



Perception of Females about Women Empowerment: A Comparative Study of Lahore and Jhang

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Abstract & Indexing



Abstract

This study aims to explore the perceptions of women regarding their empowerment and to identify key socio-demographic factors influencing this empowerment. In the context of Pakistan, women's empowerment is a crucial determinant for breaking cycles of poverty, reducing dependency, and improving overall health and mortality indicators. Despite global commitments and national efforts, Pakistan continues to experience slow progress in achieving gender equity, largely due to persistent social, cultural, and economic constraints. Adopting a quantitative and cross-sectional survey methodology, the research gathered data from 478 female students and alumni of two public universities. Data collection tools included the standardized Multidimensional Women Empowerment Scale by Hussain and Jullandhry (2020) and the Reproductive Autonomy Scale developed by Upadhyay et al. (2014). The study employed both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to analyze the data. Results indicate that demographic variables such as marital status, residential background (urban/rural), employment status, parental education, and occupational field significantly influence levels of women's empowerment. Notably, income level showed a strong positive correlation with overall empowerment scores. Moreover, participants from science and technology disciplines demonstrated higher levels of reproductive autonomy compared to their peers in arts and social sciences. The findings highlight the need for targeted policy reforms and awareness campaigns focused on education, economic opportunities, and healthcare access for women. This study provides evidence-based insights that can assist families, educators, and policymakers in designing effective, inclusive strategies to foster women's empowerment in Pakistani society.

Keywords:

Reservation Policy, Scheduled Tribes, Higher Education, Faculty Recruitment, Disparities in Implementation.

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Introduction

Pakistan, the fifth most populous country, continues to suffer from gender disparity, as highlighted in the Gender Gap Index (2023) and Sustainable Development Report (2023), with rankings of 142 out of 146 and 128 out of 166, respectively. The stark reality of gender imbalances is vividly illustrated by the reduced labor-force participation of women, as evidenced by a 1.9% decline according to the World Economic Forum Report (2023). This report further highlights maternal mortality statistics at 140/1000. Additionally, holding just 4.5% of senior, management, and legislative positions in the country. The gender wage gap in Pakistan has cost the country's economy a total of PKR 500.5 billion in lost wages. Lack of digital and financial literacy exacerbate these vulnerabilities, which further restricts women's economic participation. The situation is not different in politics as in the 2018 elections, 60% of Pakistan's women did not exercise their political rights due to a lack of knowledge of their rights. According to Pakistan's Demographics & Health Survey 2017–18, only 25% of women use contemporary contraceptive methods. Despite the conditional cash transfer programs designed to address the gender gap in education, nearly 2 million more girls than boys—or around 12 million girls overall—are not in school. These girls represent the majority of the country's out-of-school population (Baron & Bend, 2023). Moreover, for women, social vulnerabilities and cultural hazards are further increased by inadequate connections to programs and treatments that might enhance their human development outcomes, social obstacles resulting from a patriarchal cultural attitude, and limited access to opportunities (UNDP, 2023).

Despite the government's initiatives and the signing of international commitments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Sustainable Development Goals, progress on SDG 5 (Gender Equality) appears to be stagnating. While international organizations like the United Nations, World Health Organization, and World Bank actively engage in women's empowerment, the Government of Pakistan has implemented various initiatives such as women empowerment packages, the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP), and pro-women laws, addressing issues such as workplace harassment and domestic violence. However, the gap between legislative measures and on-the-ground realities persists, with challenges such as patriarchal mentalities hindering the successful implementation of protective laws (Akhunzada et al., 2015).

Despite commendable strides, women in Pakistan continue to face multifaceted challenges, from violence and socio-cultural barriers to limitations in using reproductive health services (Khan, 2010, Adil et al., 2022) due to various gender-biased customary practices and patriarchal structures. Women are believed to be the honor of a family, and male members are held responsible for protecting the chastity of the family. That's why, women's mobility is restricted and they have to go outside with the permission of the male member. Consequently, they remain less privileged and lag behind in job opportunities, political participation, and education. They also deal with a variety of other issues; less participation in decision making, sexual harassment, low wages, lack of nutrition, violence, stereotypes, limited resource control, and violation of their reproductive and political rights (Khan, 2010; Saigol, 2011; Adil et al., 2022). Women also do not receive their share in inheritance or land ownership. One of the major factors believed to be an important element of women empowerment is access and control over land (Saigol, 2011).

Women empowerment, a concept continually evolving and refined, encapsulates a myriad of dimensions reflecting access, control, and influence across various facets of life (Chutia, 2022). Saigol (2011) outlines a comprehensive definition, emphasizing empowerment as control over resources, decision-making, mobility, and power. The intricate nature of women empowerment is further elucidated by CARE, an international NGO that integrates individuals,

structures, and relationships as its core components (as cited in Saigol, 2011). Echoing these perspectives, Pakistan's Medium Term Development Framework 2005-10 aligns empowerment with access to opportunities, knowledge, resources, and the ability to control one's life (Planning Commission, 2005 as cited in Saigol, 2011). This multi-dimensional construct extends beyond the socio-economic realm, encompassing economic, social, legal, reproductive, political, and psychological dimensions (Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1999; Budryte, 2014; Zimmerman & Warschausky, 1998; Schuler & Hashemi, 1994; Sharma & Das, 2021). Each dimension contributes uniquely to the overall empowerment of women.

Reproductive empowerment: The keystone of women's empowerment

Women's empowerment and reproductive empowerment are closely linked, with the latter being a key component of the former. Reproductive empowerment is the ability of individuals to make autonomous decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health and to access and use high-quality reproductive health services (Jewkes & Morrell, 2010). A process of attaining awareness and competence regarding reproductive and sexual health and rights, enables individuals to strengthen their ability to discuss such matters and have the freedom to implement them according to their choices, without any fear (Edmeades et al., 2018). Empirical studies indicate that the concept of women empowerment supports the reproductive empowerment of women and vice versa. For empowered women, there is a greater possibility of having access to various opportunities like education, job, and political involvement, which in return improve their reproductive empowerment and give them more choices regarding the use of contraceptives (Jejeebhoy, 1995; Mason & Smith, 2000). From India to Nepal, there is a noticeable positive link demonstrating the universal impact of women's empowerment on reproductive outcomes.

Women's empowerment in Pakistan: A complex landscape

In the Pakistani context, research has widely explored women's empowerment in multiple settings (Baig et al., 2018; Hussain & Jullandhry, 2020; Khan & Sajid 2011; Burfat et al., 2018; Naz & Ashraf, 2020; Nasir et al., 2007; Abbas et al., 2021; Batool & Batool, 2018). However, social norms and cultural practices rooted in patriarchal values continue to pose significant challenges to women's empowerment (Kabeer, 1999; Butt & Asad, 2016). While initiatives at the local and national levels have been undertaken, the lack of effective implementation hampers the progress, exacerbating the plight of women (Butt & Asad, 2016). Different researchers in the past highlighted various factors that can influence women empowerment in the context of Pakistan, such as education, employment status, financial independence of women, living area, women's aging, having children, and husband's educational status (Abbas et al., 2021; Haleem et al., 2021; Baig et al., 2020; Abbas et al., 2015; Awan & Naqvi, 2016; Batool et al., 2020 & Niaz & Iqbal, 2019).

Reproductive empowerment and health outcomes: A catalyst for progress

The impact of reproductive empowerment extends beyond individual choices, influencing broader health outcomes and community well-being. Kiani et al. (2018) argued that empowerment of women results in community health promotion. Women's participation and empowerment have a significant positive impact on health and quality of life. Studies emphasize that women can directly and indirectly affect the nutritional well-being of their children. According to statistics, women devote a large portion of their earnings, time, and effort to their families, directly affecting their children (Kooser, 2017 as cited in Essilfie et al., 2020). Moreover, women's autonomy in healthcare decision-making translates into more effective use of health care resources, with the potential to improve health outcomes for both women and children (Ahuru, 2021). The intricate link between reproductive empowerment and broader health indicators reinforces the cascading effects of empowering women at the individual and community levels.

However, previous literature conducted various research on women empowerment while comparing the context of socioeconomic and political background. However, there are variables that have not been found in the previous literature, such as understanding the perception of youth (especially female enrolled in universities or have entered in their practical lives after completion of their studies) and their academic discipline. In the context of the present study, research was conducted by incorporating all these new variables to understand the influence of these variables on women empowerment and reproductive autonomy.

As researchers delve into the determinants and dimensions of women empowerment in Pakistan, it is imperative to bridge the existing gaps, particularly in comprehensively addressing reproductive empowerment. The literature underscores the need for a nuanced understanding, acknowledging the intricate interplay between socio-cultural factors, legal frameworks, and individual agency, as they collectively shape the landscape of women's empowerment in Pakistan. Future research endeavors should strive to provide a more holistic perspective, with a particular emphasis on reproductive empowerment, to inform targeted interventions and policy measures aimed at fostering a more equitable and empowered society for women.

Objectives

- To understand the perception of females about different aspects of women empowerment (such as self-esteem, control over resources, mobility and participation in decision making).
- To identify the difference in perception of females about women empowerment, reproductive empowerment and political sensitivity based on their residential city
- To examine the potential factors which might influence their perception about women empowerment.
- To understand the relationship between women empowerment and reproductive empowerment.

Hypotheses

- There is a difference in the perception of females about different aspects of women empowerment based on their residential cities.
- There is a relationship between income and the perception of females regarding women empowerment and reproductive empowerment.
- There is a relationship between women empowerment and reproductive empowerment.
- Educational status is likely to influence females' perception of women empowerment, residing in Lahore and Jhang.
- Educational status is likely to influence females' perception of reproductive empowerment, residing in Lahore and Jhang.
- Marital status is likely to influence females' perception of women empowerment, residing in Lahore and Jhang.
- Place of residence is likely to influence females' perception of women empowerment, residing in Lahore and Jhang.
- Employment status is likely to influence females' perception of women empowerment, residing in Lahore and Jhang.
- Occupation is likely to influence females' perception of women empowerment, residing in Lahore and Jhang.
- Parental education is likely to influence females' perception of women empowerment, residing in Lahore and Jhang.

Method

The purpose of this research was to investigate the female's perception about various aspects of women empowerment. A quantitative research design was used. This study was

conducted in two cities of the Punjab province to understand the perception of women from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The city of Lahore was selected because it is the capital of Punjab province and considered a hub of educational institutes with lots of opportunities to grow and earn due to development. The second city selected for this study was Jhang. The majority of people living in Jhang, the oldest city in Pakistan, work in agriculture. Both men and women work in the agricultural industry and related fields, such as managing and caring for animals (Menhas et al., 2014). Jhang has remained in the news due to deeply rooted patriarchal norms and sectarian conflicts in the past. However, in the past few years, due to development and state attention, the situation has changed. This study was conducted to compare the perceptions of women about empowerment residing in the cities of Jhang and Lahore to understand similarities and differences.

Participants

A total of 478 female participants were purposively selected for this study. Students enrolled in BS (Semester 7 & 8), MS programs, and alumni of both public universities were part of the sample.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Place of residence (Urban/Rural)		
Urban	381	79.7
Rural	97	20.3
University		
Public university of Lahore	234	49
Public university of Jhang	244	51
Qualification		
BS	310	64.9
Alumni	168	35.1
Discipline		
Arts/Social Sciences	328	68.6
Science/Technology	150	31.4
Marital Status		
Single	395	82.6
Married	83	17.4
Family Type		
Joint	211	44.1
Nuclear	267	55.9
Employment Status		
Working	139	29.1
Non-working	339	70.9
Occupation		
Government/Private Employee	64	13.4
Homes-Based Worker/Entrepreneur	75	15.7
Monthly Income		
Less than 30,000	151	31.6
30,000-65,000	151	31.6

66,000-10,0000	121	25.3
Above 10,0000	55	11.5
Father's Education		
Illiterate/Below Matric	71	14.9
Matric	105	22
Intermediate	90	18.8
Bachelors	156	32.6
Masters/Professional Education	56	11.7
Mother's Education		
Illiterate/ Below Matric	133	27.8
Matric	123	25.7
Intermediate	78	16.3
Bachelors	127	26.6
Masters/Professional Education	17	3.6
Husband's Education		
Intermediate and Less	13	2.7
Bachelors	37	7.7
Masters	33	6.9

Table 1 reveals that a greater number of females from the public university of Jhang (n= 244, 51%) participated in the study than females from the public university of Lahore (n= 234, 49%). A higher number of females from urban area (n= 381, 79.7%) were participants, compared to females of rural area (n= 97, 20.3%). The majority of the participants were single and most of them were from the non-working group. Major part of the sample was from middle (n= 151, 31.6%) and lower classes (n= 151, 31.6%) and belonged to the nuclear family system.

Instruments

The tool “Multidimensional Women Empowerment (MWE)” developed by Hussain and Jullandry (2020), covers four dimensions of women empowerment i.e. self-esteem, control over resources, mobility, and decision making. It contains 38 items. The Cronbach alpha level for this tool is $\alpha = 0.75$. (Hussain & Jullandry, 2020).

Reproductive autonomy scale (RAS)

The RAS is a 14-item scale to measure the reproductive autonomy of women, developed by Upadhyay et al. (2014). Divided into three sub-scales, i.e. liberty from oppression, communication, and decision-making. Two of the sub-scales (i.e. liberty from oppression and communication) are measured on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. The Cronbach alpha value is $\alpha = 0.78$ (Upadhyay et al., 2014).

Procedure

Standardized questionnaires/scales were used after obtaining permission from the respective authors. The questionnaire was distributed among the students in the required semesters from both universities after obtaining their informed consent. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, independent sample t-test, one way ANOVA and correlation were applied.

Ethical Consideration

During the data collection stage, the privacy of the participants was ensured, and throughout this study, the gathered information was stored according to the research ethics guidelines.

Results

Table 2

Independent sample t-test scores of Females from the Public University of Lahore and Jhang on Women Empowerment

Variables	Females from Lahore		Females from Jhang		<i>t</i> (476)	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
WE	0.59	0.191	0.56	0.169	1.41	0.15

As per the author guidelines, a score of 0.80 and above determines women empowerment

Table 2 reveals non-significant mean differences in women empowerment scores with $t(476) = 1.41, p > .05$, which is between females from the Public University of Lahore ($M = 0.59, SD = 0.191$) and Jhang ($M = 0.56, SD = 0.169$).

Table 3

Independent sample t-test scores of Females of Urban and Rural Areas on Women Empowerment

Variables	Females of Urban Areas		Females of Rural Areas		<i>t</i> (476)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
WE	0.587	0.176	0.544	0.192	2.06	0.03	0.22

As per the author guidelines, a score of 0.80 and above determines women empowerment

Table 3 reveals statistically significant mean differences in women empowerment with $t(476) = 2.06, p < .05$. Findings showed that females from urban areas exhibited higher scores on women empowerment ($M = 0.587, SD = 0.176$), than females from rural areas ($M = 0.544, SD = 0.192$). The value of Cohen's *d* was 0.22 (< 0.50) which showed minimal effect size.

Table 4

Independent sample t-test scores of Enrolled Students and Alumni on Women Empowerment

Variables	Enrolled Students		Alumni		<i>t</i> (476)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
WE	0.56	0.18	0.603	0.177	-2.24	0.02	0.21

As per the author guidelines, a score of 0.80 and above determines women empowerment

Table 4 reveals statistically significant differences in mean scores of women empowerment with $t(476) = -2.24, p < .05$. Findings showed that alumni exhibited higher scores on women empowerment ($M = 0.603, SD = 0.177$), as compared to the currently enrolled students ($M = 0.564, SD = 0.181$). The value of Cohen's *d* was 0.21 (< 0.50) which showed minimal effect size.

Table 5

Independent sample t-test scores of Single and Married Females on Women Empowerment

Variables	Single		Married		<i>t</i> (476)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
WE	0.57	0.185	0.61	0.149	-2.14	0.03	0.27

As per the author guidelines, a score of 0.80 and above determines women empowerment

Table 5 reveals statistically significant mean differences in women empowerment with $t(476) = -2.14, p < .05$. Findings showed that married females exhibited higher scores on women empowerment ($M = 0.61, SD = 0.149$), than single females ($M = 0.57, SD = 0.185$). The value of Cohen's d was 0.27 (< 0.50) which showed minimal effect size.

Table 6

Independent sample t-test scores for Working and Non-Working Females on Women Empowerment

Variables	Working		Non-Working		<i>t</i> (476)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
WE	0.614	0.177	0.563	0.180	2.83	0.00	0.28

As per the author guidelines, a score of 0.80 and above determines women empowerment

Table 6 reveals statistically significant mean differences in women empowerment with $t(476) = 2.83, p < .05$. Findings showed that working females exhibited higher scores on women empowerment ($M = 0.614, SD = 0.177$), than non-working females ($M = 0.563, SD = 0.180$). The value of Cohen's d was 0.28 (< 0.50) which showed minimal effect size.

Table 7

Independent sample t-test scores of Employees at Govt./Private Sector and Home-Based Worker/ Entrepreneur on Women Empowerment

Variables	Employees at Govt./Private Sector		Home-Based Worker/ Entrepreneur		<i>t</i> (137)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
WE	0.65	0.17	0.57	0.17	2.57	0.01	0.43

As per the author guidelines, a score of 0.80 and above determines women empowerment

Table 7 reveals significant mean differences in women empowerment with $t(137) = 2.57, p < .05$. Findings showed that females who were employed in the government or private sector exhibited higher scores on women empowerment ($M = 0.655, SD = 0.178$), compared with females who were home-based workers or entrepreneurs ($M = 0.579, SD = 0.170$). The value of Cohen's d was 0.43 (< 0.50) which showed minimal effect size.

Table 8

ANOVA Score of Women Empowerment across Father's Education

Variables	Illiterate/ Below Matric (1)		Matric (2)		Inter (3)		Bachelors (4)		Master/Professional Education (5)		F(4,473)	η^2	Post Hoc
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Women Empowerment	0.5	0.17	0.55	0.17	0.57	0.16	0.6	0.17	0.64	0.18	5.73	0.04	4>1

As per the author guidelines, a score of 0.80 and above determines women empowerment

Table 8 shows the means, standard deviations and F -values for women empowerment across father's education. Results indicated significant mean differences across participant's father's education on women empowerment with $F(4,473) = 5.73, p < .05$. The value of η^2 was 0.04 ($< .50$), which showed a minimal effect size. A significant difference was found between the illiterate/below matric and bachelors groups, $p = 0.00$. Findings revealed that females whose fathers were highly qualified exhibited a higher level of women empowerment than females whose fathers were less qualified or not qualified.

Table 9

ANOVA Score of Women Empowerment across Mother's Education

Variables	Illiterate / Below Matric		Matric		Inter		Bachelors		Master/ Professional Education		F(4,473)	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
WE	0.51	0.15	0.57	0.17	0.60	0.17	0.62	0.19	0.56	0.16	6.88	0.05

As per the author guidelines, a score of 0.80 and above determines women empowerment

Table 9 shows the means, standard deviations and F -values for women empowerment across mother's education. Results indicated significant mean differences across participant's mother's education on women empowerment with $F(4,473) = 6.88, p < .05$. The value of η^2 was 0.05 ($< .50$), which showed a minimal effect size. A significant difference was found between illiterate/below matric and bachelors groups, $p = 0.00$. Findings revealed that females whose mothers were highly qualified exhibited a higher level of women empowerment than females whose mothers were less qualified or not qualified.

Table 10

Independent sample t-test scores for Females from the Public University of Lahore and Jhang on Reproductive Autonomy

Variables	Females from Lahore		Females from Jhang		$t(476)$	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
RA	33.57	3.98	34.23	4.12	-1.79	0.07

Table 10 reveals non-significant mean differences in reproductive autonomy with $t(476) = -1.79$, $p > .05$, between females from the Public University of Lahore ($M = 33.57$, $SD = 3.98$) and Jhang ($M = 34.23$, $SD = 4.12$).

Table 11

Independent sample t-test scores of Enrolled Students and Alumni on Reproductive Autonomy

Variables	Enrolled Students		Alumni		$t(476)$	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
RA	34.02	4.33	33.7	3.52	0.807	0.42

Table 11 reveals non-significant mean differences in reproductive autonomy with $t(476) = 0.807$, $p > .05$, between enrolled students ($M = 34.02$, $SD = 4.33$) and alumni ($M = 33.7$, $SD = 3.52$).

Table 12

Independent sample t-test scores of Females from Arts/Social Science Discipline and Science/Technology Discipline on Reproductive Autonomy

Variables	Arts/Social Science Discipline		Science/Technology Discipline		$t(476)$	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
RA	33.58	4.03	34.62	4.05	-2.61	0.00	0.25

Table 12 reveals significant mean differences in reproductive autonomy with $t(476) = -2.61$, $p < .05$. Findings showed that females from the science and technology discipline exhibited higher scores on reproductive autonomy ($M = 34.62$, $SD = 4.05$), compared to the females from the arts and social science discipline ($M = 33.58$, $SD = 4.03$). The value of Cohen's d was 0.25 (< 0.50), which showed a minimal effect size.

Table 13

ANOVA Score of Reproductive Autonomy across Husband's Education

	Inter and Less		Bachelors		Master/ Professional Education		F(2,80)	η^2
Variables	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
RA	33.30	3.83	33.35	3.68	33.18	5.19	0.01	0.00

Table 13 shows the means, standard deviations and *F*-values for reproductive autonomy across husband's education. Results indicated non-significant mean differences across participant's husband's education on reproductive autonomy with $F(2,80) = 0.01, p < .05$.

Table 14

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Women Empowerment Variables

Variables	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Monthly Income	478	2.16	1.00	—		
2. WE	478	0.57	0.18	0.181**	—	
3. RA	478	33.91	4.06	0.01	0.00	—

** $p < .01$

Table 14 shows that women empowerment has negligible correlation with monthly income ($r = 0.181, p < .01$). There was no relationship found between monthly income and reproductive autonomy.

Discussion

The findings of this quantitative research offer valuable insights into the perceptions of females living in Lahore and Jhang regarding women's empowerment. The study revealed no significant differences in the perception of females living in Lahore and Jhang, which somehow highlights that women living in Lahore region are not different about their perceptions regarding empowerment than those living in Jhang region. Here the role of area seems irrelevant, which might be due to factors beyond the scope of this study, which needs to be explored further through qualitative. It is critical to note that the phrase "give power to" describes the basic concept of empowerment (Tulloch, 1993). Human capital is an essential component of any significant national growth, and a state must boost citizen's efficiency to maximize their productivity, which is possible by ensuring a supportive environment for learning and growth (Wilkinson, 1998), and in the case of Pakistan, acknowledging women as citizens and granting them equal rights and opportunities without any discrimination, as mentioned in the constitution of Pakistan.

This somehow challenges the common association between education and women's empowerment (Murtaza, 2012; Bushra & Wajiha, 2015; Naz & Ashraf, 2020). This result highlights education solely. Research conducted by Chaudhry and Nosheen (2009), Khan and Awan (2011), Varghese (2011), and Nayak and Mahanta (2012) collectively emphasized that women exposed to media exhibit heightened empowerment levels. This awareness translates to greater empowerment, differentiating women who have regular access to media from those with limited or no access.

An assumed relationship among income, women's empowerment, and reproductive empowerment showed a negligible connection between women's empowerment and monthly income. However, no significant relationship was found between reproductive empowerment and income, aligning with the findings in Bangladesh (Islam et al., 2021). The possible reason in the context of Pakistan could be the patriarchal culture; opinions of husbands are still dominated in this area, especially after marriage, such as family planning, using contraceptives, or visiting doctors, even for those in this context who are financially independent or highly educated. In some cases, even women are not in a position to use their own salaries due to the control of families. Results also identified that there was no relationship between women's empowerment and reproductive autonomy. A study conducted in Pakistan by Malik et al. (2022) ultimately supports this finding. This finding is an opportunity for future researchers to qualitatively explore reasons for further work in this area.

Examining the perceptions of enrolled and alumnus females revealed a statistically significant difference, with alumni scoring higher on women's empowerment. This supports existing literature suggesting that age, knowledge, skills, and experience contribute to greater empowerment (Faridi et al., 2009; Niaz and Iqbal, 2019; Batool et al., 2020; Haleem et al., 2021). Similar to the findings of Hussain and Jullandhry, (2020) and Menon et al., (2020), married females scored higher on women's empowerment in the present study. Urban females scored higher on women's empowerment, supporting the findings in previous literature (Akram, 2017; Soharwardi & Ahmad, 2020; Thandar et al., 2020; Urooj et al., 2022), attributed to greater opportunities in urban areas. The study suggested a significant impact of employment status on women's empowerment, with working participants scoring higher, especially those employed in the government or private sector, as supported by the literature (Ristana and Handanyani, 2018; Menon et al., 2020; Muhammad et al., 2021; Ikhar et al., 2022).

Previous research conducted in Pakistan also demonstrated that a father's higher education has a great influence on women's empowerment, especially in the case of educated mothers, as they spend more on their children and their kids do well in academics (Shoaib et al., 2012; Aslam, 2013; Meraj & Sadaqat, 2016). This was also noticed in this study, where the influence of parental educational level on women's empowerment was found.

Findings of this study revealed no difference in the perception of females residing in Lahore and Jhang about reproductive empowerment. The influence of educational status was also not found in this regard. The most credible explanation for this result could be variables outside the purview of this study, such as cultural norms, lack of understanding, and male dominance in private life and less power in decision making. Khadija et al. (2021) claimed that cultural norms and ignorance of religious teachings regarding sexual and reproductive health frequently restrict women's autonomy in making decisions about their bodies and lives. Because of patriarchal traditions, they are vulnerable to exploitation because they frequently believe stereotypes about their reproductive health and trust religious leaders. There is a significant cultural expectation that women have children, and they may feel pressured to give birth before using contraception. Cultural norms and gender roles may affect a woman's ability to benefit from family planning services and her desire to have children. In some places, women are expected to have at least one child before they can use contraception, regardless of their personal beliefs or circumstances (Dynes et al., 2012; Adams et al., 2013; Kane et al., 2016).

Non-significant differences were observed across participant's husband's education on reproductive autonomy. The most plausible explanation for this finding can be factors such as caste, husband socialization patterns, or other extraneous variables, which are beyond the scope of this study.

However, a novel finding was the significant influence of students' discipline on perceptions about reproductive empowerment, which is a new finding for the body of literature. Many of these concepts have remained unexplored or received limited attention in prior works. Therefore, the findings of this research serves as a novel contribution to the field of research. Findings of this study also revealed that females from Lahore who were single and belonged to the nuclear family system scored highest on women empowerment and reproductive empowerment. In addition, females with various demographic backgrounds, such as those currently enrolled in educational institutes, those who belonged to joint families, and those whose monthly income was less than thirty thousand, scored lowest on all the scales utilized in this research.

Implications

These research findings are beneficial for policy makers, stakeholders, and activists who advocate women's empowerment. Single females from Lahore and nuclear families scored highest on women empowerment and reproductive empowerment, suggesting that family type and marital status can influence a female's perception of empowerment. This implies that policies focusing on advancing women's empowerment should give priority to single women and nuclear families. Moreover, the identification of demographic groups that scored lowest on empowerment scales such as those who are currently studying, have joint families, or earning less than 30,000 per month -- highlights the importance for policymakers to create focused initiatives to address the particular needs and obstacles that these groups face. These policy makers may take action to empower women and support their reproductive autonomy by addressing socioeconomic gaps, challenging gender stereotypes, and providing resources to assist the reproductive health of lower-income those living in joint-family systems.

Limitations

- These findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of Pakistan, because they only cover a specific region.
- This study only focused on female's perceptions of different aspects of women empowerment. Future research can also approach male participants to examine their understanding in this context.
- Not every dimension of women empowerment was studied in this research, future studies should explore the legal and psychological aspects of empowerment.
- Future research should focus on qualitative studies to explore the cultural and societal factors influencing the disconnect between women's empowerment and reproductive autonomy and income. This will provide a deeper understanding of the issues and inform targeted interventions.

Recommendations

- Educational institutions should focus on empowering women through comprehensive education that goes beyond academics. Special attention should be paid to promoting awareness of women's rights and autonomy.
- The media plays a crucial role in shaping societal perceptions. Advocacy groups and media organizations should collaborate to create content that promotes women's empowerment, challenges stereotypes, and raises awareness of reproductive rights.
- Government and non-government organizations should continue and enhance initiatives working on women's empowerment and sensitization of males about the rights of females. Additionally, policies should address cultural and societal norms that

limit women's decision-making power, especially in matters related to reproductive health.

- The corporate sector can contribute by fostering a work environment that promotes gender equality. Initiatives such as mentorship programs, childcare facilities, and flexible working hours can empower women in the workplace.
- Local communities should be engaged in discussions and awareness campaigns to challenge traditional gender roles and empower women at the grassroots level.

Conclusion

While this research sheds light on the current state of women's empowerment in Pakistan, it also underscores the need for ongoing efforts and a multi-stakeholder approach to address the complex challenges women face in achieving true empowerment and autonomy. In addition, efforts should be directed toward addressing cultural and societal barriers that hinder women from making independent decisions about their reproductive health. Overall, this study contributes valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and activists striving for comprehensive women's empowerment in the Pakistani context.

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