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Exploring the role of Familial Dynamics and Institutional Structures in Women's Economic Empowerment in Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper explores the varying and interconnected hurdles to women's economic empowerment in Pakistan. The study primarily focuses on the interconnected familial and structural dynamics in the context of Pakistan. Qualitative research methods, primarily based on 25 semi-structured interviews with working women, male family heads, and development practitioners, are employed in the study. Analysis revealed three interconnected themes within the data. The first theme related to the women's micro agency reveals that empowerment is a complex, dynamic, and negotiated field in Pakistan. It is not about a simple transition from dependence to independence, so employment increases women's opportunities in households. The second theme concerns the institutional weaknesses that exacerbate hurdles to women's empowerment highlighted the policy practice gap. The final theme illustrates that several religious and moral codes also constrain women's empowerment in Pakistan. A few notable constraints are evident in the lack of laws and regulations, mobility issues, and social norms, such as respectability, that severely hinder women's participation in economic affairs. Conversely, it was also highlighted that limited number of family heads facilitate access to resources and enhance opportunities and achievements for their women despite of familial and structural constraints imposed by patriarchal society. The study maintains that women's empowerment can be genuinely ensured only by addressing both micro- and macro-level dynamics.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Mobility, Economic Participation, Social Norms, Institutions.

Introduction

Women's economic empowerment (WEE) is an important matter in the contemporary world. Women constitute almost half of the world's human workforce. They play a vital role in the international arena. Despite their utmost significance, they are underemployed in Pakistan. They face several hurdles in accessing a moderate workplace or getting quality education. The underrepresentation of women in the workforce is a vital issue that needs to be addressed timely and effective manner. Initially, women's empowerment was narrowly conceptualized. It was believed that economic opportunities solely constitute women's empowerment. However, in the contemporary world, women's empowerment refers to women living their lives according to their own choices. It moves beyond mere economic opportunities. In Pakistan, even today, women struggle to get into the

workplace. Many reasons, ranging from familial dynamics to structural constraints, can be accounted for that. Socially constructed religious and moral codes also constrain women in Pakistani society.

Nevertheless, despite many obstacles, WEE has not been investigated in depth in the Pakistani setting. This research will address this gap by empirically examining the key obstacles Pakistani women encounter in their economic activities. It is inclined to investigate the micro-levels of the family and macro-levels of structural limitation. The paper asserts that WEE is a socially constructed and contextual phenomenon. Therefore, a qualitative research design is chosen to examine WEE in Pakistan. The primary source of data is the semi-structured interviews with women workers, family heads, developmental practitioners, and experts in gender studies. The interview data will be analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, yielding three interrelated themes that identify the hindrances to WEE in Pakistan.

A brief overview of the existing literature follows the introduction section. The literature review highlights theoretical and empirical studies surrounding WEE. The literature review is followed by a brief overview of the methodology employed in this study. A brief theoretical framework follows the methodology. Finally, the data findings and analysis extracted from interviews are presented in the paper. Findings are synthesized with the existing literature towards the end of the paper.

Literature Review

The issue of women's economic empowerment is frequently discussed in the academic literature, where researchers offer various definitions. In the first instance, this empowerment was measured by the economic activities of the women. Nevertheless, recent literature has shifted the emphasis from financial resources to the capability to live a life of choice (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2001). In keeping with this new view, Kabeer (1999) links the concepts of empowerment to changes in resources, agency, and achievement, and suggests a holistic model that links individual decisions to the wider structural transformation. As Aggarwal (1997) notes, bargaining models and property rights discourses shape women's decision-making power within the family, as they are grounded in an ancient patriarchal gender perspective. Kandiyoti (1988) writes that adherence to norms is a strategic decision made by most women. Social norms are not random; they are created and reinforced through discourse, as Bicchieri (2016) notes, much as conditional expectations are. To empower women, we need to alter the incentives and expectations. According to North (1990), formal institutional arrangements, such as laws and courts, interact with informal constraints, such as customs and traditions, to create opportunities and transaction costs associated with social norms.

In a nutshell, the theoretical literature supports the assumption that female economic empowerment is underpinned by women's capabilities, intra-household bargaining, and institutional mechanisms that uphold social norms. The analysis of women's empowerment in Pakistan, which entails women experiencing numerous social restrictions, requires a theoretical framework. Empirical studies across various contexts offer a broad view of women's empowerment. The literature suggests that, in most cases, empowerment is accompanied by development, but development alone does not ensure empowerment (Duflo, 2012). Jayachandran (2015; 2021) states that social norms persist even with higher levels of education. The increase in the supply of female labor across contexts, however, does not lead to a change in the ratio, which is driven by safety, childcare, household chores, and more (Heath & Jayachandran, 2017).

According to the literature, the empowerment of women needs to be viewed holistically; one cannot examine it through a narrow programmatic analysis without considering social structure and power (Kabeer, 2020). Also, in conservative societies, evidence suggests that the attitudes of parents also change considerably when a woman has access to credible information regarding jobs. Some families

have been observed sending their daughters to school when jobs are available. However, education does not necessarily lead to a job due to factors such as the time required to reach the workplace, family commitments, and other responsibilities. The empirical literature emphasizes that women's empowerment cannot be viewed solely in the individual (micro) sense; they must also learn about the structural (macro) issues. The empowerment of women in Pakistan has become a global trend, but it is associated with certain challenges. Despite the high returns to education in the labor market, these returns are reflected only to a minimal extent in employment opportunities. The limitation of jobs is affected by social conventions. Aslam (2009) presents gender-specific returns in Pakistan by using national data. Other literature released by Aslam and Kingdon (2012) emphasizes the importance of education as a means of creating knowledge and skills among women. Through education alone, however, structural barriers cannot be overcome. Researches highlighted that patriarchal social structures including family units influence the educational and employment opportunities for women. Despite of strict patriarchal norms that restrict the women's position at social level, support of male family member is identified as a motivational factor to pursue their educational and economic opportunities (Rana et al., 2024; Ur Rehman et al., 2024).

The country of Pakistan is characterized by a high level of sectoral division of labor, in which women earn less and work fewer hours than their male colleagues (Majid & Siegmann, 2021). Another fact, as noted by Jayachandran (2021), is that women are not subject to social sanctions in the labor market. The labor market is restrictive for women, even when wages are fair, due to safety and mobility concerns. Pakistan is a culturally rich country, and its practices are strong such that the law tends to yield to them in issues concerning women. Most women do not receive what they deserve, even when they have the right to inherit and possess property (Khalid, 2015). A similar quantitative study by Abbas et al. (2021) established that education, wealth, and decision-making autonomy are significant variables that determine women's empowerment in Pakistan. Research has also shown that income may enhance women's agency but does not necessarily lead to actual empowerment (Khan et al., 2020). Another research also highlighted that increased level of education can lead to financial independence for women. That enables women to challenge existing discriminating social practices (Malik & Courtney, 2010). Familial support system and institutional structures influence the women's empowerment in Pakistan therefore, there is critical need for a holistic research study that address both barriers for women at both familial and institutional levels to foster gender equality (Rasheed et al., 2024; Ur Rehman et al., 2024).

In short, the literature indicates that several interrelated obstacles hinder women's empowerment in Pakistan. Social norms play a major role in women's mobility, and the weak institutional enforcement of laws does not help the situation. Poor labor-market dynamics that offer low-paying jobs are unlikely to attract women into the labor force. According to the theoretical discussion, women's empowerment requires several interdependent factors that must be considered to achieve positive results. The proposed research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge by analyzing the main barriers to empowering women in Pakistan.

Research Methodology

Women's economic empowerment (WEE) is a socially constructed phenomenon that varies over time and across space. Different scholars perceive empowerment differently. Therefore, this study adheres to a subjective ontology and, concurrently, to a constructionist epistemology. The study maintains that women's economic empowerment in Pakistan is discursively constructed. Several social factors interact to create what is known as women's empowerment in Pakistan. Philosophically, the study falls under interpretivism, which holds that reality can only be understood through interpretation. WEE in Pakistan requires an in-depth contextual analysis. A comprehensive understanding of Pakistan's societal dynamics is imperative for understanding the complex dynamics surrounding

WEE in Pakistan. Therefore, a qualitative research design is employed in the study. Qualitative research design enables a researcher to thoroughly explore a phenomenon by delving into its context. Inductive theorizing is used in the study to generate a ground-level framework for WEE in Pakistan.

Primary data generated through twenty-five (25) semi-structured interviews are primarily used in the study. Purposive, and convenience sampling techniques were used to reach potential interviewees. Details of interviewees are as follows:

Table-1

Details of Respondents' interviews

S/N	Interviewees/ Respondents	No.
1	Working women	11
2	Male family heads	09
3	Development Practitioners / gender experts	05
	Total	25

The interviewees were working women, as the study seeks first-hand data from primary experiences. Most of the interviewees were reluctant to share their experiences freely. To overcome the issue, opportunistic sampling via personal connections was employed. Besides working women, family heads, gender experts, and development practitioners were also interviewed. Data and theoretical triangulation, following Denzin's methods, were also carried out to minimize the researcher bias. Qualitative data findings are often influenced by researcher bias, and triangulation helps minimize it. The insights from working women were triangulated with those of experts and practitioners.

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke six six-stage process, is employed to analyze the interview data. Twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted with diverse stakeholders over 3 months. The interviews were manually transcribed. Interview transcripts were coded manually for the further thematic analysis. The coding was followed by theme generation. The final results yield three interconnected yet distinct themes that illustrate major challenges in WEE in Pakistan. Per the participants' request, their identities are anonymized using pseudonyms rather than their real names.

The interview protocols for conducting the study were framed based on the questionnaire of World Value Survey (WVS) Wave-7. Selected questions of WVS were adopted into qualitative questions to get the deeper understanding the hurdles in WEE in Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

This study follows the theoretical conceptualization of women empowerment, institutional framework by Douglass North (1999) and concept of power by Michael Foucault (1982).

Theoretical Framework for Women's Empowerment: Theorizing the women's empowerment can be articulated through the core theoretical concepts of Sen (1999), Nussbaum (2001), Kabeer (1999) and Aggarwal (1997) to understand the contextual realities of familial dynamics and institutional structures. Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach is linked with individual's empowerment for making the strategic choices of their lives. Sen also stressed that development is about to expend people's considerable freedom to get access the life opportunities so they live the life they value (Visser, 2017). Kabeer's theoretical concept of empowerment is the process that involves resources (social, material and human), agency (ability to set their goals and act upon them) and achievements (wellbeing outcomes). Understanding the familial and institutional context of Pakistan, it is pertinent to understand women's micro agency within sociocultural constraints (Kabeer, 1999).

Nussbaum (2001) extended the concept of capabilities in regard with dignity and equality by controlling the over the resources, integrity, and ensuring institutional support for women's rights and justice which is critical in Pakistani patriarchal system and weak enforcement of women's related laws (Hopkin, 2002). Aggarwal's (1997) presented her work on social change, like in Pakistan, underscoring the socio-cultural legal barriers that women's face in familial hierarchies, decision making arenas, and discrimination at institutional level. It highlighted the urgent need to reform the familial and institutional framework to enhance the enabling environment for women's empowerment (Wahid and Kabir, 2024). These theoretical lenses develop women's empowerment framework in Pakistan, that dynamically interplay between extending women's capabilities and agency within the constraints of familial norms and institutional structures that limit the women's access to the education, legal rights and economic opportunities

Institutional Framework by Douglass North (1990): Institutional Climate creates the motivation for action or inaction. Key formal institutions, including law, rules and regulations and implementing processes maintained by the State, markets and international agencies. Rules, regulation, processes and actions by State are important in creating enabling environment (conditions) in which women and other actors make decisions. According to North (1990), formal institutional arrangements, such as laws and courts, interact with informal constraints, such as customs and traditions, to create opportunities and transaction costs associated with social norms.

Theoretical Concept of power, bio-power and panopticon: This study follows Michael Foucault's concept of power, which argues that power is everywhere in society (Foucault, 1982). It exists in many social ways that are usually not recognizable. Panopticon, a central and notable part of Foucault's conception of power, represents surveillance and control in society. The control is usually manifested in unrecognizable ways. It is usually enforced through routine social practices and norms. The social practices and norms in Pakistan, as illustrated below, classically mirror the Foucaultian concept of Panopticon. The social practices in Pakistan are pervasive, effectively acting as surveillance mechanisms. The social norms are discursively created to regulate women's behavior in Pakistan. Women constantly seek permission for their behaviour (life choices), as evidenced by the negotiation repertoire in Pakistan. The negotiation repertoire reflects the Panopticon of family, society, and institutions in Pakistan. The moral gatekeeping attitude of institutional representatives, such as police, courts, union councils and designated committees represent a subtle (layer of non-physical energy) yet effective mechanism for maintaining subjects' compliance with the existing status quo. This institutional behavior further extends the panoptic power and control. The findings show that the Panoptic powers in Pakistan are not only physical, but also psychological and procedural as well. As Foucault assumes, power is not only regulated through coercion but also through normalized behavior.

Foucaultian's power-knowledge nexus is also evident in this study. He assumes that power relations and knowledge production are mutually inclusive and reinforcing endeavors. The powerful elites produce knowledge in their favor, which, in turn, sustains their status quo. This is an ongoing process. This assertion is evident in the study's findings. The findings reveal that society selectively instrumentalizes religion for its vested interests. Religion is used to constrain women's behavior by invoking specific teachings. However, the same religion is bypassed whenever convenient (practices of inheritance right). The attitude represents how dominant discourses are created that legitimize social practices. The social practices, in turn, are vital in sustaining the status quo. Additionally, the institutional failure to ensure justice exemplifies the institutional dynamics that favor stability over justice.

Finally, Foucaultian concept of biopower is also evident in this study. Biopower signifies governing the whole life of a particular gender by regulating their life choices and behavior. Biopolitics aims to constrain women's actions to ensure social stability and the status quo. Biopolitics is usually carried through social norms. Social norms regulate women's mobility, sexuality, and behavior. Through regulations, docile bodies (conformists through surveillance, training and internalization of rules) are produced rather than proper human beings (Nadesan, 2010). This study reveals how women's mobility and freedom are constrained by invoking security concerns. They are constantly being told that their freedom must be curtailed to ensure their security. This way, society creates certain acceptable norms for them. This practice of regulating individual women's behavior is extended to collective social norms, which are regulated in Pakistan through normalized practices.

Data Findings and Analysis

This study aims to investigate the factors contributing to the limited economic participation and opportunities available to educated women in our society. It further examines the influence of familial dynamics and institutional structures on women's economic empowerment at the societal level. The findings below are structured around these objectives.

Theme 1. Micro-agency in the Household

A dominant theme in the interview data concerns women's empowerment and its associated dynamics in Pakistan. The data shows that most interviewees link “empowerment” to practical micro-level abilities within households, such as earning ownership, respectable status, and mobility to pursue employment and other endeavours. Participants believe that empowerment is a complex, dynamic, and negotiated field in Pakistan. It is not about a simple transition from dependence to independence.

Earning ownership emerged as a dominant subtheme for women to act as agents in households. Participants acknowledge that the source of income is pivotal in achieving private intentions. One respondent explicitly links personal growth with individual earnings. Without money, personal growth stalls. An interviewee noted, “I can easily make any decision due to my financial independence. Otherwise, if I couldn't independent in my personal decision-making.” (M. Khan, personal communication, July 20, 2025). The data show that income initially widens women's personal discretion. The household hierarchies are challenged in later phases. Another participant anchored, “If I am earning money, I can spend it on anything I want. I can spend my money as per my choices.” (Javeria, personal communication, August 15, 2025). Similarly, most of the other responses indicate that income increases women's personal choices. Their financial decisions become more independent. However, household hierarchies are not significantly affected by women's employment. Women's employment makes women independent in their decision-making. Women's freedom eventually spills over into household affairs, including decision-making. An interview noted, “by having control over my income, I maintained multiple income sources because they give me freedom and social status.” (Maria, personal communication, July 20, 2025).

Another associated dynamic in women's employment is the emergence of social friction. The data shows that male members of the family are often taunted when their women partners work. One mother noted, “His family and community members often taunt my son-in-law. They repeatedly comment that you got a lottery as your wife is earning.” Such taunts from family and community members discourage working women from working with their partners. Another interview anchor shared similar concerns and noted, “When a woman earns outpace than a spouse, the in-laws start creating trouble by devaluing women's earnings. They do not care about women's contributions in their family.” (Amna, personal communication, July 18, 2025).

Women's independence, which eventually spilled into household affairs, including decision-making, becomes the first constraint in women's empowerment in Pakistan. The reaction from the household hierarchy becomes problematic as well. An emergent finding highlighted that married working women opted employment by choice in accordance with family and social norms, their investment in the relations and fulfilling household responsibilities facilitated them in created spaces within social structures for acceptability of their employment, but it took time.

Mobility is an attribute of employment and, later, empowerment. Movement – the act of moving to another place – is one of the aspects lacking in Pakistan's infrastructure for empowering women. The interview data indicate that women's mobility in Pakistan is largely constrained by three interrelated factors: safety, household responsibilities, and moral status. The limitation for women in most families is the lack of safe means of travel. An interviewee observed that a personal car is the only safe mode of transportation that the majority of families prefer for their females. (Ayesha, personal communication, September 9, 2025). Absence of personal transportation constitutes an obstacle to women's empowerment (in terms of mobility) due to the lack of trust in local transportation system and other various social challenges. Another critical barrier where women's empowerment stalls is prevailing expectation withing the family and community that working women are unable to manage their household duties. This poses a challenge and undermines women's confidence. They try to put maximum effort into achieving the familial obligations and professional commitments. Another interviewee argues that women's working hours should be reduced because they must take care of their families. (Zoya, personal communication, September 28, 2025).

The issue of women's mobility is not limited to employment; it is evident in women's education as well. It also reacts with the so-called moral codes. As a female student pointed out, "When I chose to pursue higher studies, the majority of my family members strongly opposed my decision to attend higher education in a co-education setting. They were not paying my fee, or anything, but they were having a say." (Kinza, personal communication, August 15, 2025). The interview data show that, despite parental support, many females never pursue higher education because of their families' so-called moral codes. Notwithstanding, a few cases indicate that women pursue their careers despite extended family pressure, with their parents' steadfast support. An interviewee noted, "Everyone in my family opposed my decision to pursue higher education but my parents, particularly my mother took strong stand for my educational choice despite facing the threat of divorce." (Hareem, personal communication, August 8, 2025). Likewise, the data shows that few women pursue their studies after marriage as their in-laws support them in managing household chores and shared child-rearing responsibilities. Few working reported their compromised living conditions, inspite of financial independence within abusive marriage just to safe the future of their children. An additional finding elaborated that social norms remained a significant barrier, irrespective of women's educational and employment status, who decided to report violent incidents against her husband to the police, face potential repercussions including lack of support mechanism at familial and community levels, considered as shameful act and fear of stigmatization that may persist across generations.

In Pakistan, so-called religious and moral codes, often constructed by men's discursive practices, are deeply intertwined in families. The data show that when women's earnings or mobility increase, countervailing forces use religion and morals to re-discipline women. The teachings, or moral codes, are often constructed. An interviewee opined, "There was a case of child-rape. The police labelled it as adultery. The woman, an acquaintance of mine, pushed for it because she was well aware of the legal distinction. The rapist was convicted." (Hareem, personal communication, August 8, 2025). This is not a single story; there are many cases in our society.

Whenever a woman seeks to go beyond the established social protocols, society reacts with moral and religious codes. An interviewee noted, “The workplace harassment laws in Pakistan are often biased and moralistic. The society places procedural hurdles for women in many ways, including intrusive scrutiny and demanding divorce certificates, among others.” (Dr. Hafeez, personal communication, September 16, 2025).

The data show that society is saturated with moral judges who remain active in passing judgment on women's affairs. The institutions are established to maintain harmony at the expense of women's rights. Whenever a woman knocks on the doors of institutions, the message is: harmony first, rights later. Societal structures that act as moral gatekeepers, coupled with established institutions, deter women from going beyond established social norms and protocols. This eventually became a notable hurdle in women's empowerment in Pakistan.

Theme 2. The Policy-Practice Gap

The policy-practice gap emerged as another dominant theme in the interview data. The data shows that the gap dominates merit, laws, social structures, and confidence in authorities. The institutions that are established to ensure community empowerment are restricting women's empowerment. There are many structures, but of no use. They are not effective as they are not doing what they are supposed to. There are rules and regulations, but without practice. There are committees without action. The process of justice is either too slow or nonexistent. The net effect is women's barrenness from the process. They believe that engaging in institutional procedures will kill their time. By doing cost and cost-benefit analysis, most women never file their cases within the system. Henceforth, the lack of institutional process becomes a hurdle in women's empowerment.

Most research participants agree that Pakistan's harassment laws are sound. There was an agreement on that. However, the issue is in its execution. Untrained and compromised committees derail the justice process. A senior practitioner argued, “There are committees everywhere across workplaces. However, some committee members are untrained and unprofessional. The committees are not gender sensitized. This lack of training and gender sensitization creates a trust-deficit.” (Amjad Ali, personal communication, July 19, 2025). Many other participants recount similar concerns. An interviewee noted, “In most of the places, harassment committee chairs are appointed based on their loyalty, not competence.” (Huzaiifa, personal communication, September 7, 2025). Another interviewee reckons, “Sometimes, women on the apex turned against fellow women. They are more concerned about the system stability than justice.” (Amjad Ali, personal communication, July 19, 2025).

Another notable challenge in women's empowerment in Pakistan stems from institutional representatives' moral judgment. Majority of respondents expressed lack of trust in government institutions, responsible for administration of justice. Access, structure and services of these institutions are non-facilitative for women. Instead of doing their constitutional duties, government employees mostly become moral gatekeepers and begin advising women. A recurring theme across many interviews is the moralized discretion exercised by workers at first-response institutions, notably police stations. An interviewee noted, “Once, a woman reports a case of domestic violence. The police respond, women matter. His response was rationalizing domestic abuse because the women did love marriage.” (Amjad Ali, personal communication, July 19, 2025). There are countless other similar cases in which the police act as moral judges. Several instances of downstream clinical effects were also reported in the interviews. Few working women reported that university designated committees are influenced by the university management that affect the independent judgement and decision.

Additionally, development practitioners also recounted the public's trust deficit on government's justice granting institutions due to the structural issues at both levels includes patriarchal societal norms creates reluctance that women approach police station directly to file their complaint. On formal institutional level structure, environment and services of police station are not welcoming. Development practitioners expressed, "there is a trust deficit between overall population and state mechanisms and implementation authorities we talk about patriarchy the one we have inherited is feudal mindset and in urban that is industrial mindset and that is colonial mindset we don't regulate we control that mindset still existing 2025 and if a man having power they control not regulate..... again there is trust deficit in rural background there is a feudal lord so that's thana culture and I have witnessed many things women were harassed raped at feudal places reporting was issue because police station didn't facilitate public to file FIR against of the landlord." Unfortunately, power in Pakistani society flows from social networks rather than rules and regulations. Many interviewees report that committees are predominantly male and lean towards male partners. Henceforth, women seldom report their cases. Eventually, this stigma around reporting becomes a hurdle to women's empowerment.

Interviewees also expressed that, due to multiple integrated factors, most cases involving women are spoiled from misclassification to reconciliation. This is not a gap in law, but a product of administrative derailment.

Like the police, the council representatives are also biased towards men. An interviewee noted, "If the men go first to the council in any case about women, they will favour them." (Dr. Alamdar, personal communication, August 18, 2025). Additionally, participants note that community members strive to protect one another. A woman stated, "We cannot trust our police, nor the union councils... the courts are also not responsive in this matter. Not a single institution functions the way they should, or they are supposed to." (Srabeel, personal communication, August 5, 2025).

It is not that there are no laws or institutions, but rather that their performance is poor. When inquired on whether they place trust in the institutions, one of the participants answered, "NO. I do not trust. We have, in reality, no institutions here. And in case there are, it is too time-consuming, and not economical. (Javeria, personal communication, August 15, 2025). Because of these multiple, compounded causes, most women opted to remain silent during the process, which is a major challenge to empowering women. The statistics indicate that women in Pakistan have a too high a cost of opportunity of reporting malpractice. The women of Pakistan do not want to spend a considerable amount of time standing in queues, filling out forms, and re-entering offices; they want to save time. They prefer working rather than this hustle. Other respondents observe that many job and workshop applications ask about marital status. Marital status is sometimes a screening device. One of the interviewees stated that in some occupations you have to state your marital status clearly... and, in the case of divorce, you have to produce a divorce certificate. This is not fair. Besides, I would not give such proofs that would demand my submission to take up a job. (Maria Khan, personal communication, July 20, 2025).

This information demonstrates that women are not involved in numerous workshops, events, and jobs because of such documentation. According to the majority of respondents, such documentation infringes on our freedom. One of the interviewees claimed that both security and freedom matter. Suppose I have a security and am not free, what will I do? (Maria Khan, personal communication, July 20, 2025). The participants believe that the institutions in place offer security by denying women their freedom. Unless they are given freedom, women cannot be empowered. The data shows that such documentation deters women from participating in many workshops, events, and jobs. Most respondents feel that such documentation is against our freedom. An interviewee argued, "Security

and freedom both are important. If I have security, but I am not free, what will I do?" (Maria Khan, personal communication, July 20, 2025). Participants believe that existing institutions promise security at the expense of women's freedom. Without freedom, women's empowerment cannot be ensured.

Theme 3. Moral Codes of Belonging

Beyond the institutional and mobility hurdles, women in Pakistan are chained by misinterpreted religious and moral codes. These codes are mostly constructed through social discursive practices. Interview data show that ethical codes of belonging are constructed along three integrated lines in Pakistan: respect and security, religious-civic justification, and negotiation repertoires. Together, these three interconnected patterns restrict women's empowerment in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, women's security is treated as a baseline and prime utility that must be ensured at any cost. Women can only work if their job is secure and respectable. They are constantly being instructed to be safe and stay patient. Participants note that their freedom is negotiated against their security. There is always a repeated trade-off between freedom and security. An interviewee noted, "Security is always the top priority in our community. Freedom comes later. Freedom without security is the worst thing." (Salwa, personal communication, September 9, 2025). The Pakistani community always establishes a binary between freedom and security. They believe that both security and freedom cannot go together. An interviewee disagreed and argued, "Freedom and security can travel together. Both are interconnected. One should stay with their husband and family. The family will provide security. Within that secure environment, one should make their decision." (Dr. Hafeez, personal communication, September 16, 2025). Other interviewees disagree with this assertion and believe that families always put limits on their women.

Respectability is another socially constructed concept in Pakistan. It is always associated with working women. It is relational and stems from male members of the immediate and extended family. It is usually evident when women are employed in public-facing roles. An interviewee noted, "Men become disturbed when their women go out and communicate with other men." (Azhar, personal communication, August 21, 2025). Due to this reason, it is a common practice in Pakistan that women are allowed to engage in back-end jobs. Such jobs are acceptable, while public-facing jobs create trouble. The selective employment creates hurdles for women's empowerment.

The respectability element comes into play as early as female schooling. A participant noted, "I was the first female in my paternal family who continued education beyond grade 8. When I decided to pursue higher education, male members of my family threatened me. They invoked their so-called honor. They tried their best to channel me into a socially acceptable subject." (Fatima, personal communication, July 20, 2025). Such practices work with the patriarchal mindsets under the shadow of protection. This entrenched respectability in Pakistani society significantly limits women's mobility. Notwithstanding, participants also note several cases in which men go beyond the limits to ensure their daughters' education. One interviewee stated, "One of our community members sells their land to ensure their female children's quality education." (Noreen, personal communication, September 7, 2025). Heads of these families created opportunities for creating spaces for their female family members.

Another surrounding debate around moral codes is embedded in religious and democratic rhetoric. Most of the interviewees argue that Islam and democratic norms ensure women's rights. An interviewee noted, "Democracy has Islamic rules and mirrors Shariah... men and women are equal in family and political system." (Zaheer, personal communication, August 12, 2025). Likewise, another participant argued, "Democracy is the most suitable system ensuring everyone's right," while

simultaneously emphasizing Islam's principles in defining human rights. The narratives surrounding women's rights, rooted in democratic and religious rhetoric, are positive. An interviewee noted, "Female inheritance rights are bestowed by our religion. If she has rights, she should have freedom to exercise them according to their will." (Ayub, personal communication, August 24, 2025). Notwithstanding, the practice diverges from the principle. A participant argued, "Men place their properties in their wives' names as a strategy to evade tax. The control remains with husbands. In some cases, women are unaware of their properties, and male thinking always dominates." (Arooj, personal communication, August 29, 2025). Another interviewee recounts a different explanation. She argued, "Dowry is being increasingly equated with the inheritance rights in Pakistan." (Salma, personal communication, August 06, 2025).

Negotiation repertoires emerged as another dominant sub-theme within the moral codes of belonging. Respectability and religion are frames, while the negotiation repertoire is a practical method for persuading women. A sense of permission has been ingrained in women in Pakistan. They are convinced that taking permission to do something is part of their responsibilities. Taking permission to do something also limits women. An interviewee noted, "Taking permission for commencing any endeavor is a central part of our family matters. It is a kind of limiting where we need our family permission. However, I follow this process." (Sunaina, personal communication, September 15, 2025). The data shows that women are usually allowed to make small decisions in their lives. An interviewee noted, "We are free to make small decisions in our life... but for the big ones, we need our family's consent." (Esha, personal communication, September 08, 2025). Few interviewees view this repertoire positively and consider it a recalibrated and balanced approach, not a defiance. An interviewee noted, "Look, both freedom and security are necessary... we need an integrated and balanced approach, and I think this is essential." (Misbah, personal communication, July 20, 2025).

Several interviewees highlight the selective use of religion by Pakistani society in women's matters. They believe that religion is instrumentalized to maintain the status quo instead of giving women their due rights. Notably, interviewees noted that religion is used to restrict women's mobility, while the same religion is ignored when it comes to inheritance rights. A participant stated, "Pakistan's society depicts dual standards. Whenever women demand their rights, society will bring religion into play. Contrary, the same society forgets about the same religious teachings when Islam instructs them about inheritance rights. Interviewees repeatedly highlighted inheritance rights. An interviewee noted, "Inheritance rights are crucial for women's financial independence and to protect them from social injustices." (Maimoona, personal communication, July 25, 2025).

The interviewee's response was not coherent regarding women's careers and employment choices. Many male interviewees defend their women's careers. They not only support their women but also justify their choices among family members. An interviewee noted, "Women are entitled to their rights. Society should not bar them from getting their due rights." (Furqan, personal communication, August 11, 2025). Another man argued, "I believe that joint decision-making is much better. Husband and wife should both participate in decision-making. That would be much better." (Zain, personal communication, August 17, 2025). The data also shows that several men defend their wives' careers in their families. An interviewee recounted, "I told my family that my wife's education and employment are a blessing for all of us. His employment makes her an equal contributor to household income while her education is good for our children." (Zain, personal communication, August 17, 2025). Several interviewees consider their wives' employment as a common family good.

Synthesis of Findings: Analysis and Discussion

In Pakistan, women are exposed to various social and economic problems. Despite the great difficulties women face, WEE in Pakistan remains a niche that has not been researched. This paper

experimentally investigated the dynamics of WEE in Pakistan. Triangulation of the interview results with theoretical and empirical literature is carried out. The results demonstrate intricate, interwoven issues regarding women. The problems range from the family (micro-level) to the structural (macro-level), exacerbated by poor and ineffective governance structures. Micro and macro constraints have collective effects that impede women's mobility and, consequently, their empowerment in Pakistan to a great extent.

The statistics depict that women behave as micro-agents in Pakistani families. Although they make much money, they have very little input into the household's decision-making process. The occupation is their means of earning, which gives them less space in the house. Nevertheless, it never became a vital decision-making power that men dominate. These results are consistent with those of Kabeer's (1999) study, which posited that income alone is insufficient to change social structures. Similarly, Aggarwal (1997) shows that women are left behind in the social decision-making process despite their substantial contributions. The findings of this study can be followed to present similar patterns, indicating that employment does not guarantee women's integration into the decision-making process. Women need to bargain for their space and include themselves in making family decisions. The negotiation process entails several interrelated dynamics of social sanctions to societal norms. The logic of normative conformity, as reflected in Kandiyoti's (1998) study, reveals that women negotiate their status in the social hierarchy.

The statistics depict numerous inherent causes of non-WEE in Pakistan. One notable factor that does not support WEE in Pakistan is the lack of women's mobility. Pakistan has some of the most restrictive reasons for women's mobility in the country. First of all, safety issues are a prevailing factor. The family members do not want to send their females to education or the workplace because of safety issues. Besides, moral and religious codes are the major impediments to women's mobility. Discursive practices are used to construct codes socially. These results are consistent with those of the study by Heath and Jayachandran (2017), which suggests that social norms are developed to restrict women's engagement in social and economic activities.

Within the Foucauldian Framework, Pakistani society operates as a decentralized panopticon, where surveillance goes beyond state to social panopticons. Within this context Pakistani social culture discipline male family head to ensure women are adhering their traditional roles. The notion 'what people will think say and think' serves as a metaphor of modern society, with the unseen gaze of social functions as a constant surveillance within these social panopticons. Consequently, social norms become internalized surveillance that pushed male family head to engage in self-discipline and regulate family's choices, especially related to women's mobility and their career, with the assumption that society is observing and judging him (Jamil, 2021 & Elbert, 2004). Social structures and norms act as a power mechanism where moral judges exert their power by passing comments, 'women's earning as lottery for head of family' forcing him to be conformist to the patriarchal norms. Although male head of family is seen as a authoritative figure in the household but society treats him as docile body trained as instrument of patriarchy which reduce the independent will to support women's life choices (Ruwanpura & Hughes, 2016).

The existence of social norms is not the only factor that contributes to the deterrence of WEE in Pakistan. Several other factors complement the dynamics. Being a developing country, Pakistan has weak institutions. The systems of governance are weak and ineffective. The absence of an effective governance system leads to a policy-practice gap in Pakistan. The institutions cannot guarantee the proper application of the law that aggravates WEE barriers. The analysis indicates that some rules and regulations address women's empowerment in Pakistan.

They, however, have little implementation. Failure to execute can be pegged on numerous reasons. The biggest impediment to institutions playing the role of the gatekeepers is the role of informal social structures. Social structures typically shape legal institutions. The committees are also a mixture of corrupted people and are not gender sensitive. There is also a moralistic bias within the institutions. The power of informal structures over formal and legal institutions is consistent with North's (1990) study. In addition, formal processes that take legal action ultimately breed mistrust among women. The mistrust also demoralizes women from seeking justice through formal procedures. The results align with those of Jayachandran's (2015) study, which demonstrates that inappropriate institutional mechanisms discourage women from engaging in social and economic activities.

Integration of Douglass North's Institutionalism and Foucault's biopower provide a comprehensive lens to analyse the systemic regulation for women in Pakistan. Biopower by Foucault is the practice of modern state and societies to manage their people through the regulation of biological and social life (Schuller, 2018). In the context of Pakistan, this regulation is not just state-led but decentralized through social bio-politics, where mobility of women pursuing career that clash with family and social norms is considered as 'social risk' for the family unit. Women within patriarchal social structures, becomes docile bodies by practicing self-surveillance where they limit their mobility and career choices to be conformist to social norms (Sengar & Shah, 2024).

Another pertinent point is social knowledge that regulate the career choices for women through the biopolitical narratives where good women is seen in the role of home making, reproductive role and domestic stability rather than their economic contributions. The Institutional framework by Douglass North (1990) refers institutions as 'rules of game' the tension between the formal and informal institutions in Pakistan creates the restrictive environment form women in Pakistan (Mumtaz & Whiteford, 2021). Constitution of Pakistan and formal institutions grants right to work to women but they overshadow by the informal unwritten rules (patriarchal norms). North Argues that informal rules change much slower than the formal rules (Farrell & Héritier, 2007).

The other prevailing obstacle is moral policing by the institutional representatives. The findings indicates that, rather than fulfilling their constitutional duties, the police tend to act as moral guardians. They need not file an FIR for the victims, but administer them another moral discourse. The ethical talks are about preserving the status quo. They perpetuate patriarchal systems rather than guaranteeing justice. Such a moral guardianship attitude hinders female empowerment.

Several moral and religious codes are discursively constructed to restrain women's actions in Pakistani society. Socially constructed norms aim to keep women in a particular domain and regulate their behavior. The data shows a consistent tension between freedom and security. The social norms are arguable constructed to ensure women's security. Notwithstanding, in practice, they are mainly instrumentalized to curtail women's freedom. These social norms create a significant hurdle to women's empowerment in Pakistan. Bicchieri (2016) maintained that, in some societies, social norms must be altered to ensure women's empowerment. This study also believes that this case holds in Pakistan. A notable norm surrounds the respectability of women. The respectability norm limits women's participation in public-facing employment. Thus, it reduces many women's working space to only back-end jobs. Majid and Siegmann's (2021) study illustrates several instances in which the respectability norm hinders women's labor-market participation. Selective religious instrumentalization is another notable barrier in WEE in Pakistan. Pakistani society selectively invokes religious teachings when it comes to women's empowerment. They use it to restrict women from doing a job. At the same time, they bypass it while giving inheritance rights to their female family members. Rana et al., (2024) underscored that targeted educational strategies and institutional

policies are required to enact to overcome the regional disparities and social cultural barriers in Pakistan.

Negotiation repertoire emerged as another subtle mechanism through which patriarchal structures are maintained in Pakistan. Women in Pakistan constantly negotiate their position in Pakistani society. Repetitive negotiations make women's empowerment a dynamic, context-specific process. There is always a back-and-forth between independence and dependence. Negotiations constantly facilitate the process. The data show that, despite numerous challenges, few community members ensure their daughters' education and support their daughters' employment. This depicts a silver lining within otherwise constrained space. Foucault presented that where power exists, resistance is always there. Individuals tend to resist when control extortion proves detrimental to them. Consequently, people began to create enabling environment for their families to get access to the opportunities to be productive members of the society (Allen, 2017 & Mäkinen, 2006).

Conclusion

The above discussion shows that women face several interconnected challenges in their daily lives, hindering their empowerment. Several factors make WEE in Pakistan difficult. The issues span from micro-level family issues to structural restrictions, with institutional inefficiencies as a supplementary factor. The growth of women's employment does not change social structures and hierarchies; rather, the women's space within the family increases. The patriarchal order has a great limitation on women's empowerment via religious and moral codes and moral policing. Pakistan's limited institutional capacity deepens WEE challenges. Socially constructed religious and moral codes exacerbate the issue by constraining women and limiting their potential. The results of the study align perfectly with existing theories and empirical literature on WEE. The findings mirror Foucaultian concepts of panopticon, power-knowledge nexus, and biopower.

Based on the above findings, the study recommends understanding women's empowerment holistically, rather than limiting it to economic opportunities alone. In the process of policy formulation, it is crucial to consider contextual realities of social structures at familial and community levels to enhance the female labor force participation. Statistics related to the real women representation in labor force participation needs to be strong by the relevant institutions to show the progress. Ensuring safe public transport and affordable daycare will likely enhance women's mobility and, ultimately, their empowerment. Second, extensive gender-sensitive trainings of the institutions and committees must be established to ensure safety and justice for women. The process of litigation must be abolished through government intervention. Third, awareness seminars and community engagement will likely prove pivotal in educating women about their due rights, notably property and inheritance rights. Finally, policies should be framed to encourage male family members to support their female family members' educational and employment choices. This study believes that these integrated policy reforms will likely prove vital in elevating women's empowerment in Pakistan.

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