

## Crossroads of Culture and Education: The Evolving Role of Socio-Cultural Norms in Women Empowerment Through Education in the Tribal Belt of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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**This article may be cited as** Yousafzai, M. I., Ullah, H. M. I., Ali, A., & Jan, S. U. K. (2025). Crossroads of Culture and Education: The Evolving Role of Socio-Cultural Norms in Women Empowerment Through Education in the Tribal Belt of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. *ProScholar Insights*, 4(1), 227-235. <https://doi.org/10.62997/psi.2025a-41066>

**Abstract:** The current study focuses on the crossroads of culture and education and the evolving role of sociocultural norms in women's empowerment through education in the tribal belt of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The prime objective of the study is to identify the key social factors that are empowering women through the social and cultural values in the study area. The nature of the study is qualitative, whereas the data was collected from 08 respondents through open-ended, in-depth interviews. The data was collected from the school principal and concerned DEOs. The collected data were then analyzed and presented in the form of themes. The analyzed data reveal that education empowers women and can bring positive change in society. It also reveals that education is the source of cultural transformation and empowers women by bringing positive change in the culture and well-being. The analyzed data reveal that education empowers women in decision-making about all spheres of life. The study recommended that awareness workshops and seminars should be conducted in the community regarding the importance of education, and religious members and local leaders should be included in these seminars and workshops.

**Keywords:** Education, Socio-Cultural Norms, Women Empowerment

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### Introduction

Women empowerment is a process that, among other things, provides them with the authority or power to question particular circumstances (Kuteesa et al., 2024; Batool & Batool, 2018). Women empowerment, which typically occurs when they challenge prevailing customs and culture to improve their well-being, is a prerequisite and necessary requirement to make the process of personal development and the development of a country stable and sustainable (Swain & Wallentin, 2008). Sustainable development and social progress are contingent upon gender equality and women's empowerment. Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment requires education. It may give women the information, abilities, and chances they need to advance both personally and professionally (Dhiman, 2023). Every country raises its children in accordance with its ideology and culture because it believes that education is the best way to pass on its national legacy to future generations (Siddiqui, 2007).

Empowerment can be understood as a way to establish a social context where people are able to make decisions and choices for social change on an individual or group level. It fortifies the intrinsic capacity by gaining wisdom, strength, and experience (Tandon, 2016). Control over resources (financial, intellectual, human, and physical) and ideology (beliefs, values, and attitudes) are a component of empowerment. The advancement of women's empowerment is crucial to the growth of society. Empowerment is the process by which people gain the capacity to

make their own decisions, act independently, and realize their full potential as contributing, equal members of society (Dandona, [2015](#)).

Empowerment is concerned with genuine social influence, political authority, and legal rights, in addition to a psychological sense of personal control or influence. It is a multilayered concept that encompasses people, groups, and the community (Mason et al., [2002](#)). It is a global, continuous process with a local focus that involves collective engagement, mutual respect, critical thought, and compassion in order to give those who don't have an equal share of valuable resources more access to and control over them (Henry, [2011](#)).

The degree to which a woman can make decisions for the home in comparison to her husband is a measure of her level of empowerment. Since it is impossible to quantify this ability directly, economists look at the relationships between high levels of female empowerment and characteristics like ownership of assets, usage of contraceptives, and education (Rahman & Rao, [2004](#)). The self-reported variables of work, fertility, and resource allocation are indicative of the diverse range of options and decisions that are involved in the family bargain. A woman's relative physical mobility, economic security, capacity for making decisions, lack of domestic abuse, and understanding of and engagement in politics have all been used to gauge her level of empowerment (Dandona, [2015](#)).

The UNDP Gender Inequality Index (GII) indicates that gender equality has been decreasing recently despite advancements in the creation of national and international policies and conventions that attempt to lessen gender inequities in education. This problem is believed to be rooted in the continuation of detrimental and restrictive social norms that have not been sufficiently addressed in girls' education programs to date (UNDP, [2020](#)).

Because of differing socioeconomic and cultural contexts, the nature and strength of the notion of women's empowerment vary from place to country. Due to this arrangement, there are numerous instances of women being exploited worldwide, and South Asian women are in danger of experiencing similar misery. In all societal affairs, political, cultural, and socioeconomic, South Asian women have a subordinate position (Zafar, [2016](#)). Numerous advantages of female education include less infant mortality, increased labour force productivity, socioeconomic efficiencies, social development, intergenerational education, social equality, and sustainability of development efforts. It is not necessary for a nation to generate a large number of highly skilled professional women; rather, it is important to prioritize ensuring that all young women complete their secondary school. It concerns policymakers determining appropriate long-term priorities for female education (Hazarika, [2011](#)).

### **Rational Justification of the Study**

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) is a region with a distinct socio-cultural landscape in Pakistan, known for its rich traditions and deeply ingrained cultural norms. Historically, women, in particular, have had limited access to formal education despite numerous attempts by both the government and non-governmental organizations to improve infrastructure and educational opportunities. However, significant barriers still exist because of these deeply ingrained sociocultural norms, and it is important to examine how these norms are changing in relation to women's educational empowerment.

While a great deal of study has been done on women's education in Pakistan, there aren't many studies that particularly address the KP tribal belt. The extant body of literature frequently oversimplifies the obstacles encountered by women throughout Pakistan, failing to sufficiently consider the distinct sociocultural and geopolitical circumstances of tribal regions. By offering a detailed understanding of how sociocultural norms in the KP tribal belt affect women's empowerment and educational attainment, this study seeks to close this knowledge gap. Research concentrating on this particular area will add to a more accurate and localized body of knowledge, which is necessary to create focused and successful treatments.

Gender roles and educational possibilities are just two of the many facets of daily life that are determined by the intricate web of conventions, traditions, and social norms that govern the KP tribal belt. Traditional gender norms and cultural expectations severely restrict women's access to education in many areas. These standards are ingrained in society's collective consciousness and are frequently upheld by regional power structures. However, because of



increased exposure to external influences like the media, migration, and advocacy groups' efforts, there have been slight variations in this norm in recent years. To effectively promote women's education and empowerment in the region, strategies for change must take these evolving dynamics into account.

The urgent need to comprehend and solve the sociocultural barriers preventing women in the KP tribal belt from achieving educational empowerment is the foundation for this study justification. Through an analysis of the changing function of these standards, this study will enhance comprehension of the obstacles and possibilities associated with advancing gender parity and education in this distinct area. The KP tribal belt's general growth and women's empowerment will ultimately benefit from these results, which will also act as catalysts for broader societal change and shape policy and practice.

### **Objective**

- ▶ To identify the key social factors that empower women through education in the study area

### **Methods and Methodology**

A research methodology delineates the methods and approaches employed in order to locate and evaluate data pertaining to a certain study subject (Patel & Patel, [2019](#)). It's a method by which scientists plan their investigation to enable them to use the chosen research tools to accomplish their goals (Goundar, [2012](#)). It covers every crucial facet of research, such as the overarching framework for the study as well as the methodologies used for data collecting, analysis, and research design. A researcher can describe their intended study approach by using research methodology. It's a methodical, logical strategy to address a research issue (Pandey & Pandey, [2021](#)). A methodology describes how a researcher will conduct their study in order to get accurate, trustworthy data that meets their goals and objectives. It includes the kind of data they will gather, where they will get it, and how they will gather and evaluate it (Kumar, [2018](#)).

### **Design of the Study**

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the role of sociocultural norms in women's empowerment through education in the tribal belt of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The researcher used a purposive sampling technique. Data was collected through open-ended, in-depth interviews. Respondents were approached purposively as prior data collection approval was taken from the education department regarding the data collection. After proper data collection, the data were analysed through thematic analysis and were presented in the form of themes.

### **Sampling and Sampling Technique**

Sampling is the process of choosing subset of the same characteristics of the population in order to estimate the characteristics of the entire population and draw statistical conclusions from them (Rahman et al., [2022](#)). The current study is taken from the PhD work, and for this study, the researcher took a sample size of 08 principals and DEOs purposively from the four districts i.e., Bajor, Khyber, Mohmand and Kurram.

### **Procedure**

The researcher got proper approval from the Department of Education, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. After getting proper approval, randomly select schools and conduct meetings with the head of the institution by explaining the objective and purpose of the study. The concerned school head allowed the researcher to collect the data, and proper data collection was conducted by the school's principal and DEOs. During the data collection, the confidentiality of the respondents was ensured. After proper data collection, codes were generated, and the data was properly analyzed and presented in the form of themes.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

- ▶ The study was limited to female school heads and Principals.
- ▶ The study was limited to the female DEOs.



- ▶ The private school's teachers were excluded from the study.
- ▶ The higher secondary school teachers were excluded from the study.
- ▶ The male teachers were excluded from the study.
- ▶ The students were excluded from the study.

### Tools of data collection and analytical protocol

The data was collected from the respondents through open-ended in-depth interviews. The tools were properly approved by the supervisor and were sent to the experts for reliability purposes. After, incorporation of the mandatory changes suggested by the expert, the tools were properly approved by the GSC (Graduate Studies Committee) and ASRB (Advanced Studies and Research Board) committee, and then data was collected.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of examining, purifying, converting, and modelling data in order to find relevant information, draw conclusions, and aid in decision-making. It is the most technical job during research. Data was collected through open-ended, in-depth interviews and analysed data through thematic analysis. The steps involved in data analysis were:

1. **Transcription:** Interviews were transcribed.
2. **Coding:** Transcripts were coded using a coding framework developed from the literature review.
3. **Theme Identification:** Codes were grouped into themes and sub-themes.
4. **Theme Analysis:** Themes were analyzed to identify patterns, meanings and relationships.
5. **Interpretation:** Exploration of the underlying meanings and experiences.

### Analysis and Discussion

#### Gender Equality

Gender equality in education refers to justice, rights and freedom of education for both males and females without any discrimination. Gender equality in education is vital for sustainable development, peaceful societies, and the well-being of individuals as well. Gender equality still remains an area of priority for governments, civil societies and non-governmental organizations throughout the world. However, gender equality has not yet been achieved in the education sector as is expected globally, and inequalities still prevail, especially in rural areas where women are socially excluded from attaining education. In this regard, the respondents shared their views regarding the question, "Education supports women to solve gender inequality in society".

In this regard, the responses of R1 and R3 are as under;

*"Education is the key to achieving gender equality, and it is considered a powerful tool to empower women in different spheres of life. Education provides equal opportunities for both genders, and it can help reduce injustice and unequal treatment of a specific gender in society. Education provides opportunities to women in social and economic sectors for self-development and an active role".*

The analyzed data is supported by the studies of Henry (2011) and Ahmad and Ahmad (2022) that education provides opportunities for collective engagement, critical thinking and equal opportunities to both genders in every sphere of life. The studies further confirmed that education promotes gender equality by providing equal opportunities for men and women to participate actively in every walk of life.

#### Education and Cultural Norms

Education transmits knowledge, values, and behaviours, which can lead to modifications in societal norms and practices over time. Therefore, education is considered a significant driver of change in cultural norms. It provides a platform for the foundation of a modern, peaceful and socially sustainable society based on cultural norms. Similarly, education and cultural change are related to one another because education is a source of transmission of cultural norms and values from one generation to another. It helps in changing cultural norms, which are based on a discriminatory approach against women. In this regard, questions were asked of respondents regarding "Education promotes you to modify the cultural norm in the society".



In this regard, R2 and R5 recorded their responses;

*"Education brought changes in the mindset of the people regarding the cultural norms and values, which are depriving women of their fundamental rights of education, health, and employment. The local people promote positive socio-cultural norms and values. Women are aware of their rights to education, health, and employment because of education. Education empowers women to participate in various socio-cultural activities, and it improves women's understanding of ethical values, social injustice, and discrimination.*

The analyzed data is supported by the study of Mathews and Savarimuthu (2020), who state that culture and education are inseparable and complementary, with multiple points of interaction. Culture paves the way for education, while education is responsible for flavouring the cultural values in life. A sense of pride in our culture has to manifest itself through all the stages of an individual's growth. Primary education is where it all starts, and the child begins to respect the importance of a value-based life as he sees things and events happening, as well as the behaviour of others around him. All these collectively form the personality that develops in the process.

### **Social change and education**

Education is a powerful tool for social change because it provides the equipment, knowledge, skills, and critical knowledge that enable them to challenge and resist the existing values and bring about a positive transformation in society. It enables individuals to improve their knowledge and skills and bring about a positive change in their lives and the workplace environment. It is through education that society can bring desirable changes and modernize itself. Education can transform society by providing opportunities and experiences through which individuals can cultivate themselves to adjust to the emerging needs and philosophy of the changing society. In this regard, a question was asked of respondents regarding "Education facilitates women to bring change in your working position in society".

In this regard, the responses of R1 and R8 are as under;

*"That education provides an opportunity for females to add new knowledge and innovative ideas and experiences so that they can bring positive changes in their lives and work abilities. The learning of new knowledge, skills, and abilities will help them to choose a comfortable work environment for themselves. Moreover, education provides them the opportunities to secure better positions that are more relevant and comfortable for them to work in.*

The analyzed data is supported by the studies of Hassanbeigi et al. (2011), Nemanick and Clark (2002), and Roulin and Bangerter (2013), which state that interestingly, gender effects were insignificant, however, results confirmed that high academic achievement and high active engagement in extracurricular activities were positively related to job suitability and employability skills including time management, personal organization and learning skills, which concurs with another research.

### **Education and Female Dropouts from Learning Institutes**

Education plays a key role in reducing the female dropout ratio by addressing the socioeconomic barriers, i.e., financial, cultural, and religious issues, and promoting a supportive environment for learning. The female dropout ratio could be decreased if governmental and non-governmental organizations provide a supportive learning environment and employment opportunities in the public and private sectors. It will encourage females to attain education in various public and private sector educational institutions. In this regard, questions were asked of the respondents regarding "Education helps women to reduce the female dropout ratio in learning institutes.

In this regard, the responses of R1 and R8 are as under;

*"That education provides an opportunity for women to take part in the learning process in various public and private educational institutions, which helps to reduce the female dropout ratio. Various encouragement methods or programs like quotas in admissions and employment provide encouragement to female to complete their education. Female are more focused and concerned about their educational rights, but still, they lack educational institutions, especially in rural areas where various sociocultural factors create resistance to female education.*

The analysed data is confirmed by the research of Batool et al. (2013), which stated that in less developed districts of Pakistan, the number of schools and colleges is lower, and girls are not sufficiently enrolled in them. With the



reduction in the number of enrolments, gender discrimination and deprivation for higher studies have increased. Different cultural norms and values exist to stop females from getting higher education, and thus, they are left far behind in the modern world. Similarly, the most important problem faced here in the region is the dropout rate on a large scale. The drop ratio in 2003 was almost 50 percent for grade one.

### **Education as a Source of Awareness Regarding Property Rights**

Education played a key role in the transformation and shaping of women's attitudes towards property rights. Educated women have a higher level of confidence, awareness and active participation in asserting their property rights. Therefore, education and women's empowerment have a positive relationship with each other. Education opens up possibilities and creates awareness among women regarding their inheritance and property rights enabling them to fully participate in the economic and financial affairs of the family.

In this regard, the responses of R4 and R6 are as under;

*"It is education that provides awareness to women regarding their property rights. It is education that empowers women to participate in the economic and financial affairs of the family. Education provides awareness regarding a daughter's inheritance rights. Education gives women awareness of injustice and maltreatment in their property rights. Education gives voice to women against the unequal distribution of property and patriarchy".*

The analysed data is supported by the study of Maslak and Singhal (2008), which concluded that educated women become more confident they have better communication skills and can defend their point of view in a more effective and diplomatic way, and can make their own decisions. Educated women are usually better at understanding human rights, respecting differences of opinion.

### **Education and Exposure**

Education provides opportunities for women to have outdoor exposure, which helps them gain experience and new knowledge, develop a peer connection with nature, and understand cultural diversity. The women's participation in outdoor educational activities improves their cognitive, linguistic, and presentation skills. Outdoor activities improve educational outcomes give encouragement and improve the abilities and skills of women regarding upcoming challenges of life. In this regard, questions were asked of respondents regarding "Education enables women to participate in outdoor activities to boost your empowerment.

Similarly, R7 and R8 shared their view;

*"That education provides an opportunity for females to add new and innovative ideas, experiences, knowledge and behaviours through outdoor exposure. Women learn new things and ideas that improve their socio-cultural values and empower them as they can add new things according to their needs and demands, as well as give them the right to decide what to add to the culture and what not to add. Such a decision of new ultimately leads to women's socio-cultural empowerment and social development".*

In this regard, it is concluded that the negotiation of constraints in this phase of life is critical for ongoing participation in outdoor recreation, which refers to leisure activities that take place outdoors, usually in natural environments (Andkjær & Arvidsen, 2015). The transition from high school to university and/or employment not only places new demands on time and money but is often accompanied by spatial alienation and separation from outdoor friends. McMahan and Estes (2015) have suggested that during this period, contact with nature may provide one mechanism through which individuals can satisfy the need for exploration and gain some perspective on their place within the broader environment.

### **Education and Preservation of Culture**

Education plays an important role in cultural preservation. Education promotes cultural traditions and societal well-being through empowering individuals to appreciate, understand and actively participate in the maintenance of their cultural heritage. Education helps individuals understand the history, values and importance of their cultural



traditions. Education empowers individuals to actively participate in the community's well-being. Education expands an individual's consciousness, capabilities, sensitivities and cultural understanding.

In this regard, the responses of R1, R3 and R5 are as under;

*“Education plays a crucial role in promoting cultural preservation. It is a powerful tool that can help in understanding cultural values, traditions and cultural heritage. Education creates awareness about the protection and preservation of important cultural heritage and cultural symbols. Education improves community participation in various cultural events, and it sensitizes the importance of cultural preservation.*

The analysed data is confirmed by the studies of Williamson et al. (2024) that, despite its intrinsic value, the preservation of cultural heritage faces multifaceted challenges, especially in the wake of globalization, migration, and rapid industrialization. The scope of challenges encountered encompasses issues that demand sophisticated approaches to cartographic documentation, continuous monitoring, and facilitation of access. Furthermore, the endeavour of cultural heritage preservation is complicated by the imperative for a compelling presentation that respects and conveys the value of the heritage and the complexities associated with determining and managing ownership rights (Williamson et al., 2024).

## Discussion

The analyzed data shows that education supports women in all walks of life and reduces gender inequality, which ultimately empowers women. The primary data shows that education provides equal opportunities for both men and women in all spheres of life, which leads to women's empowerment. The same idea is supported by the work of Dhiman (2023), that education encourages gender equality in society regardless of nation, society, and culture, and such gender equality can further lead to the development of the nation, integrity, and sustainability, as well as empower women in all walks of life. Similarly, education provides an opportunity for women to bring positive change in society, their culture, and norms and facilitates women to bring positive change in their working environment. The work of Dandona (2015) supports the primary idea that education is a power through which women can decide, improve their capacities, think independently, and contribute to every walk of life. Similarly, the analyzed data is supported by the work (Henry, 2011) that states that education is a process of collective engagement, mutual respect, and critical thought and that it can provide the opportunity for equal share in every walk of life. Further, the analyzed data reveals that education promotes outdoor activities, which empower women as well as transform culture and work for the well-being of women, which directly and indirectly can empower women. In this regard, Swain and Wallentin (2008) opined that once women challenge the existing culture and norms for progress and development so, real change occurs in society, which leads to the development and sustainability of the society.

## Conclusion

From the study, it is concluded that education is the key factor for women's empowerment in the study area. It also highlights different social factors that promote education and empower women. It is important for socio-cultural transformation and to change culture according to the demands of the new society. Education promotes social equality in society and transforms positive social and cultural values in the study area. It is education that provides outdoor activities to local females and empowers them through door activities like job and awareness, etc.

## Recommendations

- ▶ It is recommended that awareness sessions, seminars, and workshops should be conducted on a priority basis in the local community by involving the elders of the locality, religious leaders, influencers, and community stakeholders. Through this awareness campaign, the local community will be aware of the importance of education and how education can empower women in the relevant socio-cultural context.
- ▶ It is recommended that informs context-specific Policy design, which helps policymakers design localized, culturally sensitive policies to promote empowerment in the NMDs

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