



JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES DEVELOPMENT



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EXPLORING THE ROLE OF WOMEN'S UNIVERSITIES IN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF PUNJAB UNIVERSITIES

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Women's Empowerment, Women's Universities, Qualitative Analysis, Punjab, Pakistan	The main focus of this research was to study the role of Women's Universities in socio-economic empowerment of female in Punjab Pakistan. Researcher used qualitative research for the study. The data was collected through interview method. The Heads of the Departments from women's universities were respondents. The heads of eight departments, one from each university, made up the sample of the study, which was conducted in eight women's universities in Punjab, Pakistan. The purposive sampling technique was used to select respondents. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The Findings has been found to play an important role to provide socioeconomic empowerment of females of Women University. Women university creates a professional development opportunity to enhance their competencies, encourage collaborative work environment, establish leadership role, and participate in inclusive decision-making with financial remuneration. At the same time, the heads of female departments face different challenges. The restriction on the professional development opportunities, gender bias, financial differences, lack of institutional support, work pressure as well as maintaining act-role-family restriction. In short, the women's universities are giving conducive environment where the females can work and bring professional development.
ARTICLE HISTORY	<p>Date of Submission: 25-10-2025</p> <p>Date of Acceptance: 28-11-2025</p> <p>Date of Publication: 30-11-2025</p>
	2025 Journal of Social Sciences Development
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Email:	hina.munir@wum.edu.pk
DOI	https://doi.org/10.53664/JSSD/04-04-2025-05-52-61

INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment through higher education has become an increasingly important agent of social change, economic participation, and agent of gender equality across the developing world as Pakistan (Latif & Rasool, 2025). Women's Universities in Punjab were established for purpose of improving access to higher education for women from conservative & marginalized families. While,

providing safe academic spaces contribute toward leadership development, acquiring professional skills, and socioeconomic empowerment (World Bank, 2024; Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training, 2024). In this drive, number of recently published national and international development studies have highlighted the potential of women-only higher education institutions to transform gendered structural barriers, enhance employability, and strengthen labor-market participation of women (OICCI, 2024; UNESCO, 2025). The higher educational sector in Pakistan has witnessed several national level interventions, and institutional initiatives to create women leadership for strengthening their professional skills, abilities and career opportunities, leading to women empowerment.

Various universities and academic networking organizations throughout country have launched specific measures to strengthen the capacity of women faculty. Through the National Academy of Higher Education (HEC, 2025) of the Higher Education Commission, companies organize various mentoring programs and leadership development trainings to improve Women's communication, networking and conflict-management capabilities and to groom them for key academic positions. For instance, various Women Universities have conducted empowerment and mentoring programs for female faculty to build their confidence, leadership qualities, and teaching effectiveness for linking academic scholarship with practical empowerment initiatives (RWU, 2023). Furthermore, the conferences at national and international levels organized by Women's Universities have been very constructive platforms for policy dialogue and exchange on gender equity, leadership, and academic innovation (BNBWU, 2023; Naich, Shah & Iqbal, 2025). Yet, notwithstanding the positive development as discussed above, there are a number of barriers which continue to obstruct full participation and recognition of female faculty in leadership and governance of the higher education institutions.

The policies of Women Universities must further advance, as should their professional development and support systems and their linkages with socio-cultural structures which hinder the optimum participation, and recognition of female faculty in leadership and governance of Higher Education Institutions (UNESCO, 2023). In this linking, empowerment is much more than access. In recent literature, empowerment is seen to provide professional autonomy, status, and respect; as well as decisions, job security, and an enabling environment (Rana, Lee, Saher & Shabbir, 2024; ICIMOD, 2021). Moreover, the teaching profession is more accepted socially for women in Pakistan (LCWU, 2020; Cheema, 2021). As a result, Women's Universities create opportunities to transform gender norms as well as create leadership spaces in higher education. In Punjab, several women work in Women's Universities due to the government policy that has increased the employment quota for women to 15 percent. But do the Women's Universities employ such a woman-only expert faculty who is thus able to use her education to become the socio-economically empowered woman? An examination of diverse narratives undertaken amongst the women faculty members in Women's Universities of Punjab.

Problem Statement

The women's universities in Punjab were set up with the aim of promoting the socio-economic empowerment of women but there is limited evidence in qualitative terms how do these institutions

empower their women faculty. Universities in Pakistan are now promoting women empowerment and providing easy access to higher education to females. Besides, policy interventions facilitate access to higher education for women to enhance their empowerment. Research finds that women's higher education access at universities improved their education & helped them find employment leading to economic independence. University-based constraints imposed by frequent evidential work and reports will essentially reduce the problems and challenges considerably. However, still there are structural, cultural and institutional challenges facing the female teachers due to which their professional experience in these universities is constrained. Thus, the institutional policies and practices affect the career progression of faculty members. Specifically, in academia, women are less likely to be found in positions of leadership compared to men. Ultimately, it needs qualitative research examination.

Objectives of Study

1. The study aims to find out how Women's Universities in Punjab are source of empowerment of females in Punjab.
2. To find out major institutional, cultural, and structural barriers to Women's empowerment in the Punjab, Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The women through higher education institutions having positive impact on gender equity, women leadership, and professional development: a review of literature. According to research carried out in East Asia, it was found that Women's Universities provide an academic environment that enables female faculty to challenge gender norms and take up leadership positions (Nakamura & Hirano, 2020). In a similar vein, Southeast Asian research highlights that the implementation of gender-sensitive education policies and institutional support that enhances the women's academic careers (Jamaludin & Cheah, 2020). In this connection, women's universities function as critical platforms for addressing structural gender inequalities by creating educational environments (Ibrahim & Asad, 2020). In some western contexts, researchers have studied women's colleges' gender equity initiatives and found that the mentorship arrangements, inclusive leadership models, as well as organizational culture impact the careers of the women academics (Smith & Johnson, 2019; Brown & Jones, 2020).

Research out of North America suggests that women's universities incubate leadership by allowing women faculty to expand their confidence, autonomy, and decision-making (Johnson & Smith, 2018). Findings from the Middle East and Africa show that empowerment in higher education is influenced by socio-cultural norms and policy context. According to Ndlovu and Moyo (2017), the implementation of gender focused institutional policies can greatly enhance women's progression in careers. In similar way, Al-Hariri and Khalil (2020) highlight the organizational support and educational reforms as main mechanisms to empower female academics in conservative contexts. Recent global scholarship (2024-2025) increasingly calls for the qualitative and intersectional approaches to understand women's empowerment in the higher education arguing that numerical indicators do not sufficiently capture the nuance of lived experiences, power relations along with

the contextual diverse challenges (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Malterud, Siersma & Guassora, 2024; UNESCO, 2025).

Despite their significance, the qualitative studies upon female faculty empowerment at women's universities in Pakistan, especially in Punjab, are quite scarce. There seems to be a clear gap that needs to be addressed through this particular study. Based on Women Empowerment Theory and Feminist Institutional Theory, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the experiences of women in the higher education institutions. According to Kabeer (1999) and UNESCO (2025), women's empowerment theory describes empowerment as a multidimensional process that involves increasing agency, access to the resources, control over choices and decision-making power in professional and personal life. In societies where cultural norms, safety concerns, or gender biases restrict women's access to co-educational institutions, women's universities emerge as powerful mechanisms for inclusion, equity, and social mobility (Murshid, & Critelli, 2020). In the context of the higher education, empowerment means more than just education; it includes getting a job, participating in leadership, becoming economically independent and gaining recognition from the institution.

The framework is useful for exploring how women's universities facilitate confidence, professional identity and economic security amid women faculty members. According to Feminist Institutional theory, the rules, practices and norms in institutions, both formal and informal, produce gendered experiences (Acker 2006). In other words, rather than proving the gender-neutral institution, the university reproduces the gender inequalities with its promotion structures, leadership style and culture at the workplace (Razi, Saleem, Ahmed & Subhan, 2025). This framework will help us to assess how Women's universities in Punjab are gender responsive institutions and how structural barriers inhibit women's empowerment. Thus, women's universities contribute to the empowerment primarily through access to higher education, which is widely recognized as a foundational driver of the women's personal and societal advancement (Zainab & Alam, 2025). Collectively, these frameworks will help us connect the empowering of female faculty to the workings of the women's universities as an institution. Additionally, it will connect both aspects to women's university socio-cultural environment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

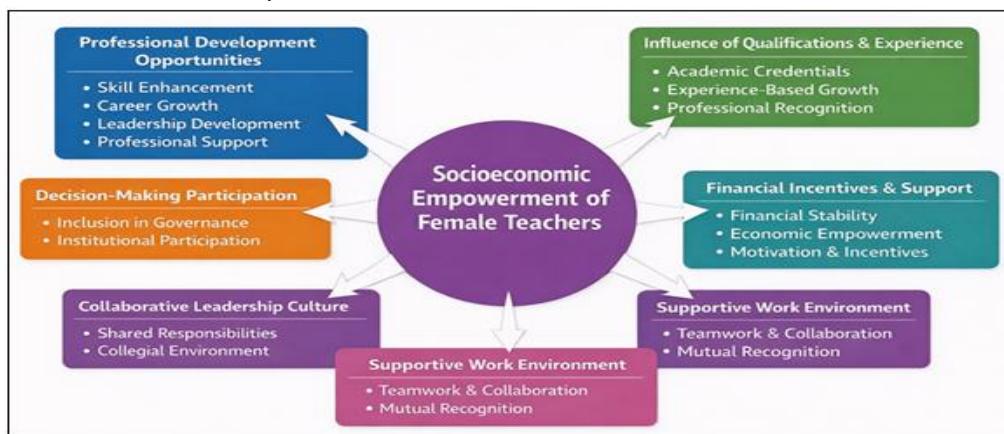
A qualitative case study research design was employed for this study to gain insight into women's universities' role in empowering female faculty in Punjab, Pakistan. The researchers undertook in-depth semi-structured interviews with Heads of the Departments of selected Women's universities on basis of purposive sampling, ensured that every academic discipline from different universities was represented. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through secure online platform. With the consent of participants, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke. It enabled the identification of recurring patterns, meanings and themes around professional empowerment, institutional support and barriers faced by the female academics. This qualitative method permitted the subtle research of participants' experiences in social, cultural & institutional context.

FINDINGS OF STUDY

Objective 1

To find out how Women's Universities in Punjab are the source of empowerment of the females in Punjab, Pakistan.

Figure 1 Socio-Economic Empowerment of Female Teachers



The thematic analysis of interviews conducted with heads of the departments across eight women's universities in Punjab revealed that women's universities play a significant role in promoting the socioeconomic empowerment of female faculty members over multiple interrelated mechanisms. Five main themes emerged that help to contribute to the empowerment process. The first theme, influence of qualifications and experience, indicates that education, work experience, and research expertise importantly influence women's career development to engage more freely in discussions, decision-making, and problem-solving activities. In the women's universities, it was observed that mainly qualified & experienced female faculty members are likely to get recognition, promotions and leadership positions according to participants. The second theme is professional development opportunities that would enhance one's capacity. Respondents pointed out that training programs, workshops, mentoring & exposure to leadership enhance women's confidence, professional learning and career progression.

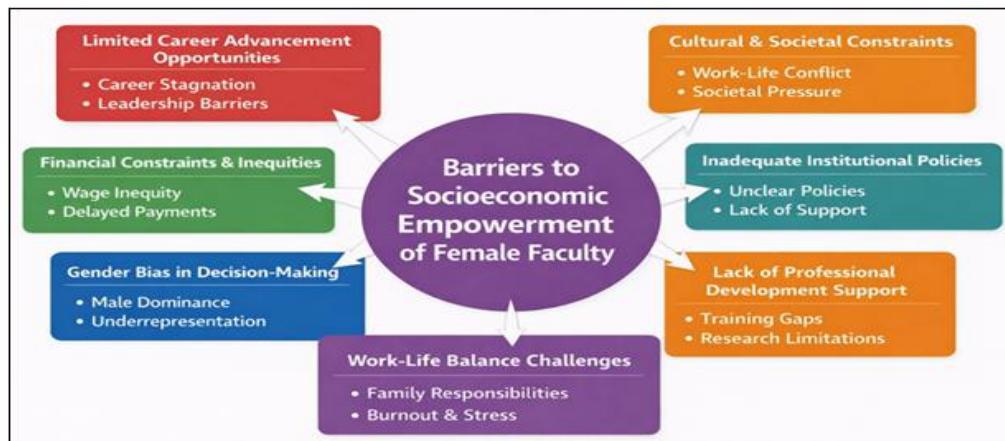
By giving them chances to take up administrative and academic leadership roles, it empowers the female teachers. Inclusive governance structures involve society in decision-making that affects them. Women educators who are involved in decision making at institutional level, policy creation and sharing of leadership feel more valued, recognized, and empowered. The cultural participation helps in breaking down traditional hierarchies and leading to institutional democracy. According to 4th theme, financial incentives and support, money is an important dimension of empowerment. When female faculty members receive competitive salaries, attractive incentives and rewards for good performance, they achieve monetary independence. This way, they can spend money on their family and personal growth. The collaborative leadership culture theme emphasizes importance of

supportive work environment. Participants felt that women's institutions are spaces of collaboration and merit recognition and respect, boost job satisfaction, professional engagement and institutional growth as a whole.

Objective 2

To find out the major institutional, cultural, and structural barriers to women's empowerment in Punjab, Pakistan.

Figure 2 Thematic Map of Challenges to Socio-Economic Empowerment



Women's universities have played an empowering role yet results suggest there are numerous barriers that still impede complete socioeconomic empowerment of female faculty. Institutional, cultural, and structural challenges revealed through seven major themes. Lack of financial funding paid up and inequities in salaries, payment delays and low incentives emerged as a major barrier. Women's economic security is harmed by these issues, impacting their job concentration. The constraints to career advancement opportunities were often highlighted, with referencing to lack of mentorship demonstrating attainable pathways to professional success and leadership. Many female teachers lost the chance for upward career mobility. Identifying Work-Life Balance was found to be a major hurdle. Thus, the difficulties females face in continuing their careers in academia are due to rigid schedules, family obligations, stress, and burnout. These cause a decrease in productivity or a break in their careers.

Women face the pressure of Cultural and Societal Constraints in professional life. The mobility of women leaders is restricted due to traditional gender roles and social expectations. The participants said the Institutional Policies were Inadequate. Especially unclear promotion criteria, the weak maternity leave policy, and no childcare facility. The missing policies weaken institutional support for female faculty. This exposure fosters aspirations for leadership roles in the academia, politics, entrepreneurship, public administration, and civil society, thereby challenging traditional gender hierarchies and redefining women's societal roles. Gender Bias in Decision-Making continues with committees dominated by men and women under-represented in influential positions. The women's

voice remains marginalized from decision-making processes. The lack of professional development support such as training, research funding, and leadership development is also packed in women empowerment constraint.

DISCUSSION

This study investigates the role of women's universities in socioeconomic empowerment of female faculty members in Punjab, Pakistan. The study also identifies barriers to their empowerment. The study's findings show women's universities serve as important institutional spaces for professional, economic, and leadership empowerment. However, such empowerment still occurs in the face of structural and socio-cultural constraints. With respect to the first objective of study, the findings indicate that women's universities contribute significantly to women's empowerment through skills training, participative decision making, and enabling institutional cultures. In line with the [Kabeer \(1999\)](#) empowerment framework, access to resources, including training, mentorship, leadership roles, and financial incentives, enhanced participants' agency and professional accomplishments by enhancing employability and promoting financial independence. Earlier studies are in line with finding where it was found that women-only higher education institutions are safer and enabling grounds for the professional advancement of the women ([Nakamura & Hirano, 2020](#); [Johnson & Smith, 2018](#)).

The qualifications and experience required for empowerment shows how career progression within women's universities is merit based. The highly qualified and experienced women staff members demonstrated a greater likelihood of receiving recognition and occupying leadership roles. These corporate previous studies conducted within the higher education context ([Brown & Jones 2020](#)). Moreover, emphasis placed by participants on participation in decision-making refers to shared governance and inclusive leadership within institution. This repeat feminist institutionalist lenses which have shown the role of institutions in promoting gender equity organization ([Acker, 2006](#)). The shared experiences of women within these institutions create strong solidarities that reinforce resilience, emotional well-being, and a sense of belonging, all of which are essential components of empowerment. But addressing second objective, the results uncovered significant barriers to socio-economic empowerment that continue to exist even in women-focused institutions. Women's career growth is unfavorably impacted due to financial inequities, restricted promotion chances and vain institutional policies.

According to the results, the findings are in line with the studies from developing contexts. In such contexts, higher education does not repeatedly empower students without institutional mechanism in place ([Rana, Lee, Saher & Shabbir, 2024](#); [UNESCO, 2025](#)). Women's mobility and balance of work and life are being affected by the cultural and societal limitations in which are especially familiar in terms of the gender and family. As per previous studies socio-cultural norms continue to create obstacles to the women's empowerment in the South Asian societies ([Ndlovu & Moyo, 2017](#); [ICIMOD, 2024](#)) this study reveals. Gender bias even in decision-making structures reminds us that institutional change is still not complete even at women universities. Thus, empowerment must look at policy reform and culture change. On the whole, the discussion reveals that women's universities in Punjab are both enablers of empowerment and reflections of social and institutional constraints.

Empowerment is thus process, rather than a product. It is shaped by interplay of individual agency, institutional support.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study concludes that the women's universities in Punjab, Pakistan, play an important role in advancing the socioeconomic empowerment of its female faculty members by offering them professional development opportunities, an inclusive academic environment, and relative financial stability. These organizations help women nurture their confidence, leadership skills and professional identity in higher education. Despite this, women's empowerment is impeded by gaps in institutional policy, lack of career progression, economic disparities and cultural and social norms. The study shows that women's universities may provide more supportive environments for women academics, but that empowerment cannot be fully achieved in the absence of social and institutional inequality. As such, women's empowerment in higher education ought to be viewed as a continual along with contextual process requiring the sustained institutional commitment as well as policy support.

Recommendations

1. In light of the findings, it is recommended that the women's university should enhance the socioeconomic empowerment of female faculty in many ways. Women's access to leadership and senior academic positions should be ensured through clear and fair promotion processes and criteria.
2. The required training, mentoring, leadership workshop, and research fund must be given to them. There needs to be improvement in policies include comprehensive maternity leave, childcare facilities, flexible work options, clearer systems for salary increments to balance home and work.
3. It is essential to ensure equal pay and timely salary disbursement with reasonable bonuses. Key committees must include greater representation of women to participate in decision-making and governance.
4. Ultimately, cultural and social impediments must be removed through awareness programs, gender-sensitivity training and other initiatives that create climate for women leadership & professional visibility.

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