



## Research Consortium Archive

P(ISSN) : 3007-0031

E(ISSN) : 3007-004X

<https://rc-archive.com/index.php/Journal/about>



### Women's Participation in Educational Development: From Access to Agency

#### Dr Farooq Abdullah

Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Mirpur University of Science and Technology (MUST) Email: [farooq.abdullah@must.edu.pk](mailto:farooq.abdullah@must.edu.pk)

#### Nida Nisar

Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Mirpur University of Science and Technology (MUST) Email: [nida.soc@must.edu.pk](mailto:nida.soc@must.edu.pk)

#### Dr Nisar Ahmed

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Mirpur University of Science and Technology (MUST) Email: [gorsi@must.edu.pk](mailto:gorsi@must.edu.pk)

#### Riffat Sultana

Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Mirpur University of Science and Technology (MUST)

**Publisher:** EDUCATION GENIUS SOLUTIONS

**Review Type:** Double Blind Peer Review

## ABSTRACT

Women's participation in educational development has evolved from the struggle for access to the pursuit of agency, reflecting a gradual but complex transformation in gender relations within educational systems. This research aimed to understand how women educators contribute to, and navigate within, the structures of educational institutions. We conducted this study by using qualitative research design in interpretivist approach. We conducted this study in Mirpur, Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). A sample size of 13 women was interviewed by employing purposive sampling technique. We analyzed the data by using thematic analysis. We concluded that women's growing participation in education marks a shift from access to transformative leadership, yet enduring gender norms and institutional biases still constrain their potential. Achieving genuine equity requires structural and cultural reforms that challenge patriarchal values and promote inclusive governance. Sustainable progress depends on normalizing women's leadership and embedding equality within educational systems and communities.

**Keywords:** Women, Education, Development, Agency, Gender

### Introduction

Women's participation in educational development has evolved from the struggle for access to the pursuit of agency, reflecting a gradual but complex transformation in gender relations within educational systems (Stromquist, 2018; Unterhalter, 2005). Historically, Stromquist (2006) argued that women's access to education was constrained by intersecting social, economic, and cultural barriers that defined gender roles and limited female mobility. In many developing contexts, including South Asian countries in general and Pakistan in particular, patriarchal traditions, poverty, and domestic responsibilities restricted girls' schooling and reinforced the perception of education as a male privilege (UNESCO, 2015; Stromquist, 2018; Abdullah & Nisar, 2024). While global and national initiatives—such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—have significantly expanded female enrolment and retention, disparities persist in terms of quality, participation, and leadership (Abdullah & Ullah, 2016; World Bank, 2020). In Pakistan, for instance, although enrolment rates for girls have improved at primary and secondary levels, socio-economic inequalities, cultural conservatism, and infrastructural deficits continue to impede women's full educational inclusion (Abdullah & Ullah, 2022; Aslam, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2018). Programs such as conditional cash transfers, girls' stipends, and community-based schooling have enhanced access, yet challenges remain in sustaining participation beyond the basic level.

Beyond access, Stromquist (2015) stated that women's experiences within educational institutions reveal how gendered structures continue to shape opportunities and constraints. Female teachers often navigate everyday biases that marginalize their voices in classrooms, staffrooms, and decision-making forums (Abdullah, Matloob, & Malik, 2024; Morley, 2013). Institutional cultures—characterized by male-dominated hierarchies, informal networks, and traditional notions of authority—limit women's upward mobility and participation in governance (Bhopal, 2020). For many women, balancing professional responsibilities with domestic and caregiving roles presents an additional burden, reinforcing gendered divisions of labour within academia and schooling (Acker, 2012). These challenges underscore that unequal access as well as subtle and structural forms of exclusion embedded in institutional practices.

Despite these constraints, women in education have demonstrated remarkable agency and resilience (Abdullah et al., 2024). Moving from passive recipients of opportunity to active agents of change, women educators have played vital roles in teaching, mentoring, and policy reform. Their leadership, whether formal or informal, often emerges through negotiation, alliance-building, and performance-based credibility rather than positional authority (Coleman, 2011; Shaukat & Pell, 2015). In conservative societies, many women use adaptive strategies to influence school governance and promote inclusive pedagogies while working within patriarchal boundaries. Case studies across South Asia reveal that female teachers and serve as catalysts for community engagement and girls' education, challenging stereotypes about women's leadership capacities (Abdullah, Nisar, & Malik, 2024; Oplatka, 2006; Dunne et al., 2017).

However, achieving sustainable gender equity in education requires transforming the very structures that reproduce inequality. Education must be recognized not only as a means of empowerment but as a space for challenging patriarchal norms and redefining gender roles. This transformation demands multi-level interventions—ranging from gender-sensitive curricula and inclusive school governance to national policies that institutionalize women's leadership (Abdullah, Nisar, & Ahmed, 2025). Community advocacy, feminist movements, and participatory policymaking are also crucial in promoting gender-just education systems. Ultimately, women's journey from access to agency represents both a social and institutional struggle—one that calls for dismantling the systemic barriers limiting women's full participation in educational development.

## **Literature Review**

Research on women's participation in educational development has progressively shifted from the question of access to a broader concern with agency, leadership, and structural transformation. Scholars emphasize that women's access to education is deeply influenced by interlocking social, economic, and cultural factors that determine opportunities at multiple levels (Abdullah, Sultana, & Nisar, 2025; Stromquist, 2018; Unterhalter, 2014). Poverty, gender stereotypes, and restrictions on women's mobility continue to serve as major barriers, particularly in South Asian context where patriarchal norms regulate female behavior and decision-making (Aslam, 2009; UNESCO, 2015). Studies in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh reveal that families often prioritize boys' education, perceiving girls' schooling as a short-term investment due to early marriage and domestic responsibilities (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Shah & Shah, 2012). Despite these challenges, policy initiatives such as conditional cash transfers, girls' stipends, and community-based schooling have led to measurable progress in female enrolment and retention, especially at the primary level (World Bank, 2020; Herz & Sperling, 2004). However, scholars caution that increased access does not automatically translate into empowerment, as gendered hierarchies persist within educational structures (Subrahmanian, 2005).

The lived experiences of women within educational institutions reveal how gender continues to mediate authority, opportunity, and belonging. Research highlights that female teachers and administrators face every day gender biases in hiring, promotion, and classroom interactions, which reinforce male-dominated leadership models (Morley, 2013; Bhopal, 2020). Institutional cultures often privilege masculine norms of leadership, marginalizing women's voices in school and university governance (Acker, 2012). Studies by Coleman (2011) and Oplatka (2006) show that women leaders often experience resistance and scrutiny, particularly in contexts where

leadership is culturally coded as a male domain. The dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities further constrains women's participation, limiting their availability for decision-making roles and professional advancement (Shaukat & Pell, 2015). Such findings underscore that achieving gender equality in education requires not only equal access but also a transformation of institutional cultures and practices that sustain exclusion.

Moving beyond access, a growing body of literature focuses on women's agency and leadership in educational development. Stromquist (2015) and Dunne et al. (2017) document how women educators contribute to school reform, community engagement, and inclusive pedagogical practices through strategies of negotiation, alliance-building, and performance-based credibility. In patriarchal contexts, women often exercise "subtle forms of power" (Kabeer, 1999), influencing school governance informally while navigating cultural constraints. Case studies from South Asia reveal that female head teachers serve as role models, mobilizing parents and communities to support girls' education (Abdullah, Shoukat, Malik, & Akhtar, 2025; Oplatka, 2006; Morley, 2013). These examples illustrate women's capacity to redefine leadership through relational and participatory approaches, challenging hierarchical and exclusionary norms.

Finally, the literature emphasizes the need for structural transformation to sustain women's agency in education. Scholars argue that gender-equitable education requires dismantling patriarchal ideologies that shape both policy and practice (Unterhalter, 2014; Stromquist, 2018). Education plays a dual role—as a tool for empowerment and a site where social inequalities are reproduced or contested. Transformative change thus involves embedding gender sensitivity in curricula, promoting inclusive governance, and strengthening policy frameworks that institutionalize women's participation (UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2020). Community engagement, feminist advocacy, and intersectional policymaking are essential to move from token inclusion toward genuine gender justice in education (Aikman & Rao, 2012). Together, this literature demonstrates that women's journey from access to agency is both an individual and structural struggle, requiring sustained efforts at all levels of the educational system.

## **Methodology**

This qualitative study employed an interpretive approach to explore women's participation in educational development, focusing on their lived experiences, agency, and leadership within the public education sector. The research aimed to understand how women educators contribute to, and navigate within, the structures of educational institutions. Data were collected from a purposive sample of thirteen working women employed in various capacities in a public sector institution (Education) from District Mirpur, AJK. Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure the inclusion of participants with relevant experience and insights into educational planning, management, and reform processes. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection tool, allowing participants to share personal narratives and reflections in depth while offering flexibility to probe emerging themes. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a comfortable, confidential setting to encourage openness.

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework of familiarization, coding, theme identification, review, definition, and reporting. This process allowed for systematic organization and interpretation of data to identify key themes such as access, gendered experiences,

leadership, and structural transformation. Throughout the analysis, emphasis was placed on capturing the participants' voices and contextual meanings within their socio-cultural environments. Ethical considerations were strictly observed at all stages of the research. Participants were informed about the study's purpose while consent was obtained prior to interviews. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms and ensuring that no identifying information appeared in the final report. Participants were also given the right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Overall, the methodological approach ensured rigor, reflexivity, and respect, providing a trustworthy and ethically sound foundation for exploring women's contributions to educational development.

### **Key Findings**

The key findings of this study reveal complex and interconnected patterns emerging from participants' experiences. Through thematic analysis, several dominant themes were identified that illuminate the social, cultural, and institutional factors shaping women's participation. These findings offer nuanced insights into the challenges, strategies, and transformations influencing their roles in educational development.

### **Theme: Access and Opportunities in Education**

The findings reveal that women's access to education remains deeply shaped by interlinked social, economic, and cultural barriers, despite gradual improvements in enrolment and policy support. Poverty continues to act as a foundational constraint, particularly in rural and marginalized areas, where families prioritize sons' education due to limited financial resources. One respondent remarked, "When there is not enough money, the first choice is always my brother's school fee; mine can wait." Such narratives underscore how economic hardship intersects with patriarchal values to sustain educational inequality. Mobility restrictions further compound this problem, as many families perceive female travel to distant schools or colleges as unsafe or socially inappropriate. A teacher from a rural girls' high school noted, "Even if girls want to study, their parents hesitate to send them outside the village; the fear of gossip or harm stops them." Gender stereotypes continue to influence both academic choices and career aspirations—girls are often encouraged to pursue "feminine" subjects like teaching or arts, while being subtly discouraged from technical or leadership-oriented disciplines.

Nevertheless, the study also documents notable progress in female enrolment and retention, particularly at the primary and secondary levels, due to expanding awareness and community-based initiatives. Participants highlighted the growing number of educated women in their communities as role models inspiring younger girls. One participant shared, "When I saw my cousin become a teacher, I realized girls can have futures too." Retention, however, declines at higher education levels due to early marriages and household responsibilities, revealing persistent gendered expectations about women's roles. Government and NGO-led interventions, such as scholarship schemes, conditional cash transfers, and the establishment of girls' schools and colleges in remote areas, were recognized as key contributors to expanding access. Policies promoting female inclusion—like reserved seats in higher education and gender-sensitive recruitment drives—have created new opportunities, though implementation gaps remain. As one woman observed, "The policy framework is strong, but in practice, cultural attitudes still decide how far a girl can go."

Overall, the findings illustrate a complex interplay between progress and persistence—while structural reforms and awareness programs have widened

women's educational access, deeply rooted social norms and economic inequalities continue to define the boundaries of opportunity. Sustainable inclusion thus requires not only policy continuity but also social transformation that normalizes women's right to education as a collective, not conditional, value.

### **Theme: Gendered Experiences within Educational Institutions**

The findings highlight that women's experiences within educational institutions are shaped by subtle yet pervasive gendered dynamics that influence their participation, authority, and sense of belonging. Many women reported encountering everyday gender biases in classrooms, where teachers and peers often assume male intellectual superiority or leadership capability. One participant reflected, "When group discussions happen, boys are the ones teachers listen to first; even when we speak, our ideas are brushed aside." Such experiences reinforce self-doubt and discourage active engagement, particularly in co-educational settings. Similarly, female teachers described the persistence of gender stereotypes that define them as "nurturers" rather than "leaders." A senior teacher shared, "Colleagues expect me to handle emotional support or moral lessons, while administrative tasks automatically go to male teachers." These gendered expectations shape institutional hierarchies, limiting women's influence in decision-making forums and creating invisible barriers to advancement.

Institutional cultures were found to play a crucial role in either perpetuating or challenging these inequalities. In many cases, participants noted that school and university environments remain male-dominated, where informal networks and mentorship opportunities are largely inaccessible to women. As one participant explained, "Important decisions are made over tea gatherings or late meetings that women are rarely part of; it's an old boys' circle." Even when women hold administrative positions, they often face resistance from subordinates and colleagues who question their authority. Nonetheless, a few institutions with gender-sensitive policies and supportive leadership were recognized for fostering inclusivity and mentorship, illustrating how institutional culture can transform women's experiences from marginalization to empowerment.

Balancing family responsibilities with professional or academic roles has emerged as another recurring challenge. Many women narrated the emotional strain of managing dual roles, often feeling torn between family expectations and professional growth. A senior teacher remarked, "After school, I rush home to cook and take care of children; by the time I sit to plan lessons, I'm exhausted." This double burden leads to career stagnation for many women, especially in contexts where institutional support such as childcare facilities, flexible schedules, or maternity accommodations is absent. The study thus reveals that gendered experiences in education extend beyond individual struggles—they reflect broader cultural norms and institutional practices that continue to define women's place within the system. Achieving true gender equity requires dismantling these everyday biases and reimagining institutional structures that value women's contributions as both educators and leaders.

### **Theme: Women's Agency and Leadership in Educational Development**

The findings reveal that women in education are gradually moving beyond the struggle for access toward meaningful participation and leadership, despite operating within gendered institutional and cultural constraints. Women teachers are increasingly recognized not only as participants but as active contributors shaping educational development. Many respondents highlighted their roles in mentoring

students, initiating school improvement projects, and influencing policy implementation at local levels. A school principal shared, “When I became head, I made it my goal to ensure girls in my village stayed in school; we started a community awareness campaign and saw attendance rise within a year.” Such narratives reflect women’s transformative leadership that extends beyond formal authority to community empowerment. At the classroom level, women teachers have been instrumental in promoting inclusive pedagogies and creating safe learning spaces for girls, often serving as role models for young learners aspiring to education and independence.

The study also uncovers the subtle strategies women employ to navigate institutional hierarchies and patriarchal resistance. Many women described negotiating their authority through relational approaches, emphasizing collaboration and moral legitimacy rather than confrontation. One respondent explained, “You cannot always challenge male colleagues directly; instead, I build trust and slowly bring them on board with my ideas.” This illustrates how women’s leadership often relies on informal influence—leveraging respect, competence, and empathy—to achieve institutional change within restrictive environments. Resistance also takes symbolic forms, such as insisting on equal participation in meetings or introducing gender-sensitivity training for staff. In policy contexts, women leaders have played a pivotal role in advancing educational reforms focused on girls’ access, teacher training, and gender equity, even when their contributions remain under acknowledged.

Case studies of women educational leaders further demonstrate how agency emerges from persistence, vision, and community engagement. For instance, one district education officer recounted, “People doubted me at first, but when schools started performing better, they began to listen.” Her experience captures the resilience and strategic adaptability that underpin women’s leadership trajectories. Overall, the findings highlight that women’s agency in education is both structural and symbolic shaped by institutional opportunities yet continually redefined through personal resolve, collaboration, and innovation. These women not only manage existing systems but also challenge and reshape them, embodying the shift from passive inclusion to transformative leadership in educational development.

### **Theme: Transforming Structures for Gender-Equitable Education**

The findings emphasize that achieving gender-equitable education requires more than expanding women’s accessibility demands structural transformation within both social and institutional systems. Education emerged as a powerful tool for challenging patriarchal norms and redefining gender roles, yet its potential remains unevenly realized across contexts. Participants described how education has begun to reshape community perceptions about women’s capabilities and rights. A participant reflected, “Before, people said girls should stay home; now, when they see educated women working, they think differently about their daughters.” However, many respondents also cautioned that deep-seated cultural beliefs continue to limit the extent of this change. Teachers noted that while girls are increasingly encouraged to study, they are still expected to conform to traditional roles after graduation. As one teacher put it, “Parents want their daughters educated, but only to become better wives or mothers, not to lead.” This contradiction reveals how education can simultaneously empower and reproduce gender hierarchies if structural inequalities remain unaddressed.

Community engagement and collective advocacy were identified as essential drivers of transformation. The study found that when schools actively collaborate with parents, local councils, and women’s organizations, attitudes toward girls’ education

evolve more rapidly. A principal shared, “We organized meetings with village elders to explain why educating girls benefits the whole community. Gradually, even the most resistant families started sending their daughters to school.” Such examples illustrate how gender-inclusive governance rooted in community participation can generate sustainable change. Advocacy networks—particularly those led by women educators—play a crucial role in challenging discriminatory practices and amplifying local voices in decision-making processes.

At the institutional level, policy frameworks that prioritize women’s empowerment through education have begun to reshape opportunities, though implementation gaps persist. Initiatives such as gender budgeting, quotas for women in educational leadership, and programs promoting safe school environments were cited as positive developments. Yet several participants noted that “policies on paper” often fail to translate into equitable realities due to lack of monitoring and resource allocation. A district education officer remarked, “We have good laws, but without accountability and support, they don’t reach the girls who need them most.” Overall, the findings suggest that transforming education into a gender-equitable system requires a holistic approach—where pedagogical reforms, community advocacy, and policy enforcement converge to dismantle patriarchal barriers and institutionalize equality. True transformation, therefore, lies not only in access but in restructuring the very norms, power relations, and governance systems that define education itself.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the study underscores that women’s participation in educational development reflects both remarkable progress and enduring constraints. While increased access, awareness, and leadership opportunities mark a positive trajectory, gendered hierarchies, and cultural expectations continue to shape women’s experiences and limit their full potential. Women educators are not only navigating these constraints but also redefining leadership through collaboration, empathy, and community engagement, signaling a shift from passive inclusion to transformative agency. However, achieving genuine gender equity demands more than incremental reformism requires structural change that addresses institutional biases, ensures policy accountability, and challenges deep-seated patriarchal values. Education must evolve as both a space and a strategy for social transformation, where women’s rights, leadership, and contributions are normalized rather than negotiated. Sustainable progress, therefore, lies in fostering inclusive institutional cultures and collective advocacy that reimagine education as a truly equitable and empowering domain for all.

## References

- Abdullah, F., & Nisar, N. (2024). Women Academicians and Autonomy: Constructing Identities in Higher Education. *International Journal of Social Sciences Bulletin*, 2(4), 1053–1060.  
<https://ijssbulletin.com/index.php/IJSSB/article/view/161>
- Abdullah, F., & Ullah, H. (2016). Physical Violence on Women: A Comparative Study of Rural and Urban Areas of Muzaffarabad, Azad Jammu and Kashmir. *Journal of Gender and Social Issues*, 15(2), 113.  
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A497793910/AONE?u=anon~54132f5b&sid=googleScholar&xid=c3282c17>
- Abdullah, F., & Ullah, H. (2022). Lived Experiences of Women Academicians in Higher Education Institutions of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. *South Asian*



- Studies, 37(02), 323-340. <https://sasj.pu.edu.pk/9/article/view/1292>
- Abdullah, F., Matloob, T., & Malik, A. (2024). Decision-Making Trajectories of Working Women in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. *Policy Research Journal*, 2(4), 2189-2197.
- Abdullah, F., Nisar, N., & Ahmed, N. (2025). Career Trajectories of Women Academics in Higher Education of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. *The Knowledge*, 4(2), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.63062/tk/2k25b.42057>
- Abdullah, F., Shoukat, S., Malik, A., & Akhtar, S. (2025). Patriarchal Norms and Female Teachers' Participation in Decision-Making in Azad Jammu and Kashmir: *Pakistan Journal of Social Science Review*, 4(5), 1181–1191. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17491575>
- Abdullah, F., Sultana, R., & Nisar, N. (2025). Female Faculty Navigating Professional Journeys in Higher Education of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. *ProScholar Insights*, 4(2), 179-187. <https://doi.org/10.55737/psi.2025b-42093>
- Abdullah, F., Ahmed, N., Shaheen, I., & Sultana, R. (2024). Women academicians' career progression in higher education of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. *Regional Lens*, 3(1), 86-94. <https://doi.org/10.62997/rl.2024.31042>
- Abdullah, F., Nisar, N., & Malik, A. (2024). Gendered higher education and women academicians' career development. *The Regional Tribune*, 3(1), 418-428. <https://doi.org/10.63062/trt/v24.076>
- Acker, S. (2012). Gendered games in academic leadership. *Gender and Education*.
- Acker, S. (2012). Gendered games in academic leadership. *Gender and Education*.
- Aikman, S., & Rao, N. (2012). Gender equality and girls' education: Investigating frameworks, disjunctures and meanings of equality. *Theory and Research in Education*.
- Aslam, M. (2009). Education gender gaps in Pakistan: Is the labour market to blame? *Economic Development and Cultural Change*.
- Bhopal, K. (2020). *White privilege: The myth of a post-racial society*. Policy Press.
- Coleman, M. (2011). *Women at the top: Challenges, choices and change*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dunne, M., et al. (2017). *Gender and teacher education in Africa*. UNESCO.
- Herz, B., & Sperling, G. (2004). *What works in girls' education: Evidence and policies from the developing world*. Council on Foreign Relations.
- Human Rights Watch (2018). *Shall I feed my daughter, or educate her?*
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*.
- Morley, L. (2013). *Women and higher education leadership: Absences and aspirations*. Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.
- Oplatka, I. (2006). *Women in educational administration: The legacy of the past, present realities, and future directions*. Educational Management Administration & Leadership.
- Shah, S., & Shah, U. (2012). *Women, educational leadership and societal culture in Pakistan*. Educational Management Administration & Leadership.
- Shaukat, S., & Pell, A. W. (2015). Personal and professional development of female teachers in Pakistan. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*.
- Stromquist, N. P. (2006). Gender, education and the possibility of transformative knowledge. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 36(2), 145-161.
- Stromquist, N. P. (2015). *Women's Empowerment and Education: linking knowledge*

- to transformative action. *European Journal of Education*, 50(3), 307-324.
- Stromquist, N. P. (2015, 2018). *Women in higher education: Issues and challenges*. UNESCO.
- Stromquist, N. P. (2018). Gender structure and women's agency: toward greater theoretical understanding of education for transformation. In *Education and other modes of thinking in Latin America* (pp. 67-83): Routledge.
- Stromquist, N. P. (2018). *Women in higher education: Issues and challenges*. UNESCO.
- Subrahmanian, R. (2005). Gender equality in education: Definitions and measurements. *International Journal of Educational Development*.
- UNESCO (2015). *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*.
- Unterhalter, E. (2005). Researching women, gender, education, and development. *Beyond access: Transforming policy and practice for gender equality in education*, 15.
- Unterhalter, E. (2014). Measuring education for the Millennium Development Goals: Reflections on targets, indicators, and a post-2015 framework. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*.
- World Bank (2020). *Girls' education and women's empowerment: A global priority*.