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ABSTRACT

This study examines the socio-cultural barriers and opportunities faced by working women in Larkana District, Sindh, Pakistan, as well as their socio-economic empowerment. The research has three main objectives: to assess the socio-cultural barriers faced by working women in the district; to identify the key employment opportunities available to them; and to assess the resilience and socio-economic empowerment achieved through employment. A quantitative descriptive research methodology was used to collect data, in which information was obtained from 150 working women through purposive sampling to ensure representation of different social and professional backgrounds. The participants were asked to fill out closed-ended questionnaires, and the data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods in SPSS, while ethical principles such as confidentiality and anonymity were fully adhered to during the research. The findings show that while unequal treatment in the workplace was not generally considered a major barrier, women face several significant issues that limit their participation in the workforce. These include domestic responsibilities, unsafe work environments, cultural values, social expectations, traditional gender roles, family criticism, and insufficient support from family. Despite these hurdles, employment plays a significant positive role in women's confidence, self-esteem, financial independence, decision-making ability, and social resilience. The research highlights key points at the practical and policy levels, including creating secure and flexible work opportunities, providing better access to education and training, increasing leadership opportunities, and creating supportive environmental conditions in the family, community, and workplace. Five key recommendations have been made in light of the research findings: Promote awareness and education about gender stereotypes; Strengthen family and community support; Ensure safe workplaces for women; Increase employment and leadership opportunities; and provide skill development programs and introduce flexible working hours.

Keywords: Working Women, Hurdles, Opportunities, Sociocultural, Descriptive Study

INTRODUCTION

Working women in rural Sindh, a province in Pakistan, face several challenges that can hinder their ability to succeed in the workforce. These challenges and issues are often the result of societal attitudes, cultural values, and lack of resources and support (Kabeer, 2016). One of the main issues faced by working women in rural Sindh is discrimination and prejudice. Many women in rural areas face discrimination based on gender, which limits their access to education and employment opportunities (Khaskheli et al., 2024). This problem is particularly pronounced in sectors where women are underrepresented, such as leadership positions or technical sectors. Another challenge is the need for more access to education and training. Many women in rural Sindh need access to quality education, which can limit their opportunities for advancement in the workforce. In addition, women may face barriers to participating in vocational training programs or apprenticeships, which can provide them with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their careers (Ishak et al., 2023; Sikander & Bashir, 2025).

According to Mahmood and Sultan (2006) working women in rural Sindh are facing challenges that require more supportive infrastructure, such as transportation and childcare facilities. Many women in rural areas need access

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to reliable transportation, which can make it difficult for them to get to and from work. In addition, the lack of affordable and accessible childcare can be a barrier for women who want to work outside the home. Additionally, working women in rural Sindh may face cultural and societal barriers that prevent them from pursuing their career goals. Furthermore, women may face resistance from family members or community leaders who do not support their desire to work outside the home (Amjad et al., 2024).

Problem Statement

Women's employment in Pakistan is often influenced by a complex interplay of institutional, socio-cultural, and economic factors. Despite increased educational and professional opportunities, many working women continue to face persistent socio-cultural barriers, such as traditional gender roles, family responsibilities, societal expectations, and lack of social support (Panhwar et al., 2021). These barriers can limit women's economic autonomy, hinder their professional development, and negatively impact on their overall well-being. These issues are particularly prominent in the Larkana district, where rural social structures and traditional practices are still strongly present. Although some women overcome these difficulties and find opportunities for professional and personal development, little empirical research has been conducted on the specific socio-cultural opportunities and constraints faced by working women in this area (Magsi & Mujahid, 2024). The study aims to fill this research gap by examining the socio-cultural opportunities and challenges faced by working women in the Larkana district. It attempts to understand the real experiences of women and identify the factors that may facilitate or constrain their participation in the workforce. It is expected that the findings of this study will be useful for policymakers, social workers, and organizations working for gender equality and women's empowerment in rural Sindh.

OBJECTIVES

The current study has the following objectives:

1. To explore the social and cultural barriers faced by working women in the Larkana district.
2. To identify the key employment opportunities available to working women in the Larkana district.
3. To assess the resilience and socio-economic empowerment developed during employment among working women in Larkana district.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women still face barriers in the workplace that prevent them from reaching their full potential and achieving their professional goals. Despite the implementation of the concept of equal pay, many women still face wage gaps compared to their male counterparts, especially in sectors such as industrial production, labor-intensive work, and service-related sectors (Shah et al., 2023). This situation often arises due to the persistence of gender stereotypes and biases, which result in women being overlooked for higher-paying jobs and their educational qualifications being given less importance (Majok, 2024). These biases make it more difficult for women to achieve promotion and earn higher salaries, which affects their professional success and development (Javed et al., 2018). To address these issues, organizations need to take proactive steps to create a more inclusive and equitable work environment (Beghini et al., 2019; Gilal et al., 2024). This could include implementing policies and practices that ensure equal pay and equal opportunities for advancement, as well as providing training and support for women to succeed in their careers (Cardazone et al., 2022; Women, 2020). Through collaboration, we can create a more equal and just society where every individual, regardless of gender, has the opportunity to reach their full potential and achieve their professional goals (André et al., 2023).

In addition to the above challenges, rural areas in Pakistan's Sindh province may also face problems related to agricultural and economic development. For example, these communities lack adequate access to modern technologies and resources that could help increase crop yields and incomes. Furthermore, these areas also have limited economic diversification and development opportunities, which hinder prosperity and long-term sustainable development (Ellis, 2000). This situation also affects the employment opportunities available to rural women. To address these issues, it is essential to work with local communities and organizations to develop effective strategies and solutions that take into account the specific needs and problems of these areas. This may include implementing educational programs, providing access to financial resources and investment opportunities, and promoting the development of small businesses and other institutions (Strand et al., 2022). By working together and focusing on the specific needs of Sindh's rural communities, it is possible to create positive change and promote long-term prosperity and development.

Balancing the demands of work and home life is particularly challenging for rural women, who often face additional barriers and challenges related to poverty, limited access to education and resources, and socio-cultural

norms (Women, 2019; Work, 2018). These issues make it difficult for rural women to participate in paid employment or other income-generating activities and also place a greater burden on them of caregiving and other household responsibilities (Adil & Wazir, 2024; Khan et al., 2025). To address these challenges and promote work-life balance for rural women in Sindh, it may be useful to introduce programs and initiatives that provide education, training, support, and access to resources for business or income-generating activities. Furthermore, it is also important to challenge traditional gender roles and expectations and support policies and practices that promote work-life balance, such as flexible working hours and paid family leave (OECD, 2017; Federation & International Labour Organization, 2019).

The issue of male ego and its impact on working women can be particularly challenging due to traditional gender roles and expectations (Kandiyoti, 1988; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Many rural women in Sindh may face additional barriers and challenges related to poverty, limited access to education and resources, and social and cultural norms that reinforce patriarchal power dynamics (Sathar & Kazi, 2000). These issues can make it difficult for rural women to pursue paid employment or other income-generating activities and can place additional burdens on caregiving and other household responsibilities (Khan et al., 2025). To address these challenges and promote gender equality in rural Sindh, it is essential to challenge traditional gender roles and expectations and advocate for policies and practices that support women's empowerment (Kabeer, 1999). This may involve implementing programs and initiatives that provide access to education and training, support and resources for entrepreneurship and income-generating activities. It is also essential for men to actively work to dismantle their egos and recognize and value their female partners' contributions and achievements. By working together and advocating for change, we can create a more balanced and fair society where all individuals, including rural women in Sindh, have the opportunity to thrive and succeed.

Lack of equal opportunities for advancement and success is another issue that rural women face. Despite having the necessary skills, abilities, and experience, many women need to be noticed for promotions and other growth opportunities and may be stuck in lower-paying or less challenging positions (Federation & International Labour Organization, 2019). Possibly due to a range of factors, including bias, discrimination, and the undervaluing of women's contributions and achievements. Additionally, many women in rural Sindh may need more ownership over their earnings, with their income being controlled by their fathers or husbands, which can further undermine their agency and opportunities for financial independence (Kabeer, 1999; Ismail et al., 2020). To address these challenges and promote gender equality in the workplace, it is essential to challenge and eliminate systems and biases that discriminate against women and underestimate their capabilities. This requires implementing policies and practical measures that ensure equal pay and equal opportunities for advancement, as well as providing training and support for women to succeed in their professional fields. It is also important to advocate for policies and practices that support economic independence and empowerment for women and to challenge traditional gender roles and expectations (Beghini et al., 2019).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was quantitative, and it was a descriptive research design that identified the social and cultural hurdles faced by working women. It also identified the opportunities that are available for working women, and finally, it identified the feeling of empowerment and resilience among the women. The study was conducted in District Larkana, Sindh, Pakistan. Using a purposive sampling technique, the data were collected from the 150 working women; we also ensured the representation of the women from all occupational and social backgrounds. Utilizing the closed-end questionnaire, the data were collected from the participants by approaching them individually. Data were analyzed using SPSS, it was coded and then using descriptive statistics like frequencies and percentages, it was further explained. We adopted ethical measures to collect the data and perform the further steps of the study. Anonymity and confidentiality of the responses of the participants were fully ensured.

RESULTS

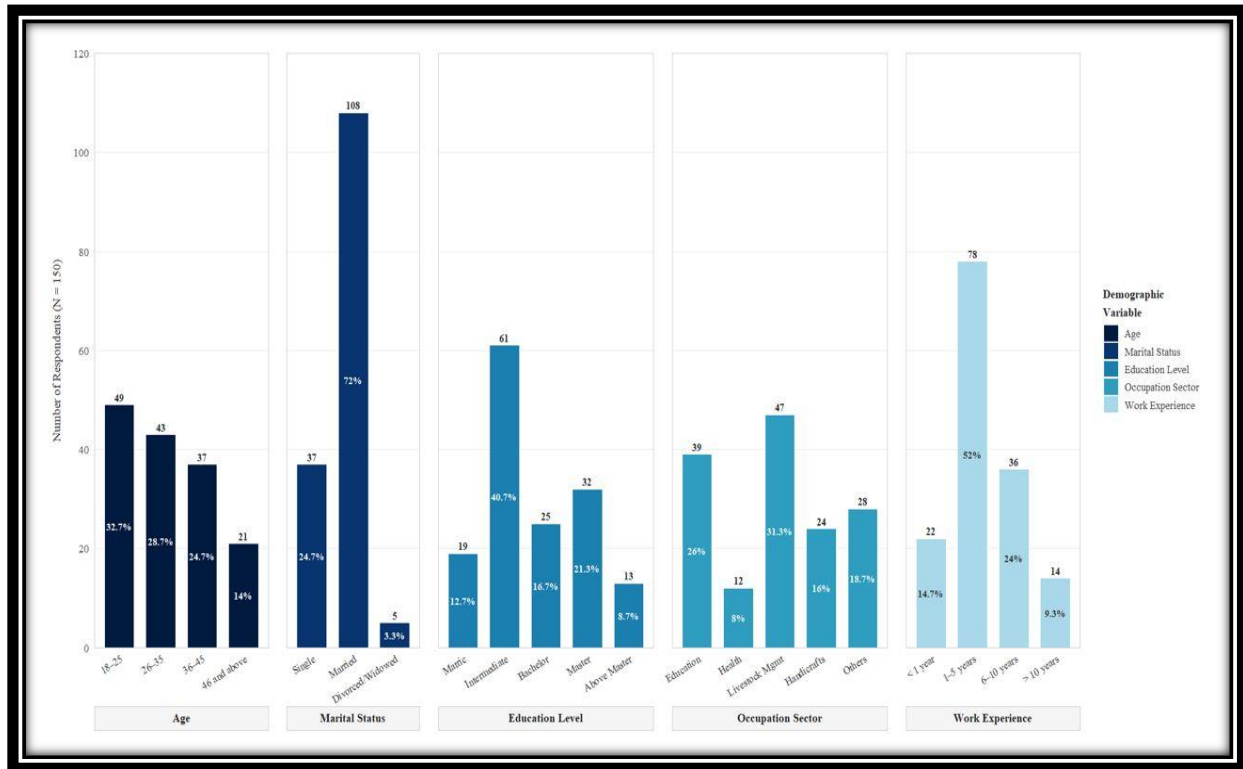


Chart 1: Explains the Demographics of the Participants of this Study (n=150)

The demographic profile of the respondents provides an important background for understanding the opportunities and socio-cultural challenges faced by working women in the Larkana district. According to the data obtained, most of the participants were young and employed. In terms of age, the highest number of women was between 18 and 25 years (49), followed by 26 to 35 years (43), 36 to 45 years (37), while the number of women aged 46 years and above was (21). These data show that a large number of working women in the district are young women. In terms of marital status, 108 respondents were married, 37 were single, and only 5 were widows or divorced. This indicates that a large number of working women are juggling work and family responsibilities, which may affect their perceptions of social barriers and support systems. In terms of educational attainment, most respondents had completed intermediate education (61), followed by respondents who had obtained a bachelor’s degree (25) and a master’s degree (32), while some respondents had educational qualifications above master’s (13) or only up to matriculation (19). These results show that most of the participants had intermediate-level education, which may have influenced their employment opportunities and professional development. In terms of occupation, the largest number (47) worked in livestock management, followed by the education sector (39), handicrafts (24), health sector (12), and other sectors (28). This distribution shows that women in the Larkana district are employed in a variety of sectors. In terms of work experience, the majority (78) had one to five years, followed by six to ten years (36). Smaller percentages claimed less than one year of experience (22) and more than ten years of experience (14). All things considered, young, reasonably educated working women in Larkana District who are just starting their careers made up the bulk of the sample.

Socio-cultural Barriers and Prospects for Working Women in Larkana District

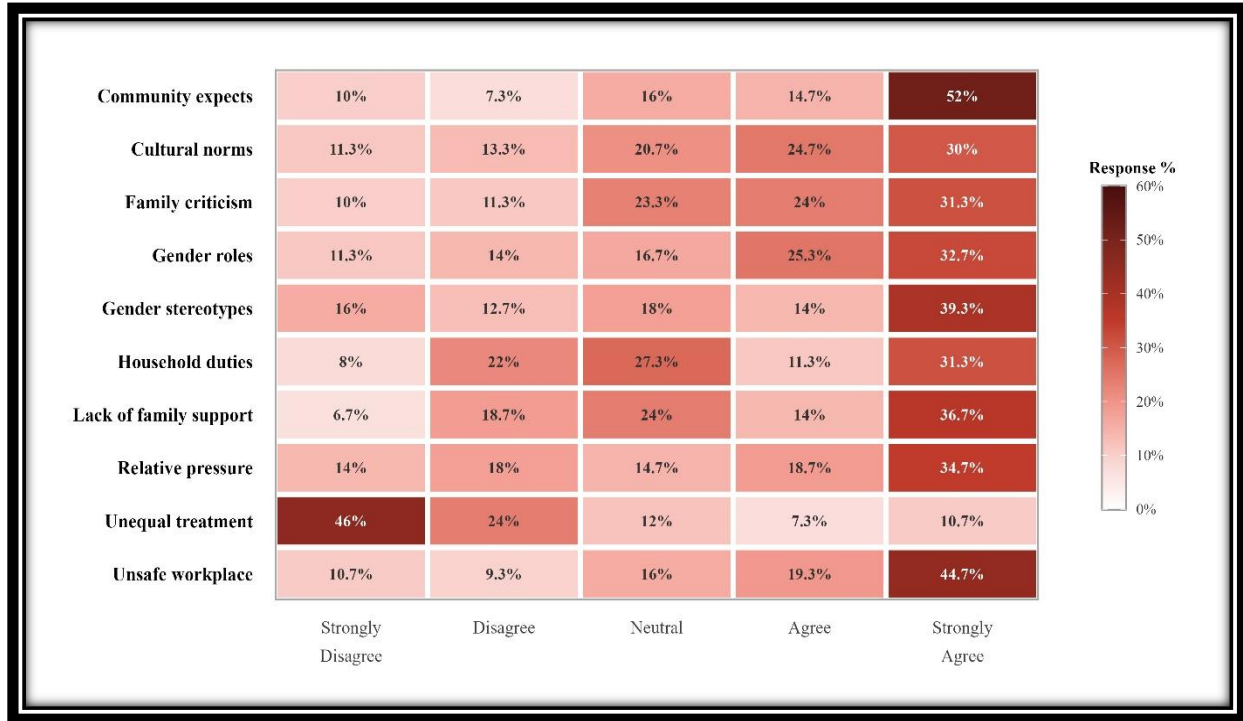


Chart 2: Participants’ Responses about the Socio-cultural Barriers (n=150)

Chart 2 represents the respondents’ perceptions regarding sociocultural hurdles faced by working women in Larkana District using a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree). The analysis highlights several important socio-cultural barriers that working women face. About the expectations of the community members, 52% of participants strongly agreed, and 14.7% agreed that they face barriers in their work in the form of community expectations. In this context, 16% of respondents remained neutral. Only 7.3% and 10% respondents, respectively, provided the responses in the disagree and strongly disagree. The results reveal that a large number of participants face hurdles in the form of community expectations. The study also showed that women in the Larkana district also feel resistance in their working from the cultural norms. As 30.0% and 24.7% of the participants strongly agree and agree, respectively. Combining these two components reveals that 54.7% of the respondents were of the view that cultural norms prevent them from working. The study identified that women in Larkana District also face criticism from their family members if they work. In this regard, 31.3% of respondents strongly agreed and 24.0% agreed, following the 23.3% participants who remained neutral. Collectively, the strongly agree and agree percentage is 55.3%, that support the perception that family criticism is a hurdle for working women. Gender roles that are assigned to women in District Larkana also prevent women from working, as the analysis expressed that 32.7% and 25.3% women strongly agreed and agreed, respectively. Combining the percentage of these two types of responses is 58%, which constitutes a greater number of the participants in favor of this response. Gender stereotypes are another barrier that the study identified as a hurdle for the working women in Larkana District. The strongly agree 39.3% and 14.0% responses of the participants were obtained in this context. Only 16.0% and 12.7% of respondents strongly disagreed and disagreed, respectively. Almost 42.6% of the respondents were of the view that their household duties also prevent them from working. The participants were also of the view that they do not have family support to work, as 36.7% and 14.0% respectively, provided their responses strongly agree and agree. However, 24.0% of respondents remained neutral. Women in the Larkana District also face relative pressure to work, as the study reveals that 34.7% participants

strongly agreed, and 18.7% were agreed, collectively, this number form the 53.4%, showing that relative pressure is one of the hurdles that prevent women from working. The study does not support the unequal treatment as an element that creates difficulties for women to work in District Larkana. In this regard, 46.0% and 24.0% (together constitute 70%), respectively, were of strongly disagree and disagree. The last item in this category was greatly supported by the responses of the participants and proved that unsafe working conditions in the workplace prevent women from working. The results revealed that 44.7% and 19.3% of participants, respectively, strongly agreed and agreed.

Opportunities for Working Women

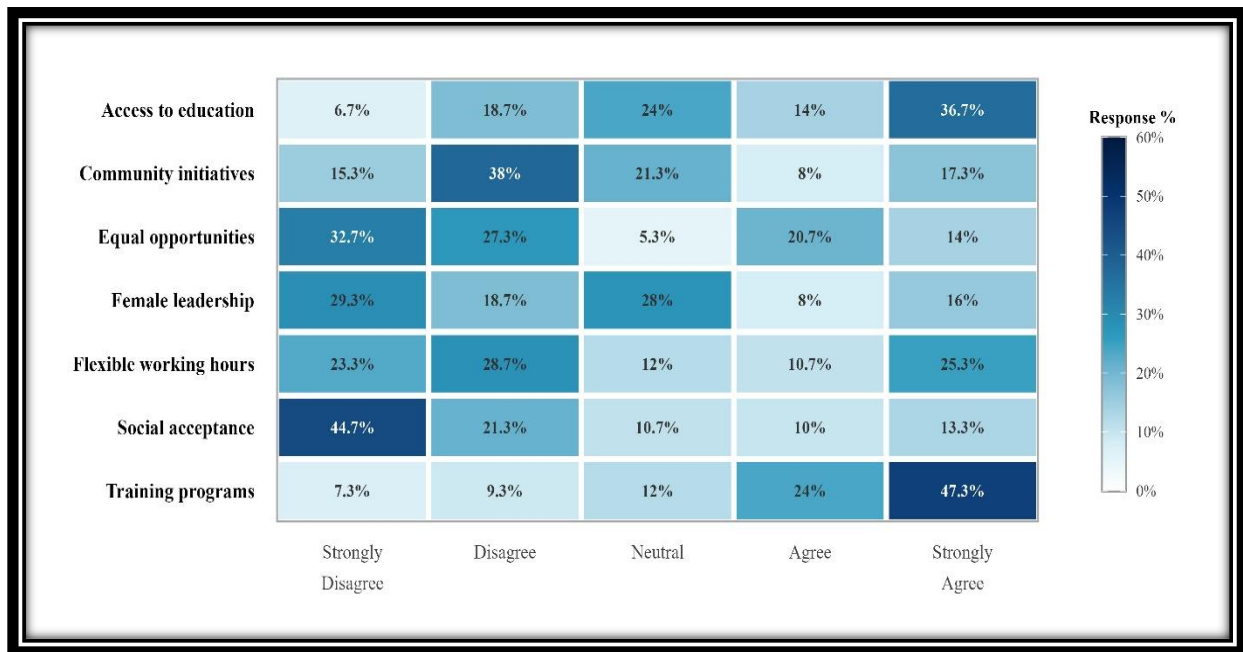


Chart 3: Participants' Responses about the Opportunities for Working Women (n=150)

The above-mentioned chart reveals the opportunities for working women in District Larkana. It is identified that working people have good access to education in the district. About this, 36.7% of participants strongly agreed, and 14% agreed that they have access to education. The study reveals that, in the form of community initiative, there are fewer opportunities for working women in the district. The participant's response reveals that 38% of respondents disagreed and 15.3% strongly disagreed that they have opportunities based on community initiatives in Larkana. The participants also stated that they do not have equal opportunities as compared to the male members of society. In this connection, 32.5% of respondents strongly disagreed, and 27.3% disagreed. The participants mentioned that they do not have leadership opportunities, as 29.3% and 18.7% of participants strongly disagreed and disagreed in this context. In response to the flexible working hours, 28.7% disagreed, and 23.3% strongly disagreed that they do not provide flexible working conditions. However, 44.7% and 21.3% respectively strongly disagreed and disagreed that they do not have social acceptance. In this category, we also identified the opportunities in the shape of training programs. Hence, 47.3% of respondents strongly agreed, and 24% agreed that training opportunities are available for them to work. Overall, the results revealed that the women in Larkana District have less opportunities to work.

Resilience and Socio-economic Empowerment

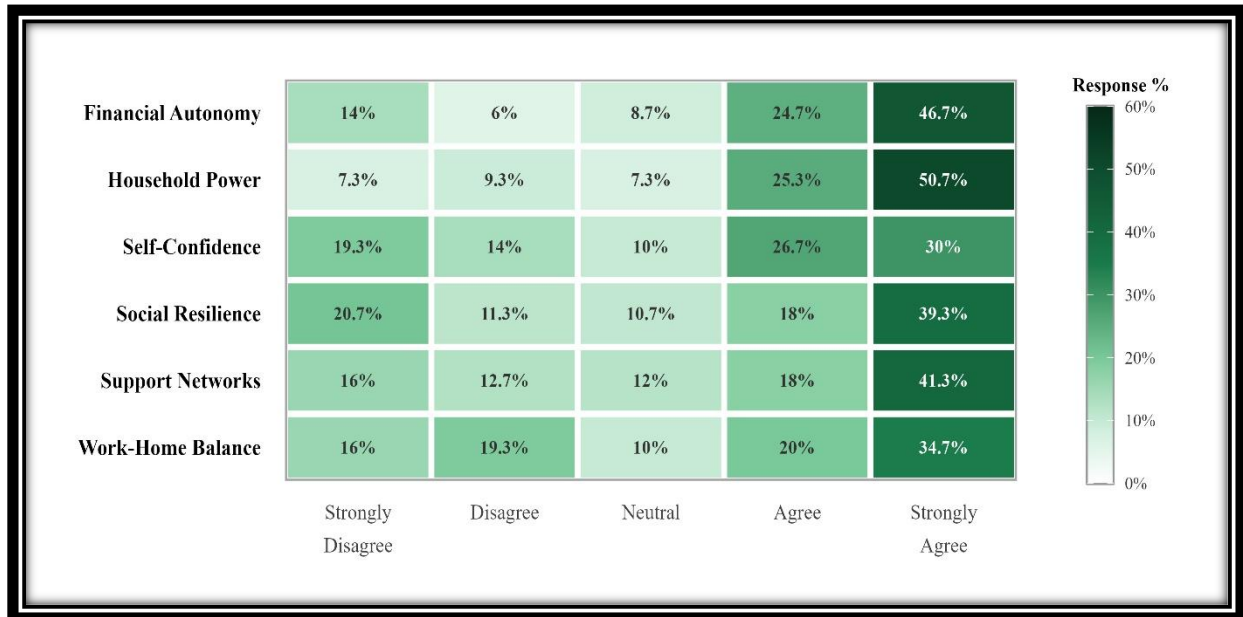


Chart 4: Participants’ Responses about Resilience and Socio-economic Empowerment (n=150)

Chart 4 represents the data of the responses of the participants regarding the resilience and socio-economic empowerment of working women. In response to the statement that the participants enhanced their confidence and self-esteem due to the job, it is identified that 30% and 26.7% of participants, respectively, strongly agreed and agreed. It provides the interpretation of the results that job opportunities and the work provide confidence to the participants. The respondents also feel that their work has given them financial autonomy, and it has increased their financial independence as well. Therefore, in this relation, 46.7% of respondents strongly agreed, and 24.7% agreed. Additionally, the participants, while working, feel social resilience as well. So, 39.3% and 18% of participants strongly agreed and agreed that their work has provided them with social resilience. The participants agreed that their work has given them empowerment in household matters, especially, it has enhanced their chances of decision-making. In this regard, 50.7% strongly agreed, and 25.3% agreed. The study also revealed that the participants rely on support networks like family, friends, and colleagues in order to overcome the challenges. In this connection, 41.3% of respondents strongly agreed, and 18% of participants agreed. The participants were also most likely to believe that they can manage the balance between work and their homes. Therefore, 34.7% and 20% of participants strongly agreed and agreed, respectively.

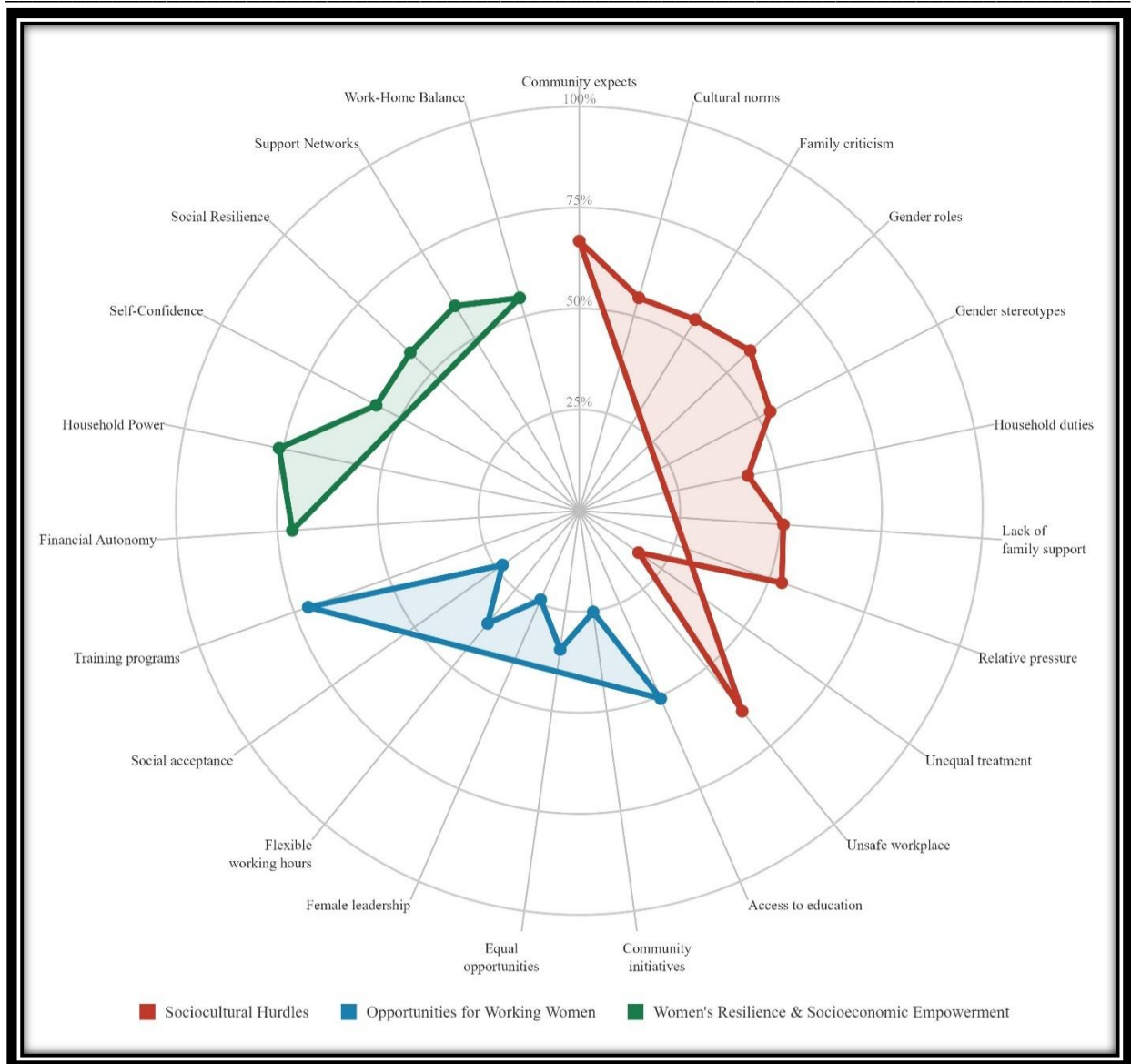


Chart 5: The Radar Chart Presents Combined Point of the Respondents Hurdles of Working Women (n=150)

Chart 5 displays respondents’ opinions about socio-cultural barriers, opportunities for working women, and the socio-economic empowerment and resilience of women in Larkana. The results indicate that the main socio-cultural barriers limiting women’s participation in employment include cultural norms, family criticism, community expectations, and traditional gender roles. Other factors also influence the challenges faced by working women, such as relational pressures, lack of family support, and household responsibilities. Furthermore, unsafe working conditions are perceived as a major problem, while unfair or unequal treatment is seen as a relatively minor barrier.

In terms of opportunities, the graph shows that women’s employment is generally supported by access to education and training programs. However, opportunities for leadership positions, equal employment opportunities, community projects, and flexible working hours are low, indicating that institutional and structural support for working women is still insufficient. The results also show that despite these barriers, women’s resilience and socio-economic empowerment have improved. Employment has promoted women’s financial independence, greater control over household decisions, increased self-esteem, and stronger support systems. Overall, these results show that employment

is of great importance in empowering women and raising their socio-economic status in Larkana district, although social barriers still exist.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of the study indicate that working women in the Larkana district face significant social barriers despite the potential benefits of employment. The findings suggest that traditional gender roles, cultural values, and social expectations have a profound impact on women's employment opportunities. Most respondents believed that cultural traditions and social expectations prevent women from working outside the home. These findings indicate that patriarchal thinking still exists in the district, where women are often expected to prioritize their household chores over employment.

Lack of family support and criticism also emerged as significant barriers. Several respondents reported that pressure from family members and relatives prevented them from finding a job. These social influences can limit women's autonomy and create psychological barriers to their participation in the workforce. Domestic responsibilities also emerged as a major barrier, indicating that women still struggle to balance their professional goals with family responsibilities.

The study also found that women's reluctance to work is also affected by unsafe work environments. Workplace safety and security issues still have a profound impact on women's participation in employment. However, most people did not consider unfair treatment to be a major barrier, which shows that the underlying problems lie not in the workplace but in the family and society.

The results in terms of opportunities present a mixed picture. Although women in the Larkana district have reasonable access to education and training programs, opportunities for leadership, community service, and flexible working hours are still limited. Gender disparities in the labor market still exist, as several respondents stated that women do not have equal employment opportunities to men. Reluctance to work is also influenced by hazardous work environments. Safety and security issues in the workplace still have a profound impact on women's employment participation. However, most did not consider unfair treatment to be a major barrier, indicating that the underlying problems lie not in the workplace but in the family and society.

Despite these barriers, the results show that employment plays a significant role in women's socio-economic empowerment and resilience. Due to their employment, many participants felt more self-reliant, financially independent, and confident. Furthermore, employment helps women build social support networks that help them cope with social and professional challenges and also strengthen their role in household decisions.

Overall, the findings suggest that although social barriers limit women's employment opportunities in the district, work participation promotes women's resilience and empowerment. Therefore, promoting gender equality, eliminating cultural barriers, improving workplace safety, and expanding employment opportunities can be highly conducive to the socio-economic development of women in the region.

PRACTICAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have important practical and policy implications for increasing the employment rate of women in Larkana. From a practical perspective, the research emphasizes that to promote women's employment, it is necessary to overcome socio-cultural barriers such as traditional gender roles, family pressures, and community expectations to establish supportive and encouraging social and work environments. Family awareness initiatives, community involvement, and awareness campaigns can help change attitudes towards working women in society. Employers should enforce anti-harassment laws, provide safe and welcoming work environments, and allow women flexible working hours to balance work and home responsibilities. From a policy perspective, the government and relevant institutions should develop gender-sensitive labor laws that ensure workplace safety, promote equal employment opportunities, and support women's leadership and professional development. Providing access to education, vocational training, and skills development programs is also crucial to improving women's employment opportunities and financial independence. Overall, the study is significant because it provides empirical insights into the socio-cultural realities of the working women in Larkana district and guides policymakers, community leaders, and organizations to develop strategies to effectively promote women's empowerment, inclusive socio-economic development, and gender equality.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the socio-cultural barriers, opportunities, and socio-economic empowerment faced by working women in the Larkana district. The findings suggest that the main socio-cultural barriers limiting women's participation in the workforce include cultural norms, community expectations, traditional gender roles, family criticism, and lack of family support. Concerns about domestic responsibilities and hazardous work environments also prevent women from finding employment. Although unfair treatment in the workplace was not considered a major obstacle, opportunities for women in leadership positions, community involvement, and flexible working hours are still limited. Despite these obstacles, employment increases women's self-confidence, financial independence, and participation in household decisions, which increases their resilience and socio-economic empowerment. Overall, the study shows that although socio-cultural barriers still exist in the district, women's employment plays a significant role in their social development and empowerment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Encourage education and awareness: Government and social organizations should conduct awareness campaigns to eliminate gender stereotypes and create positive attitudes in favor of women's employment.
2. Strengthen family and community support: Community leaders and organizations can create supportive behaviors in families to reduce social pressures and encourage women to join the workforce.
3. Ensure a safe work environment: Employers and legislators can improve workplace safety by providing strong anti-harassment laws and safe working conditions for women.
4. Increase employment and leadership opportunities: Businesses should support women's participation in leadership and decision-making and provide equal employment opportunities.
5. Provide skills training and flexible work policies: Increasing training opportunities and implementing flexible work hours help women balance work and household responsibilities and also improve their employment opportunities.

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