

# Education and Women'S Empowerment in Northern Pakistan: Tracing Accomplishments and Predicaments

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## Abstract

This paper is an attempt to investigate the transformatory potential of education in changing women's lives in the light of empirical data from the Chitral valley in northern Pakistan. The paper argues that where education opens up new avenues for some women, for others it creates dilemmas. The empirical findings show that the schooling of girls has gradually become a norm in Chitral, yet how it is perceived by men and women is complex. The data demonstrate that the local discourses about girls' education are not merely about access to schooling, but also about the use of education to exhibit personal change and to gain economic benefits. I posit that the process of gaining a sense of agency needs attention in terms of critical self-assessment, realization of one's position in the society, the ability to desire change and to be able to work for it. The paper calls to move beyond a simplistic co-relation between education, gender and empowerment and the need to establish a reflexive relationship based on personal experiences of women and on contextual imperatives.

**Keywords:** education, empowerment, women, agency, Chitral, Pakistan

## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary age education has been promoted as an uncontested good by key modernizing agents, including international development organizations, NGOs and governments. Education (formal/informal) has been associated with awareness of basic human rights, and an essential ingredient to achieve equity, development and peace (UNESCO 2006). In addition, education is often seen as a proxy for women's empowerment and is generally believed to enhance women's advancement. It is believed to impart status and confidence to women and to influence household decisions (Kassam 1989, 531).

However, a woman's right to education is usually measured largely in instrumental ways as a mean to facilitate the well being of the family and the society in general (Kabeer 2005). For instance, effects of women's education on children in terms of better nutrition and more hygienic conditions is considered important since it is believed to give better outcomes in schools (Kagitcibasi, Goksen, and Gulgoz 2005, 473; King and Hill 1993, 12-13; Mukhopadhyay 2008, 12-13; Pimental 2006, 6). Moreover, education is also considered as a pre-requisite for a good marital relationship and for obtaining a good match (Kabeer 2005; Shurei 1997). Nevertheless, such discourses are silent on the means through which education could lead to change in relations of power and the ways through which it could assist women to become independent citizens (Stromquist 1992, 62).

To address this gap, efforts have been made by qualitative researchers' especially through ethnographic studies on literacy (e.g. Rockhill, 1993; Farah, 1992) to provide alternative narratives of schooling from the perspective of the individuals. This paper is part of the larger shift in the literature on gender, education and empowerment by including the voices and perceptions of informants about the importance and use of education. It is an attempt to unravel changes in women's lives as a result of their access to schooling and consequently the changing gender roles in a context which remains under researched. It is aimed at highlighting the complexity of women's experiences with regard to schooling. The paper argues that, though education and schooling of girls is being accepted as a norm in the Chitral valley the process of being educated is complicated. For some women it leads to change in social status, respect, dignity, employment while for others it results in new forms of dependencies and challenges. To make this argument, the paper relies on empirical data from the Chitral valley of Pakistan.

The notion of women's empowerment in this paper is understood as the ability to bring substantial changes in women's lives including; change in 'consciousness' (Kabeer 2012) and change in relations of power. Here, by change in consciousness, I mean being largely aware of their rights and responsibilities and being able to analyze their lives in comparison to others around them. I argue that since empowerment begins with individual attempts for change and entails constant labour it as an intimate and personal journey (Ali, 2013).

## Methodology

The paper draws on data from a larger study on women's empowerment in the Chitral valley in the north of Pakistan. The ethnographic study was carried out over a period of six months during 2009/2010. The major aim of the project was to capture intimate aspects of the women's lives and so life histories of a small number of participants were taken instead of generalized interviews (Bryman 2012). Additionally, to get a broader view of how empowerment works for different women in different circumstances and backgrounds but similar social settings, in-depth interviews were carried out with 15 women belonging to different walks of life including housewives and working women. Informal conversations were carried out with both men and women. The participants had diverse educational and occupational backgrounds and were selected considering their relevance to the research and their potential to answer the research questions (Patton 2001). Purposeful sampling and snowball sampling methods were used to collect data (Bogdan and Biklen 2007; Patton 2001). These methods assisted in selecting the most appropriate informants based on the research questions.

In this paper, data from the in-depth interviews, observations and life history of a woman named Sadaf are utilized to offer analysis of education and its link with women's empowerment in Chitral. Though majority of the informants were educated and employed, but it was Sadaf, whose life trajectory clearly depicted the nuanced ways through which education when accompanied with self-reflexivity' can lead to personal empowerment. Narrative analysis was used to interpret the stories of the women inspired by Geertz's (1988) ethnography and Riessman's approach to narratives (2001). During the narrative analysis the concrete details of the women's lives were presented in chronological order as if they were product of a unique event. The social reality of the informants was presented as experienced and constructed by them. The aim was to convey an authentic feel for life's complexity as experienced by the informants. The narratives were organized into several patterns recounting it with visual clues, gestures, etc for emphasis (Neuman 2003).

## Gender, education and empowerment

Feminist studies over the last few decades have focused on gender as an independent unit of analysis and have emphasized on 'gender equality' for a balanced society. Achieving gender equality is believed to involve freedom of all individuals, irrespective of gender or other marker of discrimination (Sen 1999; Aikman and Unterhalter 2005). Gender equality is seen as more than equal distribution of resources among men and women. It encompasses the deeply embedded structures of power, including 'discriminatory laws, customs, practices and institutional processes which could undermine opportunities and outcomes in education' (Unterhalter 2005; Aikman and Unterhalter 2005).

Empowerment is a term which has been used in the last few decades to explain unequal power relations in the society. The primary idea behind women's empowerment from a feminist point of view has been to ensure gender equality and to create awareness by facilitating women to bring about substantial changes in their lives (Author 2013). Empowerment is believed to happen when women who are denied choices in important matters in their lives are able to attain the right to make independent decisions (Kabeer 2005). However, the contemporary uses of empowerment in mainstream development policies in line with neoliberal transformations taking place around the world perceive it as a tool to foster gender equality in such a way that it can shape the outcome of development in terms of economic growth achieved through market regulation and poverty alleviation. It is expected to produce self-improved individuals who use their "gains" to rescue their families and thus take part in the transformation of the society at large (Cornwall 2007, 27-28).

To this end education too is used as an entrepreneurial strategy to ensure the inclusion of women in the market driven economy in a more efficient way (Sharma 2008, 199). Nevertheless, emerging qualitative research on education suggests that schooling can contribute to empowerment at a personal level' provided individuals use a greater sense of agency vis-a-vis their household and community. Agency here denotes the ability to define one's goals and to act on them; it is not only decision making power but also includes subtle expressions like negotiations, manipulations and deceptions (Author 2013; Kabeer 1999).

Education in the feminist discourses is believed to lead to women's empowerment and a sense of agency, if it questions the unequal gender hierarchy in the society (Kabeer 2005). Gender equality in education is only one component of the ongoing struggles of women for gender equality in the society. This is because gender equality in education besides being a huge platform for the participation of girls in educational institution, also provides equal opportunities for women after school (Aikman and Unterhalter 2005). In addition, unless education is provided in a way that can give women the courage to question unjust practices, its potential for bringing about meaningful change will be limited (Kabeer 2005). Feminist researchers thus emphasize women's education as a mean to transform their lives through meaningful changes (Gallaway and Bernasek 2004, 521).

For education to be transformative, it must not only provide knowledge about the conditions of one's subordination but also give the emotional support and political skills to visualize and implement social change (Stromquist 2006b, 149). The focus of such education is on broader educational strategies of awareness building, social analysis, critical reflection and organizational skills for mobilization (Patel 1998, 168). Whether the

education being imparted in schools is transformatory and if it is sufficient in empowering women' are questions which could only be determined through the lived experiences of women and their engagement with literacy which remains the focus of this paper.

To illustrate this point the remainder of this paper draws on the empirical findings from Chitral. It explores women's perceptions of education in recent times and its relation to their personal empowerment. It also highlights some core issues of women's conceptualization of education in the local spaces. Firstly, background of Chitral is given to introduce the readers about this region. This will also provide a ground to trace the changes in women's lives in the subsequent section.

### **Gender in the context of Pakistan**

Gender discrimination and inequality is visible and widespread in the Pakistani society to a great extent despite the fact that women constitute almost half of the total population of the country, that is, 49.19 per cent (World Bank 2011). Women are considered weak compared to men despite of their constant labour. Women's work outside the house is considered secondary and at times, they do not even have control over their own income and they remain at the lower level of the hierarchy (Omvedt, 2005). Due to "classic patriarchy" (Kandiyoti 1988, 278), men have substantial level of power over women, and they make important decisions and women are expected to be modest and obedient, first to the parents, later to husbands and parents-in-law (Jejeebhoy 2002). Gender biasness in the society is evident from the low participation of females in the labor force, that is, 21.7 per cent for females against 68.7 per cent for men (Pakistan Economic Survey 2011/2012) and low literacy rates, that is, 45.2 per cent compared to the male literacy rate of 69.5 per cent (Pakistan Labour Force Survey 2010/2011). Gender-based discrimination and the resultant disparity are also evident in the denial of equal access to education for females and the prevalence of violence in the society. Women are subjected to discrimination and there has been a serious rise in violence against women in the country during the last three decades. There have been 1792 cases of violence, including 827 incidents of rape and gang-rape, 110 cases of sexual assault and 29 cases of burning and acid throwing (Aurat Foundation 2012). Women are intimidated and restrained from approaching law enforcing agencies due to cultural and religious norms (Saeed 2004, 1). These practices have hampered efforts for women's development and created obstacles for the process of their empowerment. The process of Islamization aggravated the situation during Zia-ul-Haq's regime of the 1970s–80s and the education for females was almost ignored (Weiss 1990).

### **The cultural context of the study area**

Chitral is the northern-most district of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) Province of Pakistan situated just across the border from Afghanistan. The main language spoken is Khowar, which is an Indo-European language, that shows the imprint of both Central Asian and South Asian linguistic areas and is spoken by 85 per cent of the people (Marsden 2005, 3). The primary source of livelihood for the majority of people is subsistence farming. Chitral shares a border with Afghanistan. The population according to the last available census (1998) is 318,689 (162,082 males and 156,607 females), which shows a rapid increase of 2.5 per cent from 1981 (Census Bulletin-1 1998). Approximately 90 per cent of the population is settled in 463 hamlets ranging in size from 20 to 3573 inhabitants. Chitral town is the only urban settlement in the district and has a population of 20, 622 (IUCN 2004, 8). The male to female ratio according to the 1998 census is 100 males to 103.5 females.

The unique Chitrali cultural characteristics – including customs, traditions, rituals and values – isolate it from the rest of Pakistan. "Arts and crafts, traditional costumes, food and beverages, local games, music, dance, folksongs, and legendary sites" (Zahiruddin 2011) as well as customary funeral practices and festivals are some of the cultural legacies of the area which separate it from other parts of the country. In particular these characteristics differ from the Pakhtun tribe, which is dominant in KPK Province, and has slightly different living patterns, language, rituals and general approach towards life. Also, Chitral's geographic position and topography makes it isolated from the rest of Pakistan (Pardhan 2005). The "dry and cold climate paucity of agricultural land inaccessible nature of terrain fragile environment and marginalized nature of environment make human existence here an extremely difficult task" (Mulk 1990, 4). Women in particular face challenges as a result of the harsh conditions (Pardhan 2005).

Since the district is geographically isolated from the rest of the country, in the past the state has largely ignored the socio-economic development of the region. This has led to extremely poor living conditions, especially in the most remote areas of the region (Zaman 2008). Moreover, 36 per cent of the households live below the poverty line of Rs 6165 (approximately AUSD\$60.65) per capita determined by a baseline survey carried out in the area in 1998, while 11 percent live below half of the poverty line (IUCN 2004, 9).

### **Status of women in Chitral**

The position of women in Chitral bears clear commonality with their counterparts in the rest of Pakistan and South Asia where they are in subordinate position compared to men. In Chitrali society, there is a marked

division of space as public space and private space and division of roles and responsibilities between men and women. Due to cultural expectation of seclusion' the women are mostly restricted to the private spaces including the home, close neighborhood or farms. Women face challenges as a result of harsh climatic conditions and they usually work 16- 18 hours a day (Pardhan 2005, 439). Kitchen gardening, maintenance of dairy products, the production of handicrafts from silk, grazing cattle, farm work and *shu* (local fabric made from wool of sheep) production are some of the skills and chores, which have remained the exclusive domain of women. Beyond such socio spatial activities, permission from men - often the father, husband, brothers - is essential who are also to accompany women in public domains. This restricts the mobility of women to a large extent. In public spaces women are also required to observe *purdah* (physical segregation from men) by wearing a *chador* and *hijab* or *burqa*.<sup>1</sup>

However, in response to changing socio-economic realities through exposure to world outside, female literacy rate has been increased in recent times in chitral that has given upheaval to the expectations of women and they are eager to explore formal employment for the first time in their lives. As a consequence, new avenues of employment are also being created and traditional gender roles seem to be changing gradually. So, the public space for the women seems to be expanding as more women are entering the job market and taking part in voluntary services where they work with men. Yet, the integration of a small percentage of women has not been able to make any visible change in the power structure of the society. Women remain at lower end of the hierarchy and they face issues like low salary, exclusion from decision-making at implementation level and harassment. The majority of working women do not have full control over their income, which is usually controlled by the husband or the in-laws. In case where women do control their income, it is often spent on the household utilities and children. Besides, the new roles of the women have also increased their responsibilities and the workload to a large extent since they continue to perform their traditional duties at home. At village level this also includes taking care of farm work and animals.

The literacy rate in Chitral according to the 1998 census is 40.30%, which consists of 58.02% for males, and 22.09% for females.<sup>2</sup> The figures are low as compared to the overall literacy rate of Pakistan, which is 57.7% (69.5% for males and 44.7% for females) according to the labor Force Survey held in 2009/2010 ("Pakistan Economic Survey" 2010/2011). The low literacy level of females over the years has been due to limited socio-economic conditions, instable political situation, poor physical infrastructure, cultural barriers to women's education, and unattractive education system. According to the latest Labor Force Survey, the increase in literacy rates for rural areas of KPK Province in general is 67% for male and 29% for female ("Pakistan Economics Survey" 2010/2011). Recent data at district level is not available from the survey. However, the literacy rates for women in Chitral are reported to be increasing steadily according to local sources. A national newspaper reports that the district has achieved 98% literacy rate being the highest in the province in the age group of 6-10 while the dropout rate is 23% which is second highest in the province ("Chitral has highest literacy rate" 2003).

Historically speaking, government schools for girls were set up in Chitral town and some major hamlets of the region as early as the 1970s. Yet, efforts to provide open access to education for females were initiated by the Aga Khan Education Service (AKES) under the umbrella of Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), which played a vital role in filling the gap in education and promoting girls' education during the 1980s by opening schools in the remotest valleys of the district. This played a pivotal role in creating access to education and increasing female literacy rates in the district (see also Zaman 2008; Afzal 2004; Sales 1999). Currently AKES, Chitral is running 50 regular schools (three high schools, 14 lower secondary schools and 33 primary schools) and two high-profile higher secondary schools, one for girls and one for the boys with a total of 6619 students (Zaman 2008, 4). The initiatives taken by the AKES for promoting the education for females have been followed by a boom of private schools for both girls and boys. Since, the government education system was believed to be insufficient to deal with the educational needs of the masses according to the changing times, the emergence of the private education sector has received positive response from the local communities. This has made access to schooling easy for young girls who no longer have to travel long distances to attend schools in neighboring hamlets. So, the social security attached with schooling, which restricted women's mobility in education is no more a concern in most parts of the valley.

### **Women's experiences of education in Chitral**

Though life in the village was very relaxing but the importance of education and the motivation to learn was something very much on the minds of many people. This was true for working women as well as the housewives during gatherings in their homes; over *pesheeno chai* (afternoon tea) or *granesho chai* (morning tea). A major portion of the women's daily conversation revolved around (a) debate about education including; the achievements of their children, who is getting into the medical college this year? Who got scholarships for the cultural exchange programme? Who applied for scholarships for higher degrees? Who returned this year? Marks obtained in school and if they were employed, how well they were being paid and if they were given pick and

drop facility in a ‘beautiful’ ‘white’ car. The practice of reading by young girls while grazing cows in the fields was a common sight in many hamlets of Chitral. Some put their books/copies on top of the fodder on their head as they walked back home. Others carried these in bags, which they hung to one side of their arms as they took care of their *paitaik* (a lengthy scarf) while chasing the cows.

The major income source of local folks in Chitral is farming whose output is insufficient, thus capital has always been a core hurdle in the way of women’s education. In case of limited family resources the education of a male child is given priority over that of a female child. This practice is common in most rural areas of Pakistan, Chitral is not an exceptional region (Rashid 2006). My observations from Chitral depict(s) that among conservative families investment on women’s education beyond certain level is considered beyond the immediate utility, as females are believed to depart the natal families after marriage. Besides, since the education of girls is often at the expense of losing a labor at home, so in some families the decision is usually made considering the individual circumstances and the long-term benefits to the family.

Nevertheless, my interview data and my various encounters with the people – which I illustrate later in the text – clearly illustrate that this perception is gradually changing. Many consider education as a productive investment for their daughters. Women too have great faith in education and the fact that it can bring positive changes in their lives (Sales 1999). The experience of education for many young Chitrali women does not cease with the completion of their school anymore. Many women are engaged in constant debate regarding the purpose of education and its importance for women in terms of long-term outcomes, a point I discuss later in the paper. They are eager to increase their qualifications for career development with the hope to change their vulnerable circumstances. Those having access to financial support are able to attend universities in other cities of Pakistan while those having limited finance usually continue their education privately and get enrolled in short courses through the Allama Iqbal Open University distance education programmes. This is also an option for those who drop out of school due to early marriages.

Nevertheless, the challenge for the new generation of women (and men for that matter) is the need to fulfill their desires of meaningful employment opportunities. This has resulted in a growing concern related with the very purpose of schooling and education and how it is employed in practical life beyond the spaces of school. In addition, despite this change in access to women’s education, their choices of employment and their ability to make strategic life choices are still largely restricted by religious and cultural norms, which are the major barrier to their empowerment (Kabeer 2005).

My field observations explain that, since the education of women in current times is associated with new gender roles and upward mobility, so women who were unable to attend school had yearning for education because of the social status associated with it. These women considered education as a ‘*qeamati tohfa*’ (precious gift). Gulnar one of my informants explained the importance of education in the following words.

“Education is like ‘*sheli ghech*’ (beautiful eye) of human, without which one cannot see. Ma hardee (my dear) it is ‘*rosht qhaich*’ (bright eye) not ‘*kanoo*’ (blind), my eyes are blind.....” (Gulnar, interview).

Gulnar considered herself blind because of her illiteracy which she believed had restricted her activities immensely. Yet, Gulnar and many other women like her were optimistic to achieve their unmet expectations by educating their daughters in future. Besides, the women I interviewed were universally positive about the role, education has played to change their lives. For instance, Dana was an informant who worked in a hospital and was one of the few women who had chosen to get paid employment when it had not become a norm in Chitral. Following is what she had shared with me while reflecting on how her education and employment had changed her position in the society.

“When there is a single educated woman in a village she becomes a role model and when people see her they try to follow her. This is how things change i.e. by looking at one another” (Dana, interview).

This quote indicates the meaning and value attached with being educated in a rural village. It also shows that people perceive educated women as a catalyst for change and the community associates certain expectations with such women. For instance here Dana clearly believes that being an educated woman in a village means she is respected and in turn she too has to set examples for others. This, in turn, also highlights the responsibilities attached to being educated. Further, the quote also illustrates that the structural conditions are not always fixed. They tend to change as individuals change and education is playing a role in facilitating this process. It is largely due to this reason that I associate empowerment with education.

According to Dana people often change through acts of comparison and due to this reason she emphasized on the need for some women to act as role models for others. Dana and many other women were of the view that education is providing guidelines in their lives and it was giving them the ability to differentiate between right and wrong. These promises attached to education have been instrumental in making it a norm in Chitral.

The fact that education has become a norm in Chitral and is valued was evident from my various interactions with the informants and other people in general. For example, in an informal conversation with a teacher and a driver in a hamlet in the periphery of Chitral town, the eldest daughter of the driver, who was

engaged with a cousin, was enrolled at a University in Peshawar, he told us. The teacher was curious as to why the driver was investing so much in the education of his daughter when he had to marry her off soon. He asked the driver “Why don’t you marry her off and it is up to them (the in-laws) if they want to give her further education?” “What do you think *kai* (sister)” the teacher turned to me. A surprise look on my face I looked at the driver instead, since I was eager to know what he had to say. “I will marry her off, but after she completes her graduation and stands on her foot.” He replied.

The unconditional support of the driver for his daughter shows the role and responsibility of men, which is a major change in people’s perception about women’s education. However, the attitude of the teacher illustrates that where some people have welcomed education as a positive force for change yet resistance exists due to the fact that the roots of patriarchy are deeply embedded in the society.

Nevertheless, my interaction with the community shows that when people evaluated their past and their present lives, education was central to measuring continuities and change in their lives. People associated education with better economic conditions for the people in general and increased opportunities for women in particular.

The following excerpt explains an informant Akram’s perception of change in the valley and he attributed it to education.

*“By the grace of Allah (God) draganzo anoos (days of extreme poverty) are over in Chitral, we are not starving any more, today even a poor family can afford to eat rice. We might not eat rice with meat, but we do eat it with vegetables. Above all we afford to send our girls to school too. What else can we desire? shukar Khoda-o-sum (Thanks God)” (Akram, informal interview).*

Eating rice and meat was considered a privilege for wealthy people in the past, but now rice is a staple food in Chitral and is cooked in every house. In Akram’s opinion the fact that people in recent times could afford to eat at least rice and vegetables instead of rice and meat is an indication that poverty is being alleviated, which is a major change in Chitral. Importantly, he expressed his deep satisfaction over the fact the young girls in his hamlet could afford to attend school. This was a source of immense happiness for the community. The excerpt also illustrates that education is not only the means for change in Chitrali society, but it has also transformed the lives of people living in there.

The above discussion highlights the importance of education in people’s lives in Chitral, which is against the critical stance that had been taken in the beginning regarding formal education and its role in women’s empowerment. While education is playing a central role in creating awareness and it is allowing individuals to re-think about their roles and responsibilities, it is not empowering in the sense that empowerment has been defined at the beginning of this article. By this I mean that mere schooling is insufficient to inculcate the feelings of empowerment among women. It does not automatically lead to a sense of agency. This is because due to internalization of norms and the predominance of patriarchy, schooling too reflects gender bias. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that education leads to empowerment in the long run by creating awareness and by giving the space for self criticism.

In addition, the common perspective in the vicinity about education that I present here is in contrast to the dominant discourse. Education was not necessarily seen as a route to better health or smaller families as policy documents suggest, but it was mostly valued in terms of how it could enhance their social status and help to meet their ends by reducing their economic vulnerabilities. This reflects a great change in the context of Chitral where as stated earlier women were limited to private space only.

Importantly, the majority of women informants continuously linked education with personal change and empowerment. What can education offer to make their lives better and change their circumstances? This was a question very much on the minds of many Chitrali women. I posit that the emergence of this debate is explicitly as a result of acts of constant self-reflection and comparison with other women. As more and more educational opportunities are becoming available to women they are eager to materialize this knowledge in appropriate ways. This was explicitly evident from the needs and efforts for improving their social status in the society primarily through engagement with employment opportunities as the following sections will demonstrate.

Though such acts of awareness remain important for changing the social status of women in the society, however, there was also a downside associated with it. Access to paid employment was not possible for all women and this resulted in tensions and dilemmas. This highlights the complexity of empowerment and the fact that education can be both a positive force for gaining agency and negative when women’s expectations remain unmet despite being formally educated.

## **Education for personal change and empowerment**

### ***Life history of Sadaf***

In this section I aim to trace the educational struggles of a woman informant Sadaf and her ability to ‘use’ education as a means to gain agency. The life history is envisioned to explain that education if accompanied with the realization of one’s social status in a society in relation to the patriarchal social structure, leads to personal

empowerment where women are able to choose for themselves and are able to make decisions related to important matters in their lives. This I argue happens when women gain a certain level of control over their lives and access to paid employment plays a significant role here. The main purpose of highlighting on a single case is to offer an in-depth analysis of the process of being educated its association with upward mobility and other related complexities.

Sadaf is affiliated with a national NGO as a program officer and holds a Masters degree. Her work involves field trips to far off areas of the region where she is also involved in skill development of women. She takes personal interest to examine how these trainings affect the women and whether these facilitate them to meet their needs in practical lives. Sadaf is a strong advocate of women's rights and is very enthusiastic about improving women's quality of life. At work her male colleagues know her as a *qahri* (*angry*), a woman having a *sakht tabiat* (strict nature). Her personal choice of wearing a *hijab* further assists her in maintaining this distance from the male colleagues. At home and among friends, relatives and neighbors too, she is known as a *sher zhur* (brave daughter) because of the fact that she has established an image as a respected educated working woman who also equally takes care of her family obligations.

The life history of Sadaf depicts her love of education as a child and how her early marriage constrained her ambitions. Sadaf was married off with a close relative at the age of 14. The decision was taken by her parents and her consent was not considered important. Her status resonates with a number of other girls who have to drop school due to early marriage. Yet, she was lucky to be able to negotiate her desire to continue her education with her husband after the marriage.

Sadaf was able to complete her graduation, despite bearing children and taking care of the needs of the husband and in-laws. Performing the domestic responsibilities meant that the degree was prolonged over a period of time. She stated that the years of schooling and the resulting degree made no visible changes to her status at home, including her treatment at the hands of the in-laws and the existing power dynamics in the house.

Sadaf could realize the actual learning and value attached to education when she took up her first employment as assistant in a private organization long after she had earned her degree. It was through working in this organization that she got the opportunity to interact with men and women with whom she shared her deep interest to enhance her career path. One of the women working in the institute inspired her and acted as her mentor. She especially guided her on how to change her career path according to her interests and her qualifications. It was at this stage when she came to understand that the meaning of education was beyond reading textbooks, writing assignments, passing exams or merely finding employment to meet her financial shortcomings.

The realization came as a result of critical reflection on her life, her paid employment and how her paid work was connected to her education. Then she attempted to use her education beyond employment and as something she could enjoy, learn from and contribute to. Upon this awareness, she discovered that the sacrifices she had given and the pain she had endured during her educational journey – for instance, writing assignments and taking exams while also taking care of the children and the family - were not worthless since what education offered to her was beyond what she had comprehended. Hence, for Sadaf the process of being educated was not sufficient, it was the realization of being an educated woman and the ability to see education as a value to change her life that mattered. Seen through this lens education becomes a first step towards learning to stand up for individual's own aims.

Besides, access to paid employment expanded her choices and rights to decision making only after going through the process of self-reflection. She then understood that having an opinion and choice was her right as a woman; not a privilege. Through this realization education provided a space for her empowerment and to accomplish a personal agency. In this case self-reflexivity was achieved by critical analysis of her role and awareness of her rights as a woman and it was significant during the process of her personal empowerment since it enabled her to challenge the rules which she could not do so earlier in her life.

Importantly, when education was accompanied by self-reflection it enabled Sadaf to negotiate her ambitions in the private and public spaces with confidence. For example, in the private space she was able to negotiate her choice with her husband and in-laws during the construction of their new house. In the public spaces she learnt to travel alone – an act, which was not a norm in Chitral. So, education gave her access to opportunities and other options in life, which she did not know existed. Hence, it was through the process of being educated and more importantly the use to which she put her education that she understood her position in relation to others in the intimate and social spaces. This indicates that once Sadaf realized education as instrumental its value had shifted and it helped to improve her social status as well. The changes in the personality of Sadaf are manifested in terms of a positive attitude towards life and the ability to face challenges. Change could also be seen from her self-image and positive attitude and expectations for her children's education.

However, the process of personal empowerment for Sadaf was not an overnight achievement, it involved the ability to initiate activities for personal change, the ability to work through those initiatives

constantly and patiently despite resistance from others. Being able to use her education in appropriate way was vital in this regard. This clearly indicates that where societal barriers attempt to block agency, education can be used to overcome such barriers.

To sum up, the life history of Sadaf indicates that education contributes in allowing self-reflexivity which in turn leads to empowerment by enabling individuals to 'choose' and to make important decisions regarding their lives. It highlights her personal perceptions and capacities in the negotiations of socio-spatial relations and structures that shaped her practices and how these negotiations were enhanced by the value of education. It gives an important message that, education as an 'object' is not empowering but it is an opportunity which enables women to be able to struggle for empowerment in a more meaningful way.

### **Dilemmas in the way of education**

This section unveils the complex and nuanced ways through which the women of Chitral report the meaning and utility of education through their personal experiences. The data for this section comes from personal observations and interviews with a group of women working in a training center in a rural village in the periphery of Chitral. The group consisted of both literate as well as illiterate women between ages 16 to mid-30s. To the majority of these women literacy was associated with the ability to improve their living conditions and their social status through creating employment opportunities.

The literate women in the group had been to the local schools in the village and could not continue their higher education regularly' since, there were no womens' college nearby and they could not afford to attend the degree college in the town. Some of them were enrolled privately with the Allama Iqbal Open University or Malakand University; others had finished their bachelors and unemployed. The majority among the literate women in the group were in constant struggle for finding employment as teachers in the local schools however they had been unsuccessful in their attempts. As one woman said;  
*"For employment, the schools give preference to women who have higher degrees...who will give employment to us", so what to do with this education"* (Durdana, informal interview).

The excerpt exemplifies the tensions experienced by the women as a result of their unemployment. These women were confused and frustrated due to the unmet expectations and their inability to use their education in any meaningful way. Since the increase in literacy rate of the women in general has made life more competitive and these women too realize that the society has turned into meritocratic space where they are in constant battle to survive. Their concern was on one hand the education they had achieved was not sufficient for a promising career and they were facing unemployment while on the other hand, they believed that they were no longer prepared for the harsh work illiterate women (including their mothers) did in the village. I.e. collecting fodder, making *Shu*, grazing cows, etc. Nor did they have skills like sewing, stitching, which they could use for income generation. So they considered themselves *baikar* (useless) and *boj* (burden) on their parents and brothers.

The dilemma of the women shows the downside to their increased aspirations and this disempowerment was a result of the experience of tension between their newfound education and the expectations and the burden of the habitual practice of the family. Where they believed that the new ideas they had gained could not assist to change their circumstances in any way. This in turn had created disappointment among these women as one of them said;

*"I feel I was better off not knowing what my rights are as a woman and what I am entitled to? It is hard to accept the limitations posed by the society after gaining awareness about my rights"* (Gulnar, interview).

The excerpt exemplifies that once women realized what had happened to them was unjust, the idea of accepting the unequal treatment they encountered at different levels was problematic for them. This is the first step towards gaining agency. Nevertheless, as stated earlier the realization of its own is often not sufficient, it needs to be accompanied with acceptability in the context where women live and the level of freedom allowed to women within the structural conditions where they live. This also evidences the fact that education for empowerment needs to be contextual, and it should be in line with the norms and values of the society where people are being educated.

The above quote depicts the pain these women had to endure during this process of resistance. For these women empowerment was not necessarily the ability to read, but whether they were able and willing to take on the task of demanding what they now feel is their right. This tension was also true for many other women in Chitral and their efforts to meet the societal expectations often lead to psychological issues and even suicide attempts.<sup>3</sup> The excerpt also speaks of the kinds of structural barriers which resist women to participate in any social activities beyond the private domain and women have to depend on men regarding almost all matters in their lives.

The stories of the literate women showed that there seems to be a tension in how education is employed in practice. Their education earned through years of schooling remained symbolic and failed to assist them in any way since they could not use it for employment purpose, as was the expected promise of education

in the local context. So, it was of no significance to them, since there was no value attached to it. Rather, their sufferings and pains had increased since they found themselves torn between their previous roles and expected new responsibilities. Thus, engagement with formal education had actually perplexed these women and made them more vulnerable for these sufferings and disadvantages in the local space.

Hence education was largely associated with the ability to gain access to employment opportunities. This lens to identify education as a means of employment was not only confined to these particular women discussed here, many women in my this research site, including graduates of formal universities viewed education merely as a tool for employment. Few considered it as a means to question the social structure and imbalanced power relations in the society. Importantly, a number of educated women in different hamlets I visited considered themselves as disadvantaged and at the mercy of men. For example, a teacher in the same village where this training center was located explained that despite her earning, it was her husband who actually had control over the household income and who made important decisions regarding the family.

As explained in the beginning of the paper this evidences that even the gender roles had not made remarkable changes in women's lives and women were still at lower level of the hierarchy. Besides patriarchy, it's the internalization of oppression which prevented women from questioning the unequal gender norms and unequal power relations in the society. Internalization of oppression was evident from my various encounters with the women. For example, a relatively educated woman working in an international NGO during an interview while sharing her views on domestic violence stated "to me there is nothing wrong if a man beats his wife."

This clearly indicates that education does not necessarily inculcate awareness about women's rights among individuals and it does not automatically enable women to question their position in relation to men. Hence the degree or the level of education, i.e. graduate, postgraduates did not actually contribute to empowerment as such. This implies that the kind and quality of education and the question that if it prepares women as critical thinkers matters for empowerment. In Chitral, where such training was unavailable; women's ability to use education for personal empowerment was possible only through means and ways which exposed them to such ideas and enabled them to have their opinion and being able to express their point of view.

In comparison, the illiterate women who attended the centre were those who had never attended school or had been dropped from school only after a few years of education. Most of these were married and had children. They too looked at their positions with much despair and considered themselves unable to do much because of their illiteracy. A woman participant in the training centre mentioned.

*"The reason why I have come here is to be able to learn something so that at least I can tailor clothes for my own family without the need to request others to do it for me"* (Khadija, informal interview)

This means that the idea of self-sufficiency was significant for these women since it allowed them to reduce their dependency on others, especially their husbands for financial means. The concern of these women was also their inability to fit into the group of women around them who were educated and worked as teachers in schools and as nurses in the health centers. This means that illiteracy was an issue because of the inadequacies associated with it and their inability to achieve their goals due to illiteracy. So, illiteracy mattered to them because of the inability to gain expected opportunities. This also implies that illiteracy becomes something to hide behind, to shy away from demanding change and is used as an excuse at times.

Illiteracy also mattered to some women due to their inability to operate and fit into the changing society. For example, some women were concerned that they could not assist their children with their homework. For others, it mattered because of inability to meet their daily needs like keeping track of how much they spent or reading electricity bills instead of taking these to others for reading in the absence of the husband from home, or even keeping a record of the money they spent. Though important in their own ways, yet these were not the major issues in the women's lives related to their illiteracy. Their major concerns revolved around employment and lack of respect from their husbands and society in general due to their illiteracy. So, in contrast to the discourse of education as power, these women's stories revealed that they were not suffering primarily through lack of reading and writing skills. In contrast their struggles were against poverty, scarcity and inequalities (Betts 2004).

Juxtaposing the illiterate women with the educated ones in the training centre, it seems that they were experiencing the same inadequacies in their lives with or without education. As discussed above the women found it hard to question the patriarchal social structure which dominated their lives and considered what they were experiencing as normal. Women found it hard to engage with responsibilities previously accepted of them. Importantly, even educated women failed to see education beyond a source of income generation. Seen through this lens, there is little difference in the outlook of both these categories of women towards life and their perceptions of themselves as disadvantaged individuals, despite their access to formal education. The discussion highlights that being educated is complex in Chitral. Where for some women education instills the desire to be employed and respected, for others it doesn't take them where they would want to be and hence creates dilemmas and despair.

## Conclusions

This paper investigated the process through which education informs the choices of women thus leading to personal empowerment. It illustrated that education is important for women's empowerment if it inculcates feelings of worth among individuals and encourages them to make efforts to bring positive changes in their lives (Author 2013). The paper argued that though on one hand education is considered a norm and it brings clearly visible changes in women's lives. Yet on the other hand, for some women it creates more dilemmas due to their inability to be able to utilize it in a meaningful way. Surprisingly, though many women informants considered education instrumental in enhancing their social status and in gaining access to employment opportunities but the majority failed to realize if education could work beyond this space.

The data elucidates that though formal education cannot be accepted as leading automatically to empowerment, but if it is provided in the context of discussion of gender and sociopolitical issues, it could be a fundamental tool for empowerment. This means that education cannot be classified as empowering or disempowering as such and the consequences of schooling are deeply embedded in the understanding of the social context where it is imparted. These findings are significant since these allow us to move beyond accepting schooling per se as a totality and as a certain path to empowerment.

## Notes

1. 'Chador is a lengthy scarf used to cover the entire body except the face, while the *burqa* and hijab are outer garments worn by women to cover the body including the face. In Chitral women usually use the chador to hide their face while in public. *Burqa* and hijab are used in more conservative families.
2. The latest available census data from Chitral.
3. Forced marriages, domestic violence, and family issues were some of the other reasons for suicide. The suicide rate was higher among women as compared to men.

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