

Gender Empowerment through Women's Higher Education: Opportunities and Possibilities

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In Pakistan, particularly in the rural and suburban areas, promoting women's education can perhaps play a vital role in gender equality. Education will also increase the ability of women to secure employment in the formal sector. The purpose of this study was to explore the possibilities and opportunities for women's empowerment in Pakistan. This first stage looked at the perceptions of a small group of ten women who hold senior posts in a female university. Data were gathered by semi-structured informal interviews and it was hoped that considering information-rich cases would illuminate the questions under study. 1) How the participants in the study understand the role of higher education in empowering women at home and at their work, 2) what they see as the major constraints to progress in career, 3) what type of coping strategies they propose for the entire female population to realise their full potential. Participants were more or less agreed that women have to face socio-cultural hurdles to acquire education and pursue careers. Pakistani women are struggling hard naturally to get their rights but also to write history of success indicating how opportunities were/ are created and possibilities can be explored and negotiated in a non-confrontational manner.

Keywords: empowerment, higher education, gender, equity

Introduction

Women were regarded sacred and enjoyed respectable place in primitive societies because of her ability to reproduce human race till the time men realized their role to impregnate women (Goel 2004 & Smith 2008). The concepts of Goddess rather than God in Greek mythology and Devi, Mata etc. in Hinduism may be the manifestations of women reproductive role in primitive societies. The gender roles, domestic for women and outdoor for men, were perhaps assigned to women and men in primitive societies on the grounds of convenience with any concept of dominance. Male role as bread winner in hunter-gatherer societies perhaps laid the foundations of male dominant patriarchal societies. During hunting and wood or water collection men were vulnerable to accidents which cost their lives. Loosing men perhaps meant no food or

protection for the family. It is argued that male as precious family member may be rooted in Male Dominance resulting in patriarchal structures in the society (Lerner, 1986). With the passage of time and process of development the world went through significant changes and transitions but role of men in controlling the affairs of the family, community and state remained significant in many parts of the world especially Islamic, traditional societies of Asian and African regions. Gender roles worked out on the basis of convenience prevailed and men being powerful in controlling women at home and masses in communities and societies hardly thought about the complex conditions that caused and promoted subjugation and oppression among women. Due to urbanization, industrialization and other development aspects societies become segregated into different sectors of work classes such as artisan, merchant and agricultural labour. Till twentieth century

authority was more or less exclusively the right of men in many parts of the world. Ahmed (1992) argued that all the decisions about family were the right of the family head, who is usually male, in traditional societies of Asia and Africa. Many evil customs, values and traditions stepped in which enslaved women and tied them to boundaries of the house. The untold miseries and suffering of the women especially during various wars especially World War I and II awakened the conscious of mankind (Goel, 2004).

The work on Third World development undertaken by Ester Boserup (1970) influenced a network of female development professionals (Women's Committee of the Washington DC) who used the term "Women in Development". United States Agency for Development (USAID) adopted the term. A number of policies, programs and projects were designed to uplift the status of women in Third World during 1970s and 1980s as reflected in macro level economic and social policy approaches. Moser (1993) categorized these approaches as welfare, equity, anti-poverty, efficiency and empowerment in Third World.

Jahan (1995) comments on the opinions of feminists from North and South during the first conference on women in Mexico 1975, that "equality appeared to be the priority of First World; peace of the Second and development of the Third World"(pp 7). The exchange of views between North and South experts during the following decade resulted in alliance on gender equality and social transformation recognizing the differences in interests and priorities. Education especially higher education of women is a significant indicator of development, equality and social transformation.

With the consistent efforts of development workers and agencies, there was the realization that development and changes in society

influence women and men in different ways (David, 1993, Stein, 1997, Radford, 1998, Francis & Skelton, 2001). This is usually known as Women in Development Approach (WID). The WID framework, with its emphasis on bringing women into development has strong links to the aspects of liberal feminism. It stresses the importance of including women in development planning to improve the efficiency. However this approach ignores the questions of exploitation, subordination and social injustice.

In opposition to WID approach, the Gender and Development Approach (GAD) emerged in late 1980s (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2005). This was a paradigm shift from the "*women in development*" approach, which focused almost exclusively on women and the impact of macroeconomic policies on their lives, to the "*gender and development*" perspective. This examines the relationship between the social and economic roles of both women and men across different spheres of life to achieve better living environment for both. This change in perspective led to a parallel shift in data production: from "*statistics on women*" to "*gender statistics*" or statistics on women and men in all spheres of life. The WID approach to the challenge of gender inequality in education is to get more girls in schools while GAD approaches have had impact on practice of equality of gender with special emphasis on women empowerment (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2005).

The manifestation of these efforts occurred when the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000 focused on the issues of gender inequality and addressed the issue in the following Millennium Development Goals (MDGs):

MDG 2: achieve universal primary education, with the target of ensuring that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling by 2005 (not achieved).

MDG 3: promote gender equality and empower women, with the target of eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 in all levels of education by 2015.

The MDGs complement other international declarations on gender equality in education, formulated several years ago but not yet realised: the Beijing platform for action for gender equality (1995), the Dakar Education for All (EFA) Framework of action (2000) and World Declaration on Education for All (1990). Linking MDGs to the implementation of CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action is crucial for capitalizing on the synergies generated from both processes. In turn, the resources mobilized for the achievement of MDGs, and international political consensus and commitment to achieve the Goals, can also be used to expedite the implementation of CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action (Dawood, 2006).

Follow up work on United Nations Declarations was more seriously undertaken in developed countries notably in Europe, former Eastern European communist countries, the USA and much of Far East and Australasia. Women in Third World developing countries lagged far behind in education because there was no law and enough facilities for free and compulsory primary or secondary education (Khalid 1996). Nonetheless, Mishra (2005) noted that some 121 million children are out of school of which 65 million are girls mostly residing in developing countries. Verma (2006) observed that women's choices for both work and leisure usually remain limited as compared to men in traditional African and south Asian societies. Haq (2002) argued that higher education usually increase the ability of women to secure employment in the formal sector.

National Education Policy (1998-2010) stressed to establish one or more women's

universities with campuses in all provinces. Fatima Jinnah Women University was established in Punjab in 1998 followed by four more Women universities in all the provinces (2 in Punjab) by 2004-05. A number of women institutions of higher education got the status of Degree Awarding Institutions. Millennium Development Goal 3: "Promote gender equality and women empowerment" created opportunities to reflect on gender segregated data and monitor the gap between boys and girls enrolment at various levels of education. In professional colleges and universities women's enrolment was only 25% in 1991 and it remained almost same during the next decade (Pakistan Statistical Year Book 2000). Annual Report (2008-09) by Higher education Commission indicated 358,000 female out of total 803,507 students in all universities of Pakistan (43%) including distance learning programs of public and private universities.

Purpose of this Study

According to Pakistan Social and Living Standard Measurement (PSLM, 2006-7) only 55% adults out of total population are literate (67% male and 42% female). As mentioned above there are gaps in the enrolment of boys and girls at all levels of education in Pakistan. Planning Commission (2007) indicated that opportunities for employment are increasing based upon increasing education skills among women. Women have started to enter in Armed Forces, electronics, textile, medical specialists, banking and financial experts and their visibility in professions and blue-collar occupations such as paramedics, teachers and police is mostly due to their improved levels of education. The study seeks to find out the perceptions of highly educated women who have achieved senior posts in a female university. Major questions focussed were: how do they see the issues involved in women education, employment and participation in social life? What holds back progress of women? What constraints they face and the type of opportunities they had that

facilitated them to pursue their careers successfully? How social transformation through education of women may be achieved in Pakistan?

Methods

The study explores three major aspects: 1) how the participants in the study understand the role of higher education in empowering women at home and at their work, 2) what they see as the major constraints to progress in career, 3) what type of coping strategies they propose for the entire female population to realise their full potential.

A case study approach was used in this study. Paton (2000) argues that an understanding of a social phenomenon is best achieved by selecting information-rich cases to illuminate the questions under study. In essence, participants were asked to share their experiences during their education and careers and reflect on how they saw gender equality moving forward. Lincoln & Guba, (1985) stated that a case study is a fitting capstone for the naturalistic inquirer that helps to catch the reality in its original form. Case study research involves studying individual cases, often in their natural environment. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates contemporary phenomena within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (Sarantakos, 1998). A local female university was selected as a case study unit.

The participants for this study were selected from women who held senior posts (with major administrative roles) in a local female university. A qualitative interview method was used (i.e. abstracting main themes from lengthy interviews with participants). This did not permit a large sample to be used. Ten women (Deans and Heads of the academic departments) were selected as a sample of the study. The

sample involved: a Vice chancellor, four Deans, one Head of Department randomly selected from faculties of Natural Sciences, Engineering and Technology, Humanities, Islamic and Oriental Learning and two from Social Sciences (because this faculty was comprised much larger than the other three and comprised 17 departments).

Semi-structured interview technique was used to collect data from the participants. The major themes covered were: family background and support for education and job, experiences during the process of education and career choice, social and cultural factors influencing their education process and career development. The researchers tried to keep the sequence of questions same for all participants but deviation took place in a number of cases. It did not affect the data because the intended information was given by the participants while elaborating their views one way or the other. Almost all interviews were held in the offices of the participants in two to three sessions of about 2 hours of duration. The interviews were audio recorded supplemented by notes by the researchers which were transcribed later for the purpose of analysis. All interviews were held in bilingual situation – a mix of English and Urdu.

Results and Discussion

The research provides confirmatory evidence that education plays important role in the lives of women and years of education directly influence the upward mobility in the careers of participants. There were differences in the opinions /perceptions of participants on the issue of domestic responsibilities of women. Some insisted that husbands share domestic responsibilities while others thought that domestic responsibilities can be further categorized by outdoor and indoor work so that women have more time for their children, kitchen and home management. Very few pointed out that instead of creating confrontation at home women need to

understand that they live in an Islamic country with deeply rooted traditions of patriarchal culture of Indian region. They were of the view that women must pursue higher education and career by strategizing and acknowledging the support of their male family members (fathers, brothers, husband and even sons) for their forbearance. Many participants agreed that the phenomenon of male domination should be handled in non-confrontational manner so that men are confident their women are under their control. Many participants avoided to discuss family issues perhaps they considered it highly personal matters. Almost all participants appreciated and acknowledged the support of their fathers, brothers and husbands in supporting them during their education and job in times when the society was much conservative than today's society (all participants had more than 25 years of career). The role of education in the life styles and empowerment of women is being discussed in subsequent sections.

Importance of Women's Education

There is a particular mindset, usually labelled as Mullaism (person serve usually as an imam in mosques having superficial religious knowledge) opposes women's learning and education. This traditional stereotype thinking is in favour of putting such restrictions that make it impossible for female students to get knowledge in many cases. This is mainly because of the male domination imbedded in the culture of Asian especially South Asian region (Women Division, 1985).

In Pakistan, particularly in rural and suburban areas, women are placed largely at the bottom end of the educational system in comparison to their male counterparts (Khan, 1989; King and Hill, 1993 and Khalid 1996). Traditionally, it is assumed that women are limited to their homes and men are the breadwinners of the family. In this situation, education can play a vital role in enhancing the

status of women and placing them on an equal footing with their male counterparts. Education of women usually increases their ability to secure employment in the formal sector. According to Haq (2000) "No society has ever liberated itself economically, politically, or socially without a sound base of educated woman". This is a very interesting and powerful statement because only education is not sufficient factor facilitating the process of women empowerment. Rather women empowerment is a very complex agenda to be achieved. Education can be one of the important conducive factors. Education helps women in personal gains in releasing their potential in terms of fulfilment, satisfaction; the fact that society will function most fully if all its members are treated equally; the observation that educated mothers can stimulate the educational growth of their offspring in ways that fathers find more difficult. Some interesting narrations of the participants are given below:

Higher education definitely raises women's status whether she contribute in the income of the family or not. She can be at par with men. Majority of the women in our country are uneducated that is why they are suppressed. It is the duty of school teachers to tell them that becoming a wife is not their ultimate goal. Their standing up on their feet and being something is important. I always teach my students about their worth and importance as a human being. I have young and new faculty. I have only one message for this young lot that search and go ahead. This is not the end of the world go and explore opportunities.

Another participant describe the role of education in following way

I am very thankful to God that I am an educated lady. If I did not get education I might be house wife

without any individual recognition and spend my life as a wife. I enjoyed my job because I love teaching. If you are a working lady your life becomes more disciplined. The house wives life is limited and usually spends routine life. Now the society is changing due to expansion of education and media. Women never talked about their property rights before but now they become more vigilant demand about property right. Women's should negotiate on equality basis. It is not necessary that we have to set a battle fields for our rights. We can achieve this target without conflict due to our behaviour. We should negotiate on the basis of equality with solid arguments. This quality can only earn through education. Uneducated woman can't argue instead sometime they irritate their husband due to their illogical and nonsense talk. Even brothers don't like sisters who behave rudely. If women talk logically and nicely with men she can better achieve her targets.

Majority of the participants believed that educated women are more confident. They can argue and can form their opinions and make their own decision. After getting higher education woman become more useful citizen. They start realizing things and become aware about their rights. She consciously starts feeling about her right and if someone tries to overrule her rights, she raises her voice. Education has major contribution in reducing the dependency of women emphasized by a Dean.

Higher education brings a lot of confidence among women's and increases their income.....highly educated..... earning woman makes a difference in her life. The feelings that she is contributing in the family income boost her self-esteem. Her

mobility also increases; she can go around, can drive her car, can visit her friends and attend some functions at her own convenience.

Thorough analysis of the data revealed that almost all participants believed that education can bring phenomenal change in women's life resulting in social transformation in the long run by inculcating following attributes among them:

1. Enhancing their confidence
2. Raising their status in the family and society
3. Bring awareness about their rights
4. Boosting their self esteem
5. Increasing their self efficacy
6. Reducing their dependency
7. Better up bringing of their children
8. Enhancing their mobility
9. Opening career opportunities

The Link between education and women's empowerment

Increased knowledge, self-confidence and awareness of gender equity are indicators of empowerment process (Murphy-Graham, 2008). There is evidence that these components are usually developed during and as a result of higher education (Maslak and Singhal, 2008). The participants of the study also emphasized the importance of pursuing education and career for women empowerment on the basis of their experiences, as pointed out by one of the Deans:

You become empowered if you are educated and earning otherwise earning does not ensure empowerment. In lower class although a woman may be earning but yet not empowered because she is uneducated. In upper class women are some time empowered even if not earning because they are educated and have enough control over financial resources. In the case of lower class, I can give you my maid's example; she gives everything to her husband. She does not have control on her own income because her husband

takes away everything. So I think both education and earning are crucial factors for woman's empowerment (Dean, Management Sciences).

Women, who are educated and earning, are in much better position in our society as compared to uneducated women worker. This is a commonly understood view about the role of education in transforming women. One of the Heads talked about the education contents that might assist women to develop better coping strategies in their real life situations She was of the view:

I think education is the most effective tool instrument for empowering women. Actually in this scenario we need to define education. Education should be in terms of giving them knowledge, in terms of giving them some sort of character building and in terms of their personality formation. They are trained to handle various situations in life. They should train to face even the adverse situations in the life. If a woman is educated and well equipped, in most cases she is able to overcome deplorable and pathetic situations (Head).

Educated women become more confident (Maslak and Singhal, 2008) and they have better communication skills and can defend their point of view in more effective and diplomatic way and can make their own decisions. Educated women are usually better in understanding human rights, respecting difference of opinions, care for societal norms and try to resolve conflicts and build peace and harmony in society. They become aware about their rights. They consciously start feeling about their own rights due to this process of education which transformed them as empowered citizens as told by one of the Head of Department.

If women want to be empowered they have to become more organized, more responsible, work hard and acquire right

type of education. I mean they should have to develop skills which are the needs of the market. It is not necessary that everyone gets a high status job.....like professor, but whatever you get should be beneficial for you and society as well. They [women] should try acquire all that leads towards their self development. Literacy rate in our country is very low. Very few women are highly educated and that is why the ratio of empowered women is low in our society. The good sign is that this number is increasing. Education and empowerment are directly related. With Women as Vice Chancellors and Deans and on other senior positions we can see role models for younger generation who can aspire to attain these positions in future.

Education not only empowers women in different ways but also ensures a future civilized society as educated women are more prone to provide better training to their children. Many participants agreed that educated and working women are more confident as compared to education women who are domestic workers. They consider themselves valued persons (not a commodity) who can do something for their families. The life of educated women is different from uneducated as they have a different approach towards life and different styles to solve the problems of life. One of the Head said that “my highly educated friend usually says that I am servant of my family and my wages are food and clothes”. Talking about the significance of women's income on the head said,

An educated woman with a job is empowered; I give you my example. If I was not educated and earning I could not survive at my in-laws in a joint family system. Education helps me a lot to understand their psychology and behaviour as the environment quite different from my parents' home.

Education improves analytical thinking, adaptability and prone to change if convinced.

For most of the participant's financial independence, decision making and mobility are important factors for empowerment and education is the crucial step that enables women to achieve this target. The participants also emphasised that women should have to be educated and mentally enlightened not only degree holders. Many participants pointed out that many educated women especially working ones somehow learn/ develop techniques to cope with difficult and confronting situations because of their attributes of tolerance and patience.

Al most all participants included in the study believed that education had a role in their development as individuals and provided them opportunities to establish their potential /talent before their families who then made provisions/ adjustments in the prevailing norms of the society and allowed them to continue higher education and take follow their career.

Conclusions

Individual empowerment only through education is a long-term strategy to change social and cultural norms. However, individual empowerment cannot, by itself, change the boundaries within which women live, work and participate in public affairs (Murphy- Graham, 2008). There is a need to bring change at society level through concerted efforts such as gender balanced policies, implementing laws and ensuring protection to women. The participants of the study were women who were more or less in teaching profession because all were working in the women university, though on managerial positions. This is the profession usually approved by traditional stereotyped cultures. The opportunity for women empowerment can be seen because women working as Vice Chancellors, Deans and Heads belonging to

various disciplines of Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities, Art and Design and Engineering usually participate, chair and coordinate meetings and other high level events with their male counterparts. The emerging women leaders (Vice Chancellors, Deans, Heads, Teachers, Registrars, Controller Examination, Treasurer, Directors etc.) is providing Role Models for younger generation to plan their career.

The analysis of research data revealed that gender main streaming is significant to achieve gender equality and empowerment of women in traditional societies. Gender-separated schools and universities open up education opportunities for girls and women from families who otherwise remain deprived of education. May be this is not the best option for the development of women but higher education builds their confidence, self esteem, open career opportunities, reduces their dependency, increases their mobility, develops skills to manage home and children better. Follow up official records (as mentioned in the annual reports 2009-10) of the graduate students of Fatima Jinnah Women University (FJWU) and Lahore College for Women University (LCWU) indicate that these students are working in mixed environment like: offices, mixed schools and universities, hospitals, banks, audit firms, information technology, software houses, textile industry, laboratories own business. These achievements are paving way for gender mainstreaming. Because graduates of women universities are competing with men on merit and in many case selected for jobs.

The process of education somehow transforms women and enable the to exploit their full potential explore their abilities and make informed decision though many factors related to family, religion, socio-cultural, law and state policies are linked in a complex manner. Somehow women's visibility in social life is much better as compared to 1990s which

is reflected in increased enrolment of girls and women at all levels of education. The government has fixed 10% share of women in jobs apart from those they obtain on merit. These opportunities for education and jobs have opened up unprecedented venues for women to contribute in the development of the country forming gender balanced society aiming at the ultimate goal of gender equality and empowerment. Strategic gender needs emphasize the coping mechanisms used by women to lead peaceful life with dignity and promoting just society. Many women participants had earned Ph. D. degrees from foreign (Western) universities had successful married lives, and well qualified children. The paradigm of women's empowerment needs to be contextualized in the framework of hard work, scholarship, responsibility, achievement motivation and developing coping strategies to deal with the domains of family, work and society structures.

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