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Women's Employment as a Tool for Social Empowerment and Economic Mobility

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ABSTRACT

Women's employment has increasingly been recognized as a crucial driver of social empowerment and economic mobility, particularly in societies where gender inequality remains deeply entrenched. This qualitative study was conducted in Mirpur, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, using an exploratory research design. Purposive sampling was employed to interview 14 women working in various fields, and the data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that women's employment significantly transforms household dynamics, gender roles, economic conditions, and social perceptions. It enhances women's participation in decision-making through increased financial contributions, confidence, and bargaining power, although patriarchal norms continue to limit full equality. Employment also fosters autonomy and challenges traditional gender stereotypes; however, the "double burden" of paid work and domestic responsibilities persists. Economically, it improves living standards and access to education and healthcare, despite constraints such as low wages and job insecurity. Moreover, it elevates women's social status and gradually shifts community attitudes. Overall, employment serves as a key driver of empowerment, albeit within enduring structural limits.

Keywords: Women, Employment, Empowerment, Economy, Mobility, Autonomy and Transformation

Introduction

Roshan and Rahman (2025) argued that women's employment has increasingly been recognized as a crucial driver of social empowerment and economic mobility, particularly in societies where gender inequality remains deeply entrenched. Across the globe, Buvinić and Furst-Nichols (2016) stated that women's participation in paid work has been linked to improved autonomy, enhanced decision-making power, and greater control over personal and household resources. However, in patriarchal contexts, women's access to employment is often shaped by cultural norms, mobility restrictions, and unequal opportunities in the labor market. Despite these barriers, employment continues to serve as a transformative force that can challenge traditional gender roles



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and improve women's position within families and communities (Darj, Wijewardena, Lindmark, & Axemo, 2017). According to Hunt and Samman (2016), development is fundamentally about expanding human freedoms, and women's economic participation is central to this process of capability enhancement.

One of the most significant impacts of women's employment is its contribution to social empowerment (S. Ahmed, Bari, & Jabeen, 2021). Employment enables women to move beyond traditional domestic roles and participate more actively in household and community decision-making. Studies have shown that employed women are more likely to have a stronger voice in decisions related to household expenditures, children's education, and healthcare choices (Bhajantri, 2025; Marcus, 2021). This shift in decision-making power is closely linked to increased self-confidence and autonomy. Furthermore, women's employment often leads to a gradual transformation in social perceptions, as economically active women are increasingly viewed as contributors to household income and community development (Lese, 2016). However, the extent of empowerment varies depending on the nature of employment, working conditions, and prevailing cultural attitudes toward gender roles.

In addition to social empowerment, Costantini and Sebillio (2022) asserted that women's employment plays a critical role in enhancing economic mobility. Economic mobility refers to the ability of individuals to improve their income status and overall standard of living over time (Kabeer, 2018). Employment provides women with financial independence, reducing their reliance on male family members and increasing their bargaining power within households. According to Ferrant and Thim (2019), increasing women's labor force participation is strongly associated with poverty reduction and improved household welfare. Women who earn their own income are better positioned to invest in education, healthcare, and nutrition for themselves and their families, thereby contributing to intergenerational development outcomes (Andari et al., 2023).

Moreover, employment enables women to develop new skills, access broader social networks, and gain exposure to diverse economic opportunities (Saha, Chattapadhyay, & Richardus, 2019; Wulifan, Brenner, Jahn, & De Allegri, 2015). These factors collectively contribute to upward economic mobility and improved quality of life. However, research also highlights persistent challenges such as wage gaps, occupational segregation, and informal employment conditions that limit the full realization of women's economic potential (Pal, Gupta, & Joshi, 2022). In many contexts, women are concentrated in low-paid, insecure jobs that do not provide adequate financial stability or long-term security.

Despite these challenges, the literature consistently emphasizes that women's employment remains a key mechanism for both social and economic transformation (Akram, Shaheen, & Kiyani, 2015; Habib, Shafiq, Afshan, & Qamar, 2019). It not only enhances financial independence but also strengthens women's ability to challenge traditional gender hierarchies. As employment increases women's visibility in public and economic spheres, it gradually contributes to reshaping societal attitudes toward gender equality (Hosseini & Asadisarvestani, 2022).

Women's employment serves as a powerful tool for promoting social empowerment and economic mobility. By increasing decision-making power, improving financial independence, and enhancing social status, employment enables women to move toward greater equality within both family and society. Understanding this relationship is essential for developing policies that support women's workforce participation and address structural barriers to their economic and social advancement. We focused the following objectives.



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To examine the impact of women's employment on their social empowerment, particularly in terms of decision-making power, autonomy, and social status within the family and community

To analyse the role of women's employment in enhancing their economic mobility, including income generation, financial independence, and improved living standards.

Literature Review

Women's employment has been widely recognized as a key driver of social empowerment and economic mobility, particularly in societies where gender inequality remains deeply rooted in patriarchal norms (Simon & Hasan, 2025). A substantial body of literature suggests that women's participation in paid work not only improves household income but also transforms gender relations by enhancing women's autonomy, decision-making power, and social status within families and communities (Kabeer, 2016; Marcus, 2021). According to Kabeer (2016), employment expands women's "fallback position" by increasing their access to resources and bargaining power, which in turn strengthens their ability to make strategic life choices. Similarly, Manhas (2025) argues that development should be understood as the expansion of human freedoms, and women's economic participation is central to achieving these freedoms.

A key dimension of women's employment is its impact on social empowerment. Studies show that employed women are more likely to participate in household decision-making, including choices related to children's education, healthcare, and financial planning (Kabeer, 2016, 2018, 2021). Employment also enhances women's social visibility and recognition, shifting perceptions of women from dependents to contributors within the family structure. Research indicates that women who earn an income gain greater respect and authority within their households, which can gradually challenge traditional patriarchal hierarchies (Sakthivel Arumugam Bordoloi, Awasthi, & Roy, 2025). However, the degree of empowerment is influenced by the type of employment, with formal and stable jobs offering greater autonomy compared to informal or unpaid labor.

In many developing contexts, Guban, Steward, and Subhashini (2024) argued that social empowerment through employment is also linked to changes in community attitudes. When women enter the workforce, they often serve as role models, encouraging other women and girls to pursue education and employment opportunities (Bradshaw, Castellino, & Diop, 2017). This ripple effect contributes to broader cultural change, gradually reshaping norms around gender roles. However, literature also highlights resistance from patriarchal structures, where women's employment may be perceived as a threat to traditional family authority systems (Ali Alhazmi, 2023; Marcus & Somji, 2024). Despite this, the overall evidence suggests that employment is a significant catalyst for shifting gender relations and improving women's social standing.

In addition to social empowerment, Shahane (2024) said that women's employment plays a crucial role in enhancing economic mobility. Economic mobility refers to the ability of individuals to improve their income status and standard of living over time (Hassan, Yaseen, & Butt, 2024). Employment provides women with financial independence, reducing reliance on male family members and increasing their control over resources. According to Dias (2021), increasing women's labor force participation contributes significantly to poverty reduction and economic growth at both household and national levels. Women's income is often directly invested in family welfare, including nutrition, education, and healthcare, thereby improving overall living standards (Abdullah & Ullah, 2022; Singhanian, Swain, & George, 2021).

Furthermore, employment enables women to develop skills, build professional networks,



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and access better opportunities over time, which supports upward economic mobility (Morton Ninomiya et al., 2023; Singhanian et al., 2021). However, research also identifies persistent barriers such as wage gaps, occupational segregation, and limited access to formal employment sectors (Bhajantri, 2025). These constraints often confine women to low-paying, insecure jobs, limiting the full realization of their economic potential. Recent global reports also highlight that women continue to perform a disproportionate share of unpaid labor, which further restricts their economic advancement (Akram et al., 2015; Costantini & Sebillio, 2022).

Despite these challenges, evidence consistently shows that women's employment remains one of the most effective pathways to both social empowerment and economic mobility (R. Ahmed & Hyndman-Rizk, 2020; Michaeli, 2021). It not only improves financial independence but also strengthens women's agency within households and society. As women gain economic power, they are better positioned to challenge gender inequalities and contribute to long-term social transformation (Folbre, 2021; Milazzo & Goldstein, 2019). Therefore, promoting women's employment is essential for achieving both gender equality and sustainable development outcomes.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design using an exploratory approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the issue under investigation. The exploratory method is appropriate as it allows the researcher to examine complex social phenomena and capture participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings within their natural context. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who have relevant knowledge and direct experience related to the research topic. A total of 14 participants were intentionally selected based on predefined criteria to ensure the inclusion of information-rich cases. Field data is shown in Table 1. This sampling strategy enabled the researcher to obtain detailed and meaningful insights. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, providing flexibility for participants to express their views while maintaining focus on the research objectives. All interviews were conducted in a comfortable and confidential setting, recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving systematic coding and identification of patterns and themes. Key steps included familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, developing themes, and refining them into a coherent narrative. Ethical considerations were strictly followed, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right of participants to withdraw at any stage.

Table1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 14)

Participant ID	Age	Marital Status	Education Level	Employment Status	Residence
P1	21	Single	Intermediate	Student	Rural
P2	29	Married	Bachelor's	Employed	Urban
P3	34	Married	Primary	Unemployed	Rural
P4	25	Single	Bachelor's	Student	Urban
P5	31	Married	Master's	Employed	Urban
P6	27	Married	Intermediate	Unemployed	Rural
P7	39	Married	No Formal Education	Unemployed	Rural



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P8	23	Single	Bachelor's	Student	Urban
P9	33	Married	Secondary	Self-employed	Rural
P10	28	Married	Master's	Employed	Urban
P11	26	Single	Bachelor's	Employed	Urban
P12	37	Married	Primary	Unemployed	Rural
P13	22	Single	Intermediate	Student	Rural
P14	35	Married	Bachelor's	Employed	Urban

Source: Field data.

Key Findings

Women's Employment and Household Decision-Making Power

The theme highlights how women's participation in paid work reshapes power dynamics within the family by enhancing their voice, influence, and involvement in important domestic decisions. Participants' narratives reveal that employment often strengthens women's bargaining position, particularly in matters related to household finances, children's education, healthcare, and daily expenditures. Many employed women reported that earning an income increased their confidence to express opinions and participate in discussions that were previously dominated by male family members. One participant explained, "Earlier I had no say in household matters, but after starting work, my husband and family now ask my opinion before making decisions." This reflects how economic contribution translates into increased respect and decision-making authority.

A key aspect of this theme is the shift from dependency to shared decision-making. Women described that financial contribution to the household altered how they were perceived within the family structure. In many cases, employment reduced their economic dependence on husbands or parents, which in turn strengthened their position in negotiations. One respondent shared, "When I started earning, I felt my words carried more weight in the family. Now I can also decide about my children's education." Such narratives indicate that employment not only provides financial resources but also enhances women's perceived legitimacy in family decision-making processes.

However, the findings also reveal that the impact of employment on decision-making power is not uniform and is often shaped by prevailing patriarchal norms. Some women reported that despite working and earning, major decisions were still controlled by male family members, particularly in conservative households. One participant noted, "Even though I contribute financially, final decisions are still taken by my husband. My role has improved but not equal." This suggests that while employment improves women's bargaining power, deep-rooted gender norms can still limit full autonomy.

Another important dimension of this theme is the emotional and psychological empowerment associated with decision-making participation. Women expressed that being involved in household decisions increased their self-esteem and reduced feelings of helplessness. As one participant stated, "When my opinion is considered, I feel respected and more confident in myself." This demonstrates that decision-making power is closely linked to psychological well-being and a sense of dignity.

Overall, this theme illustrates that women's employment plays a significant role in enhancing household decision-making power by improving financial contribution, confidence, and bargaining ability. However, the extent of empowerment depends on the degree to which patriarchal norms are challenged within the family structure.



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Employment, Autonomy, and Transformation of Gender Roles

The theme explores how women's participation in paid work contributes to reshaping traditional gender expectations and enhancing their personal autonomy. Participants' narratives indicate that employment plays a significant role in increasing women's independence, self-confidence, and freedom of choice in both personal and social spheres. Many women described that before entering the workforce, their lives were largely shaped by familial control and restrictive gender roles. However, employment provided them with opportunities to move beyond these limitations. One participant explained, "Before I started working, I depended on my family for everything, but now I can make my own decisions and feel more independent." This reflects how employment acts as a catalyst for autonomy.

A central aspect of this theme is the gradual transformation of traditional gender roles within households. Employed women reported that their contribution to household income challenged the perception that men are the sole providers. As a result, some families began to adopt more flexible role divisions, where women's opinions and responsibilities outside domestic work were increasingly acknowledged. One respondent stated, "Now my family sees me not only as a housewife but also as someone who contributes financially, so they respect my role more." This shift indicates that employment helps redefine women's identity from being solely domestic caregivers to active economic participants.

The theme also highlights how employment enhances women's mobility and freedom of expression. Many participants noted that working outside the home allowed them to interact with diverse groups, develop new skills, and build confidence in public spaces. One woman shared, "Job has given me confidence to speak in front of people and move freely without fear or restriction." Such experiences illustrate how employment expands women's social boundaries and strengthens their autonomy in decision-making and self-expression.

However, the transformation of gender roles is not always smooth and often involves negotiation and resistance. Some participants reported that despite being employed, they still faced expectations to fulfill traditional domestic responsibilities. One respondent noted, "Even after working all day, I am still expected to manage all housework. It feels like I have two full-time jobs." This highlights the persistence of the "double burden," where women are expected to balance both professional and domestic roles.

Overall, this theme demonstrates that employment plays a crucial role in enhancing women's autonomy and gradually transforming traditional gender roles. While it promotes independence and challenges patriarchal expectations, the process remains complex and shaped by ongoing negotiations between modern economic participation and entrenched social norms.

Economic Independence and Pathways to Mobility

The theme highlights how women's employment serves as a crucial mechanism for achieving financial autonomy, improving living standards, and enabling upward economic mobility. Participants' narratives strongly indicate that earning an income allows women to reduce dependency on male family members and gain greater control over their personal and household financial decisions. Many women described employment as a turning point in their lives, enabling them to meet personal needs and contribute to family expenses. One participant shared, "Before working, I had to ask for money even for small things, but now I can manage my own expenses and support my family." This reflects how income generation fosters economic self-reliance.



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A key aspect of this theme is the role of employment in improving household living standards. Women reported that their earnings contributed to better nutrition, education for children, healthcare access, and overall household stability. In many cases, even modest incomes were described as making a meaningful difference in reducing financial stress. One respondent stated, “My salary may not be very high, but it helps us manage school fees and daily needs, which has improved our living conditions.” Such accounts demonstrate that women’s employment directly contributes to economic well-being at the family level and supports poverty alleviation.

The theme also reveals how economic independence enhances women’s confidence and sense of security. Financial contribution was often associated with increased respect within the household and a stronger voice in financial decisions. One participant explained, “When I started earning, I felt more secure about my future and less dependent on others for my basic needs.” This sense of financial control reduces vulnerability and increases women’s ability to plan for long-term goals, such as saving for education, health, or emergencies.

However, the findings also highlight structural limitations to economic mobility. Many women reported working in low-paid, informal, or insecure jobs, which restricted their ability to achieve substantial upward mobility. One respondent noted, “I am earning, but the salary is very low, and there is no job security. It is difficult to improve my financial situation.” This indicates that while employment provides income, the quality of work significantly influences the extent of economic advancement.

Overall, this theme demonstrates that women’s employment is a vital pathway to economic independence and improved living standards. It enhances financial autonomy and household well-being, but its impact on long-term mobility depends on access to stable, fair, and dignified employment opportunities.

Social Status, Recognition, and Community Perceptions of Working Women

The theme explores how women’s employment reshapes their identity and position within society by influencing how they are perceived, respected, and valued in both family and community settings. Participants’ narratives reveal that employment often enhances women’s social recognition, as working women are increasingly seen as contributors to household income and community development rather than being limited to traditional domestic roles. Many women reported a noticeable shift in how others treated them after they began working. One participant explained, “Before my job, people used to see me only as a housewife, but now they respect me because I also earn and support my family.” This reflects how employment contributes to improved social status.

A key aspect of this theme is the gradual transformation in community attitudes toward working women. Participants noted that in many cases, employment challenged traditional stereotypes that confine women to private, domestic spaces. As women entered the workforce, especially in teaching, healthcare, and office roles, they gained visibility and recognition in public life. One respondent shared, “In our area, people now encourage girls to study and work because they see educated women doing good jobs and helping their families.” This indicates that employed women often serve as role models, influencing broader societal perceptions and encouraging positive attitudes toward female education and employment.

However, the findings also reveal that social recognition is not uniform and may vary depending on cultural context and type of employment. Some women reported experiencing criticism or negative judgments, particularly when working in non-



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traditional or public-facing roles. One participant stated, “Some people still think a woman should stay at home, so they talk negatively about working women, even if we are doing good jobs.” This highlights the persistence of patriarchal norms that continue to shape community perceptions and limit full social acceptance.

Despite such challenges, many participants emphasized that employment gradually improves their dignity and self-worth. Being financially independent and professionally engaged allowed women to feel more confident in social interactions and community participation. One respondent expressed, “When I go outside for work, I feel more confident and respected. I can talk to people without hesitation.” This demonstrates that employment not only affects external perceptions but also strengthens women’s internal sense of identity and self-respect.

Overall, this theme illustrates that women’s employment plays a significant role in enhancing social status and recognition, while also slowly transforming community attitudes toward gender roles. Although resistance from patriarchal norms persists, working women increasingly gain respect, visibility, and influence within society.

Conclusion

Findings demonstrate that women’s employment plays a transformative role in reshaping household dynamics, gender roles, economic conditions, and social perceptions. Employment significantly enhances women’s participation in household decision-making by strengthening their financial contribution, confidence, and bargaining power. While many women experience increased respect and involvement in family matters, the persistence of patriarchal norms means that full equality in decision-making is not always achieved, particularly in conservative settings. The study further reveals that employment contributes to greater autonomy and a gradual redefinition of traditional gender roles. Women’s engagement in paid work challenges the stereotype of men as sole providers and expands women’s roles beyond domestic boundaries. However, the continued existence of the “double burden” shows that gender role transformation remains incomplete and requires further social change. Economically, employment provides women with pathways to financial independence and improved household living standards. Even limited incomes contribute to better education, healthcare, and financial stability. Nevertheless, structural constraints such as low wages and job insecurity restrict long-term upward mobility for many women. Additionally, employment enhances women’s social status and recognition, gradually shifting community attitudes toward greater acceptance of working women. Despite occasional criticism rooted in traditional norms, employed women increasingly gain respect, visibility, and influence. Overall, the findings suggest that women’s employment is a key driver of empowerment across multiple dimensions; however, its full potential is realized only when supported by broader structural and cultural transformations toward gender equality.

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