transformative power should inspire and motivate the audience. However, the study also reveals that empowerment through education is not an automatic outcome. Deeply embedded cultural norms, economic disparities, and institutional barriers continue to restrict women's freedom to utilize their educational achievements fully. Patriarchal expectations related to marriage, mobility, and domestic responsibilities often prevent educated females from translating their qualifications into professional and social empowerment. Similarly, higher education institutions in Pakistan, though expanding access for females, frequently replicate gender hierarchies through biased curricula, limited female representation in leadership, and unsafe learning environments.

The theoretical integration of feminist perspectives, empowerment theory, the capability approach, and Freire's critical pedagogy highlights that empowerment is a multidimensional and context-dependent process. It involves not only acquiring knowledge but also developing the capacity to act upon it within supportive institutional and social structures. Empowerment, therefore, is achieved when education cultivates critical consciousness, enhances agency, and promotes equitable opportunities for participation and decision-making. In conclusion, the study underscores the urgent need for systemic reform in Pakistan's higher education sector. Gender-sensitive pedagogies, inclusive institutional policies, and supportive infrastructures are essential to transform universities into truly empowering spaces. Higher education moves beyond access to embrace equity, voice, and critical engagement, serving as a powerful instrument for achieving gender justice and sustainable social development in Pakistan.

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