

# **Social Media and Women Empowerment in Pakistan – A Study of Opportunities and Challenges**

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## **Abstract**

*This research paper is exhibiting the outcomes of a research study that explores the practice of utilizing social media to attain women empowerment in Pakistan. The research employs a quantitative research approach to gauge the intensity of various opportunities as well as challenges that women in Pakistan combat while making their presence in cyberspace for the purpose of empowerment. An online survey among 100 female social media-based entrepreneurs is conducted inviting them to share their online experiences. The data collected through the survey indicates social media is acting as a catalyst for social change for these female entrepreneurs. Not only they have become able to generate personal income and saving but they have also acquired position in decision making and power sharing hierarchy. This journey towards empowerment is however becoming difficult for many as they commonly face the problems of cyber harassment, cyber bullying and difficulties in managing financial transactions online. Despite all these difficulties women consider social media as blessing because it has allowed them to manage household and professional responsibilities side by side. In sum, the role of social media is very substantial and supportive for the Pakistani women in their quest for empowerment however, it is critically important that the government and related authorities take meaningful steps to resolve the issues faced by these women identified in this study.*

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, social media, Cyber harassment, Bullying, Power sharing, Female Entrepreneurs, Social Change

## **Introduction**

Women empowerment is an insightful term that indicates the meaningful and active role of women in societies. Empowered women possess the capability to take an active part in the social, economic, and political spheres and contribute to the progression of societies (Vardhan,2017). Women who gain empowerment focus on gaining financial stability and attempting to get out of the dependency cycle. This attitude not only alters their ways of living but also makes them eligible for having say in the decision-making processes not only in domestic but also in professional roles (Rehman, 2013).

Purposeful endeavors, as well as conscious equity-oriented and uniformly arranged approaches, can work to empower women by assuring them an equivalent part in networks, the working environment, and the marketplaces. Everywhere, various leveled efforts are being exercised to level up the current degrees of women empowerment in relative social orders. Conventional forms of mass media have been viewed as useful and influential devices to support women's efforts of gaining empowerment. Nevertheless, in the contemporary era, social media has also evolved as a highly effective and powerful medium that not only brings forward the problem of women in front of the world but also creates awareness and openness among the masses to discuss those issues and consider diverse ways to resolve them (Freiri, 2016). Henceforth, the efforts for women's empowerment are concentrating more on social media as compared with the traditional one because the former offer women more avenues to express themselves and find ways to resolve their problems (Morahan-Martin, 2000).

Almost half of the population of Pakistan comprises women but their share in the workforce is just 24%. This is among the world's highest gender gaps in labor force participation rates. The low progress of the Pakistani economy along with various other principal factors is also caused by the low participation of women in economic activities. In a country where there is little openness to provide equal learning and working opportunities to half of the population, unsubstantial participation of women in economic progression is inevitable. Women commonly experience problems in finding suitable and decent working opportunities, even if they decide to come forwards and play an active role in their individual and social enhancement. The typical social structure of the country makes it difficult for most women to excel at their professional level by exploring different opportunities (Mahpara & QuratulAin, 2011).

Along with time, there is gradual improvement occurring in the situation. The population residing in the urban areas has especially become open to

giving education to females. In some rural areas also, such awareness exists among people but the lack of resources available makes it difficult for them to educate the girls. There are many technical fields that are still considered unsuitable for girls and this attitude hinders their professional development despite them having passion and capabilities (Tazeen et al, 2011).

With all these limitations and socio-cultural barriers, there is still ray of hope in the situation. Due to the continuous effects of different organizations and activists, the concept of women empowerment is no longer a novel idea for Pakistani society. The urban areas across the country are the leading places where each new day brings some new opportunities the women. Women are taking a step forward while they welcome these opportunities and unlock the doors to enter various fields that were supposed to be prohibited for them in early times. The contribution of women in daily economic activities is increasing as they are not only working in different sectors but also managing their own businesses and providing employment opportunities to others (Muhammad & Harrison, 2010).

This journey is well supported by social media as Pakistani women are increasingly using the internet and social media for a variety of purposes on daily basis. Unfortunately, gender discrimination is causing a gap in the usage of social media in Pakistan as well. Women and girls are generally provided with limited access to resources and devices; therefore, just 33% of internet users in Pakistan are female whereas 77% are male. However, despite this gender gap in internet usage, Pakistani women are making a noticeable online presence, and the number of female internet users is increasing in Pakistan (Jahangir, 2019).

Among many other usages of social media, establishing and managing their businesses in an important reason that is bringing Pakistani women towards social media. Social media is helping these women in so many ways. Facebook pages and groups, Whatsapp groups and broadcast lists, Instagram, YouTube, and many other social media platforms are offering a variety of avenues for Pakistani women to earn a decent amount of money through their online businesses. Reckoning the need, there some exclusive female entrepreneur platforms are also created online like Sheops, Fempro, HerFeet. Many female owned Facebook groups are also providing free marketing services to these female entrepreneurs like Women of Today, Ladies Lounge, Firefly, Super Women of Pakistan, Wonder Women League, etc. On these platforms, women exhibit their products and services and reach their potential customers while staying at their homes. These platforms also help them to connect with different

female vendors and service providers. In this way, not only they develop their businesses but also support other female startups (Masood, 2018).

The trend of creating online communities to empower women is changing the situation for women in very positive manner. Social media is facilitating their empowerment struggle and women are supporting each other also in their journeys. This article is based on the objective of examining social media role in the women empowerment struggle in Pakistan by gauging the intensity of women empowerment indicators observed by the Pakistani women who have been using social media for this specific purpose. The article also explains various challenges and opportunities associated with the usage of social media for these women. The intention of the research is to find out the ways through which the struggle for women empowerment can further be facilitated and supported by means of social media.

### **Research Objectives**

This research study is aimed at attaining following core objectives:

- To understand the social media usage trend among Pakistani women for establishing their businesses.
- To examine the role of social media as a facilitator of empowerment for Pakistani women
- To find out the different types and scales of businesses that Pakistani women are running through social media
- To identify the challenges and opportunities Pakistani women face in their empowerment journey through social media.
- To formulate some recommendations for the authorities in order to further enhance the role of social media in fostering the empowerment process of Pakistani women.

### **Literature Review**

Empowerment is a profound concept that originated almost a century ago. The beginning of this concept could be followed back in the literature composed by the Brazilian educationalist and Philosopher Freire (1973) that fostered the proposition of empowerment in schooling reasoning. He believes that people become ready to comprehend and satisfy their requirements when they conquer the obstacles that influence their lives in the type of social and social boundaries. Be that as it may, when they are abused by others, they frequently neglect to perceive their necessities and go to essential lengths to meet those. Considering the

concept of empowerment proposed by Freire (1973), one more social scientist Gutierrez (1990) suggested that the idea of empowerment is just a human way of behaving that display people's mindfulness with respect to their command over their lives, choices and decisions.

Schuler (1986) proposes that women empowerment refers to their battle to grow their current abilities and resources which at last permits them to build their support in the navigation and exchange process with respect to the issues that worry their lives somehow. Another approach to explaining the concept of women empowerment is explained by Moser in 1993 who believe that the struggles of third-world feminists act as the foundation for the women empowerment journey. He also believes that the core objective of all women empowerment interventions and efforts is eventually to get hold of power and have say in the decision-making processes.

Sen and Batliwala (2000) mention that the process of empowerment begins the day when an individual or group of individuals make affirm decision and initiate their journey to live a life where they have the decisions of their lives in their hands. They are not supposed to get affirmation from others before deciding something for their selves as they are no longer dependent upon others to fulfill their needs. Sen and Grown (2000) saw that women empowerment is set apart by their expanded cooperation in monetary and political exercises.

Martha (2000) accepts that when women gain empowerment it isn't just for their own benefit or individual advantage. Rather, the whole society turns into the recipient of this strengthening somehow. Jeejebhoy and Sathar (2001) accept that empowerment settles on women fit for pursuing decisions, utilizing their abilities and capacities to oversee various parts of their life, and taking a functioning part in socio-political existence with expanded mobilization. As per Golla et al (2011) observations, the activists raising voices for the rights and empowerment of women are not asking for rights in any single or specific area, but they want empowerment in every aspect of life. In broader sense, the struggle of women is not limited to gain control over financial resources, but they also want to be free in choosing their ideologies, religions, norms and beliefs that are often imposed upon them in many societies.

The study of Kurtis et al (2016) identified some common characteristics of efforts directed at gaining women empowerment and explains that like men, women also have certain dreams and ambitions that they want to fulfil in their lives. Empowerment is all about having them access of all such resources, facilities and platforms that can help them in making their dreams true. Esther (2012) exhibited his understanding about women struggle for empowerment as a process that allows them to

reclassify an orientation that takes into account them to procure the capacity to pick between known choices that have in any case been limited from such capacity.

The survey of existing research studies around the topic gave a definite outline of advancement and improvement of origination of women empowerment concept and determined a few significant highlights that show the movement of women empowerment process throughout the time. The objective of this research paper is to study different aspects of women empowerment in relation to social media usage in Pakistan. From the review of literature focusing on development of women empowerment concept, it is concluded that there are some agreed upon attributes that signify the presence of women empowerment in a society. There are 13 main characteristics or indicators that adequately sum up the essence of women empowerment. The rating scale of women empowerment is therefore, built upon these attributes and Pakistani women running social media businesses were asked to rate these indicators to get a fair idea about the level of empowerment that they have achieved so far. These indicators are as follow:

1. Power sharing
2. Self-reliance
3. Making Decisions and choices
4. Increased participation in various economic and political activities
5. Freedom & Increased Mobility
6. Self-awareness and Self-sufficiency
7. Increasing personal, interpersonal or political power
8. Expansion of capabilities
9. Advocacy for social justice and rights
10. Financial Independent
11. Self-Confidence
12. Recreation and transformation of role in a society
13. Personal Income and Saving

### **Role of Traditional and social media in Women Empowerment**

The study conducted by Mądra-Sawicka, Nord and Lee (2020) investigated the role of digital media especially social networking platforms in creating an empowered society. The researchers concluded that women are among the prime beneficiaries of digital media platforms because social media has opened doors for them that were not available earlier. The visible change in the lives of women clearly indicates the power of social media is supporting the empowerment efforts of women

all over the world. The trend was confirmed in Madal (2022) study as well. The researcher confirmed through his data analysis that social media is empowering women in India up to a great extent.

Kumari (2022) believes that there is great responsibility lies on the media to assist women in their quest for empowerment. She observed that this responsibility is adequately fulfilled by digital media where various platforms are providing support to women in so many ways. Alameri (2022) examined this hypothesis in the Bahrain context and found that in a Gulf country where society views women differently as compared with the western countries, social media has opened a window for fresh air. Social media is not empowering women on social and economic grounds, but the political participation of women has also increased in the country using social media. Therefore, the researcher believes that social media is a game changer for women.

Malik (2010) observes that the mainstream media has always place for the women struggle for empowerment. Therefore, when women carry on different activities to gain empowerment, they find different media outlets behind them giving them coverage and exposure. On the other hand, women are entering diverse fields including media and thus, their creative approaches have also led to the growth of these sectors. Maghadam (2010) affirms that the media has always been on women side throughout their struggles for empowerment. This support is in form of giving them coverage and in form of content that awakens the women and make them realize the importance of standing for their rights. Tufekci & Christopher (2012) observe that the world has change a lot after the invention and popularity of social media and this change is also visible in social interaction and communication patterns of individuals. With no exception, women working on empowerment interventions are also supported by the internet especially social media and their activism has reach to the next level by going online.

The study of Gordon & Trammel (2016) found that like many other countries of the world Jamaica and Brazil are also experiencing change in women status due to advent of social media. The introduction of different e-learning opportunities also helped the women up to a greater extent and many of them seek the ways to earn through social media by using their skills and talent. However, the social media usage among women in these countries varies across different racial groups and social classes. Rajendran (2015) in her paper mentions that the social media has appeared to be the driving force behind various cases of women activist in recent years in India including the Delhi bus rape case.

Vardhan (2017) observed that the social media has been acting as change agent for women around the world however, in many of the developing

countries social media role in supporting women empowerment is not strong as the western world due to gender gap in literacy, access to technology and cyber bullying etc.

Joseph and Sharma (2006) further confirmed that the feminist ideologies and activities are well supported and well-presented in front of the world by the social media. The hash tags activism and online campaigns have significantly supported the struggle of empowerment led by women in different parts of the globe by giving them a voice that the world can hear.

According to Gordon and Trammel (2016) World Wide Web, particularly social media has ended up being a strong vehicle for carrying women issues to the consideration of a more extensive public, beginning activity in the urban communities all over the planet and empowering strategy creators to move forward responsibilities to gender-based equity. Joshi (2004) affirms that social media has assumed control over the waning flow of conventional media like TV, radio, papers and magazines. The act of riding the web 2.0 to get ongoing data in a split second has prompted the ascent of a perpetually associated foundation climate universally. Web based businesses are thriving with the assistance of computerized promoting and marketing platforms.

### ***Social Media and Women: Opportunities and Challenges***

Subhash (2017) revealed that advancement of new media has opened the entryways for specific new open doors for the women of the contemporary era. Narayana and Ahamad (2016) mentioned that the new media, explicitly the quickly developing social media, has incredible potential to be utilized as a weapon by the modern-day women for acquiring strength and empowerment. Uma Rani and Sripriya (2013) view social media as turning point for the entrepreneurial activities because there is great scope for creativity and diversity in this platform. The researchers believe that for women social media appeared to be a useful tool because they are able to get access to lot of information, tools and platforms to run their own businesses which was not possible for them in real world. Taking example of India, they reveal that with the help of social media many women have proved that they are not burden on their families and societies rather they are also capable of contributing to the economic and social lives. Muhammad and Harrison (2010) observe that there are many business-oriented communities of social media including Facebook and WhatsApp groups and Instagram where women are freely carrying on with their business activities. They are



connecting with vendors and potential customers in these platforms and finding new ways to grow their businesses.

Ray (2008) points out that there are many problematic areas also evolving due to the increased activities of women on cyberspace. He identified that women on social media are getting access to endless opportunities on one hand but on other hand, they are in high-risk position of becoming a victim of cybercrimes. It is found that cyber stalking, harassment, threats, bullying, blackmailing, and cyber defamation are commonly experienced by women who carry out different activities online. Cyber-crimes are committed against both men and women but usually, women are soft targets for such criminals and young girls are often stalked by men on different social media platforms.

Dawn Newspaper published a report in 2019 in which it was revealed that Facebook and WhatsApp are top social media platforms where women are at high risk of getting harassed in Pakistan. The cybercrime cell established under FIA receives around 100 calls every month in which the victim is female and often the report is registered by their male family members

(Jahangir, 2019)

### **Research Methodology**

The objective of this study is to find out what role social media is playing in women's quest for empowerment in Pakistan and what challenges and opportunities come along when these women use social media to gain empowerment. Therefore, the research study is exploratory in nature. A qualitative research approach is employed to collect the data. With the help of an online survey, 100 Pakistani women running their businesses through social media are approached and requested to take part in the study. Their social media pages and social media business communities are also accessed and reviewed to know about different issues related to the subject matter. A purposive sampling technique is used for this survey and Pakistani women who use social media and also run their businesses on any of the social media platforms were made part of this research. The consent of women to participate in the study was collected by contacting them through their social media accounts and pages and the link of Google Form was sent once they agree to take part in the survey. The survey questionnaire was constructed using a rating scale and respondents were allowed to submit the form only once. Along with the survey, observations of the social media platforms created especially for the women's empowerment cause were also reviewed to know about various issues that women share on these platforms. This observation

also helped in gaining insight to the utilization of social media for empowerment purposes by Pakistani women.

### Research Findings

The literature around the topic of women empowerment was surveyed and a list of thirteen indicators of women empowerment was derived from it. A rating scale was developed comprising of these indicators and Pakistani social media-based entrepreneurs were asked in the survey to rate those. This is to see how much empowerment they have attained after making their businesses alive with the help of social media. Table 1 shows the result of women indicators rated by the Pakistani social media-based businesswomen.

*Table1 - Rating of indicators of women empowerment*

<b>Rating of Indicators of Women Empowerment</b>	1 (Very Low)	2 (Low)	3 (Medium)	4 (High)	5 (Very High)
Power sharing	8%	16%	26%	28%	22%
Self-reliance	5%	11%	21%	35%	28%
Making own decisions and choices	12%	16%	27%	22%	23%
Increased participation in various economic and political activities	7%	16%	29%	26%	22%
Self-awareness and Self-sufficiency	5%	11%	24%	28%	32%
Freedom & Increased Mobility	10%	18%	25%	23%	24%
Increasing personal, interpersonal or political power	12%	27%	20%	20%	21%
Expansion of	2%	5%	29%	33%	31%

capabilities					
Advocacy for social justice and equality	9%	21%	26%	24%	19%
Financial Independence	6%	11%	22%	30%	31%
Self-Confidence	2%	7%	22%	34%	35%
Recreation and transformation of women's role in a society	5%	8%	25%	32%	30%
Personal Income and Saving	3%	10%	29%	28%	30%

Along with rating the indicators of empowerment, the female social media-based entrepreneurs who took part in the survey were also asked to rate the intensity of opportunities and challenges that they experience online in the process of managing their business. The data related with the intensity of challenges faced by the participants is presented in Table 2 which clearly indicates that fake buyers, online scams and trust issues are major problems that are creating problems for these women.

**Table 2 - Intensity of problems and challenges**

<b>Problems Faced while doing busyness online</b>	<b>1 (Very Low)</b>	<b>2 (Low)</b>	<b>3 (Medium)</b>	<b>4 (High)</b>	<b>5 (Very High)</b>
Trust issues	7%	13%	27%	27%	26%
Intellectual Property theft	10%	19%	21%	23%	27%
Lack of Secure Payment Solutions	18%	21%	28%	17%	16%
Delivery of products/Service	7%	19%	24%	26%	24%

ces					
Identity Theft	25%	24%	16%	17%	18%
Insecure spread of Private information	22%	23%	18%	19%	18%
Non serious buyers	8%	11%	21%	33%	27%
Last minute cancellations	7%	12%	22%	31%	28%
Delivery charges	8%	10%	24%	26%	32%
Cyber harassment	3%	19%	22%	27%	29%

Another section of the survey questionnaire asked the respondents to rate the intensity of different opportunities that social media as bestowed. The data collected from this question clearly indicate that there are wide array of benefits including flexible work timings, convenience and low maintenance cost; due to which Pakistani female entrepreneurs commonly view social media as effective tool of gaining empowerment. The data exhibited in Table 3 shows how Pakistani women are experiencing different opportunities provided by the social media.

**Table 3 - Intensity of Opportunities and Benefits**

<b>Benefits and Opportunities</b>	<b>1 (Very Low)</b>	<b>2 (Low)</b>	<b>3 (Medium)</b>	<b>4 (High)</b>	<b>5 (Very High)</b>
Flexible Work timings	7%	13%	27%	27%	26%
Low maintenance cost	10%	19%	21%	23%	27%
Work from home	7%	19%	24%	26%	24%
Time and transportation	13%	15%	31%	17%	24%

n expenses saving					
Working alongside household routine	15%	14%	16%	27%	28%
Work on multiple projects	22%	23%	18%	19%	18%
Self-Management	8%	11%	21%	33%	27%
Self-Supervision	7%	12%	22%	31%	28%
Lesser physical security concerns	8%	10%	24%	26%	32%
Easy Execution & display of ideas	3%	19%	22%	27%	29%

### Discussion

The data collected from the survey conducted among social media based Pakistani female entrepreneurs portrayed a profound and reflective account of social media usage in Pakistan for the purpose of supporting the women empowerment struggle. It is also revealed from the study that on one hand social media open the door for countless opportunities for women but on the other hand, there are some critical issues and problems that they must face in their quest. The positive aspect brought by this study is the fact that there is growing trend among Pakistani women to establish variety of businesses on social media. This is not only helping them financially, but they are also utilizing their skills and capabilities in effective manner.

The change brought by the social media in the lives of Pakistani females is quite substantial and noticeable. As they become engaged in their online businesses, they attain higher level of composure and become better aware of their capabilities. This self-reliance and self-actualization give these women high level of confidence that they also start taking part in various social, political as well as economic activities at different level. This is because they realize that there is no facet of life where they

cannot progress. This trend of adopting an active lifestyle is very positive for the country as well. Pakistan which is ranked very low in terms of women participation in the work force, is currently hoping to attain better position with this increasing trend of women getting engaged in economic activities online. This increased rate of participation in workforce is also expected to elevate the lifestyle of women and their families as they would be able to spend more on their own needs and on their families. With these developments, Pakistani women are expected to become more active and important component of society in coming years.

To attain this level, nevertheless, it is critically important to take into consideration the problems that these women are currently facing. Cyber space is not a safe place for users be it men, women or children. However, women are among the highly vulnerable segment of society and the fear of getting harassed or blackmailed is enough for a woman to take a step back in her journey. Cybercrimes including cyber bullying and harassment are commonly experienced by these women which clearly indicate that there is need of developing a mechanism where women can feel safe and can concentrate on their businesses rather getting worried about the security of their data and personal information. It is found that most of the women are struggling to run their businesses and due to lack of technical and business management knowledge many of them are facing losses and failures. This is because there are very few noteworthy platforms that are teaching the women about the technicalities of running online businesses. There are many paid courses and groups but many women either find it difficult to pay for the paid courses or they find the content of such courses less helpful and worthy. Looking at the trend of online earning, many opportunists have start selling their courses at high fee luring women to earn while sitting at their homes. Unfortunately, many of these women are scammed by such people and they lose their money in the effort of earning more.

Scams and online frauds are very important issues that need to be addressed at government level if the government really wants to see women progressing through social media businesses. On one hand, women face fraudulent behavior from the buyers and on the other hand, buyers is also concerned about the credibility of the seller. There is no physical existence of many of the online businesses, so buyers often prefer not to trust them for their money. Proper registration system can help improving the situation up to a greater extent. After the investigation and verification of the seller, the businesses should be registered with an authentic body so the buyers can trust on it and the women can also concentrate on their businesses rather dealing with scams and frauds.

The study confirms that there is ample awareness among Pakistani women about the importance of social media. They seem to truly realize the significance of social media as tool to claim empowerment. Liking at the typical structure of the Pakistani households, many women find themselves unable to work on fixed timings and outside the houses. This is where social media came and help them to explore the outside world while staying at their homes. In this way, their domestic routines are not much disturbed, and they also continue their skill development and professional journeys.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In sum, social media is identified as a very important tool for supporting the efforts of Pakistani women through social media. Pakistani women who have access to internet and smart phone are trying their best to excel in various fields by using their limited resources, talent and capabilities. But this journey needs adequate support and facilitation from the policy makers and government. In the light of this study finding, following recommendations are put forward to help Pakistani women in their empowerment struggles through social media.

- **Registration and Regulation:** Currently there is no government led authority or organization where the Pakistani female entrepreneurs can register to get validation for their businesses. There is dire need of registration system of online women businesses to assure the credibility and proper regulation of their businesses.
- **Prevention of Cybercrimes:** Women need to feel safe and secure online and for this, the government need to assure that all criminal activities taking place against Pakistani entrepreneur are strictly and timely addressed and due punishments are given.
- **Training and Mentoring Sessions:** There are many women who waste their time, money and efforts because they don't have clear direction to exert their efforts. The authorities must arrange exclusive training and mentoring programs where all queries of women could be answered, and they can get proper guidance about doing businesses on social media.
- **Reliable delivery and payment system:** Currently trust issues between buyer and seller often result in termination of the deal and orders are cancelled. If there is middleman authentic authority that can assure delivery of product and payment to both parties, the situation will become better.

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