

## Education as a Prerequisite to Women's Empowerment in Pakistan

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### Background

Education is widely perceived as an indicator of the status of women and even more importantly as an agent for women's empowerment. Recently there have been several attempts by development organisations to break the development process down into more tangible, concrete goals which often include gender equity and women's empowerment (Murphy-Graham, (2008). For example the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) 1979; the Beijing Platform for Gender Equality 1995; the Dakar Education for All (EFA) Framework of Action 2000, and the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000, all focused on the issues of gender inequality and women's empowerment. The United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000 addressed this problem in its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The third Millennium Development Goal was broadly framed to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Within the Goal, the target relating to education was set in terms of eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 (not achieved) and in all levels by 2015 (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2005). The recognition that women's equality and rights are central to achieving economic and social priorities is important. But it is not by chance that this has come about. It is the result of work by women's human rights advocates over decades, creating a groundswell of activism for gender equality at global, regional, and national levels (Heyzer, 2005). Despite this recognition, gender equality still remains a dilemma due to insecure school environments and inadequate sanitation which disproportionately affects girls' self-esteem, participation and retention. Textbooks, curricula and teacher attitudes continue to reinforce stereotypes of gender roles in society (UNESCO, EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2008, p. 5). Education has recently been proved to raise the level of awareness about gender related discrimination and disparities among women and has equipped them with the knowledge and skills to better compromise with their circumstances. Highly educated women become exposed to new ideas, making them challenge the existing norms more openly than less educated women (Maslak & Singhal, 2008). My study aims to shed light on the real link between education and empowerment and how education might foster women's empowerment.

### Research Questions

The main purpose of this research was to see the effect of higher education on women's lives and how higher education has empowered women in the apparently patriarchal society of Pakistan. Specifically the objectives of the study were to:

1. Investigate the participants' perceptions about women's empowerment.
2. Explore the indicators of women's empowerment.
3. Analyze the collective efforts of the participants about women's empowerment.

### Methods

A case study approach was used. A semi structured interview was used as a method of data collection. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed by reviewing the existing literature on the subject. This was linked with the aim and objectives of the research and the broad research questions. The sample was selected from a local women's university. The sample comprised a Vice chancellor, four Deans, one Head of Department each randomly selected from faculties of Natural Sciences, Engineering and Technology, Humanities, Islamic and Oriental Learning and two from the Social Sciences. The data were analyzed in the tradition of qualitative research. A four step qualitative analysis process was designed to ensure that patterns and themes which might emerge from the data could be carefully verified.

## **Frame**

The main aim of this research was to examine the effect of higher education on women's lives and how higher education empowered women in an apparently patriarchal society such as Pakistan. A case study approach was used in this study. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates contemporary phenomena within its real life context when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used. This approach helps to understand a real-life phenomenon in depth (Yin, 2009). The social phenomenon of empowerment which is being studied in this research is a multidimensional concept (Hashemi et al. 1996) and could not be understood merely by quantitative analysis without contextual considerations. The present study has tried to understand empowerment in term of socially constructed reality as stated in term of the first axiom of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **Research findings**

The five main themes that emerged during the analysis stage are:

1. Construction of Gender Identities
2. Women's Education
3. Women's Empowerment
4. The link between education and women's empowerment
5. Women's empowerment and collective efforts

According to participants in Pakistani society, children's gender identities are internalised very early as a result of differing parental attitudes towards the two sexes. This parental attitude is very much influenced by patriarchal societal norms. The construction of gender identities for the research participants is believed to be shaped by the family and school.

The main factors which participants identified as hurdles in female education are, social norms, poverty, early marriages and dowry. Participants of the study are in view that in the middle class educated families women are given due respect and they are equal partner in decision making process. The results of data analysis suggest that women's access to resources contributed significantly to the mobility, political participation and involvement in major decision-making. The asset holdings in their own names increase their purchasing and buying power.