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EMPOWERMENT LEVEL AMONG RURAL WOMEN OF SINDH:
A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Women empowerment is an important factor in the growth of any country. It means equal social standing of women to their male counterparts in any society. However, even today, in the 21st century, women's empowerment is a global issue and is prevalent in most societies, particularly in patriarchal societies. Since Pakistan is a patriarchal society, women in Pakistan are subjected to marginalization and social exclusion, especially in rural areas. This research work studied the complex nature of socio-economic factors and cultural norms that affect the empowerment level of rural women in Sindh, Pakistan, and what interventions can be implemented to improve their social, economic, psychological conditions, and political participation as well as decision-making power with an aim to achieve the following objectives: i) to study the socio-economic background of rural women; ii) to determine the social empowerment levels of rural women; iii) to determine the psychological empowerment; iv) to determine the economic empowerment levels; and v) to determine the political empowerment levels among the rural women of Sindh, province of Pakistan. The present study was conducted using a quantitative survey methodology with a close ended five-point Likert scale questionnaire focusing rural women of Sindh. The research questionnaire consisted of indicators related to socio-economic status, cultural norms, and empowerment level of rural women. The surveyed data was then analyzed using IBM SPSS software. Results drawn under the study inferred that the rural women of Sindh remain highly unempowered socially, psychologically, economically as well as politically with a weak socio-economic background. The study further recommends strong policymaking along with the introduction of various schemes in support of gender security by provincial and federal governments and strict measures taken for the implementation of policies.

Keywords: empowerment, oppression, patriarchy, rural women, women

INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment is believed to be an uplift catalyst through which women are enhanced with a self-sustaining mechanism to augment their own self-independence and self-efficiency. Moreover, it also enables women to make independent choices on their own, without their decisions dictated by their male counterparts. This way, women eliminate the concept of patriarchy and their own subordination (Vadlamannati and Dykstra, 2021). Earlier in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Women were restricted to domestic obligations and were considered as property of their male companions. They were deprived of the right to separate from matrimony or be granted guardianship of their children (Pathak, 2021).

Over the years, course of women's lives have altered drastically, however their situations at work and in home still remains, of a subordinate to men (Becknuss, 2022). The struggles continues globally, to be fought against numerous kinds of discrimination against women due to the prevailing gender inequalities in human development i.e., women's bodies objectification, sexual harassment, and the pay gap on the basis of gender (German, 2018). The enhancement of women empowerment as a development goal is assumed to be set on two principle arguments: i), social justice is crucial for the welfare of human and should be intensively pursued; ii), and women manumission is a path to attain other possible legitimate ends of human development (Adjei, 2015). Generally, women in underdeveloped and developing patriarchal societies, like

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Pakistan, especially across rural areas, still bear the brunt of social exclusion, gender-sex marginalization, and helplessness in terms societal cohesion. Additionally, the current dehumanizing predicament of women paints an appalling picture as a consequence of socio-cultural values, traditions, poverty, illiteracy, inadequate awareness, high fertility in underdeveloped economies (Habib, 2020). Specially the rural woman, are mostly isolated, fragmented and are unable to discuss and share their wishes, concerns and problems (Henning-Smith, 2019). Presently, Pakistan is placed under the worst countries with respect to gender parity, only above Republic of Iraq, Republic of Yemen, and the Islamic republic of Afghanistan. According to "Global Gender Gap Report 2021" published by the (World Economic Forum, 2021) (WEF), Pakistan ranks 153rd out of 156 countries on the global index for gender parity. Women have historically been treated as a substitute and thus were oppressed and kept deprived of their legitimate rights, such as equal status and access to opportunity to suppress their professional elevation. Furthermore, women were marooned from the development process and social factors including health, education, family inheritance, access to information and authority, and decision-making phenomenon (Agarwal, 2020). A recent study conducted by International Monetary Fund (IMF) revealed that the annual GDP of Pakistan can be improved by 30 percent if its female population are given opportunities on equal levels. Revealing that one of the reasons for Pakistan not being developed is due to lack of utilization of human capital in terms of women

folk (Memon and Idris, 2019). In light of above facts and figures, this research work aims to address the following research objectives among the rural women of Sindh, Pakistan. (1) To study the socio-economic background of the rural women. (2) To determine social empowerment levels of the rural women. (3) To determine psychological empowerment of the respondents. (4) To determine economic empowerment of the respondents. (5) To determine the political empowerment among the respondents.

METHODOLOGY
Study area
Sindh, a province in southeastern Pakistan. Sharing borders with Balochistan on the west and north, the province of Punjab on the northeast, Rajasthan and Gujarat (States of India) to the east, and the Arabian Sea to the south (Kronstadt, 2015). Topographically, the province of Sindh consists of three regions extending from north to south, namely, *utar* (upper Sindh)-*wicholo* (middle Sindh)- *laar* (lower Sindh) (Khushk, 2015). In this regard, three rural districts from each belt namely Jacobabad (Upper Sindh), Matiari (Middle Sindh), and Mirpurkhas (Lower Sindh) were chosen to carry out the study. The area was further divided into three talukas from each district. Thul, Garhi khero, and Jacobabad taluka from district Jacobabad. Saeedabad, Hala, and Matiari taluka from district Matiari. Jhudo, Sindhri and Mirpurkhas taluka from district Mirpurkhas. Figure 1 further depicts geographical representation of study area.
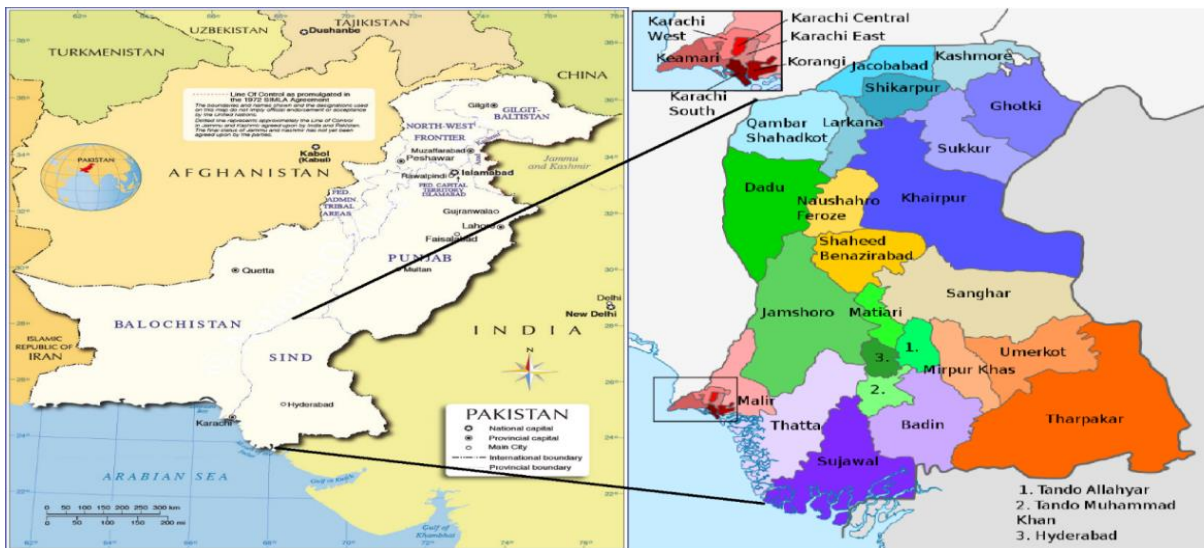

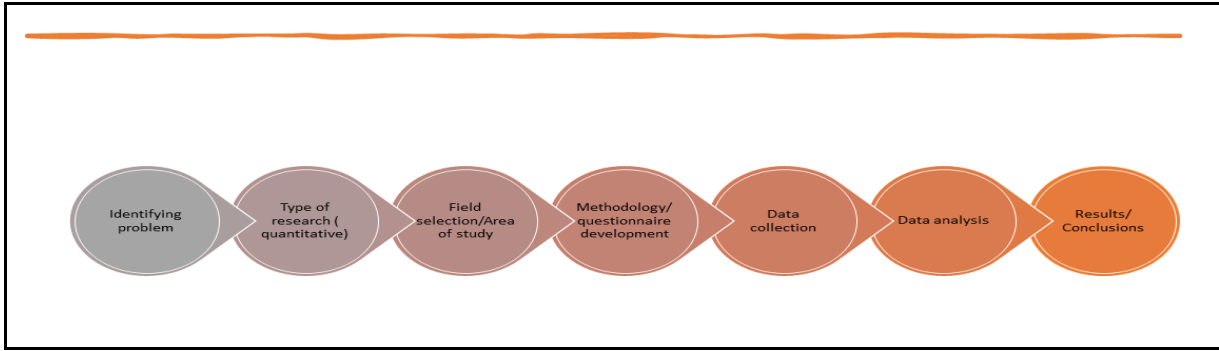**Figure 1.** Location map of study area

Figure 2. Technical roadmap of study

Study design

According to (Arif *et al.*, 2018), researchers use investigative techniques like surveys and experiments to gather data for statistical analyses. They are primarily employed in investigations where the analytical units are humans as a whole. In order to better understand respondents' intentions for change and adoption. Therefore, in order to answer the research questions, the current study used a quantitative survey research approach. Figure 2 further presents technical roadmap of this study.

Research method

According to (Story and Tait, 2019), survey research is used to give a quantitative description, clarification, or evaluation of attitudes, beliefs, and actions. Therefore, this study adopted a survey research approach based on a closed-ended questionnaire.

Population

According to (Frosch, 2011) inventors under the age of 40 are responsible for all notable accomplishments, creative performances tend to decline at older ages. Opportunities for older people remain limited, meaning these respondents will find it harder to grow and develop in the same way that young respondents do (Deacon, 2019). Hence, the target population in this study were the rural women of Sindh aged between 15 to 40 including but not limited to (single, married, widowed, etc.) with no restrictions regarding ethnicity.

Sampling Method

This study employed a simple random sampling method, since according to (Standards, 2005; Harrison Oghenekevwe *et al.,* 2020; Kumar and Chhaparwal, 2020), simple random sampling method ensures that the participants forming any target population have the same chance of being included in a sample.

The quality of a quantitative research, is its ability to generalize outcomes of a sample to the entire population (Maxwell, 2021). In order to determine sample size, regression analysis assumptions are considered and as recommended by (Arif, 2016), studies that employ regression analysis to examine a hypothesis, samples more than or equal to 100 observations should be taken. Hence, a sample of 300 participants was considered appropriate for this study, with a number of 100 respondents from each district of each topographical zone of the province.

Research instrument

This study used a 5-point Likert scale based closed ended/structured questionnaire, question types having a distinct set of pre-defined responses are defined as close ended questions (Damayanti, 2020) whereas Likert scale is a broadly used popular scaling method in social science research. Likert scale was developed in 1932 by Rensis Likert as a part of doctoral dissertation, this scale is a psychometric tool, including a set of statements for the hypothesis under research (Likert, 1932). A five-point Likert scale is simple and easy to use. Respondents can quickly and easily indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with a statement, which can help ensure a high response rate. It provides enough range of responses to capture a range of attitudes or opinions. The scale allows for a nuanced understanding of attitudes and perceptions without overwhelming respondents with too many options. It further produces ordinal data, which can be easily analyzed using statistical techniques like mean, standard deviation, and correlation analysis. These statistical techniques can provide

valuable insights into the data and help researchers draw meaningful conclusions.

Data analysis

Data Analysis is carried out to extract useful information from gathered data and based upon data analysis, the following two types of data were used for this study, i.e., (i) primary data: data collected in person, and (ii) secondary data: published/established data. After collection, the data were tabulated and analyzed through statistical packages for social sciences (SPSS) software and resultantly frequency, percentage, range, mean, standard deviation for the studied objectives were computed. Potential of SPSS has been recognized by the researcher in aiding them define, evaluate, interpret and report data (Richardson *et al.*, 2019). SPSS is most frequently used software in higher research institutions (Harrison *et al.*, 2002; Chen *et al.*, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Response rate for socio-economic background

Table 1 represents the socio-economic back-ground of respondents, results show that the majority of respondents were aged between 25-29 years, making up 29 percent of the total participants. The majority of respondents remained uneducated constituting 42.30 percent of the studied population, whereas most of the respondents were married making 60.30 percent of the studied sample population. Islam was the major religion with 81 percent respondents. Family size remained with 38.70 percent of respondents living in a family size of 8-10 members in each household. And the highest number of respondents remained unemployed comprising about 43.30 percent of the studied population. With the obtained results of socio-economic background, it is inferred that the rural women of Sindh remain highly unempowered. Similar trends of results have been reported by (Ashraf, 2018) in a study on the socio economic well-being of women. The study observed that economic deprivation has negative relationship with women's status in Pakistan. (Beath *et al.*, 2013) also observed that the status of rural women in particular and women in general remains under low frame of empowerment in Afghanistan while (Roy *et al.*, 2019) add further to the literature by highlighting low empowerment levels of women and societal gender gap in India.

Table 1. Socio-economic background of the respondents (n=300)

Variable	Valid	Frequency	Percentage
Age	15-19	37	12.3
	20-24	58	19.3
	25-29	87	29.0
	30-35	79	26.3
	36-40	39	13.0
Education	Uneducated	127	42.3
	Matriculation	89	29.7
	Intermediate	55	18.3
	Graduate/Above	29	9.7
Marital Status	Single	105	35.0
	Married	181	60.3
	Widowed	7	2.3
	Divorced	7	2.3
Religion	Islam	243	81.0
	Hinduism	44	14.7
	Christianity	12	4.3
Family Size	2-4	33	11.0
	5-7	87	29.0
	8-10	116	38.7
	11-13	65	21.3
Monthly Income	Unemployed	130	43.3
	>10,000	106	35.3
	>20,000	53	17.7
	>30,000	11	3.7
		300	100

Table 2. Social Empowerment amongst the respondents (n=300)

Sr. No.	Statements	Range	Mean	Std. deviation
01.	I can visit male doctors without a male relative's company.	4	1.71	.688
02.	I can join the social workforce for the betterment of society by myself	3	1.79	.787
03.	I am allowed to get the education and other capacity-building training.	4	1.80	.841
04.	I am always allowed to visit health care centers/hospitals by myself	4	1.82	.781
05.	I have my personal cellphone and I am allowed to keep in contact with my extended family friends and relatives	3	1.85	.723
06.	I can attend village festivals and other socio-cultural activities by myself	3	1.90	.746
07.	I mostly go out by myself to meet my friends/relatives or for grocery shopping	4	2.04	.987
08.	I can attend events/functions of my relatives by myself	4	2.13	1.074
09.	I have friends in my neighborhood	4	2.14	.910
10.	I am always allowed to visit my friends and family	4	2.17	.950
11.	I have remained a victim of discrimination regarding eating priorities in my family or extended family	4	2.90	.934
12.	I have remained a victim of gender discrimination on various occasions	3	3.30	.728
13.	I have remained a victim of social discrimination on various occasions	3	3.78	.832
14.	I have been a victim of societal or generational conformity	4	4.11	.830

Response rate to psychological empowerment analysis

According to Table 3 in terms of psychological empowerment, 49.3% of the recorded responses were negative to empowerment. Therefore, it can be concluded that even if the rural women were somehow aware about their rights but they still struggled to stand against the deep-rooted patriarchal system. (Ahmad *et al.*, 2020) illustrates socio-psychological affects for a women due to harassment in Islamabad. (Cleary *et al.*, 2021) provides details on the women of Muslim Asian countries how weak psychological conditions make them to see suicide or self-harm as an escape from a male dominant society.

Table 3. Psychological Empowerment amongst the respondents (n=300)

Sr. No.	Statements	Range	Mean	Std. deviation
01.	I have the independence to choose my spouse myself	4	1.61	.564
02.	I can easily think of a solution to a problem on my own in most of the situations	4	1.64	.616
03.	I am not afraid of happenings around me	4	1.65	.714
04.	I have the independence to choose a career path for myself	4	1.66	.626
05.	Life is good and I like being a part of it	4	1.71	.585
06.	I have the confidence in myself to perform any activity in daily life	4	1.76	.704
07.	I can take action if I feel violated personally or professionally in any way	4	1.78	.581
08.	I am satisfied with my life	4	1.81	.775
09.	I always rely on my coping ability therefore I face difficulties with calmness	4	3.48	.824
10.	I have been a victim of discrimination (any kind)	4	3.65	.773
11.	I need validation from others for my work	4	3.66	.941
12.	I do respect myself, other family members and community members as well	4	4.21	.669

Response rate to economic empowerment analysis

Table 4 portrays how most of the respondents (64%) remained under the category of zero to minimum empowerment economically. Due to restrictions of pardah (veil) most rural women were not allowed to leave the house which resulted in low employment levels amongst the rural women. Similar observations have been reported by (Oniyinde, 2020) regarding the laws for women in Nigeria as they face vulnerability due to religious and cultural factors. (Bader *et al.*, 2018) discuss how women face discrimination at workplaces and suffer gender exploitation with evidence from 25 countries.

Whereas (Irrynta, 2022) illustrated the effects of covid19 pandemic on sociopsychological and economic conditions of women with respect to gender oppression.

Table 4. Economic Empowerment of the respondents (n=300)

Sr. No	Statements	Range	Mean	Std. deviation
01.	I have the skills to earn and support my livelihood	4	3.06	1.256
02.	I have learnt traditional embroidery and sewing skills	4	3.14	1.239
03.	I have inherited a property from my parents	2	1.60	.543
04.	I own livestock to support my livelihood	4	2.01	1.149
05.	I run a small business or SME to support my livelihood	4	1.95	.706
06.	I have savings for myself to tackle any unwanted financial crisis	3	1.68	.521
07.	I have my own land	3	1.85	.505
08.	I can purchase and sell farm animals for livelihood	4	2.49	.959
09.	I can purchase and sell liquid-able assets to support my livelihood	4	3.12	.921
10.	I can contribute a certain amount to my family's healthcare and/or education	4	2.35	.805
11.	I have enough amount to support my children's education	3	2.09	.712

Table 5. Political Empowerment of the respondents (n=300)

Sr. No	Statements	Range	Mean	Std. deviation
01.	I have the right to sign any legal document regarding family property or assets	3	1.58	.609
02.	I have the right to decide regarding my family property	3	1.70	.691
03.	I have the independence to become a candidate of any political party as per my preference	3	1.73	.648
04.	I have the right to ownership of my family property	3	1.78	.732
05.	I have the right to challenge the authority of a male member of my family	3	2.15	.720
06.	I have the right to participate in the important decision-making process concerning my family	4	2.20	.877
07.	I have the independence to vote as per my conscience	3	2.32	.883
08.	I have the independence to participate in the election process.	3	2.48	.844
09.	I have the independence to join or participate in political rallies to support ideologies that I am interested in.	4	2.48	1.003
10.	I have the independence to openly support the political leader of my liking	4	3.51	.799

Response rate to political empowerment analysis

According to Table 5 in case of political empowerment, most women were not allowed to vote as per their conscience or participate in the election process as it is considered a male

dominant sector. Along with that woman's right to inheritance remained extremely low, a woman cannot make decisions regarding the family property or claim her right to the property. Resulting in 83.30% of the respondents politically unempowered. (Bardall, 2020; Hussain *et al.,* 2020) reviews violence against women in politics, laws and policies to reduce and end the violence. (Hussain, 2022) describes challenges for women in the politics of Pakistan. (Ashraf, 2018) discuses social, economic and political status of women and Pakistan, suggesting that the higher empowerment of these factors will positively impact the status of women in a male dominated society. (Cassese and Barnes, 2019) also reported about sexism and the difference between white women and women of color in American political systems.

Table 6. Empowerment level of respondents (n=300)

Variable	Levels	Frequency	Percentage
Social empowerment level	low	169	56.3
	moderate	122	40.7
	high	09	3.0
Psychological empowerment level	low	148	49.3
	moderate	149	49.7
	high	03	1.0
Economic empowerment level	low	192	64.0
	moderate	106	35.3
	high	02	0.7
Political empowerment level	low	250	83.3
	moderate	47	15.7
	high	03	1.0

*levels (low, moderate, high); low (1 - 2.4), moderate (2.5 - 3.5), high (3.6 - 4.2).

Empowerment levels of the respondents

Results drawn under this study and as illustrated in Table 6, empowerment among rural women of Sindh remain at its lowest with an average of 63.2% participants falling under low level collectively in all of the objectives analyzed in this research study. From getting married at an early age due to societal and cultural norms to not being allowed to study the rural women remains dependents on their male counterparts. Low education levels add to lack of psychological empowerment. Whereas early marriage results in economic instability of rural women as most women are not allowed to work by their husbands or in laws. Along with that the responsibility towards being a homemaker, a mother and a wife further restricts the rural women to take charge of her economic conditions. Hence, the women remain dependent on their spouses, in case of widowed or divorced they remain dependent on their sons, father, brothers or in laws in some cases. (Beltrán Tapia and Raftakis, 2021) illustrates gender discrimination in the modern Greece, which gives us an idea about the levels of

discrimination in developing countries like Pakistan where even the victims are not aware of being victimized.

CONCLUSION

Rural women's level of empowerment is critical for both their personal development and the advancement of their communities. Even though, several measures have been taken for improvement, yet there is still much to be done to empower rural women. It is therefore concluded that rural females are in general dependent (election and financial matters) and could not make decisions by themselves. In addition, they are also restrained from making social contacts mainly due to cultural/religious restrictions. Countries may realize their full potential and advance inclusive, equitable, and sustainable communities by placing a high priority on the empowerment of rural women. Governments, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders must cooperate to give rural women the tools and assistance they require to prosper.

SUGGESTIONS

The provincial government authorities, with the help of community-based organizations (CBOs), social workers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and different community stakeholders, should conduct a survey of locally empowered and oppressed women in the countryside. Government should introduce programs and/or projects for empowering rural women's ability for productive and innovative opportunities and political participation. Schemes should be introduced to locally educate women, focusing on enabling confidence-building, awareness, realization of self-worth. Furthermore, projects to aid economically disadvantaged women in developing their talents and by linking them to services and the local market and ensuring their financial inclusion should be the top priority and is the need of time. Moreover, Governments should implement women empowerment-friendly policies in order to enhance rural women's empowerment and spur growth and development in a nation. These regulations should address gender inequalities, boost access to financial services, invest more in infrastructure, support women's land rights, and promote women's involvement in decision-making. By implementing these policies, governments can create a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable society that benefits everyone.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION
M. Bukhari: Conceptualization, investigation, formal analysis, wrote original draft.
G. M. Khushk: Conceptualization, supervised.
K. Khoso: Validation, investigation, software, review and editing.
S. Shah: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis.

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