

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A CASE OF WOMEN SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN PAKISTAN (2008-2018)

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Abstract

Women empowerment is the process of granting women the knowledge, skills, resources, and opportunities to participate in and contribute to society on an equal basis with men. It involves enabling women to make informed decisions, control their own lives, and exercise their rights. Women socio-economic empowerment is a critical driver of societal progress. Women socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan from 2008 to 2018 witnessed notable developments and challenges. During this period, Pakistan made efforts to address gender disparities and enhance women participation in various sectors just like the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP), launched in 2008, aimed to provide financial support to low-income women, contributing to poverty reduction and increased financial independence for many. Additionally, Women representation in politics and the workforce improved, with more women entering the labor market and participating in political roles. This study through scholarly literature and impact reports, explores the various policies and initiatives aimed at empowering women both socially and economically by Pakistan's government.

Keywords: Empowerment, Socio-Economic, Women, Constitutions, BISP etc.

INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment refers to the process of providing women with the tools, resources, opportunities and the ability to make choices and decisions that lead to greater control over their own lives and increased participation in various aspects of society. It aims to create an environment where women can exercise their rights, have equal access to opportunities, and can actively engage in economic, social, political, and cultural activities without facing discrimination, violence, or other forms of inequality.

Women socio-economic empowerment refers to the process of enhancing women social and economic status by providing them with opportunities, resources, and support to achieve economic independence and improve their social well-being. It involves addressing both the economic and social dimensions of empowerment simultaneously.

Socio-economic empowerment for women is a multi-dimensional approach that recognizes the interplay between economic well-being and social standing. It aims to improve the overall quality of life for women, enhance their status in society, and contribute to gender equality. Achieving Women socio-economic empowerment is crucial for both individual and societal development, as it leads to more inclusive and equitable communities.

Socio-economic empowerment of women in Pakistan is a multifaceted challenge, as the country grapples with various socio-cultural, economic, and political factors that can hinder Women progress. However, there have been significant efforts and progress in recent years to promote Women socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan.

Women empowerment in Pakistan has been a priority, and several policies and initiatives have been implemented to promote gender equality and socio-economic empowerment. These policies address various aspects of Women lives, including education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and legal protection.



Between 2008 and 2018, the Pakistani government took several steps to promote women socio-economic empowerment. Some of the key initiatives and policies during this period included:

Benazir Income Support Program (BISP): Launched in 2008, this social safety net program provided financial assistance to low-income women, widows, and families. It aimed to reduce poverty and enhance the economic well-being of women.

Women Political Empowerment: Efforts were made to increase women political representation. Special seats were reserved for women in both the National and Provincial Assemblies, encouraging their participation in politics and decision-making.

National Plan of Action for Women: This plan was implemented to address gender disparities and improve the status of women in various sectors, including education, healthcare, and employment.

Pro-Women Legislation: The government passed several pro-women legislative measures during this period, such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, which aimed to create safer working environments for women.

Gender Mainstreaming: Various government departments initiated gender mainstreaming efforts to ensure that policies and programs considered the specific needs and challenges faced by women.

Education Initiatives: The government introduced programs to increase girls' enrollment in schools and improve the quality of education. These initiatives aimed to reduce the gender gap in education.

Women Entrepreneurship Development: Initiatives were launched to promote Women entrepreneurship, such as the Prime Minister's Youth Business Loan Scheme, which provided financing to women entrepreneurs.

Healthcare Services: The government worked to improve Women access to healthcare services, including maternal and reproductive health, in an effort to reduce maternal mortality rates.

Awareness Campaigns: Various awareness campaigns and advocacy efforts were undertaken to promote Women rights, gender equality, and the importance of Women socio-economic empowerment.

Despite these initiatives, significant challenges remained, including gender-based violence, economic disparities, and unequal access to resources in rural and marginalized communities. These efforts aimed to address these issues and enhance Women socio-economic empowerment during the 2008-2018 in Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women socio-political empowerment is a vital aspect of gender equality and democratic governance. In many parts of the world, women have made significant strides in achieving political representation, leadership roles, and active participation in decision-making processes. This empowerment extends beyond the political arena to encompass social, economic, and cultural spheres, enabling women to advocate for their rights and effect meaningful change (Duflo, E. (2012). Despite progress, gender disparities still exist in many regions, emphasizing the ongoing need for policies, education, and societal support to further Women socio-political empowerment and ensure their voices are heard in shaping the future of their communities and nations (Cypher, J. M., & Dietz, J. L. (2008).

Economic Empowerment focuses on enabling women to access economic resources, earn income, and achieve financial independence. It includes measures such as providing job opportunities, vocational training, and access to credit and financial services. Encouraging Women entrepreneurship and participation in the labor force are essential components (Cornwall, A. (2016).

Financial Inclusion explains that women have access to banking and financial services, including savings accounts, loans, and insurance. This allows them to save, invest, and manage their finances effectively. Provision of education and skills development training opportunities to women, which can improve their job prospects and income potential. This includes both formal education and



vocational training (Subbarao, D. (2009). Access to healthcare services is crucial for women well-being and economic productivity. It includes reproductive healthcare, family planning, and general healthcare to ensure that women can participate in the workforce and society without health-related barriers. Ensuring that women have legal rights to property, including land and housing. This is critical for their economic security and social standing.

Promoting gender equality in all aspects of society, including the workplace. This involves addressing issues such as the gender pay gap, workplace discrimination, and harassment. Implementing laws and policies that protect Women rights and promote their socio-economic empowerment. This includes legislation against gender-based discrimination and harassment (Cornwall, A., & Rivas, A. M. (2015).

Social Empowerment addresses social factors that can influence Women economic opportunities, such as cultural norms and traditions. Breaking down barriers created by these norms is essential for Women socio-economic empowerment. Access to Technology ensures that women have access to and can effectively use technology, including the internet and mobile phones, which can open up new economic and social opportunities (Rewani, S. K., & Tochwang, L. (2016).

Support Networks include creating support networks, mentorship programs, and Women organizations that provide guidance, resources, and encouragement for women to advance in their economic and social pursuits. Women empowerment in Pakistan has made significant strides in recent years, with increased access to education and employment opportunities for women. Legal reforms and awareness campaigns have aimed to combat gender-based violence and discrimination. However, challenges persist, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, where cultural norms and economic disparities can limit progress (Malik, S., & Courtney, K. (2011).

Women empowerment is a multifaceted concept that has been examined through various theoretical frameworks. Empowerment theories often consider economic, social, and political dimensions, acknowledging that Women empowerment involves not only individual development but also changes in societal norms and institutions. Intersectionality theory underscores how Women experiences of empowerment are influenced by multiple factors, including race, class, and sexual orientation, highlighting the importance of addressing various dimensions of identity. These theories collectively provide a foundation for understanding and promoting Women empowerment across diverse contexts and domains (Alexander, A. C., Bolzendahl, C., & Jalalzai, F. (2016).

Women representation in political and leadership roles has improved, though more efforts are needed to ensure Women voices are heard and their rights are protected. Grassroots organizations and government initiatives are driving change, with ongoing work required to continue advancing Women empowerment in Pakistan (Latu, I. M., Mast, M. S., Lammers, J., & Bombari, D. (2013).

From 2008 to 2018, Pakistan witnessed significant strides in Women socio-economic empowerment, marked by key government initiatives and policy reforms. The launch of the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) and the reservation of seats for women in political bodies contributed to greater financial independence and political representation for women. Educational opportunities for girls expanded, and awareness campaigns promoted gender equality. While progress was made, gender disparities persisted, particularly in rural areas, where access to healthcare and economic opportunities remained limited. Addressing issues of gender-based violence and achieving true socio-economic empowerment for women continued to be an ongoing challenge during this period (Ashraf, I., & Ali, A. (2018).

Between 2008 and 2018, Pakistan introduced a range of policies aimed at advancing Women rights and empowerment. The Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) stood out as a pivotal initiative, providing financial assistance to low-income women and families, thereby addressing poverty and enhancing economic stability. Efforts to increase Women political representation through reserved seats in legislative bodies and pro-women legislation such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act worked to create safer, more inclusive environments (Roy, C., Chatterjee, S., & Dutta Gupta, S. (2018).



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methodology is an approach to research that focuses on exploring women issues. Challenges related to women socio-economic empowerment. In this research tried to examine step taken by Pakistan's government for women socio-economic empowerment, meanwhile effort to suggest suitable measures for the institutions and policy makers to ensure women empowerment. In this also focuses legislation made by state in past and these legislation contribute to in the development of women.

Key elements of women socio-economic empowerment:

Economic Empowerment: Ensuring women have equal access to economic resources, including employment, entrepreneurship, and financial independence. This includes bridging the gender pay gap and promoting Women participation in traditionally male-dominated fields.

Promoting education for girls and women, as it is a fundamental tool for empowerment. Education equips women with the knowledge and skills they need to participate fully in society and make informed decisions. Ensuring women have access to healthcare services and information, including reproductive health and family planning. This enables them to make choices regarding their own bodies and reproductive rights. Encouraging Women participation in politics and leadership roles. This involves increasing the representation of women in decision-making processes, government positions, and other leadership roles.

Eliminating social and cultural norms and practices that perpetuate gender inequality, discrimination, and violence against women. This includes raising awareness about gender issues and promoting gender equality in all aspects of society. Advocating for and enforcing laws that protect Women rights, such as laws against domestic violence, sexual harassment, and gender-based discrimination. Access to justice and a legal framework that supports Women rights is crucial. Ensuring that women have equal access to resources such as land, property, and credit, which can contribute to economic independence. Encouraging the formation of support networks and organizations that provide women with the information, mentorship, and guidance they need to advance their goals.

Significance of Women Socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan

Women socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan holds great significance for various reasons, as it has far-reaching positive impacts on individuals, families, communities, and the nation as a whole. Here are some key reasons why Women socio-economic empowerment is significant in Pakistan (Bushra, A., & Wajiha, N. (2015)).

Reduction of Poverty: Women economic empowerment can contribute significantly to poverty reduction. When women are economically empowered, they can generate income for their families, which, in turn, improves living standards and reduces the prevalence of poverty.

Economic Growth: Empowering women economically increases the size of the labor force and contributes to economic growth. When women are active participants in the formal and informal sectors, it boosts the country's overall productivity and GDP.

Improved Education: Economic empowerment enables women to invest in education for themselves and their children. Educated women are more likely to send their children, especially girls, to school, which has long-term benefits for the entire society.

Better Health Outcomes: Economic empowerment often leads to better access to healthcare for women and their families. It can result in improved nutrition, better maternal and child health, and overall well-being.

Gender Equality: Empowering women economically helps challenge traditional gender roles and expectations, contributing to more balanced and equal gender relations. This shift is not only a matter of social justice but also contributes to societal harmony.



Political Participation: Economic empowerment can translate into increased political participation. When women have economic independence, they are more likely to be engaged in politics, and their voices can be better represented in decision-making processes.

Reduced Gender-Based Violence: As women gain economic independence, they often have more leverage to negotiate within their households and communities. This can lead to a reduction in gender-based violence and discrimination.

Entrepreneurship and Job Creation: Empowering women to start businesses and participate in the workforce contributes to entrepreneurship and job creation. This, in turn, leads to greater economic opportunities for the country.

Improved Quality of Life: Women empowerment enhances their overall quality of life. It can lead to better housing, sanitation, and access to basic services.

Social Development: Empowered women play a critical role in social development. They are more likely to invest in their communities, support local initiatives, and engage in social projects that benefit the broader society.

Global Competitiveness: Economically empowered women contribute to a more competitive and dynamic society. They bring diverse perspectives and talents to the workforce, which is increasingly important in the globalized world.

Sustainable Development: Empowering women economically is closely linked to achieving sustainable development goals, as it addresses issues such as poverty, inequality, health, education, and environmental sustainability.

Barriers to women socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan

While there have been significant efforts to promote Women socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan, there are still several barriers that hinder Women progress in various aspects of their lives. These barriers are often deeply rooted in cultural, social, and economic factors. Some of the major barriers include (Akhunzada, Z. U., Khattak, M. K., & Ashraf, A. (2015).

Cultural and Social Norms

Traditional gender roles and cultural norms restrict Women mobility, decision-making power, participation in economic and social activities. These norms often limit women to domestic roles and undervalue their contributions to the workforce.

Limited Access to Education

A lack of access to quality education, particularly in rural areas, restricts Women opportunities for skill development and access to better-paying jobs. Early marriage and family expectations can also prevent girls from pursuing education.

Limited Access to Healthcare

Health disparities, especially in rural areas, can affect Women ability to participate in the workforce and pursue economic opportunities. This includes inadequate access to reproductive health services.

Economic Inequality: Women often earn less than men for the same work, and they have limited access to economic resources such as credit and land. The gender pay gap and disparities in property ownership can be significant barriers.

Lack of Legal Protection

Despite legal reforms, many women in Pakistan still face discrimination, harassment, and violence. The enforcement of laws protecting Women rights can be weak, and women may lack awareness of their legal rights.

Child Marriage

Early and forced marriage remains a significant issue in Pakistan. This practice deprives girls of educational and economic opportunities and can lead to a cycle of poverty.

Limited Mobility

Societal expectations, safety concerns, and a lack of transportation options can restrict Women mobility, making it challenging for them to access education and employment opportunities.



Challenges for women socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan

Women socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan faces numerous challenges, many of which are deeply ingrained in the country's social, cultural, and economic fabric. Overcoming these challenges is essential to create an environment where women can fully participate in economic activities and achieve equality.

Cultural and Social Norms: Traditional gender roles and cultural norms restrict Women access to education and employment. Societal expectations often prioritize Women roles as homemakers and caretakers, limiting their opportunities for economic empowerment.

Limited Access to Education: Despite progress, Pakistan still faces gender disparities in education. Many girls lack access to quality education, and cultural norms sometimes prioritize boys' education over girls'.

Child Marriage: Early and forced marriage remains a significant issue in Pakistan, resulting in girls being taken out of school and preventing them from pursuing economic opportunities.

Gender Pay Gap: Women in Pakistan often earn less than men for the same work, contributing to economic inequality. Discrimination in the workplace is a significant factor in this pay gap.

Lack of Access to Economic Resources: Women have limited access to credit, land, and other economic resources, making it challenging for them to engage in entrepreneurship or secure their financial independence.

Legal Barriers and Discrimination: Although there have been legal reforms, women still face discrimination and harassment. Enforcement of laws protecting Women rights can be inconsistent, and many women may not be aware of their legal rights.

Limited Political Representation: Women representation in politics and decision-making positions remains low, affecting policy changes that could support Women empowerment.

Security Concerns: In some areas of Pakistan, security issues can pose a threat to Women participation in economic activities and limit their mobility.

Access to Healthcare: Limited access to healthcare, particularly in rural areas, can affect Women health and ability to participate in economic activities.

Lack of Childcare Support: Balancing work and family responsibilities can be challenging without access to affordable and reliable childcare services.

Stereotyping and Bias: Stereotypes and biases against women persist in various aspects of life, affecting their opportunities for advancement in the workforce and society.

Limited Access to Technology: The digital gender gap can limit Women access to technology and the benefits it provides, such as online education and business opportunities.

Lack of Awareness: Many women in Pakistan may not be aware of available resources and programs that could help them improve their socio-economic status.

Economic Instability: Economic instability, inflation, and unemployment can exacerbate the challenges women face in seeking employment and economic independence.

Lack of Skills and Training: Many women may lack the necessary skills and training required for better-paying jobs or entrepreneurship.

Opportunities for Women Socio-Economic empowerment in Pakistan

Despite the challenges, there are several opportunities for Women socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan. Various government programs, civil society initiatives, and international collaborations aim to create an environment that provides women with the tools and resources to improve their economic and social standing. Here are some opportunities for Women socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan (Sohail, M. (2014).

Education Initiatives: Programs aimed at increasing girls' enrollment in schools and providing scholarships can help bridge the gender gap in education. Access to quality education equips women with skills and knowledge for better employment prospects.



Microfinance and Financial Inclusion: Microfinance institutions and initiatives like the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) provide women with access to credit and financial services, enabling them to start businesses and gain financial independence.

Women Entrepreneurship

Promoting Women entrepreneurship can lead to economic empowerment. Various organizations and programs offer training, mentorship, and access to markets for women entrepreneurs.

Legal Reforms

Continued enforcement of legal reforms that protect Women rights, such as laws against domestic violence and harassment, can create a safer environment for women to pursue economic opportunities.

Women-Only Workspaces

The establishment of women-only workspaces and business centers can provide women with a supportive environment to explore entrepreneurial ventures and gain valuable work experience.

Gender-Sensitive Workplaces

Encouraging businesses and organizations to implement gender-sensitive workplace policies can help address gender disparities, including the gender pay gap and workplace discrimination.

Political Participation

Efforts to increase Women representation in politics can lead to policy changes that support Women empowerment and gender equality.

Access to Healthcare Services

Initiatives to improve access to healthcare services, including maternal and reproductive health, can enhance Women health and well-being, allowing them to participate more fully in economic activities.

Rural Development Programs Programs like the Benazir Bhutto Shaheed Youth Development Program focus on providing training, skill development, and employment opportunities for rural women, addressing economic disparities.

Support Networks and Women Organizations

Government support for Women organizations and networks that provide resources, mentorship, and encouragement can help women advance in their socio-economic pursuits.

Digital Inclusion: Efforts to reduce the digital gender gap can provide women with access to technology, online education, and online business opportunities.

Private Sector Engagement: Encouraging the private sector to invest in Women empowerment and gender diversity can result in job opportunities and leadership roles for women.

Awareness Campaigns: Campaigns and programs that challenge societal attitudes and norms that perpetuate gender inequality can raise awareness and promote gender equality in all aspects of life.

Key aspects and initiatives for women socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan (2008 to 2018):

Education: Increasing access to quality education for girls and women has been a primary focus. Initiatives have been undertaken to improve girls' enrollment and retention in schools, provide scholarships, and establish Women colleges and vocational training centers (Baig, I. A., Batool, Z., Ali, A., Baig, S. A., Hashim, M., & Zia-ur-Rehman, M. (2018).

Workforce Participation: Efforts are being made to encourage Women participation in the labor force. This includes promoting equal opportunities for women in the workplace, addressing the gender pay gap, and encouraging women to enter traditionally male-dominated fields.

Microfinance and Financial Inclusion: Microfinance institutions have played a crucial role in providing women with access to credit and financial services. Programs like the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) also offer financial assistance to low-income women.



Legal Reforms: Pakistan has introduced several legal reforms to protect Women rights and enhance their socio-economic empowerment. Laws against domestic violence, sexual harassment, and gender-based discrimination have been enacted and enforced.

Property Rights: Initiatives have been launched to educate women about their property rights and help them secure land and property ownership. This is critical for economic security.

Healthcare and Family Planning: Access to healthcare services, including reproductive healthcare and family planning, is essential for Women well-being and their ability to participate in the workforce.

Entrepreneurship and Skill Development: Various programs and vocational training centers have been established to equip women with the skills and knowledge needed to start businesses or seek employment.

Gender Sensitization and Awareness: Campaigns and awareness programs aim to change societal attitudes and norms that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination. This includes challenging harmful cultural practices and promoting gender equality.

Support Networks and Women Organizations: There are numerous Women organizations and networks that provide support, mentorship, and resources to women seeking socio-economic empowerment.

Government Initiatives: The government has launched several initiatives such as the Prime Minister's KamyabJawan Program, which offers loans and skill development opportunities for young women and men.

Conclusion:

Women empowerment is crucial for achieving gender equality and creating a more just and equitable society. It has a positive impact on Women well-being, economic development, and overall social progress. Many governments, organizations, and individuals work towards women empowerment through policies, initiatives, and advocacy efforts.

In Pakistan, where gender disparities and social norms have sometimes limited Women opportunities, Women socio-economic empowerment is vital for the country's progress. Government policies, civil society initiatives, and international efforts are working together to bridge the gender gap and unlock the full potential of women in all sectors of society.

Efforts to overcome these barriers involve a combination of legal reforms, education initiatives, awareness campaigns, and economic empowerment programs. Additionally, changing societal attitudes and norms, as well as involving men and communities in the process, are crucial to making progress in Women socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan.

Overcoming these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes legal reforms, education initiatives, awareness campaigns, economic empowerment programs, and addressing cultural and social norms that perpetuate gender disparities. Additionally, involving men and communities in the process and promoting gender equality at all levels of society is vital to making progress in Women socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan.

These opportunities for Women socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan reflect a collective effort involving the government, civil society, and international organizations to address gender disparities and create an inclusive and equitable society for women. While challenges exist, these opportunities represent important steps toward empowering women economically and socially.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain. Gender disparities persist, particularly in rural areas, where conservative cultural norms and limited access to resources can hinder Women socio-economic empowerment. Additionally, women often face barriers related to mobility, security, and limited decision-making power within households.

The progress toward Women socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan is ongoing, and continued efforts from the government, civil society, and international organizations are vital to addressing these challenges and ensuring a more equitable and inclusive society for women.



While these policies and initiatives represent important steps toward Women empowerment in Pakistan, challenges still exist, including the need for more effective implementation, changing societal norms, and addressing barriers related to mobility and security, particularly in rural areas. Continuous efforts are necessary to ensure that these policies lead to tangible improvements in the lives of women across the country.

From 2008 to 2018, Pakistan made notable efforts to advance Women socio-economic empowerment. Key initiatives included the establishment of the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) in 2008, a social safety net program that provided financial assistance to low-income women and their families, aimed at poverty reduction and increased financial independence. The period also saw improvements in Women political representation, with reserved seats for women in legislative bodies, and the passage of pro-women legislation, such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act. Initiatives to enhance girls' access to education and programs promoting Women entrepreneurship were also introduced. Despite these advancements, significant challenges remained, particularly in addressing gender-based violence and reducing economic disparities in marginalized communities, highlighting the ongoing need for comprehensive efforts to further Women socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan.

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