

## WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF SOUTH PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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### ABSTRACT

*This study investigates the relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development, focusing on university students in Multan, Pakistan. It examines how students perceive women's empowerment, its impact on sustainable development, and whether demographic factors such as marital status and residential background influence these perceptions. A sample of 227 students (126 single and 101 married) from government universities in Multan were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a structured research tool and analyzed using Pearson's correlation and independent sample t-tests. The findings reveal a significant positive correlation between women's empowerment and sustainable development, supporting the hypothesis that gender equality is crucial for Sustained improvement in economic and social conditions. However, demographic variables, particularly the area of residence (urban & rural), do not show a statistically significant difference in perceptions of empowerment. This suggests that while students recognize systemic barriers to women's rights—such as restricted access to education, income and leadership roles—these challenges are acknowledged across residential backgrounds.*

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Sustainable Development, Empowerment, Gender Disparities.

### Introduction

Gender inequality remains a pressing global issue, with women facing systemic barriers in workforce participation, wage disparities, and restricted rights to property and inheritance (Holshue et al., 2020; Htun & Weldon, 2011). Such inequalities perpetuate poverty, limit economic growth, and undermine sustainable development (Klasen et al. 2016). The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 underscores gender equality as a catalyst for Promoting inclusive economic and social growth . Empowerment—rooted in access to resources, organizational support, and measurable outcomes (Ng et al., 2014)—enables women to contribute meaningfully to their families, communities, and national economies.

Elneel (2024) describe empowerment as the extension of the ability of individuals to make choices and to convert the choices into customs and wills. This includes vital knowledge, autonomy, and access to a variety of resources. Research showed that with the empowerment of women, a lot of benefits had been enhanced such as income generated in the households, health, and education. In Pakistan there exists imperfection in lives of women. Donations to decisions, finances, property, property, and donation of women in the educational (Batol, 2021) are also made to the worker market. Pakistan also has the female oppressed since it has nearly half of its population including

women and girls. Pakistan is also critical to sexual decision that has been prevalent in sustainable development goals.

In Pakistan, patriarchal norms confine women to domestic roles, exacerbating low labor-force participation (24.8%), high maternal mortality, and limited representation in leadership (Schwab, 2016). Ranked 141st of 142 nations in gender parity (Global Gender Gap Report, 2014), Pakistan's progress toward sustainable development goals (SDGs) remains stagnant. Empirical evidence suggests empowering women could boost GDP by 30% (IMF) and improve health, education, and inter-generational equity. Despite this, research on women's empowerment in Pakistan remains scarce, particularly its nexus with sustainable development.

This study addresses this gap by examining how women's empowerment influences sustainable economic development in South Punjab, Pakistan. It constructs a region-specific Sustainable Economic Development Index (SEDI) and evaluates the role of empowerment in achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs).

### Literature Review

Women empowerment is the act of making women empowered in such a way they can equally use their freedom and rights in any circumstance and they are able to make decisions on their own side. Being empowered. Elneel (2024) describe empowerment as the extension of the ability of individuals to make choices and to convert the choices into customs and wills. This includes vital knowledge, autonomy, and access to a variety of resources. Research showed that with the empowerment of women, a lot of benefits had been enhanced such as income generated in the households, health and education. Hussain et al. (2019) believe that empowerment of women is significant since it increases the participation of women in labor market and decision making, which set preconditions of stable development of the economy.

Pakistan is slowly witnessing a change in the participation of women in the workforce. Moreover, girls who develop higher education are starting to get more and more, and women are getting more and more interested in career (Tahir, 2019). Pakistan women and girls in politics, financial, education and health sections are at the distance (Memon, 2021). A human privilege is a right to life and working is the dominant characteristic of a person. The number of mothers in Pakistan is still rising and in 2014 and 2015 the rights of this drug dies in Pakistan. Women know more than when they are not educated, they will take part in the design of programs, or curtail their own power, and there is mature impact of a learning nation in the educational field (Ali, 2023). According to Kassa (2015), the socioeconomic status of women largely affects their participation and representation in the political bodies. The economic barriers represent a common aspect limiting women since the cost of elections is expensive (Mlambo & Kapingura, 2017).

Pakistan's mixed progress on SDG 5 (Gender Equality) reflects these challenges. While laws like anti-harassment protections and maternity benefits exist, implementation lags. Urban women have seen greater gains in education and employment, but rural disparities endure. Economists estimate full gender parity could boost GDP by 30%, yet cultural resistance slows progress.

### Objectives of the Study

The research addresses four key objectives:

1. To determine the perception of students about women's empowerment.
2. To find out the perception of students about gender discrimination.
3. To examine the perception of students about sustainable development.
4. To study about the relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development.

### Research Methodology

This study employed a correlational research design to examine the relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development among female university students in Multan district, South Punjab. The quantitative approach utilized survey methods to collect data from participants who were selected due to their likely awareness of empowerment and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) issues. The research involved 227 female university students selected through convenience sampling from an initial target of 250 participants. This non-probability sampling method was chosen due to time constraints and accessibility challenges. While practical, this approach limits the generalize ability of findings beyond the specific academic context studied. Data collection utilized a structured questionnaire adapted from validated instruments developed by Jafree, (2017), Mhembwe (2019) & Jayashree (2023).

The 26-item questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale and covered three key areas: demographic information, women's empowerment measures (including mobility, financial independence, education access and decision-making autonomy) and sustainable development perspectives (encompassing social justice, economic participation and environmental awareness). The research instrument demonstrated strong reliability with a Cronbach's Alpha (0.81) was established through pilot testing with 45 participants.

Data were collected through both physical and online distribution via Google Forms, ensuring participant anonymity to encourage honest responses while maintaining confidentiality. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS software, incorporating descriptive statistics to summarize participant characteristics, reliability analysis to confirm measurement consistency, correlation analysis to examine variable relationships, and regression analysis to assess predictive relationships between empowerment measures and sustainable development outcomes. The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines, including obtaining institutional approval, securing informed consent and ensuring complete participant anonymity. These measures protected respondents while maintaining research integrity. This study limited included the use of convenience sampling and the exclusive focus on university students in South Punjab. Additionally, the cross-sectional design provides only a snapshot of perceptions at a single point in time. Despite these limitations, the rigorous methodology, validated instruments and comprehensive analysis approach provide a solid foundation for examining the relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development in Pakistan's higher education context.

### Results

SPSS was applied for data interpretation. The mean score and percentage were computed. The percentage frequency and mean score of the data were used to analyze the data. The aim of this study was to investigate the Role of women's empowerment in sustainable development at the higher level in the Multan district: a quantitative study. In this chapter, data have been analyzed, and results were obtained using SPSS software.

*Table 1: Ho1: There is a significant perception among students regarding women's empowerment.*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t. value	Sig.(p)
Women's empowerment	227	3.8264	0.49974	24.90	0.000

The results of the one-sample t-test reveal that students' perceptions regarding women's empowerment are statistically significant ( $t = 24.90$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Since the p-value is less than 0.05,

the null hypothesis is rejected. The mean score ( $M = 3.82$ ) is above the scale midpoint (3), indicating that students have a significantly positive perception of women's empowerment.

*Table 2:* Ho2: There is a significant perception among students regarding gender discrimination.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t. value	Sig.(p)
Gender discrimination	227	3.9284	0.65353	20.18	0.000

The results of the one-sample t-test show that students' perceptions regarding gender discrimination are statistically significant ( $t = 20.18$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. The mean score ( $M = 3.92$ ) is above the neutral point (3), which indicates that students have a significantly strong perception of gender discrimination.

*Table 3:* Ho3: There is a significant perception among students regarding sustainable development.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t. value	Sig.(p)
Sustainable development	227	3.9145	0.54858	25.11	0.000

The results of the one-sample t-test show that students' perceptions regarding sustainable development are statistically significant ( $t = 25.11$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. The mean score ( $M = 3.91$ ) is above the neutral midpoint (3), indicating that students have a significantly positive perception of sustainable development.

*Table 4:* Correlation between Women's Empowerment and Gender Discrimination

	WEM	GD
Women's empowerment	1 .457** 227	.457** 1 227
Gender discrimination	.457** .000	1 .000

The results of the Pearson correlation analysis indicate a moderate positive relationship between women's empowerment and gender discrimination ( $r = 0.457$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This means that as students' perception of gender discrimination increases, their perception of women's empowerment also tends to increase and vice versa. Since the p-value is less than 0.01, the relationship is statistically significant.

### Conclusions

Study examined university students' perceptions of women's empowerment and its relationship with sustainable development in Multan, Pakistan. The findings reveal a strong consensus among respondents about existing gender inequalities, with 55% agreeing that women's education is undervalued compared to men's. Cultural barriers like early marriage (41% agreement) and limited rural educational access (48% agreement) were identified as significant obstacles. Despite these challenges, students overwhelmingly recognized the potential of women's empowerment, with 46% strongly agreeing that educated women lead healthier families and make better decisions. The results of the Pearson correlation analysis indicate a moderate positive relationship between women's empowerment and gender discrimination ( $r = 0.457$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This means that as

students' perception of gender discrimination increases, their perception of women's empowerment also tends to increase and vice versa. Since the p-value is less than 0.01, the relationship is statistically significant advance Pakistan's progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals.

### Discussion

The study highlights the strong connection between women's empowerment and sustainable development in South Punjab, Pakistan. The findings demonstrate that economic, familial and psychological empowerment significantly contribute to sustainable economic development in the region. These results are consistent with Batool (2021), who emphasized that women's decision-making power, financial independence and confidence play a crucial role in driving economic progress. Similarly, Arshad & Malik (2022) argued that empowered women, particularly those who are self-reliant and capable of influencing household and community decisions, however, the study also reveals promising signs of change among educated youth, who demonstrate growing awareness of gender equality issues.

At the same time, the analysis reveals that unpaid domestic responsibilities and higher fertility rates hinder women's ability to participate in economic activities and decision-making. This aligns with the structural challenges highlighted in the literature, where traditional gender norms and unequal domestic workloads reduce women's economic potential and limit their contribution to sustainable growth (Khalid et al., 2020). Regional disparities further demonstrate that empowerment is not uniform across Punjab; while Central Punjab shows stronger economic and psychological empowerment, Southern Punjab is comparatively more politically active (Batool, 2021). These variations underscore the importance of adopting context-specific approaches to policy and intervention.

Similarly, Andleeb et al. (2024) pointed to patriarchal norms, mobility restrictions, and poverty as key barriers to empowerment, suggesting that reforms need to address deep-rooted cultural constraints. Studies by Khalid et al. (2020) also revealed that only about one-third of women in Punjab are considered empowered, with rural and southern regions particularly lagging behind, emphasizing the need for targeted strategies.

In sum, the study provides empirical evidence that women's empowerment is not just a social necessity but also a driver of long-term sustainable development. By addressing systemic barriers and promoting inclusive opportunities, policymakers can harness the full potential of women in South Punjab to Promote overall social and economic improvement and contribute effectively toward the Sustainable Development Goals. The research showing that women's empowerment, gender equality and sustainable development are related. Results from the surveys help us see how college can encourage social change by promoting equal treatment of genders and including gender studies in public sector universities encourages students to identify and look critically at gender stereotypes.

### Recommendations

#### 1. Educational Reforms

- Expand rural educational infrastructure and implement targeted scholarship programs for female students.
- Integrate gender studies across university curricula to challenge stereotypes and promote equality.

#### 2. Economic Empowerment

- Establish microfinance initiatives and entrepreneurship training specifically for women.
- Create mentorship programs connecting female students with industry leaders.



### 3. Policy Interventions

- Strengthen legal protections against workplace discrimination and gender-based violence.
- Develop gender-sensitive monitoring systems to track SDG progress.

### 4. Community Engagement

- Launch nationwide awareness campaigns featuring positive female role models.
- Establish community centers offering digital literacy and vocational training for women.

### 5. Research Expansion

- Investigate inter-sectional barriers faced by women from different socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Explore the impact of women's empowerment programs on specific SDG indicators.

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