

## **Levels of Education, Age, Legal Awareness and Women's Empowerment**

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The aim of the present study was to assess the dynamic role of legal awareness by controlling the two extensively researched demographic variables (viz., education and age) in women's empowerment. A purposive sample of 272 women of reproductive age ranged between 21 and 49 years was selected from four cities of upper Punjab, Pakistan (viz., Lahore, Rawalpindi, Gujranwala, and Faisalabad) and a questionnaire on legal awareness (Batool, 2017) and Composite Women's Empowerment Index (CWEI: Batool, 2017) were administered. The hierarchical regression supported the hypothesized model that age, education, and legal awareness significantly predicted empowerment in women. The study recommends adding legal awareness in course curricula to empower women.

**Keywords:** *age, education, legal awareness, women's empowerment.*

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### **Introduction**

Empowerment is a process that prepares women with the authority to challenge specific situations (Basu & Basu, 2003). Women's empowerment is materialized when they challenge predominant customs and cultural philosophies in successfully advancing their welfare (Swain & Wallentin, 2008). In Pakistan, many women feel un-empowered, largely due to a deep-rooted patriarchal system that turns out to be the fountainhead of the dejection and violence against women for example, women are considered inferior to their men counterparts, remain helpless against violence by fathers, brothers, husbands and other male members in their families (Ibrahim, 2005). In many cases,

when a woman's behaviour does not follow the patriarchal commands, she is inflicted by whippings, sexual abuse, burnings, and even murdered in the name of honour (Noor, 2004). Socio-cultural norms grounded in patriarchy are responsible for the seclusion and exclusion of women in Pakistan. Men's perception of women's roles is also thought to be among the crucial features which restrain women's empowerment and independence in Pakistan (Isran & Isran, 2012). Women are considered inferior and fragile both physically and mentally by men, and they are treated like that. In addition, the intrinsic feudal system adds hostility towards women in Pakistani society (Critelli, 2010). During the 1980s, Pakistani society underwent changes in various organizations that favoured and improved women's

position in rural and urban areas of Pakistan (Alavi, 1991), but the socio-cultural and economic status of women in Pakistan continues to be low due to a deep-seated and inherent patriarchal and feudal systems prevalent throughout the country. In order to change the patriarchal system to a more equalitarian system, it becomes necessary to support women with favourable policy agendas by the government. The government of Pakistan has taken notice of such inequalities and has taken steps to empower women.

### **Literature Review**

The interest of many social scientists and development specialists has long been focused on the circumstances and factors that can empower women and include gender equality, which is imperative to economic growth, poverty decline, and greater human welfare (Mason, 2003). Among other well-studied predictors, education is listed as a blocker of socio-cultural customs that enhances women's welfare and augments their decision making power in economic and household domains and liberty of mobility and employability. A resilient positive predicting role of education in empowering women has been supported by numerous researchers (e.g., Ahmad & Sultan, 2004; Aslam, 2013; Haque et al., 2011; Heaton,

Huntsman & Flake, 2005; Khan & Awan, 2011; Khan & Maan, 2008; Kishor & Gupta, 2004; Mishra & Nayak, 2010; Parveen & Leonhauser, 2005; Rahman et al., 2009; Roy & Niranjana, 2004; Sheikh et al., 2015; Sridevi, 2005; Sultan & Bould, 2004; Wiklander & Thede, 2010).

Age is another rigorously researched factor in the field of women's empowerment. As the rights and duties of a woman change with age, so does their empowerment (Jejeebhoy, 2000). Women's empowerment has been observed to be significantly and positively determined by their chronological age (e.g., Acharya, Bell, Simkhada, Teijlingen, & Regmi, 2010; Ahmed & Bould, 2004; Haque, Islam, Tareque & Mostofa, 2011; Khan & Awan, 2011; Khan & Maan, 2008; Mostofa, Tareque, Haque, & Islam, 2008; Nayak & Mahanta, 2009; Parveen & Leonhauser, 2005; Rahman, Karmaker, & Mia, 2009; Sheikh, Meraj & Sadaqat, 2015; Tareque, Haque, Mostofa, & Islam, 2007; Wicklander & Thede, 2010). The common explanation given by a majority of these researchers suggested that since older women spent more time with their husbands, therefore they were supposed to get greater chances to communicate with their husbands on different matters to understand and grasp the family matters.

Awareness of legal rights is yet another distinguishing factor that has been supported to empower women. It has been recognized by the proponents of legal empowerment that education in women alone is not sufficient and that legal rights and their consciousness should empower helpless persons to use abilities and knowledge to improve their interests (Asian Development Bank, 2009). Without being conscious of their legal rights, women would continue to accept their subjugation by others. Majority of the women are oblivious of their genuine legal rights. Even knowledgeable women in this domain are not assertive enough to take legitimate steps under the law which should greatly protect women before and after their marriage. Even in the presence of the statutory rights of heritage, the women customarily do not bother to get the inherited land left by their parents in case of alive brothers (Mira, 2001), which follows the conservative beliefs that land should not go outside the male-controlled family system.

Highlighting the importance of awareness about legal rights, Weiss (2012) affirmed that women's empowerment in Pakistan could be reflected in an array of backgrounds, but none was more important than the law itself. Definition of legitimate rights for women in present law needs to be

fundamental in advancing women's empowerment. Khan and Maan (2008) conducted a study in district Faisalabad and used multiple linear regression model to show that awareness of women about their rights had a statistically significant impact on their empowerment. Likewise, Chaudhary, Chani, and Pervaiz (2012) found that women's awareness of their rights in Pakistan had a positive and significant influence on their empowerment. The positive relationship between 'legal awareness concerning the rights and women's empowerment has also been recognized by others researchers (Bisnath, 2001; Blumberg, 2005; Musokotwana & Siwata as cited in Khan & Maan, 2008).

Although the role of demographic variables like education, and age etc. in empowering women are well documented in the existing literature, however, the role of legal awareness to empower women in the traditional patriarchal society of Pakistan by controlling the impact of these demographic variables has not been done. The objective of the present study was to measure the extent to which the women in the study were aware of their legal rights and to assess the role of legal awareness in the empowerment of Pakistani women by controlling the impact of age and education.

## Conceptual Framework

The notion that legal awareness plays its part in women's empowerment is hinted in theoretical background of feminist's theories wherein they directly talk about legal rights and indirectly refer to legal awareness for gender parity among men and women, for instance, Scott and Marshall (2009) report, belief in parity for women that encompasses the same legal rights, similar contribution in communal activities, as well as parallel access to all prospects linked with men is important. Liberal feminists supposed that equivalent rights to property between the life partners would balance the position of women within marriage and that the performance of women regarding domestic and nurturing duties would not preclude them from enjoying identical opportunities and rights (Beasley, 1999). According to Donovan (1990), women should and must go into the public domain and should have the right to vote due to the reason that their moral outlook is needed to clean up the corrupt (masculine) world of politics. Women cannot have their rights by just making laws rather they can attain their rights given willingly by their male counterparts (father, brothers, husband etc.) or they may themselves demand their rights. But demanding rights without having a legal awareness of the legal

system would be futile. So to say without having legal awareness women would be unable to demand their rights in an effective manner which calls for creating legal awareness among women.

## Hypotheses

H<sub>1</sub>: As education, age and legal awareness of women increase, their empowerment will also increase.

H<sub>2</sub>: Legal awareness will significantly predict women's empowerment by controlling the influence of age and education.

## Method

### Participants

Initially, 300 women were contacted, but 18 refused to take part in the study and 10 questionnaires were found incomplete, therefore, 272 women were left for the final sample who were in their reproductive age between 21 and 49 years ( $M = 31.58$ ,  $SD = 7.87$ ) and came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. The sample was divided into three levels of education (school, college and university), with working ( $n = 122$ ) and non-working ( $n = 150$ ) women. The sample was selected from four major cities of upper Punjab, Pakistan: Lahore ( $n = 68$ ), Rawalpindi ( $n = 68$ ), Gujranwala ( $n = 68$ ), and Faisalabad ( $n = 68$ ), so that the representations from all segments of the population were ensured. Divorced,

widowed, married more than once, and childless women were excluded from the survey because it contained questions related to the decisions regarding children and relationship with husband.

### Measures

*Demographic data sheet.* The demographic data sheet was used to document women's age in years, and years of education.

*A measure of Legal Awareness (Batool, 2017).* Legal awareness about rights was measured by six items measure with a stem question: To what extent are you aware of the women's legal rights, mentioned in the following statements? (e.g., the right that Islam has given to a woman regarding the choice of her husband; the legal share of a daughter in the property of her parents; the legal share of a wife in the property of her husband; the legal rights of a woman regarding divorce/khula, the steps taken by the present government of Pakistan to safeguard the legal rights of women; and the discussion about women's legal rights in Pakistani assemblies). A 4-point rating scale was used to record the responses (1= *Not at all*, 2 = *to some extent*, 3 = *to moderate extent*, 4 = *to great extent*). Value of the legal awareness was attained by adding the rating-scores of all six statements. The expected

range of the scale could be from 6 to 24 points. The higher score designated higher level of 'legal awareness about rights. The value of Cronbach's alpha was .87 in the present study.

*Composite Women's Empowerment Index (CWEI: Batool, 2017).* The CWEI was used as a dependent variable in the study. The CWEI consisted of 4 dimensions: economic, familial, socio-cultural, and psychological with 33 items. Economic, familial, socio-cultural, and psychological empowerment consisted of 5, 8, 5, and 15 items respectively. Women's control over economic resources was named as economic empowerment, decision making within family and participation in the family discussion were named as familial empowerment, social mobility was labelled as socio-cultural empowerment, and five indicators (impact, problem-focused coping, meaningfulness, self-efficacy, and self-determination) added together were named as psychological empowerment. A 5-point Likert type scale was used to assess the empowerment. The Cronbach's alpha of CWEI for the present study was .85.

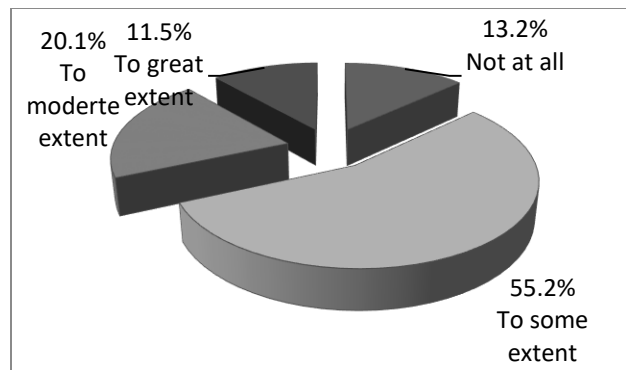
### Procedure

The women in the present study were contacted at their homes and jobs through a

purposive sampling strategy. The questionnaires (in Urdu) were given to the women after taking their verbal consent and guidelines regarding how to fill the questionnaires were explained to them. The filled questionnaires were taken back on the same day. The participants were guaranteed about the confidentiality of their identity and their data. They had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage of data collection. Enough time was given to complete the questionnaire and to ensure that the ethical guideline by APA was properly followed in the study.

**Analyses and Results**

In order to assess the percentage of women in the study who were falling in the four options of the questionnaire of legal awareness, a pie diagram was made with help of MS Excel sheet.



**Figure 1:** shows the percentages of the responses of the respondents to the questions asked in the questionnaire: to what extent are you aware of their legal rights?

Figure 1 indicates that overall from all six questions asked about the legal awareness 13.2 % of women responded that they were not aware of their legal rights at all, 55.2% women answered that to some extent they were aware of their rights, 20.1% women replied that they were aware of their legal rights to moderate extent, whereas only 11.5% respondents were of the opinion that to great extent, they were aware of their legal rights. The results show that amongst the sample of Pakistani women, the majority had little awareness of their legal rights.

**Pearson’s Correlation**

In order to assess the inter-correlations among study variables, the Pearson Correlation was run. The analysis guides towards the direction and strength of linear relationships among the variables of the study.

Table 1  
*Inter-correlations among the Study Variables (N=272)*

	1	2	3	4
1. Women’s Empowerment	-	.08*	.16**	.30**
2. Chronological Age		-	-.15**	.05
3. Education			-	.16**

4. Legal Awareness

Note: \*\*p<.01, \*p<.05

Table 1 shows that women’s empowerment has significant positive relationships with age, education, and legal awareness.

**Hierarchical Regression**

In order to control the role of demographic variables to see the predictive strength of ‘legal awareness’ in women’s empowerment, a hierarchical regression was run. The hierarchical regression shows whether a statistically significant amount of

variance is explained by the variables of interest after controlling other variables. By using this outline, a researcher may construct different regression models by adding more variables to a previous model at each phase. The investigator usually focuses to conclude whether the newly added variables significantly increase the value of  $R^2$ . (“University of Virginia Library Research Data Services+ Sciences,” n.d.).

Table 2

*Hierarchical Regression to Predict Women’s Empowerment from Age, Education, and Legal Awareness (N = 272)*

Models	Predictors	B	S.E	$\beta$	t-values	Sig	$R^2$	F
1.	Age	.07	.024	.09*	2.87	.004	.03	16.42**
	Education	.13	.024	.17**	5.34	.000		
2.	Age	.05	.023	.07 <sup>NS</sup>	2.34	.019	.10	39.72**
	Education	.10	.024	.13**	4.26	.000		
	Legal Awareness	.23	.025	.28**	9.15	.000		

Note. \*p < .05, \*\* p < .01 & NS = Not significant.

Table 2 depicts two hierarchical regression models. In the first model only the demographic variables: age and education were entered and it was found that both the variables turned to be significant predictors of women’s empowerment and the variance explained ( $R^2$ ) by these two variables was 3%. In model 2, legal awareness was entered in order to examine its influence on women’s empowerment after controlling age and

education: By adding legal awareness in the model, the variable age became insignificant, variable education although remained significant but the value of its beta coefficient decreased from .17 to .13, and the value of  $R^2$  increased from .03 (in model 1) to .10 (in model 2) i.e.  $R^2$  increased by 7 per cent.

**Discussion**

Education appears to have a significant positive correlation with women’s

empowerment. Roy and Niranjana (2004) support effective role of education in making women mobile in the society by declaring that much higher proportion of women who have completed at least middle school education are involved in decision making, have freedom of movement and also have access to money, compared to the women who were illiterate. Positive role of education in empowering women is numerously supported (e.g., Ahmad & Sultan, 2004; Heaton et al., 2005; Khan & Awan, 2011; Khan & Maan, 2008; Kishor, 2000; Kishor & Gupta, 2004; Parveen, 2005; Rahman et al., 2009; Sridevi, 2005; Sultan & Bould, 2004). Our results are similar to that of Haque et al. (2010) who proclaimed that education, in a patriarchal culture like Bangladesh, did not all the time improve women's physical mobility as well as the overall empowerment.

Age also appeared to be a positive and significant correlate and predictor of women's empowerment in the first model of hierarchical regression (see Table 2). The results are in line with (e.g., Acharya et al., 2010; Ahmed & Bould, 2004; Haque et al., 2011; Khan & Awan, 2011; Khan & Maan, 2008; Mostofa et al., 2008; Nayak & Mahanta, 2009; Parveen & Leonhauser, 2005; Rahman, Karmaker, & Mia, 2009;

Sheikh, Meraj & Sadaqat, 2015; Tareque et al., 2007). The reason of insignificance of age in the second hierarchical model might be the fact that when the women attain legal awareness, no matter they are younger or older they may become empowered and the role of age becomes secondary.

Legal Awareness is found to be the highest significant positive correlate of women's empowerment in the study. The result that women's empowerment increased with the increase in legal awareness of women is aligned with (e.g., Berg et al., 2010; Bisnath, 2001; Blumberg, 2005). Women's awareness of their legal rights give them a sense of control, they raise their voice for their due rights in the society, and the law constitutes a powerful tool to improve the situation of women. Power has been advocated to be determined by awareness, ideology, and culture (Collins, 2000; Musokotwana & Siwata as cited in Khan & Maan, 2008).

The results also reveal that the majority of women in the study were barely aware of their legal rights. The results are in line with the literature that shows that Pakistani women are not well aware of their rights. A survey was conducted by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (Government of Pakistan, 2002) proclaims



about 90 per cent of the women do not comprehend their rights. This indicates that making laws does not guarantee that women are aware of their legal rights. The plethora of long list of legal reforms in the favour of women speaks out the truth that making laws only is not panacea to empower women unless the legal system is easier to be understood by the stakeholders and this might be possible through making women aware of their rights.

### **Implications**

The results of this study have implications for the specialists in gender issues, the economists, and the policymakers that it is not just the older age that empowers women, and the women cannot be empowered only by getting higher levels of education, unless the opportunities are open to them to materialize their knowledge by having legal awareness to attain their legal rights. So we suggested that at every level of education, the syllabus should be designed in such a way that elucidates basic rights of women in Pakistani constitution, so that at least educated women may deter exploitation from their male counterparts especially, regarding property rights and rights to divorce and *khula* (divorce demanded by women). But in this respect, the suggestion put forward by the Legal Awareness

Programme of India should be kept in view, “Theoretical knowledge cannot prepare individuals for challenges in real life. Thus more stress should be laid on imparting knowledge through discussions, case studies, video films, case conferences and street plays, interactions and meeting with social activists, visits to local courts, District Legal Service Authority, Jails, Police Stations, Family Courts, Mahila Courts, Consumer Courts etc.” (National Commission for Women, . New Delhi, 2017).

### **Limitations and Suggestions**

This preliminary study was carried out in four major cities of Pakistan, so we should be cautious in generalizing its results. Results should be further validated in other provinces of Pakistan. Only Urban women were engaged in the study, so women from rural areas should also be included in future studies. The results were based on self-reported measurements, so social desirability factor and issue of common method variance cannot be ruled out. In order to get a broader picture, it is suggested that other determinants of women’s empowerment should also be examined in a broader spectrum.

### **Conclusion**

The significant role of legal awareness in predicting empowerment of

women suggests that in a patriarchal culture of Pakistan, where women are prone to male dominance, experience degradation of legal rights. Legal awareness may act as a catalyst to accelerate the process of women's empowerment. The outcomes further propose that policies to create legal awareness of their rights among women along with imparting general education will help to empower them in different domains of life and this all will contribute in the overall development of the economy.

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