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BARRIERS TO EMPOWERMENT: A CONSTRAINT ANALYSIS OF RURAL WOMEN'S ACCESS TO SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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Abstract
Technological advancement requires inclusive development, yet in Pakistan rural women are still excluded from education and skill development to limit their economic contribution. Despite promise of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), women are structurally disadvantaged when it comes to empowerment. This study addresses the problem of rural women's inaccessibility to vocational training due to cultural, geographical, institutional, and economic challenges. Cross-sectional study design was used to carry out this research in Faisalabad District of Punjab with an aim to study 382 women from rural-background. Participants were chosen through multi-stage sampling from a population of the graduates of 15 vocational training institutes of district Faisalabad. Data were collected on a pre-tested interview schedule and analyzed employing descriptive statistics. Relative Importance Index (RII), Chi-square, Kendall's W, Friedman's test, and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) were used to study the data. The results indicate that cultural practices (RII = 0.83), safety issues in travel (RII = 0.77), and absence of childcare facilities (RII = 0.83) acted as key deterrents in women empowerment. Financial constraints, specifically transport cost (RII = 0.99) and training material cost (RII = 0.96), were found to be the most stringent limitations. Six major dimensions of constraints—financial, cultural, social, institutional, logistical, and safety constraints, accounting for 67.6% variance, were identified by EFA. The research concludes that vocational training upgrades women's skills, confidence, and entrepreneurship, but systemic constraint limit its full potential. It suggests rural-based training facilities, transport and child care assistance, monetary incentives, customized programs, and awareness initiatives for sustainable women's empowerment.
Keywords: Rural women, Skill development, Vocational training, Barriers, Empowerment, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

The world's rapid technological growth demands new approaches to progress. Excluding women's education and training sidelines half the population from economic contribution (Farah & Afzal, 2024). As Cornwall (2016) notes, empowerment means shifting power to those who previously had little control over their lives. Women and all other gender minorities deserve equal opportunities as fundamental human rights (Dahlum *et al*., 2022;Touseef, Abbas, & Ali, 2024). In Pakistan, most women's work remains unpaid and invisible, limiting national productivity. Empowerment requires shifting resources and power to strengthen their decision-making role (Ahamad *et al*., 2016). Women's empowerment is vital for sustainable development and gender equality (Aguiar & Hurst, 2007; Akresh *et al*., 2016). It enhances mobility, decision-making, and rights awareness, as defined by UNESCO. Economic independence and education drive empowerment, benefiting both women and national development (Shetty & Hans, 2019). Despite Pakistan's economic growth, greater focus on women's social and human development is essential. Women's economic empowerment enhances rights, independence, and their transformative role in society (Tiwari &

Malati, 2023). Linked to SDG-5, Pakistan is committed to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment by 2030. In Pakistan, 63.09% of the population lives in rural areas, however, rural women, face limited education, cultural constraints, and poor vocational opportunities (Gul, 2014). Empowerment, as noted by the Aurat Foundation, requires access to resources like income, land, education, health, and mobility (Iqbal, 2021). Skill development, when integrated into education, drives economic success and empowerment, especially for rural women (Shetty & Hans, 2019). Market-oriented training and microcredit can improve household prospects in Punjab (Gatla *et al*., 2024). However, barriers like limited access to programs and weak property rights persist, with only 9% of rural women exercising property control (Khan, 2017).

Vocational training has emerged as a significant driver of human capital development in Pakistan, contributing to the creation of a skilled workforce, poverty reduction, and enhanced women's participation in the labor market (Mahmood, 2024). These programs provide individuals with practical expertise in areas such as trades, agriculture, and commerce, enabling them to pursue self-sufficiency and sustainable livelihoods (Azubuike, 2011). The Technical Education and Vocational Training Authority (TEVTA) has been particularly instrumental in expanding skill development initiatives, fostering women's employability, and enhancing their economic independence (Shah *et al*., 2011). For many women, vocational training is more than a pathway to employment; it is a means of gaining agency and mobility in traditionally restrictive social environments.

The demand for vocational training in Pakistan continues to grow, yet institutional capacity has not kept pace. In 2021, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions reported only 0.5 million enrollments, of which just 33% were women (United Nations, 2023). Such figures highlight the limited inclusion of women in skill development despite their potential to significantly contribute to the economy. Institutional shortcomings are compounded by cultural norms and biases that discourage women from pursuing vocational careers. Without targeted, gender-responsive strategies, the gap between women's aspirations and their economic opportunities will persist, further entrenching socio-economic inequalities.

Aside from structural and institutional limitations, entrenched social and psychological impediments further limit women's empowerment and business prospects (Williams & Shahid, 2016). Patriarchal beliefs, social discrimination, and health inequities restrict rural women to low-paid, informal, or subsistence farming jobs. Moreover, lack of government support, poor enforcement of labor standards, and wide-spread gender violence further marginalize women. In contrast to other lower-middle-income nations, Pakistan has one of the widest gender differentials in labor force participation (Sangeeta & Bose, 2024). This cannot be addressed by merely increasing training provision; it necessitates a concerted strategy that aligns educational reforms, strengthening institutions, and socio-cultural change to facilitate women's meaningful engagement in the economy.

In spite of considerable research on women's empowerment, less has been understood about the social consequences of skill programs in rural Punjab. There are gaps regarding how cultural values, gender roles, and access factors influence participation and long-term autonomy. Bridging these gaps can provide insight into how skill development changes rural women's lives and inform effective policy. This research underscores the value of sociological insights in skill development programs. In contrast to income-oriented studies, it focuses on how family pressures, cultural norms, and patriarchy mold women's involvement and contends that empowerment is more than acquiring skills. Pakistan's vocational training programs, such as those conducted by TEVTA, have curbed poverty and improved women's job opportunities (Mahmood, 2024). However, most women from rural areas are still not included in programs because of a lack of infrastructure, high expenses, and social discrimination. The labor market shows a strong gender imbalance, with only 30% of educated women working while 83% of men are employed. Pakistan's technical and vocational system has capacity problems as well, with female enrollment still only 33% in 2021. These limitations constrain women's entrepreneurship and lock them in informal or subsistence work.

This research addresses these gaps by examining how skill development initiatives shape women's entrepreneurship, arguing that empowerment requires a holistic approach beyond income, incorporating cultural and sociological dimensions to achieve lasting transformation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a cross-sectional study design to evaluate the contribution of vocational and skill development programs towards empowering women in rural Punjab, Pakistan.

Description of the Study Area

The research was conducted in Faisalabad District, Punjab province of Pakistan, in Faisalabad Saddar and Faisalabad City tehsils. Faisalabad is the second industrial city of Pakistan with a population of approximately 9.1 million. In spite of its urban industrial economy, there are massive populations of females who are from rural areas where women lack skills development and empowerment programs. The chosen research area encompasses both rural and urban areas and therefore is most appropriate to study the impacts of skill development programs.

Population of the Study

The population of the study included all female graduates from 2021–2023 from 15 purposively selected vocational training institutions. The population base included approximately 6,893 women, with the knowledge that only graduates from the rural background were to be included for analysis.

Sampling Procedure

A multi-stage sampling method was employed in order to achieve representativeness and minimize bias. Stage one constituted purposively sampling 15 institutes where registration of women with rural origins was relatively high. During stage two, the sample size was determined using Taro Yamane's formula through which out of a total of 6,893 graduates, a representative sample of 382 respondents was reached. The third step involved proportionate sampling according to a stratified approach for adequate representation of participants from institutes and years of graduation. Finally, since some graduates had migrated on account of marriage or employment, snowball sampling technique was employed in order to trace and obtain their contact successfully.

Data Collection Method

For this research, a structured schedule interview was utilized in order to meet the objectives of the study. The area concerning the constraints that inhibit women participation in vocational training and skill acquisition. For validation of the research instrument, face and content validity were employed by the researcher to measure the magnitude of each statement. The research used a quantitative research methodology, whereby the collection of uniform data from a large sample of respondents enabled statistical analysis. Due to literacy limitations in rural areas and cultural background of the target population, interviews were carried out face-to-face to avoid ambiguity and incompleteness of responses. The final interview schedule contained Likert scales where necessary, to capture quantifiable data as well as contextual information. This helped in achieving high response rates, reducing non-sampling errors, and increasing the validity of data gathered from the rural women beneficiaries of different vocational training schemes.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by using SPSS for descriptive and inferential statistics. The study used the Relative Importance Index (RII) to rank cultural, geographical, and institutional barriers. However, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) further identified hidden factors shaping these challenges, aiding data reduction and analysis.

The study followed ethical standards like informed consent, anonymity, privacy, and voluntary participation. The participants were informed of the study purpose, and they were assured of privacy and comfort. Cultural sensitivity was strictly followed as per rural culture and gender norms.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Information on socio economic attributes such as age, family structure, household size, monthly income, primary income source, marital status, level of education of the respondents, their spouse and parents are described and presented in this section. The demographic characteristics used in this study are presented and discussed below:

Table 1: Socio-Economic Profile of Respondent

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Age	Under 20	204	53.49
	21 – 30	160	41.86
	31 – 40	18	4.65
Family Structure	Nuclear	178	46.60
	Joint	169	44.24
	Single-Parent Family	35	9.16
House Hold Size	1-2	9	2.35
	3-4	44	11.52
	5-6	133	34.81
	7-8	81	21.21
	More than 8	115	30.11
Monthly Income	Below - Rs/20,000	62	16.28
	Rs/20,001- Rs/40,000	71	18.60
	Rs/40,001- Rs/60,000	89	23.26
	Rs/60,001- Rs/80,000	80	20.93
Marital Status	Single	324	84.82
	Married	27	7.06
	Divorced	9	2.35
	Widowed	22	5.77

Education	No Formal	62	16.23
	Primary Education	9	2.35
	Secondary Education	151	39.53
	Higher Secondary	53	13.87
	Bachelor's	62	16.23
	Master's	45	11.78

The socio-economic profile showed that most respondents were young and single, with the majority falling below 30 years of age, which highlighted their potential for education and skill development. Family structures were almost evenly divided between nuclear and joint systems, while large household sizes were common, creating financial dependency pressures. Income levels suggested that many belong to middle and lower-middle-income families. Educationally, secondary schooling were most prevalent, though higher qualifications remained limited, pointing to barriers in advancing beyond basic education. Overall, the respondent represented a youthful population with opportunities for growth but were constrained by economic and educational challenges.

Constraint Analysis of rural women's struggle vis-à-vis their cultural, geographical and institutional challenges to skill development access.

In rural Punjab, women's empowerment is restricted by patriarchal norms, early marriage, limited mobility, and economic hardships. The Punjab Women's Economic and Social Well-being Survey (2017–18) found 48.4% of rural women face financial barriers to skill training. Patriarchy, gender discrimination, distance, and poor infrastructure further restrict mobility and access (Batada, 2022; Sarwar & Khan, 2021). Institutional constraints, such as limited centers and high costs, also deter participation (Muhammad *et al*., 2010).

Cultural constraints

Cultural values greatly impede rural women's learning and career development by putting domestic responsibilities ahead of education or training. Social stigma discourages women from employment outside the home, as access to skill programs remains restricted. Patriarchal systems also restrict choice-making by needing male consent for one to participate. Coupled with early marriages, values of modesty, and poor social support, these impediments block women's access to skill development opportunities.

Table 2: Relative Importance Index of Cultural Constraints

Statements	**RIIV**	**Std. Dev.**	**Rank**
Cultural norms and traditions	0.83	0.83	1
Family expectations and responsibilities limit my ability to attend vocational training program	0.75	1.17	2
perception that vocational skills are not necessary for women	0.65	1.26	4
Traditional gender roles in my community hinder women from acquiring vocational skills	0.74	0.91	3
Crumbach's Alpha	0.57		
Grand Total Score	1395		
Overall Relative Importance Index	0.74		
KCC	.094		
Friedman test (X^2)	106.219		

*** RIIV = Relative Important Index Value

Table 2 indicates, the Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance (KCC) which reflects the degree of agreement among the raters' rankings runs between 0 and 1. In this analysis, a KCC of 0.094 indicates low rater agreement. This suggests that the raters have differing perspectives regarding the importance of the factors listed. According to the rankings, cultural norms and traditions (Rank 1): This constraint is considered the most important cultural constraint with a RII of 0.83. Respondents seem to concurred that cultural customs and norms are the most significant cultural challenge to women skill development in the study area. This finding is supported with that of Verma, (2015) who reported that cultural norms and traditions of some community is a significant challenge to women skill training and empowerment. Family obligations and expectations as challenge to skill development and training program was ranked 2 with the R.I.I of 0.75. The component, which ranks third with a RII of 0.74, suggests that traditional gender norms are also seen as crucial in keeping women from developing their vocational abilities, belief that women do not need occupational skills (Rank 4) with relative important index of 0.65. Similar findings were discussed by Kaur *et al*., (2018) in their study on the challenges and ways to improve skill development among rural women in India who outlined the most important constraints as illiteracy, gender bias, social norms, dual responsibility and limited fields of training courses for women.

Geographical Constraints

Table 3 shows result of geographical constraints that impact efficiency of women empowerment through skill training. The variable views as geographical constraints consists of quality of the training in rural area, safety concern, weather and distance to the vocational training center.

Table 3: Relative Importance Index Geographical Constraints

Statements	R.I.I.V	Std. Dev.	Rank
Localized availability of vocational training is poor, which discourages me from participating	0.74	0.84	2
Safety concerns while traveling to and from training centers prevent me from attending vocational programs	0.77	1.00	1
Weather conditions or seasonal factors often make it hard for women in my area to attend vocational training	0.69	1.19	4
The distance of vocational training center available in my area is so far, which discourages women from participating	0.72	1.19	3
Crombach's Alpha	0.74		
Grand Total Score	1375.5		
Overall Relative Importance Index	0.73		
KCC	0.023		
Friedman test (X^2)	25.33***		

With the R.I.I.V of 0.77, Safety concerns while traveling to and from training centers was ranked the most important constraint (Table 3). This highlights that fear for personal safety is a significant deterrent for women attending training programs. Many villages are located in remote areas with limited infrastructure and transportation facilities. This finding is supported by (Sarwar and Khan, 2021) as it is difficult for women to travel to training centers, especially due to cultural norms that restrict their mobility. Poor quality of the training rank 2 with the RII of 0.74. The perceived poor quality of training programs acts as a deterrent. Distance of the training centers also discourage participation with the RII of 0.72 which rank third. This indicates that accessibility is a critical factor. Strategies like opening more localized centers or providing transport services could mitigate this problem. Weather and Seasonal Factors rank 4th with the RII of 0.69 this indicates that this constraint is less impactful as compared to others. the KCC of 0.023 suggests limited agreement among respondents on the rankings, possibly reflecting diverse personal experiences or geographical differences.

Institutional Constraints

Institutional hindrances to skill acquisition are a result of systemic constraints in education and organizational systems such as low capacity, poor quality of training, gatekeeping entry, lack of childcare, few female trainers, and low program promotion. Khoury and Prasad (2016) noted that inflexibility in policies and bureaucratic inefficiencies further constrain skill development through the creation of unnecessary hurdles. Such hindrances restrict personal and professional growth, reinforcing deep-seated skill shortages.

Table 4: Relative Importance Index of Institutional Constraints

Statements	R.I.I. V	Std. Dev.	Rank
Lack of awareness about available vocational training center	0.75	1.21	4

Vocational training programs are not tailored to the specific needs and interests of women in my community	0.73	1.05	5
The quality of vocational training available in my area is poor,	0.68	0.99	6
Limited seats offer for skill courses is hurdle to get admission in programs	0.79	1.02	3
The registration process for vocational training programs is complicated and discourages women from enrolling	0.62	1.42	8
The lack of child care facilities near training centers makes it difficult for women to attend vocational training	0.83	0.91	1
The lack of female instructors in training programs makes me hesitant to participate	0.63	1.28	7
The training programs are not adequately advertised or promoted in my community	0.80	0.79	2
Crombach's Alpha	0.76		
Grand Total Score	1368.87		
Overall Relative Importance Index	0.73		
KCC	0.127		
Friedman test (X^2)	334.21		

Findings show that insufficient childcare centers (RII = 0.83) are the primary institutional barrier, followed by poor promotion (0.80) and scarce seats (0.79), indicating capacity and outreach problems. Low medium barriers are low awareness of centers (0.75) and mismatch between programs and women's needs (0.73), and lower rankings for poor quality training (0.68), insufficient female instructors (0.63), and difficult registration (0.62). Overall, institutional barriers—such as few centers, high expenses, and official charges—continue to be significant hurdles for the skill development of women in rural Punjab and Sindh (Din & Khan, 2008).

Economic Constraints

Economic limitations, including high expenses of materials, transport, computer training, and absence of incentives, discourage women from participating in skill courses and business ventures. Public-private partnerships, government subsidies, and microfinance are some of the solutions.

Table 5:Relative Importance Index of Economic Constraints

Statements	**R.I.I.**	**Std. Dev.**	**Rank**
Lack of financial incentives, such as scholarships or stipends	0.93	0.86	3
High transportation cost to cities where training centers are located	0.99	1.06	1
The cost of materials and supplies for vocational training is a significant barrier for me	0.96	0.90	2
High cost of some digital training	0.95	0.91	4
Crombach's Alpha	0.82		
Grand mean	1805.33		
Overall Relative Importance Index	0.96		
KCC	0.002		
Friedman test (X^2)	2.03		

Table 5 shows traveling expenses as the top constraint (RII 0.99), as most centers are city-based and lack transport facilities. Cost of materials ranked second (RII 0.96), while lack of financial incentives was least critical (RII 0.93). Digital training costs (RII 0.95) also hinder access, especially for poor women. The overall RII (0.96) highlights high significance of these barriers, with a KCC of 0.23 indicating moderate agreement among respondents. Many digital courses fee is so high that students particularly poor students can't pay. There is a need of time that government should support to those who can't afford expensive courses in vocational institutes. These findings supported by Din and khan (2008) who conducted a study in Sindh, Pakistan, observed that official training fees and other costs were significant barriers to skill development for rural women.

Perceived Constraints Analysis Using Exploratory Factor Analysis

Variables	**Median**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**
The cost of materials and supplies	5	.769					
Lack of financial incentives	5	.769					
training programs are not adequately advertised	4	.635					
Quality of Vocational training available in my area is poor	3	.554					
The lack of female instructors in training programs	3		.816				
Complicated registration process	3		.754				
Weather conditions or seasonal factors	3		.521				
Distance	4			.800			
High Travelling expenses	5			.631			
High cost of some digital trainings	5			.527			
Lack of awareness about available vocational training centers	4			.525			
vocational skills are not necessary for women	4				.767		
Traditional gender roles in my community					.577		
Family expectations and responsibilities	4				.516		
Limited seats offer for skill courses	4					.779	
Societal cultural norms and traditions	5					.741	
Vocational training is not based on the societal felt need	3					.454	
Safety concerns while traveling to and from training centers	5						.864
The lack of child care facilities near training centers	4						.579
Crumbach's alpha	0.87						
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin	0.61						
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	3422.1						
Eigen Values		4.90	2.45	1.70	1.46	1.25	1.09
% of variance		25.81	12.87	8.94	7.69	6.58	5.73

Table 6 presents exploratory factor analysis of rural women's skill training constraints. The constraints from 1 to 19 are associated with their respective factor loadings. All the constraints have a factor loading of 0.4 and above indicating that all the factors outlined are important impediment to skill training among the respondents in the study area. From the result, different factors affecting vocational training programs, such as financial issues, lack of awareness, societal norms, and logistical challenges were examined. Each variable is associated with a median score and grouped into different factors based on their loading values. Eigen values show the amount of variance each factor accounts for. From the result, the first factor explains 25.81% of the total variance. The second factor explained 12.87%, Third factor explained, 8.94%. Similarly, fourth, fifth and six factor explained 7.69%, 6.58% and 5.73% respectively. As reported by (Din & Khan, 2008) top barriers are costs of training, no incentives, distance, mobility limitations, gender roles, no female trainers, safety, shortage of child care facilities, and inferior quality training.

CONCLUSION:

Nevertheless, women's access to vocational training remains uneven, with rural women in Punjab facing the most acute disadvantages. Structural barriers such as low literacy rates, inadequate educational infrastructure, and restricted mobility prevent many women from benefitting from training initiatives. These challenges are situated within a broader global context, where women constitute two-thirds of the world's illiterate population. In Pakistan, the labor force reflects these disparities acutely: only 30% of educated women participate in formal employment compared to 83% of men. This gendered imbalance not only undermines women's economic empowerment but also restricts the country's capacity to utilize its full human resource potential.

The research indicates that vocational training empowers rural women in Punjab by advancing skills, confidence, employment, entrepreneurship, and social relationships, resulting in increased agency and integration. Overall, it points out the magic of skill development in empowering women. Skill training programs, though well-designed, encounter financial, cultural, logistical, safety, family, and quality-related concerns restricting them to empower women effectively.

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