

## **A Study of the Perception of the Community regarding the Impact of University Education in Resolving Gender Issues**

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Educated women are fundamental to ending sex discrimination by reducing poverty, which increases discrimination in developing countries. Gender equality is no longer seen simply as a problem of social justice. In order to ensure that women have equal rights, resources and opportunities within a community, making their voices heard is widely recognized as essential to the growth and development of a community. Women's education is the most effective tool for changing their position in society. Educating women in Pakistan was a necessity as education is a milestone in women's empowerment. Education also leads to a reduction in inequalities and functions as a way to improve their status within the family and develops the concept of participation. The major objective of the present study was to explore the role of the universities of Southern Punjab to foster social justice and women empowerment in the community. The study was carried out in three districts namely Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, and Bahawalpur of South Punjab region. A sample of 30 alumni of the universities of Southern Punjab from various organizations was selected through purposive sampling technique. A semi-structured interview was used to collect information from respondents. It was concluded that university education is improving gender equality, helping the community to adopt liberal attitudes towards women, moderately improving women empowerment and mobility.

**Keywords:** *University education, gender equality, women empowerment, social justice*

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### **Background of the Study**

The administration of universities is receptive to stress to show a visible evidence of their contributions to the host city and region (Starke, Shenouda, & Smith-Howell, 2017). The mission of community benefit is not a luxury; it is important to the identity of the higher education institutions and essential to vibrancy and zeal of the regional communities (Smith, Palco, & Rooke, 2017). An intentional alignment in a university-community partnership would be

important to address complex and adaptive regional problems. Higher education believed to be, “not need always be involved in, much less at the forefront of, community engagement work” (Whitney, Harrison, Clayton, Muse & Edwards, 2016 p. 85).

In general, higher education systems are compelled to respond socially to changes in society by addressing issues of social justice such as justice, access, success and the creation of a democratic culture. There are a number of reasons for the current gender equality in Pakistan. Girls are less

favoured in education and are trained to perform household chores (Khan, 2007). Homework helped them become good mothers and wives (Maqsood, & Raza, 2012). A male family member thought that in the future he would assume responsibility as a leader and generate resources. Preferably, male members receive quality training and are supported by resources (Khalid, and Mukhtar, 2002). Early marriages and the pressure to administer dowry are also a barrier to investing in girls' education (UNESCO, 2010). Female mobility in Pakistan is limited because of the risk of personal safety and a major barrier to accessing more distant educational institutions (World Bank, 2007). Although these socio-cultural traditions are being challenged in urban areas and more and more women are entering educational environments at different levels, women in rural areas still face problems because of these social barriers. At this stage, the current research of university education's role in the elimination of barriers in social justice has conceptualized the elimination of gender and racial inequalities and other discriminatory tendencies or the use of artificial social categorization for maintaining an inequitable distribution and social inequalities. Significant evolutions

have occurred in the university's vision during the last three decades around the globe. University-community partnership and collaborations have been gaining attention to address societal concerns. Universities are now believed to be responsible to play an active role in the identification and refining regional development indicators so they can be used to align the university's assets and efforts to contribute to measurable regional outcomes. Universities have deeply engaged with the neighbouring communities to address complex social problems (Smith, Palco, & Rooke, 2017). Education has given the responsibility to attain the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG) as to encourage gender parity women empowerment. The MDG also gave direction that goal of equal access to primary and secondary education should be achieved by 2005, and to the all other levels by 2015 (United Nations, 2000). Education is known to be the basic human right and demands gender equality. Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 26 gave everyone a right to get a free education at least in the elementary and basic stages. Elementary education shall equally be accessible to everyone and be compulsory (United Nations, 1948). Education in any democratic society

provides opportunities to all the men and women to participate in the social, economic and political development of the society. Education enables society to restore their rights without any discrimination. Socioeconomic advantages of education have increased the demand for education. Since long; focus on the coupled approach of open access and quality of education, both demands gender equality. Although the contemporary power dynamics of universities, busy schedules, and fiscal uncertainty has limited the collective impact of universities still they are facilitating and cultivating courage in women to fight for their rights (Trani, 2008). Gender equality in all spheres of life now becomes a fundamental social value around the globe. Interventions through the education sector can play a role in solving the problem of inequality in society. Education can bring attitudinal changes in girls and women and impact their lives to stand for any type of discrimination against them. Education not only has a basic role in generation and proliferation of knowledge; education believed to be responsible for the cultivation of norms and values for the notion of gender parity. Researches in many countries profound that equal opportunities are linked to the finance, labour markets, land-based

and services sector. However, the role of women is still limited in production and productivity and that is due to the lower achievement of education. (Buvinic, Morrison, & Ofosu-Amaah, 2008). Tembon and Fort, (2008) found girls education as the most cost-effective way to boost development. According to them, women's education helps poverty alleviation, intergenerational gains, higher economic productivity, stronger labour markets, higher profits, better health and social well-being.

Empowerment can be seen as a means of creating a social environment in which decisions can be made individually or collectively for social transformation. Empowerment develops innate abilities through the acquisition of knowledge, powers, and experiences (Hashemi, Schuler and Riley, 1996). Women's empowerment can be strengthened through higher education. Higher education helps women in two ways. This allows qualified women to assume a leadership role in society and to make them role models for girls. It also helps women to choose areas of expertise, as decision-makers, that influence political issues related to the social, economic and cultural development or through participation in family and community life (Shaukat and Siddiquah, 2013). Higher

education provides independence to the women and control over finances as compared to the women with no or lower level of education. Higher education also helps them to receive social recognition and enable them to better understand the surrounding environment in terms of socioeconomic benefits. Women are using their vision to foresee the future opportunities suit them, and mean to achieve them. It can achieve what is within reach and what it needs to do to improve it (Usha and Sharma, 2001). It is a direct contribution of universities that women are now empowered and enjoying an elevated status and autonomy. The autonomy and independence of educated women are recognized at national and domestic levels (Friedmann, 1992, Zafar, 2004).

Gender inequality gives women a limited freedom to the use of time and money and lets them deprived of basic life needs. It is evident from research that empowered women has many positive effects, including 1) reducing the fertility rate of women; 2) lower rates of infant and child mortality; 3) lower rates of maternal mortality; 4) increasing the participation of women in the labour market; 5) promotes educational investment in children.

(Commitment to Afghan Women, 2009) These have long-term positive effects on the living standards of women and personal economic benefits.

A community with a high rate of educated women discourages early marriages and let women allow deciding when they should get pregnant. Now educated women use their right in the control over the birth rate and contraceptive uses. Education can play a key role in reducing violence against girls and women and strengthening their control over their bodies (Raina, & Balodi, 2012). Educated mothers adopt better hygiene practices, nutrition, lower fertility and it helps them to overcome poverty and helps to grow in future. Education is an important step towards women's emancipation, as it is able to respond to challenges, take on its traditional role and change lives. Higher education sensitizes women regarding social influence, political power, and legal rights. The economic impact of higher education is relatively easy to quantify, its objectives can be established and its value can be more easily communicated to society. Measuring the social value of higher education is difficult and is rarely addressed in the

literature. But that is not enough reason to neglect the problem.

Historically, universities have played a key role in the development of the socio-economic status of women in Pakistan. The role is visible in generating knowledge about gender equality through research to develop a common vision to combat gender discrimination. The Commission for Higher Education has developed an initiative to develop and implement the first policy against sexual harassment in higher education (HEC, 2011). The policy has allowed women to understand their rights and denounce any form of violence or aggression against them. The University of South Punjab Cooperation with community partners to increase their intentions by creating groups of experts and community participation initiatives that identify clear results with measurable goals. It is important to understand the current landscape of partnerships with the university community, as well as efforts to better align existing academic activities and news with gender equality. In addition, universities are implementing curricular reforms to achieve the goal of gender equality. Courses such as gender studies, women's rights, and women's empowerment are integrated into various programs to accelerate the movement for

gender equality. Universities provide a safe and non-discriminatory academic environment that encourages learning. Universities, like knowledge organizations, conduct research on different gender issues and present valid solutions for the community. Women now study in universities in a less stressful and impartial environment.

The current research was carried out to determine the impact of university education on gender discrimination as a social problem. The major objective of the study was to explore the role of the universities of Southern Punjab to foster social justice and women empowerment in the community. Following were the research questions developed to direct the research methodology.

1. How and to what extent universities of Southern Punjab are contributing to bringing social justice and women empowerment?
2. What are the perceptions of the community regarding the impact of universities on resolving gender issues in Southern Punjab?

## **Research Methodology**

The main objective of this research was to study the impact of university education to stimulate social justice and empowerment of women in Southern Punjab. This study was conducted to learn about the current scenario in depth. The nature of the research was exploratory, and that is why a qualitative method was adopted since it provides broader, in-depth and more complex answers to research questions.

In this sense, a semi-structured interview for individuals and focus group interview was developed, and data from official documents, relevant publications of the Government of Pakistan were used as tools for data collection. The alumni of all the three universities of Southern Punjab who are currently working at key decision making positions in various organizations and civil society were considered as the population. These were included school and college heads, chairmen of university departments, doctors, lawyers, businessman, bankers, journalists, social workers, and mothers. These were found key informants to explore their perceptions and investigate in-depth the happening of the phenomenon being researched. An equal number of

respondents were selected from each of the above mention groups and districts. A sample of 30 respondents was selected using the purposive sampling technique to collect qualitative data. A protocol was designed to keep the identity of the respondents confidential. All the listed 30 respondents were allocated with a code from, R1 to R30 respectively and their comments and quotes were presented by the codes.

Qualitative data were analyzed through transcription, coding, and exploration of topics. To answer the research questions, the qualitative results were compared with the data from selected official documents and previous research and conclusions. Conclusions were drawn at the end to present a concise summary of the outcome of the research. This research is the first study of its kind in Pakistan that quantifies the role of higher education in gender equality and presents a comprehensive summary of the main items in the field.

## **Analysis of Qualitative Data**

The main objective of the research was to determine the role of university education in promoting gender equality in the community. The interviewees were invited to express

their opinion on the role of university education in improving the status of women and in the integration of gender equality in society. The details of the answers are provided below. Almost all agreed that there is a discrimination against women in all spheres of society and illiteracy is a basic cause of that discrimination. The majority believed that university education is playing a vital role to eradicate these discriminations especially in enrollment at different levels of education. The main reason behind these discriminations is illiteracy and conservative thinking. According to the overwhelming majority of respondents, university education plays a fundamental role in changing this typical attitude towards women. One of the respondents R-13 gave view “now, there is more openness for women to access education at all levels. University education played an important role in changing the typical mindset against women education”.

Another respondent R-5 presented her viewpoint in the following words, “University education enable female graduates to present their views with confidence at various levels. Women are now confident enough to move alone in

society. This helped a lot to continue their education”. One university teacher had a view that, “higher education played a role in the equal status of women in the community and is the surest mean of improving their status within the family. Higher education is recognized for this emphasis on personal growth and development of its students. Building trust, broadening perspectives, improving analytical skills, promoting creative problem solving, and developing communication and leadership skills are the main benefits of higher education.” One of the businessmen said that “highly educated women have the courage to raise voice against false traditions and culture. Women now resist against early marriages, restricted mobility and educated parents support them to make their own decisions regarding future”.

*R-14 gave view “educated women are more concerned about their health, they keep them fit.....adopt healthy life choices.”*

*R-22 said, “highly educated women keep their family limited and boldly use family planning options”*

*R-19 gave a view, “mostly the educated families keep the family small according to the resources they owned”*

One highlighted the changing mindset of a male in the following words, *“people now prefer working women to get married. It helps to meet financial expanse....the concept of male as the ‘Breadwinner’ is now getting change”*

*R-1 said, “educated parents do not accept stratification of gender roles as it was existed in past ....women are now working with the man and became a source of family income. although this role is minimal in magnitude and man is still playing an active role in running the household expenses.”*

Common answer on women decision making the role of women at domestic level was,

*“women with higher studies are sensible and logical in their attitudes....so they get importance equally in the decision making at home”.*

Moreover, R-23 gave logic to changing the position of women at home in these words,

*“the nature of the relationship between man and women has drastically changed due to higher education. Educated women are now better expressing their expectations and interact in a democratic way”.*

Few acknowledged the supporting attitudes of fathers in women education. One of the respondents R-9 stated, *“although, we teach them how to cook food, how to take care of home, keep the house clean ...same time her education is also relevant.”*

One of the problems against women was violence in the home. In recent years, many women have been physically and mentally abused by men in their families. Many have a view that,

*“a decrease in all types of abuse and harassment is observed. The main reason is the attitude of educated women, they are bold and do not accept the violence of any type”.*

One of the professionals from the lawyer community commented that

*“university education plays a vital role in giving a sense of independence. Now they are more aware of their rights and know the legal ways to protect them”.*

Another respondent R-10 responded in these words:

*“university students are confident enough to face challenges at home and in the community, especially at work, do not hesitate to report any form of discrimination or harassment.”*

One had a view,

*“highly educated women are now well aware regarding physical, psychological and economic abuse, and techniques to address the challenge”.*

A respondent from lawyer community R-15 pointed out,

*“women now were raising voices against domestic violence and the rate of the violence drastically decreased.”*

The majority gave credit to the universities that women were now more confident to move freely in society.

*R-2 said, “there are many women who visit the markets as compared to previous years.”*

According to the population statistics of Punjab, women constitute almost half of the total population of Punjab (48 per cent) and 63 per cent of them are under 24 years of age. The active participation of young women in various sectors of the economy is inevitable. In recent years, disparities in the status of men and women have been observed in almost all areas of life. Few comments maintain that women get jobs in many sectors besides the education sector. Educated women have more power than those who are illiterate or less qualified. A majority has a view that higher education enables women's equitable access to and control over resources through professional education. But this is helping little in promoting women's empowerment as:

*R-5 articulated, “traditionally man have control over everybody in the house because he earned money, so he is the*

*final authority. But women employment now made the environment more democratic. Working women now have the power to influence household decisions.”*

Although higher education has improved women's rights to equality with men, much remains to be done to bridge the gender gap. In Southern Punjab, women still lack basic rights and protection. The cuts still prevent women from achieving the same levels of return and wealth as their male counterparts, making growth and development more difficult.

*R-9 said, “women have less access to the job market with reasonable pay. The reason is a viewpoint that women are less able to perform....”*

Few have a view that a conservative approach is still dominating and working women are not being encouraged. Women are socially and traditionally taught to remain dependent and not preferred to the decision making posts.

*The remarks of a regional head from banking sector were as, “during recruitment and promotions women are less preferred....many have an opinion that they*

*are less innovative and less capable of multi-task activity”. One of the respondents from the Medical profession gave their view as “male leaders are a less confrontational and better deal with problematic situations. So they get preference in appointed as managers”. Women rarely get entrepreneur role in society as R-18 highlighted the possible reason as “is the owner or head of any enterprise one has to be involved in outdoor meetings and go out for longer periods...as it does not suit women in our culture .....women also are resistant to accept these head roles...that is the possible reason for the low entrepreneurial role of women”*

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Assessing the impact of university education on promoting gender equality was the main aspect of the research. Gender discrimination in various social environments is a fundamental cause of women with low socioeconomic status and deprivation. The present study indicated that the university plays a visible role in raising women's awareness of their rights. A large number of women graduates gain autonomy

and a sense of community independence. Higher education plays a fundamental role in the fight against gender discrimination in education. The same results were presented by Knowles et.al. (2002) and Straus and Thomas (1995). The Punjab Gender Parity Report 2016, showed a significant improvement in gender equality in education at various levels. According to the Asian Development Bank (1998), gender inequalities exist in women's education in Punjab at various levels. According to the data of PGPR (2016) for the year 2011-2015, an increase in the GPI of primary and secondary enrollments in southern Punjab is visible. In 2011 GPI of primary education in Bahawalpur, Multan and DG Khan were 0.64, 0.81 and 0.59, respectively. He showed an increase in 2015 when he was in Bahawalpur 0.79, 0.91 and 0.68 at Multan, in DG Khan. The GPI of gross enrollment in secondary education also indicates that gender equality has been raised in southern Punjab. The GPI data in the course of enrollment in the year 2011 were 0.81 Bahawalpur, Multan and DG Khan was 0.69 0.59. In 2015, an increase that is noteworthy since Bahawalpur had a 0.89 GPI, Multan and DG Khan was 0.75 was 0.68. This correlation indicates that the research results are valid in terms of gender equality in

education (Punjab Commission on the status of women, 2016).

According to the World Bank, (2001), and Schultz, (2002) education of women plays role in reducing fertility and infant mortality. Educated women are now health conscious and taking care of their family health. The data from Contraceptive Performance Report, 2016 show the growth in family planning visits and the overall contraceptive use rate (RCP) from 23.4 in 2011 to 28.36 in 2015 (Government of Pakistan, 2016). There is a correlation between 0.277 family planning visits and the rate of literacy in the different Punjab districts (Punjab Commission on the status of women, 2016).

Workplace harassment poses a serious threat to the participation of women in various professions. Ahmed, and Haider, (2006) and Zaidi (1999) reported that harassment, assault, and discrimination were factors in low female employment rates. In the current study, the respondents perceived that universities of Southern Punjab, among other educational institutions, have an impact on women as sensitizing them about various types of harassment and to raise voices against domestic violence. According to the Punjab Commission on the status of

women, (2016), in PGPR, the relationship between literacy levels and a range of violence against women has been determined. There is a positive relationship found between literacy level and the incidence of violence against women in Punjab. Multan, Rawalpindi, and Lahore have a relatively higher literacy rate, but they also have a high reporting rate. This could be the result of their significantly higher population.

According to Ellsberg and Heise, (2005) "Women and girls are subjected to physical, sexual, economic and psychological abuse both inside and outside their homes, although the degree of violence and the frequency can vary significantly". Several reports of violence in South Punjab showed a decrease of 5.3% between 2012 and 2015. (Government of Pakistan, 2016, on the basis of data provided by the Office of Inspector General of Punjab Police)

Another result of the study leads to the mobility of women in society. University education increases confidence and gives them a projection in several forums, which helps them to move freely without fear. Women are now more empowered on one side and benefit from the civic participation of the other. Mobility refers to the ability to

access the workplace and other places. In Pakistan, the mobility of women is threatened. The main reasons are a cultural stigma, family pressures, and family responsibilities. The low mobility of women leads to the limit of education and work. Having a vehicle on behalf of a woman directly facilitates women's mobility. It also improves their social status and economic power. In the South Punjab analysis of the past three years, the data show low parity and stagnation of vehicle ownership. According to district registrars, the property of the GPI vehicle was 0.1 in Bahawalpur, 0.35 in Multan and 0.08 in DG Khan in 2011-12, while it was 0.2 in Bahawalpur, 0.5 at Multan and 0.07 at DG Khan in 2006-7. Although the ownership of the vehicle stagnated, the general mobility does not depend on a personal vehicle. Ownership of a vehicle is one of the indicators of mobility. Mobility in public transport or even family owned transport is increased.

The results related to the third objective of the study highlighted that university education plays a significant role in women empowerment. Siddiqui, (1998) and Arif, et. al. (1999) also concluded that education play a vital role in the development of human capital and women

empowerment. The data of various official documents supports the results of the study by showing an increase in the women employment rate. According to the Labor Force Survey, (2013-14) women employment increases from 4 to 8% in various public and private sectors. However, the majority of working women fall under the lowest paid category i.e. up to Rs. 5000 whereas the majority male fell in the category of Rs. 15000 and above. This disparity does not support the claims of women empowerment. The possible reason is the participation of female workers in seasonal and temporary work.

The current research demonstrates no relationship between higher education and women entrepreneurship. The result is consistent with the data of PGPR, 2016, which revealed that have no visible proportion of women in high-growth sector entrepreneurship. The total number of women proprietor of cottage industry was 2.6%, and small-scale industry was 4.2%. The share of agriculture in the economy is 20.9% in Pakistan and the growth rate of the agriculture sector is 4.1%. Majority of the rural women are active in non-marketed businesses and they are either unpaid or underpaid. The share of women in land ownership is less than 20% (PCOSW, 2016).

Women entrepreneurship in the legal and judicial system is still very weak. According to PGPR, (2016), there are 709 police stations in Punjab, and only three have a female police officer. Only 6% of judges are women in superior courts and 15% in district courts (PCOSW, 2016). The total participation of registered women lawyers at all levels is 12%. Even the representation of women in decision making and the resulting influence are minimal. Only one woman works in grade 21 and none in grade 22 in Punjab. So there is a minimal portion of women in public sector decision making positions keep them a vulnerable segment of society.

The following are the conclusions of the study: The study concludes that gender discrimination is an emerging problem of the region and university education impact is explicit in the promotion of gender parity. Gender parity is visible in educational enrollments at various levels, increase in literacy rate and employment.

Higher education has inter-generational effects on women, as they give equal importance to the education of their children. Further, it is evident from the findings of the study that university education impacts community to adopt

liberal attitudes towards co-education which increased women's enrollment in the universities of Southern Punjab. Universities in South Punjab provide awareness to women to stand for their rights and fight against any type of assault, harassment or violence against them. The study concludes that university education is playing role in women mobility. Female graduates of universities trickle autonomy and sense of independence to the community of Southern Punjab. There is a gender inequality exists in women empowerment and entrepreneurship in Southern Punjab.

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