Women’s Empowerment in Punjab: An Analysis of Socio-Cultural Challenges

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**ARTICLE DETAILS**

**ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** Women empowerment is a rapidly growing theme that inspires women to feel courageous and do what they feel they cannot do. Women seem far behind compared to men when it comes to participation in different sectors, particularly the economy and politics. Punjab is the largest province of Pakistan in terms of population. Here, women are more in number than men and constitute 51.8% of the province’s total population. Despite being outnumbered, women lag far behind in terms of availability and access to resources and opportunities. A notable disparity can be observed in economic, political, and social sectors. The research intends to explore the key socio-cultural challenges that hinder the way of women towards empowerment in the province of Punjab.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The study adopts qualitative research design to explore the selected phenomenon. Under the particular paradigm, case study method is selected by researcher.

**Findings:** The socio-cultural conditions are progressive and favorable for women in Punjab, compared to the rest of the provinces still, women do not feel empowered. The primary challenges to empowerment include Patriarchy, a less supportive family system, domestic violence and abuses, and misinterpretation of the religious teachings.

**Implications/Originality/Value:** Government can take different initiatives to reduce gender disparity and to protect the rights of women by empowering them socially and economically

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**Introduction**

The existing distribution of human development and resources placed both genders at two ends, where, on one side, men acquired superior positions by controlling most of resources and
development opportunities, while on the other end, women seem to be banished and marginalized. The term “Women Empowerment” refers to the elevation of women's status in the power structure of society. It recognizes women’s power and capability to standardize their existence politically, economically, and socially. (Lone, H & Amin, W, 2017, p. 68). Srilatha Batliwala defined empowerment as “the process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power” (Cornwall, A, 2016, p.343). This definition emphasizes people’s ability to control such activities that can impact their well-being. One can consider empowered when he would be able to dominate and challenge existing trends of power, particularly at the social level. This paper intends to explore the social status of women in the province of Punjab, which is the largest province of Pakistan, in terms of population. The primary objective is to identify the socio-cultural challenges to women’s empowerment in the province that do not allow them to make their life choices. The paper adopts a qualitative research design to explore the selected phenomenon. The province of Punjab has been taken as a case study for this research paper.

According to statistics provided on the government of Punjab portal, the total area of Punjab is 205,344 square kilometers. As per the sixth population housing census result of 2017, the total population of the province is 110 million. The accurate figures are 110,012,442 (2021). It makes up 52.94% of a total population of Pakistan. 36.71% of people live in urban areas while 63.9% live in rural areas (Rana, S, The Express Tribune, 2017). District-wise demographic analysis tells that the most populous districts of Punjab are Lahore which has 11 million, Faisalabad 7.8 million, Rawalpindi with 5.4 million, and Gujranwala with 5 million populations. The highest gender disparity ratio is observed in Lahore is 0.992, while secondly in Kasur 0.930, and then in Sheikhupura with 0.933. A total number of women living in the province is 54,46,759 that constitute 49% of total population, while men are 55,958,974 that makes 51%. Thus there are about 1 million fewer women in the province than the men. Available data regarding registration of birth, death, marriages, divorce, and issuance of CNIC indicates a vast disparity between men and women in terms of local authorities’ registrations record (PCSW, 2018, p. ii, iii & 16). Such disparity doesn’t exist only in the mentioned field but in all significant areas. Though women constitute about fifty percent of a total population of the province and country as well, when it comes to access to resources and the decision-making structures, they lag far behind than their opposite gender. The following table illustrates the disparity in a few major sectors between men and women in Punjab.

![Figure: Disparities between Men and Women in Significant Sectors](source: Developed by the Author, Compilation of Data from Punjab Gender Parity Report, 2018 by Punjab Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW))
The Government of Pakistan has taken noticeable initiatives to reduce gender barriers for the development and empowerment of women, by ratifying certain international Human Rights Conventions including CEDAW and MDGs that later on, replaced with SDGs. According to these concords, the state is required to formulate policies that can promote a women-favorable environment in economic, social, and political domains. Same policy measures were adopted by provincial governments. In the province of the Punjab certain significant initiatives have been taken to reduce gender inequality by empowering women. A number of Punjab Women Empowerment packages from 2012 to onwards, implementation of certain legislations for the protection of women, and establishment of various institutions and departments including Punjab Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW) and Women Development Department (WDD) are noteworthy initiatives in this regard. Despite all these legal, administrative, and policy processes, figures and data indicate that women still face many obstacles in achieving their social, political, economic, and civil human rights.

Women’s Status in the Punjab and Socio-Cultural Challenges
The term “status” with its relevancy to “Women” has vague connotations as various scholars elucidated it in different manners. Some have used the term in the concept of female autonomy and rights, while others have underlined it in the idea of patriarchy and men’s situational advantages. Few others denoted it as access to basic resources such as health, education, and occupational prospects, while for some it is related to the position, influence, and authority of women in several state institutions (Hakim, A & Aziz, A, 1999, p.730). So, it can be said that the status of women cannot be identified by defining a single or similar indicator but the existence or non-existence of multiple factors in different societies, adjust the general status of women. Few dynamics are highly significant and some are less significant. As far as the status of women in the province of Punjab is concerned, findings of various relevant studies regarding Pakistan can be consulted to identify the prevailing situation in Punjab. The supportive argument is that the population of Punjab constitutes about half of the total population of the country and among these about half are women. According to the 2017 census, the total number of women in Pakistan are 101,314, 780, while the total number of women living in Punjab, as mentioned earlier, is 540, 46,759, which makes almost 53 % share of the total women’s population of the country. So the findings generated from the evaluation of almost half of the population are justified to implement on the other half too.

In the province of Punjab, though socio-cultural trends seem to be much moderate and considerate towards women, as compared to the rest of the provinces, still it doesn’t claim that environment is women-favorable and gender-equality persists here. The paper evaluates the status of women in Punjab by analyzing prevailing socio-cultural trends patterns. Family and society, both are basic institutions that play a significant role to define these patterns. The evaluation of these trends and the nature of both institutions would be helpful to identify women’s prestige in society.

Less-Supportive Family System
An individual is a basic unit of society and the very first system with which an individual interacts, immediately after his birth is the “family system”. It is a significant substance of the social system. Family is considered to be a basic institution of training and socialization. If this primary institution is supportive and encouraging in nature, the spectacular grooming of an individual is indispensable. On the other hand, if this system is not just and follows discriminatory patterns, equality cannot be achieved in the whole society. In this context, the role of the family cannot be overlooked to analyze the status of women. Women are mostly reported to get suffer and be powerless at the domestic level in the province of Punjab.

Family is the fundamental social and economic institution that is a source of security, protection, and strength for a woman and she remains dependent on it, almost throughout his life, especially
in all patriarchal societies like Punjab. Though the situation varies in rural and urban areas predominant tendencies are nearly alike. For instance, the birth of a baby boy is considered a matter of pride and glory, while the birth of a baby girl carries the thought of responsibility and restriction. The son is considered as a resource while the daughter is considered as a liability. This is an initial stage where a family discriminates against men over women. The said disparity might also exist due to the specific reproductive role of both genders. They are welcomed and treated from a gender perspective rather than a human perspective. In the words of Din, M.J & Khan, M a girl child obtains a lesser amount of food, limited access to education, and less health care than a boy. This is the reason that ratio of deaths of girls is higher due to childhood diseases. A family invests a meager amount in a girl’s education or other skill development tasks. As she is made aware at a very early stage of her life that she is not a permanent member of the family, any investment in her will not be productive or fruitful for the family (2008, p.485). Based on the mentioned approach, this gender-based discrimination goes on through whole life. Even women are unable to make any choice about their careers and life. She needs to take family’s permission before availing of any opportunity. The following chart indicates the dependence of women on family regarding their life’s decisions. It is the family’s liability to provide and ensure women’s access to a few basic material resources such as health and education, along with a few non-material resources that include moral support, confidence, and encouragement. This institution has a far-reaching impact on personality and traits that develop in the early stage of life remain a part of it throughout life. The following figure demonstrates the significance of the role of the family in a woman’s personality development.
Figure: Role of Family in Empowering Women

Source: Author’s Compilation
The figure depicts that a family ensures access to basic material resources that are necessary to increase the power and position of women in social and political structures. It also can enable a woman to identify her self-esteem and worth by providing her non-material resources like encouragement, support, and trust. Collectively, access to these resources develops inter-personal empowerment that encourages a woman to participate in shared tasks and activities. This ultimately leads her towards the stage of instrumental empowerment. Thus, somehow, the family is liable to the development of the first two categories of empowerment in a woman. The relevant facilities regarding these two resources are provided by state authorities but the family ensures access of female towards it. The available figure on females’ access to a different level of education in Punjab illustrates that most of the women are deprived to get access to this major material resource due to disapproval of family.

According to the statistics of 2013, in Punjab, the percentage of the population that has never attended school is 36%, out of which, 50% are females and 28% are males (Imran, M, 2015, p.11). The recent figures provided by the Bureau of Statistics, the government of Punjab shows that the Gender Parity Index in primary education from the age group of 5-9years is 0.99% and in lower secondary, it is 1.05%. The literacy rate between the age group of 15-24 years of Males is 77.7%, and for female it is 71.7% (GOP: Planning &Development Board, 2020,p.15). As far as women's health is concerned, it is analyzed that women’s health is the least significant and ignored area in domestic matters. According to the report of the Asian Development Bank, the low social and cultural status of women leads to their lower health status of them. Most of the nutritional deficiencies in girls develop due to intra-household partiality in food distribution. Moreover, financial dependency, control of family over women's sexuality, and restricted and limited mobility are the causes of lower access of women to health services. (Bari, D, F, 2000, p. 6).

**Domestic Abuse and Violence Against Women**

Domestic violence is a frequently used term that refers to “women abuse”, those who are being suffered by their male partner. American Medical Association defines the term as, “a pattern of physical, sexual and psychological abuse by a person with whom the survivor had an intimate relationship” (Naz, S & Malik, N, I, 2018, p.184). The issue of domestic violence has attained much attention throughout the globe as a major threat to women. It is conceived as a critical reason behind the morbidity and mortality of women. According to the figures provided by UNODC, the condition of women seems quite grim, as about 90% of women in Pakistan have experienced any sort of domestic violence from their families and life partners. It also stresses that during a covid-19 pandemic, due to economic, health, domestic, and social stress, the situation became worse (2020, p.7).

Details provided in the report of Sustainable Development Policy Institute indicate that in rural Punjab, about 35% of women are beaten by their male partners, among which 7% are beaten regularly. In mentioned percentage, 54% of women belong to the age group above 34 (SDPI, 2008, p. 64). The figures provided by the government of Punjab on criminal cases registered against violence on women during 2013 and 2014 reveal a noticeable reduction in violent incidents. The total number of murder cases registered due to domestic violence was 819, in 2013 and 752 in 2014. Registered criminal cases on beating were 676 in 2013, 537 in 2014. In 2013, cases of Honor-killing were 251 and 214 in 2014. 1998 rape cases were registered in 2013 and 1945 in 2014. Despite these specific criminal acts, registered cases against any other type of violence were 1936 and 1606, in 2013 and 2014 respectively (Tanwir, M, et.al, 2019, p. 135). According to the report of Aurat Foundation, a Non-Governmental Organization that is working for the protection of women’s rights, In Punjab, honor killing is highest compared to the rest of the provinces. (Jalil, X, Dawn, 2015) Again a rise can be seen in the number of registered cases.
against any kind of violence from 2015 to 2016 and then a decrease can be observed in 2017 in the following table.
Table: Reported Cases of Violence against Women in the Punjab (2015 to 2017)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crimes</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>2509</td>
<td>2938</td>
<td>3083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>666</td>
<td>688</td>
<td>922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beating</td>
<td>588</td>
<td>539</td>
<td>361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang Rape</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honor Killing</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acid Burning</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2341</td>
<td>2637</td>
<td>1171</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Punjab Gender Parity Report, 2018 by PCSW

The most recent figures provided by the planning and development board, the government of the Punjab, total number of registered rape cases in 2019 was 3881 (GOP, Planning and Development Board, 2020, p.14). The government of Punjab has taken various legal initiatives to curtail violent activities against women and to raise their status. The noteworthy developments are the promulgation of “Punjab Women Empowerment Package 2012”, the establishment of “Punjab Commission on the status of women 2014”, and implementation of “the Punjab protection of women against violence Act” on 29th February 2016. This act was enforced to protect women from domestic violence and economic, sexual, and psychological abuses. Despite taking all the above-mentioned measures, the most recent statistics provided by various institutions indicate no significant betterment in this regard.

Data delivered by PSCA and PUCAR-15 indicates a considerable rise in domestic violence during lockdown implemented due to Covid-19. In April 2020 the total number of received calls consisting of the complaint of domestic violence was 3,079 and in May, 3039. It makes an average of 100 calls per day. Statistics reported by PUCAR demonstrate a 25% rise in the said stigma. The average number of monthly cases reported before the lockdown was 2581, which increased up to 3217 soon after the imposition of lockdown. According to the data, provided by HRCP, the percentage of the most common type of domestic violence, faced by women in Punjab is as follows: Shouting or Howling 76%, intimidating 49%, pushing 47%, slapping 52%, punching 40%, and kicking 41%. (Warraich, S, The News, 2020). According to UN Women, inadequate training of women on Gender-Based Violence and low investment in human resources are key factors behind women’s vulnerability. Patriarchy and conservative societal norms encourage exploitations of women (Minhas, S, F & Jahanzaib, M, 2019, p.29).

**Patriarchy**

Social and cultural rules affect the life of every individual living in that society including women. If these rules are supportive and non-discriminatory, they persuade women to take part in shared activities to protect their collective interests. Thus, women get ‘Substantive Empowerment’ and get the ability to take effective actions both at the organizational and social level. With time, ‘Formal Empowerment’ occurs that allows meaningful control of women over the political system. Representation in politics enables them to partake in decision-making and work for the betterment of the whole community.

The term “Patriarchy” is derived from the word ‘pater’ or father. In this context, the patriarchal arrangement of society encourages male-dominated power structures at both social and individual levels. The concept has been the center of attention of feminist theorists who describe it as a biased system that favors male superiority. Patriarchal societies are also patrilineal, in which possessions and names are inherited through male lines only (Napikoski, L, 2020, p.1). This system restricts every initiative that can be the basis for increasing a woman's power.

The society of Pakistan is patriarchal from a socio-cultural perspective. Here, both genders are bifurcated into two separate spheres. Home is the legitimate domain of women while men belong
to the outside world. This divergence ultimately reduces the status and social values of women in the outside world due to a lack of exposure, access, skills, resources, and opportunities. On the other hand, male members are supposed to be equipped with skills and expertise because of easy access to education, resources, and opportunities. These discriminatory patterns increase the women's economic and social dependence on men and he gets power over women in all interactions (Bari, D, F, 2000, p.2).

Most of the women believe that male domination and specific socio-culture trends discourage their share in the power structure. The mechanism of control and subjugation of women by men leads to norms and behaviors that are based on gender disparity. The following results show women’s concerns regarding the role of men in empowering them.

According to a 2018 report published by Thompson Reuters, Pakistan ranked in the top four countries with the highest level of gender-based discrimination against women. The same is the situation of Punjab, where, particularly in the Southern region, a high level of violence against women is reported. The contributing factors behind violence against women include a low level of human development, poverty, illiteracy, and the most significant one is the patrilineal and patriarchal structure of society (Tanwir, M, et.al, 2019, p. 137). In which, authority vests in the hand of the eldest male member of the family who deals with all family matters, take the protection of his family as a liability and in return, seeks their complete compliance. Men are considered superior to women members. On the other hand, women in every role are expected to behave submissively. As a daughter, she is considered as a temporary guest in the home while as a wife, she must bow to her husband’s authority. The husband, in most of the cases, is less concerned about his relationship with his wife until she gave birth to a son, whose arrival confirms her mother’s status in the family. On the other hand, if a woman, bears only daughters or is childless, may suffer disgrace and humiliation in various ways (Hakim, A, & Aziz, A, 1999, p. 729). In return, a woman is expected to protect a man's and family’s honor and reputation, and to ensure this act, man is given complete control over her existence, body, emotions, thoughts even her life. If any woman tries to raise her voice against these patriarchal arrangements, she has to bear the punishment in the form of mental torture, beating, burning, sexual assault, or killing (Bhattacharya, S, 2014, p. 187).

The following unbalanced patterns of society develop a wider gap between both genders. One gender has so much power that it decides the fate of the other gender. While putting gender issues aside, if a woman is considered a human being only, there is no justification for doing so and all these norms seem against human rights. The government of Punjab has established WDD in 2012 to develop the women-favorable environment and to get them empowered. One of the main objectives of this institution is to eliminate discriminatory behaviors and approaches by working with communities and civil society. After passing so many years, besides a little difference in specific sectors, no significant change in social behavior and patterns towards women is observed.

**Religious Interpretations**

As a religion, Islam has granted ample status, prestige, and prospects to women to become an imperative part of society. It allows her to have an independent personality that cannot be subjugated. The Holy Qur'an discourses both genders in the same manners and grants basic equality. A woman, like a man, can earn her livelihood and manage her property. The religion also granted women the right to inheritance to ensure their financial strength (Bhattacharya, S, 2014, pp.180-181). Moreover, it clarifies the human rights of women, which are specifically mentioned in ‘Surah Al-Nisa and generally in various parts of the holy book. Even, in many parts, men are strongly warned about women’s rights as they are physically vulnerable. According to the sacred saying of prophet Muhammad (PBUH),
"The best among us are those who behave well with their women, and I am the best amongst you in this regards."(Akhtar, N & Metraux, D, A, 2013, p.50)

Being the Islamic Republic, it is a matter of course that Pakistan's system should be in accordance with Islamic principles, but unfortunately, the true essence of religion isn’t implemented here. The main factor is that in the sub-continent, while living together with the Hindu community, Muslims had absorbed many of their customs that became part of their lifestyle over time. The practice of discrimination against women is also relatable to this fact. However, as mentioned earlier, Islam gives women, equal rights to men but this spirit of equality has swapped with gender discrimination and disparity. Even, by misinterpreting Islamic considerations, women were making subject to torture and violence. Sanchita Bhattacharya describes that commands of the Quran, related to gender justice were diluted as they were conceived as a challenge to a patriarchal culture that cannot afford to grant equal authority to both genders. So, it can be stated that the issue of women empowerment and gender inequality here, is more cultural rather religious. The situation became more intricate when religious zealots started to defend these customary cultural and social transgressions on the basis of Islam (Bhattacharya, S, 2014, p.182). The various religious groups belong to different sectors; interpret the Islamic teaching according to their specific insight and belief. Traditional and un-civilized patterns followed by the majority of people, in the name of Islam, in many parts of the country, crucially affect women’s lives. The tradition of “forced marriages or Marriage with the Quran” both are against the true essence of Islam. A famous Islamic scholar, Imam Abu Hanifa stated that “a marriage contract that is reached without the woman's express consent is null and void”. (Akhtar, N & Metraux, D, A, 2013, p.37-39). Unfortunately, in Pakistan, this act is constantly in practice in backward rural areas, particularly where feudalistic trends are implemented. Though Islam has given considerable rights to women, but it also set boundaries in some cases. Hakim, A and Aziz, A categorize these limitations into two groups. The first category is consisted on legal limitations and disparities that are interpreted from the Holy Quran, Hadith, Sunnah and traditional Shariah laws based on these sources. These legal restrictions include discrimination in inheritance, marriage, divorce, child custody in case of separation, and status as legal witness. The other category is linked with enforcement of veil. Scholar argues that both of these categories bear such restrictions that hinder women’s inclusion in significant activities. The situation is more unsatisfactory in those areas where these limitations are austerely correlated to local civilizations rather than religion (1999, p.730). In order to achieve development related goals, defined by modern state system, this issue is needed to address strategically. There are no two opinions that true interpretation of Islamic teachings determines dignified status for women.

**Conclusion & Reflections**

Socio-culture trends determine the status of women in all existing systems. Patriarchal societies, less supportive family systems, domestic abuses, and other likewise patterns undermine the status of women. In the case of Punjab, several dynamics contribute towards the development of these trends that with due course, tilts the balance of power distribution at the social and political level, tilt to the favor of one gender. These include lack of education and health facilities, financial dependence, lack of psychological empowerment, and unawareness of women regarding legal rights.

The paper exposes that due to specific family traditions and prevailing mindset, mostly men are not very supportive and encouraging to empowering the women, besides few exceptions. Keeping a woman in the walls of the house is a matter of honor. Her opinion is not taken into account in domestic decision-making, nor is her control over domestic assets and finance considered appropriate. Empowerment entails change and collective change requires change at the individual level. The best social status empowers a woman at the individual level that gradually leads towards community empowerment. Women are needed to get familiar with their
worth. Agents of socialization should play a significant role in empowering women. Moreover, the role of men in this regard, cannot be denied in such patriarchal and male dominating social structure of Punjab. Gradual transformation in traditional socio-cultural patterns can improve women’s social status. In the light of the above finding, the researcher makes the following recommendations, for the accomplishment of the goal of women empowerment.

- Re-distribution of power at all levels and gradual social transformation can lead toward greater empowerment of women. Specific socio-cultural patterns that hinder women’s development can be decayed. Education, religion, technology, means of communication, and awareness programs for broadening of views can be helpful tools to achieve the mentioned task.

- Inclusion of women in domestic decision-making and control over financial assets will lead toward women’s financial independence. It leads to development of self-confidence and decrease the dependency. Economic empowerment of women can be ensured through granting her share in family’s assets. Government needs to adopt strict legislative measure in order to ensure women’s right to inheritance that is deliberately overlooked by the family due to male dominating patterns.

- Electronic and social media can be used as effective tools to change the specific mindset and for amplifying women’s viewpoints. The traditional approach regarding division and definition of gender roles and responsibilities at domestic, social, and national levels can be altered through the help of these instruments. Most rated programs and dramas can better help in broadening the views.

- Men should play the role of supporter for women, not as competitors or barriers. Together they can bring change at every level. There is a need to organize such platforms where both genders can work together to sort out the gender-related issues and apprehensions through negotiations and deliberations.

To make conditions more favorable for women in Punjab, Government claims that it has the realization of sensitivity of the issue. Chief Minister of the Punjab Sardar Usman Buzdar has also acknowledged this certitude. On 8th March 2020, on the event of International Women’s Day, he stated that dignity and respect given by Islam to women, cannot be imagined to grant by the west. A woman, in every relationship, is very respectable in our society. To fill the remaining gaps regarding women’s rights, he expressed that government is much concerned with the task of women empowerment and has taken remarkable initiatives to reduce gender disparity and to protect the rights of women by empowering them socially and economically (The News, 8th March 2020).

References


