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## Education and Women's Empowerment: Re-Examining the Relationship

### Dilshad Ashraf and Iffat Farah

The goal of empowering individuals and communities shapes and directs development discourse in contemporary societies. While the concept of empowerment is widely used, it has various interpretations in literature. Patel (1996) perceives empowerment as both a means and an end, a process and the result of a process. Batliwala (1994) explains embeddedness of 'power' within the concept of empowerment, which means control over resources such as material assets, intellectual resources and ideology. So, empowerment is manifested as a redistribution of power, whether between nations, classes, castes, genders, or individuals (Batliwala, 1994). Gaining more decision-making capacity, deepening an understanding of relations, configuring one's life and controlling conditions affecting one's life are recognized as the various dimensions of empowerment (Walters and Manicom, 1996). In a broad sense, empowerment is a process that helps individuals or communities to assert control over factors that affect their lives (Gibson, 1991). 'Autonomy' is used as an alternate expression for empowerment, which denotes one's ability to decide and act without any external pressure and control – apparently synonymous for empowerment.

Patel (1996) perceives women's empowerment as a process of confronting patriarchy, which must lead to the end of women's subordination. Similarly, Batliwala (1994) asserts that the goals of women's empowerment are to challenge patriarchal ideology (male domination and women's subordination), to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequality (the family, caste, class, religion, educational processes and institutions, the media, health practices and systems, laws and civil codes, political processes, development models and government institutions), and to enable poor women to gain access to, and control of, both material and informational resources.

Many of these empowerment indicators overlap with the five levels of autonomy that Jejeebhoy (as cited in Robinson-Pant, 2004) has used to explain outcomes of education for women. For instance, her analysis of the ways in which women's education affects their behaviour describes five levels of autonomy, which overlaps with indicators of women's empowerment: knowledge autonomy, decision-making autonomy, physical autonomy, emotional autonomy, economic and social autonomy (self-reliance). Despite some similarities between the concepts of autonomy and empowerment, both differ in the scope and degree of control that women can exercise over their own affairs of life. Empowerment appears to be an ideal state in which women are ultimately able to assert control over the factors that affect their lives. While autonomy seems to be an earlier stage in the process of empowerment where women develop the ability to decide and act without any external pressure and control.

The focus of this paper is to re-examine the relationship between education and empowerment. The relationship between the two can be sought through the way education is perceived in the context of contemporary development discourse. For instance, the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations' Millennium Declaration 2000 recognize education as development that creates choices and opportunities for people, reduces the twin burdens of poverty and diseases and gives

people a stronger voice in society. Women's education is a recognized critical condition for women's empowerment – enabling them to gain greater access and control over material and knowledge resources in order to improve their lives and challenge the ideologies of discrimination and subordination (Khan and Mohammad, 2003). In line with this argument, one of the goals of the National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women (2002) is empowerment of Pakistani women to help them realize their full potentials in all spheres of life. This policy identifies education as an important means towards the social empowerment of women in Pakistan. As a crosscutting theme, this policy recognizes education as vital for ensuring women's participation in mainstream social, economic and political fields. In other words, Pakistan's policy about women's development establishes Batliwala's (1994) definition of empowerment that it is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systematic forces that marginalize women in a given context. In other words, empowerment should aim at challenging and transforming structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination.

Some research studies (e.g. Sales, 1996; Jayaweera, 1999) examine the issue whether education empowers women and changes their lives, along with gender roles and relations within families and communities. Jayaweera (1999) in her analysis of Sri Lanka's historical development in achieving universal literacy and eliminating gender inequalities in access to education identifies that equal educational attainment does not translate into equal rewards in the labour market for girls and women. Furthermore, while literacy levels are high, most women in Sri Lanka face subordination in the domestic division of labour, and a significant number experience domestic violence.

Sales (1996) in her analysis of a field-based teacher training programme in northern Pakistan finds that this particular programme of teacher development was accessible by a large number of village women because it had successfully adapted itself to village norms (e.g. a schedule that allowed women to fulfil their everyday domestic responsibilities and did not require frequent travelling away from families). But the very fact that the field-based programme works within the constraints of the female domain militates against its ability to create professionals who are able to participate fully in the development of the education system. In the context of this case study, women were able to enter the teaching profession and gain access to training, as long as their activities remained within the commonly accepted female domain. This is circumscribed both geographically, by the expectation that they will not travel outside their village, away from their families, agricultural commitments and communal scrutiny; and socially, in the sense that they must not take on an autonomous role beyond the control of men or indeed in authority over them. Hence, Sales (1996) did not find enough evidence to support the theory that education led to empowering women teachers in the patriarchal mountain communities. Jayaweera (1999) has also raised the doubt whether education in general empowers women to take control of their lives in a society that reinforces and perpetuates unequal power distribution between men and women.

As a background to the above discussion, the paper re-examines the relationship between education, gender and empowerment. First, it reviews the current situation of women's education in Pakistan. Second, based on the findings of research on the life histories of five Pakistani women teachers, it describes and discusses the contributions and limitations of education in empowering women within the family and in public life. Third, it critiques the assumptions of a strong causal relationship between education and women's empowerment, which underpins many of the education projects for girls and women and identifies factors that mitigate such a relationship. Finally, the paper makes recommendations for strengthening education in a manner in which it could support women's empowerment.

### **Status of Women's Education in Pakistan**

The constitution of Pakistan (1973) promises equal rights to all citizens, repudiates discrimination on the basis of sex alone, and affirms steps to ensure full participation of women in all spheres of life.

The constitutional assertion and emphasis on equal rights and opportunities for women was meant to address the traditionally low social status and minimal participation of women in most social sectors. In the years 1949-50, two years after Pakistan's independence in 1947, the overall gross participation rates at the primary and secondary levels were as low as 16 per cent<sup>1</sup> and 9 per cent respectively. These figures were even lower for female participation, i.e. 4 per cent at the primary level and 3 per cent at the secondary level (Jalil, 1998).

To improve female participation in education, all the education policies formulated from the year 1970 to 1998 (and the most recent policy for the period 1998-2010) have unanimously committed to ensure the provision of primary education. Each of these policies also committed to promote girls' education. Pakistan is a signatory to international declarations and commitments made since 1990. One such commitment led Pakistan to pursue basic education as an integral part of its human development plan and as a means to eliminate all disparity including those related to gender (1992 Education Policy). As a result of these constant efforts, since the 1950s, the overall participation in education has increased significantly; although the pace of change has been slow particularly for women.

Farah and Shera's (2005) review of Pakistan's education policies and programmes indicates a steady but slow increase in the overall literacy rate over the last two decades from 25 per cent in 1980 to 35 per cent in 1991 and 45 per cent in 2001. Despite this general increase, gaps between male and female literacy rates have persisted over the years. The large number of dropouts could be one explanation for this persistent gender gap. A recently published report on education (Social Policy and Development Centre, 2003) shows an overall trend of increasing drop out within public primary schools, with female dropout rates rising faster than their male counterparts.

A comparison of enrolment at primary and secondary levels, according to Farah and Shera (2005), reveals that more girls as compared to boys drop out of school at the end of each stage of schooling. Less than half the girls enrolled in rural primary schools would enter middle school; about half of those enrolled in the middle would enter secondary school. More than half the boys at each level would reach the next level. The highest drop out of girls is at the stage of transition from lower to upper primary (Class III), and from primary to secondary. High school girls' dropout rates beyond primary school persist as a result of lack of opportunities, mobility issues, and traditions and cultural norms, constraining girls' and women's access to higher education, especially in the rural areas (Government of Pakistan, 2002).

Regardless of all efforts to increase girls' participation in education, the current estimated figures for 2003 show the female literacy rate at 38.57 per cent as compared to 61.93 per cent for the male literacy rate. Farah and Shera (1995) offer two ways to improve female literacy:

- Pakistani education policy and programming needs to include in its focus female education beyond primary and basic education.
- Goals and strategies of female education should be linked with other aspects of women's development.

In a context like Pakistan, women are generally deprived socially, politically and economically. Therefore, basic education alone can neither keep poor girls in school nor can it improve women's status in society. Therefore, Farah and Shera (2005) call for an effective integration of goals for female education with other aspects of their development.

Women's empowerment is a phenomenon that needs to be situated within the larger society. An overview of women's social standing may help a later discussion to examine the pragmatic concept of achieving Pakistani women's empowerment through education. Pakistani society is structured

according to a patriarchal social framework –men dominate all walks of life while women remain subordinate. Gender segregation is a dominant rule, according to which men and women occupy different ideological and social spaces. Moreover, the concept of family honour is strictly associated with women’s sexual behaviour. Therefore, women’s social mobility is restricted sometimes through *purdah* (literally, a veil) and at other times by gender segregation. Owing to Pakistan’s consistent instable political situation, since 1947, women’s general status in society has remained in focus. In this regard, some of the steps taken by a few governments will stay in the country’s history. For example, as a part of the process of Islamization (reinforcing Islamic codes of conduct) Zia-ul-Haq, a former military ruler, enforced some discriminatory laws during the late 1970s that enhanced women’s oppression in society. Zia also minimized women’s presence on the public scene, including newspapers, television and advertisements and strictly enforced the traditional dress code in educational institutions. The present government, though it has its roots in yet another military intervention to end political unrest, has taken up an agenda of reform and good governance. In 2000, government increased the number of seats reserved for women in parliament from 3.4 per cent to 33 per cent. The resulting newly elected Parliament (elections held in 2000) included 74 women members, raising hopes of bringing about substantial changes in women’s lives through legislation. With a somewhat increased freedom of expression, in recent years, the media has provided women a platform to voice their issues and their achievements publicly.

The brief analysis of the current situation, on the one hand, reveals the complexities of women’s lives. On the other hand, this explicates the need to critically examine the concept of empowerment and its viability as a goal for Pakistani women. Recognizing education as a route to women’s empowerment is an assumption that needs further elaboration in relation to the real-life experiences of Pakistani women. For further specific analyses of women’s situation and to discuss the contributions and limitations of education in empowering women within their families and public lives, we use the life histories of five women teachers from the northern areas of Pakistan. Their life histories are pertinent as they highlight women’s experiences in connection with the relationship between their lives and the broader social and cultural context, and hence, help us understand ideas that are taken for granted about women in the context of development discourses.

## Women Teachers

The five women teachers; Fatima, Zehra, Khadija, Saira and Rabia, whose life histories are used to examine the relationship between education and women’s empowerment, belong to the mountainous northern areas of Pakistan where they were born and brought up. It is significant to note that these women are among the first group of women in their families and villages to receive formal school education (education for girls has become accessible since the 1970s) and be employed. Conforming to the dominant norm of the region, however, most of them got married at an early age and became part of their husbands’ extended families. Four of them joined teaching after completing their high school. The long distances to school, the poor economic standing of their parents and the societal attitude towards women’s mobility were among the main factors that hindered these teachers’ access to further schooling. Moreover, their reproductive roles and intensive engagements in their respective extended families that entailed family care, farming chores and cattle rearing, did not allow them to study as regular students in professional and academic institutions located mostly in cities outside the region.

The participants of the study enhanced their professional and academic qualifications either by attending training courses organized by their employers locally or through distance learning courses. During the data collection for the study, these women were teaching in different schools of the region. At that time, their teaching experiences ranged from 24 years for Fatima to 10 years for Rabia, the youngest teacher among the five. All of them had also received their Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree.

Also, they had acquired some professional training ranging from Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.), Certificate in Educational Management (CEM) to Primary Teaching Certificate (PTC).

## Social Setting

The traditional familial unit of the northern areas is a patrilineal (lineage only passes through male blood members) extended family of parents, sons and their wives and children, and unmarried daughters. This extended family as the basic unit of social control establishes the norms for male and female roles. In this patriarchal system, the father, or in his absence the next senior man, is the head of the household. As a result, both decision-making powers and economic control are vested in the hands of men.

Patrilineal mountain communities have a strong preference for boy children. Absence of a son is a socially valid reason for a man to marry another woman. Consequently, girls are treated differently from their male siblings, who get the best food, the best clothing and the best available opportunities for education. Women's behaviour outside the family home is subject to scrutiny. For example, women cannot go even on short journeys unless accompanied by a male relative; nor can they interact with men not related to them in unsupervised circumstances. Customarily, men walk ahead of the women in their company.

The time and space for women in indigenous mountain communities is of great significance. Some women's position in the extended household gets strengthened as they progress in their marital life and give birth to offspring particularly boys. For a long time, these "ruli-gus" (the Burushaski term for head woman) or "Mistress of the house" (Muller-Stellretch, 1979, p.156) have exercised authority and power within the context of their extended families. In the past, the woman in authority would have the charge of the ordinary household utensils and gear. She also controlled the year's food supplies, consisting of flour, dried fruits and vegetables. She was responsible for issuing the daily food for the family's needs. She controlled the family resources and also exercised authority over all other women in the household: daughters, daughters-in-law and sisters-in-law (Lorimer and Muller-Stellretch, 1979). Owing to scanty resources in the past, a competent woman was highly valued and incompetence was fair grounds for divorce. The practice of head woman still exists, but with some modifications; her control over food and its distribution does not need to be as tight, because the region now imports food from the lowlands via the Karakorum Highway.

The economic base is generally subsistence agriculture because of which women's ascribed roles go beyond household chores to include farming and cattle rearing tasks, that is sowing, weeding, carrying manure to the fields, collecting dried leaves, picking fruit, drying fruit, growing vegetables, milking and feeding goats and cows, and keeping the cattle shed clean. Domestic work and working in the fields are regarded as a part of women's roles in the family; the economic value of this unacknowledged invisible work is overlooked (Waring, 1999).

As crop cultivation and animal husbandry no longer suffice as a means of securing a livelihood in the face of the ever-increasing population (at the rate of 2.47 per cent a year), many men and some women take up non-agricultural occupations in order to support their families. This has boosted the gradual transition from subsistence to a cash economy. This transition also bears implications on task divisions between men and women: freeing men from farming work and adding to women's workload as they take up men's work as well. This modernization of occupations has created some dissonance among women by adding a category of "women with paid jobs".

## Education, Employment and Women's Lives

In the quest to understand how education has or has not empowered these five women, it is viable to understand what life is like for a common woman in the mountain communities. According to Ibadat

(2002) and Wilson (1999), the role of women presently comprises domestic work like cooking, washing, cleaning, child rearing, collecting fuel wood, water and overall family maintenance. In addition, women are involved in agricultural activities such as cultivation, sowing, weeding, threshing, harvesting, fruit picking and drying, livestock production and management, poultry breeding and rearing of cattle. Beginning with this description, in this section, we examine how women's education and teaching jobs interact with their ascribed familial roles as discussed above. The following excerpt from Fatima's diary explains how a new role associated with women's education has made its way in their ascribed familial routines:

*Today I woke up at 6 a.m., prepared breakfast, cleaned the home and arrived at school around 8:30. In school it took me about six periods to make the students write their tests. I marked some there, while some I brought home with me. I arrived home at 2 p.m., prepared and served everybody their food and quickly made dough for fiti (local baked bread). Then I went to convene the Women's Organization's (WO) meeting because I am the manager of this organization. I returned home at about 4 p.m. and found that the kids were not at home. Therefore, I called them and made them sit down to study. Today, I went to [the] fields [family's cultivable land] at 5:30 to do some weeding. Upon my return I prepared the evening meal, read the newspaper and did WO work (documented the details of the meeting, and account status). I made a mental plan for tomorrow and slept.*

The interaction between Fatima's domestic responsibilities and the pressure of her commitments as a professional and an educated member of her rural community is discernible here. Fatima enacts her familial ascribed role, which includes household chores and cattle rearing. During the harvest season (summer) these routines get intensified with Fatima (and other women teachers) spending much of their early mornings and afternoons in farming the land. The life histories of these five women explicate the fact that women's education and employment have not changed traditional expectations from them. Instead, education has added to their ascribed role, making life more intensive for them. A discussion here will elaborate on how/ if education helps and empower them to deal with these challenges in patriarchal mountain communities.

### **Relationships, Reciprocity and Compensatory Farming Work**

Owing to their paid jobs, the women teachers had a different pattern of everyday life than other women who lived in traditional households. They found life extremely challenging in extended or joint households, where the other women were extensively involved in farm labour. Though the members of their extended families shared the upbringing of the children and the hardship of cultivating the rocky terrain with them, maintaining relationships within the family was an incessant struggle for the women teachers. All five experienced ebbs and flows in their relationships. They believed they managed this situation through strategies, which they associated with education. For instance, Saira believed that reciprocity was the basic principle of developing a solid, enduring relationship in her extended family. For her and Fatima, their education guided them to live in harmony with their families (extended):

Education is actually learning how to deal with your practical life [after marriage]. OK! Education does not imply collecting some factual information. Instead, it is actually learning to live with other people practically and how to adjust ourselves with other people [in extended families]: the proper adjustment with other people is actually education. (SA. Int.2/04)

Saira was cognizant of her conduct as an educated woman and often attributed her smooth relationships with other members to her skills in adapting to her family's circumstances. She had spent much energy sustaining good relationships with her family members by working in the fields with them after her school hours and taking an equal share in the household chores. Knowing that

reluctance to do the required cooking, washing and farming would upset the other family members, she diligently carried out these chores after a full workday in school. Her family engagements and a peaceful home environment remained her priority over advancing her own teaching career.

The core tension between women teachers and their families derived from how the teachers perceived their traditionally ascribed roles in relation to their status as teachers. Family relationships depended on the women teachers' willingness to participate in household chores. Like Saira, all of the women teachers made extra efforts to compensate for their inability to fulfil farming obligations, mainly to please family members. Sundays, summer vacations and weekday afternoons were used to undertake this compensatory farming work. This work included a whole-day engagement in grass cutting at the family's distant pastures, collecting dry leaves and firewood for winter consumption, sowing potato seeds, reaping it and the wheat harvest. Despite the teachers' monetary contributions, the families still find it difficult to spare these women from farming labour, because each individual's participation lessens the labour and time spent by the others on the tasks. Most of the group farming tasks are scheduled on Sundays, when the women teachers can contribute. These teachers expressed guilt about their inability to take an equal share in the hardships of farming; so they tried to compensate whenever possible. Their main motivation for doing this extra hard work was to improve relationships with their family members.

Compensation also took place in the form of the teachers' directing their salaries to their families' pool of income. In return, the families reciprocated by looking after the teachers' children, preparing and serving afternoon meals and bearing with their frequent absence from household chores and farming. Rabia reported how her pleasant relationship with her in-laws became chilling when she stopped giving her salary to the family's financial pool for a few months. She used the money to repay a loan, which she had obtained to pay for travelling to a city, where she underwent medical treatment for a throat infection. During this period her mother had to intervene when her in-laws complained about her inability to contribute to farming. The family relationship returned to normal when she resumed her salary donations.

The fabric of relationships in the women teachers' families appeared tied by a very delicate thread – enactment of reciprocity by women teachers. They manipulated the days on which their families' intensive farming tasks were to be done to days subject to their availability. They also used their income-earning ability to accommodate their engagements in a profession through compensatory farming work and contribution to the family income pool.

### **Ascribed Role of Mothering and its Impact on Professional Life**

'Educated women with paid jobs' is a relatively new phenomenon for the mountain communities. Therefore, the ways to accommodate such differences do not appear to be properly established as yet by the extended families and communities. While women teachers negotiated the time to perform their share of household and farming chores with their families, their status as educated and professional women resulted in a dilemma to choose between their ascribed familial role and their professional advancement. These women took up paid jobs to earn cash incomes through teaching, to meet family needs. However, their professional needs for further development and the advancement of their careers were not recognized by their extended families. While their commitments to their extended families intensified with the birth of each child, teaching in schools also evolved and became more complex. These teachers who had been taken on with minimal education and no professional training were pressured to improve their professional and educational credentials which remained an uphill task for them because of the pressures exerted by their families and their ascribed role as mothers.

The mountain communities are close-knit, with relationship structures based on clan and blood relations. Hence, enforcing approved gender roles becomes easier. For instance, deviation from

established maternal obligations and practices was noticed. Khadija remembered the pressure she was under by her neighbours when she had just begun teaching. Her neighbours considered Khadija cruel for leaving her infant behind to go to work. They also considered her parents-in-law greedy for allowing Khadija to teach rather than look after her young baby. On the same account, Khadija's husband's act of sharing the infant's care with his wife, also received criticism from neighbours and her mother-in-law, who could not digest the idea of her only son doing "a woman's job".

Though all five women experienced these tensions, Fatima, Saira and Zehra particularly mentioned that the intensity of family affairs governed their professional lives. The non-governmental organization that managed the schools where these five women were teaching offered three of them an opportunity to attend a year-long professional course at a teachers' training college with a fine reputation; they had to refuse because of their family obligations. Saira's and Zehra's families resented the prospect of them taking professional development programmes in the city. Fatima refused any such opportunity in order not to risk her children's education. Generally, all the women were worried about their children's education and moral upbringing. Owing to their socialization in a culture that holds women responsible for the sole upbringing of their children, these women found it hard to reconcile this long-standing view of maternal nurturing as their natural duty with their professional aspirations.

Saira opted for professional development activities based in her hometown, including a degree programme and many short-term courses, especially for language enhancement. When she received an offer to study for a B.Ed. in an eminent educational institution in a city, her family, including her husband rejected it on the grounds that her absence from home for an entire year would disturb her children. She was told to take the children with her if she wished to accept the offer. At another time, Saira could not accept an offer to work in a teacher trainer programme because it required her to travel to remote areas. This resistance further strengthened her maternal obligations and she decided not to take advantage of the professional development prospects at the risk of her children's proper upbringing:

*I think that for children's good upbringing it is necessary that the mother should be with them so I thought our [village] environment is bad, there was no use my going here and there leaving them behind; I would ruin them for the sake of my studies. (Saira, April 5, 2002)*

Saira's emphasis on the good upbringing of her children included monitoring their academic performances besides the general nurturing practices. The family had particularly avoided taking any responsibility for her children (three boys, aged 15, 9 and 7). Saira's daily routines not only kept her engaged in cooking and washing for her family, she consistently monitored and assisted her children in their schoolwork. She reported in her diary that she helped her son with one lesson at midnight, after doing the laundry, while her husband was already asleep.

Like Saira, Fatima took on greater responsibility for her children's upbringing and education and found fulfilment in her children's success. In the past, she had experienced tensions between her extended family life and professional aspirations, so she moved to establish her own nuclear family. However, her professional aspirations were now constrained in different ways as she preferred her children's education over her own professional development:

*Actually, my husband is a little careless with the children. Hence, the children could have suffered if I had gone out for two years. Two years ago, our education officer asked me if I could go to Lahore [a city in Pakistan] to study for a B.Ed. programme, but I could not go. My husband also told me, "You go." I said, "All right, I will go; but the poor kids, who will give them time? They've got to study." (FT. Int. 3/15)*

The spouses' different gender roles were quite discernible in their everyday interaction with their children. Most obviously, teachers' husbands took little if any part in the process of caring for and rearing their children. Despite being reasonably educated, they did not even help the children in their studies. For example, Fatima, during her engagement in household chores, persuaded her children to study and prepare for their examinations while her husband was enjoying music after lunch. Fatima and Saira's compromises led them to enjoy a contented life with their children's academic achievements. Zehra, however, still regretted her inability to avail herself of professional development opportunities to become "an able teacher". Besides, observing other mothers who devotedly attended to their children's needs also created dissonance for Zehra and makes her feel guilty for ignoring her ascribed familial role.

Rabia and Khadija were able to negotiate with their own maternal obligations to fulfil their professional aspirations. As a head teacher of a primary school, Rabia stayed longer hours in the school. She had just given birth to her second son and she was prepared to take on the challenge to head a school. She negotiated with a relative living in her neighbourhood to breastfeed the infant in her absence. Among the five teachers, Khadija was able to take one year off to pursue professional training in a city. She reported that the family deliberated intensely on the issue of Khadija leaving them for a year to get professional training before they released her.

The size of indigenous families was a major factor behind these teachers' ability or inability to negotiate their professional career. For instance, Rabia's and Khadija's families were smaller (10 and nine members respectively) than Zehra's and Saira's families (14 members each). The formation of these families was yet another factor that contributed towards the tension between teachers' familial ascribed roles and their careers. As Rabia's husband was the eldest and only married son, she was the only daughter-in-law of the family. Similarly, by virtue of Khadija's husband being the only child, she was also the only daughter-in-law. Fewer members (particularly elders) in the family meant less and more negotiable resistance. While in Zehra's and Saira's case, besides parents-in-law, both had the families of their husbands' married brothers living with them. This intensified these women teachers' challenges as there were more members in the family to monitor whether the women teachers shared household and farming chores or not. Fatima, who finally established her nuclear household, faced similar challenges when she lived with her large extended family. According to her account, during the initial years of her teaching, her family strictly monitored her ability to fulfil her ascribed role. One day, while she was busy doing an assignment for her Distant Learning Course, nobody milked the family cow because this task was assigned to her. She could do it only at midnight after finishing her work. For her and other teachers who live in larger extended families, education only intensifies their lives.

The period in the women teachers' lives also appears important in deciding whether they could leave their families to join a professional development programme. For instance, when Khadija decided (or was allowed) to leave her family for the one-year programme of study, her children were no longer so young as to create a major childcare problem. So the family allowed her to attend this course, having considered alternative arrangements to offset her absence from household and farming tasks. For example, Khadija's mother-in-law brought her unmarried grown-up niece in to help her with everyday household chores, farming tasks and cattle rearing. Hence the family could manage the daily routines in her absence, though with difficulty.

### **Changing Dimensions of Headwomen**

While women faced tensions between their familial ascribed roles and professional aspirations, their status as educated women seemed to have added a new dimension to the role of head women. In past and present families with indigenous structures head women exercised authority within households by looking after food supplies and family routines (household chores, farming and cattle rearing

tasks). While, corresponding to patriarchal norms, men headed the families and made all decisions. The life histories of these five women, however, indicate that they were least concerned about controlling family routines and were more inclined to exercise their increased control over decision-making about their children's future. Fatima, Zehra, Khadija and Saira not only supervised their children's homework and academic performance, they also decided the schools their children should attend. Sometimes, Khadija and Zehra felt envious of mothers who did not have to go out every day to work and thus had time to address their families' needs. At the same time, they also acknowledged their own thoughtfulness towards their children's future; they possessed a positive self-image as educated mothers. Fatima, being the first woman of her family to complete her matriculation, took pride in her eldest daughter following her footsteps by becoming the first girl with a Master's degree. With Fatima's daughter gainfully employed, the family next pinned their hopes on the younger children's performance in school.

Khadija, with her aspirations for professional fulfilment, took charge of planning for her children's education. She decided to send her eldest son to a city for high school, because his progress in the local government school was not satisfactory. She had the same plans for her third son. Her second son was studying in the local government school, but did not perform well. Khadija reported paying frequent visits to his school, to keep in touch with his progress, and help him in his studies at home. Zehra and Saira also moved their children to different schools, wishing to provide them with better education. Contrary to the scope of head women's authority, women teachers were using their autonomy and control to direct the future course of their children's lives. This dimension in women's lives also requires reflection as to whether they were mediating and modifying the concept of patriarchy in the context of their families and immediate communities.

### Reshaping Traditional Task Divisions

An overview of women's home environment will, here, explain the extent education has empowered them to influence the traditional gender relations within women's immediate families. During the visits to the participants' homes, a traditional home environment was observed. Saira, Khadija and Fatima all served their husbands' meals in the traditional manner. The men sat down, and the women or children [in Khadija's case] brought food to them. The women also removed the dishes once the men finished eating. Occasionally, the women brought a basin for the men to wash their hands before having a meal. Some rare instances of attempts to change traditional practices regarding the division of positions and tasks between men and women were also observed. For example, Fatima's husband helped her bake bread. While she was making flatbread with the rolling pin, he baked it on the stove. He also checked whether the curry was ready. Later, Fatima's older son [a Grade X student] upon his return from school, warmed up a meal and served himself. Fatima proudly mentioned her husband's supportive attitude. He helped her carry out tasks such as preparing breakfast and cattle rearing; occasionally, he ironed his clothes. She believed that her husband's non-traditional attitude made it possible for her to be engaged in other activities. In her busy schedule, she could not spare too much of time for her children, yet she concerned herself with their proper upbringing. They, in turn, knew the value of time in their mother's life. Therefore, they contributed to the smooth running of the household:

*Actually, I have taught them to do their homework on their own ... the older ones help the younger ones ... and they do it by themselves ... my son begins cleaning the place ... I have not taught them [meaning her sons] to gallivant around, visiting their uncles and aunts or visit other relatives, wasting their time. If they did this, obviously, mother has a problem! The father does not feel that much. It is only mother who suffers more. (FT. Int. 3 / 12-13)*

In the context of the strong division between men's and women's positions, assistance from Fatima's husband and son did not occur suddenly. Rather, it resulted from Fatima's constant interventions.

She recalled that at the initial stages of her teaching career, Fatima asked her husband to wash her baby daughter's face because she was engaged in some work just before leaving for school. Upon hearing this, her mother-in-law rebuffed Fatima, saying, "What kind of woman are you? You are telling my son to wash your daughter's face. Next you will ask him to sweep the floor." [The most "humiliating" job for men.] (FA.Int.3/09). Though Fatima could not directly confront her mother-in-law, she nevertheless continued to involve her husband in the baby's care.

Once Fatima established her nuclear household, her children understood that their mother had working patterns different from the other women in their family or neighbouring families. This meant that by reviewing centuries-old task divisions, the family was coming to terms with Fatima's various obligations and her changed role. In contrast to the traditional family set-up governed by the father, Fatima played a crucial role in disciplining her children and establishing their routines, aiming for better performance from them in school. She constantly reminded herself that problems in the children's upbringing would affect her more as a mother, than they would her husband. More importantly, she believed that contrary to the concept of a traditional woman, as an educated mother, she was making a substantial contribution to her children's education and future plans.

Khadija also attributed her ability to accomplish different commitments to her husband's considerate attitude. Initially, Khadija's mother-in-law found it quite unacceptable that her only son did women's work, such as feeding and caring for their infants. Khadija's husband doing women's work remained a matter of interest for the neighbours:

*People say that he [her husband] does everything. I tell him, "Who should do it then?" I also do my job [teaching, a paid job] and he also does [teaching in a local school]. We never think in this manner, we always work together. A neighbour of mine has a husband who is retired, an army man. He may not help her, and she tells me, "See, Kako [brother, meaning Khadija's husband] does so much work for you. He does everything." (KH.Int.3/29)*

There is an assumption on the part of people talking about Khadija's husband "doing everything", that men are the superior sex and should not perform tasks considered of a low level because these are usually done by women. Khadija justified her husband's participation in the household because she, like him, worked in a paid job, and hence was doing a "man's job" as a provider. Her ability to rationalize the changing gender relations within her family's context is a strong attribution to her confidence that she derived from her education and ability to earn cash income. She did not give in to the negative pressure within her family and from the community, instead she persistently followed the route towards gaining more autonomy.

Zehra found it challenging to handle the household and other responsibilities while tending to her young baby. Her husband eased the pressure on her by ironing his clothes and polishing his own shoes, which Zehra construed as her tasks. Zehra repeated the phrase "my work", which implied farming, cattle rearing, household chores and looking after the children and other family members. She believed women, like herself, got more respect if they were educated, because her husband was prepared to help her. She nevertheless faced strong resistance from her elderly mother-in-law who did not approve of her son's helping his wife and thus attempting to change traditional values.

The family size and structure consistently proved a major factor in determining the success and failure of these women's attempts to modify family routines and make slight changes in the traditional gender relations. Saira said:

*The majority of people, here, live in extended families. If there were nuclear families, such problems would be rare. I mean, men could help their women to an extent which is not possible in a combined [extended] family system ... men in combined families do not like to help us in the presence of other family members. (SA. Int. 4/11)*

She felt that the extended family strictly monitored the enactment of traditional gender roles; a wife doing feminine work and husband behaving as a “man”. Saira reported an argument with her husband who could not respond to her positively when she asked him to make the bed for their children while she was busy with post-dinner kitchen chores. Men who help their wives by feeding the children or putting them to bed are looked down upon by other members in the family for not being able to maintain the image of masculinity.

In resisting the ascribed boundaries for the work of men and women, the women teachers seemed to be redefining their own images and the related expectations. Some fought tradition by involving and encouraging their husbands in so-called “female work”; others were still debating as to what was acceptable or unacceptable in the context of their families in their changing circumstances. The process of challenging values deeply instilled in men and women from childhood intensifies further because the extended family and close-knit local community strictly monitor the practice and transmission of these patriarchal values. Extended families exert pressure on men to maintain their image of supremacy and difference as men by not engaging in women’s work. For example, Saira believed that her husband’s avoidance in assisting her in childcare was rooted in the pressure exerted by his extended family.

In contrast, the flexibility of Fatima’s family in dealing with daily household chores was derived from her maintaining a nuclear household. Thus, she had some autonomy to establish a different pattern of relationship that suited her engagements in teaching and community development. Fatima did face pressure to fulfil various traditional commitments, but this pressure was less intense than that on the women who lived in extended or joint families. Similarly, a comparatively smaller joint family facilitated Khadija’s attempts to involve her husband in daily household chores. Her mother-in-law’s unstable health provided Khadija’s husband with a strong reason to support Khadija in fulfilling her various commitments.

## Social Mobility

The absence of a public transportation system and the hard geographical terrain pose a challenge for the residents’ swift mobility. For women, this challenge further intensifies because of the stigma attached to women walking alone. The data suggests that women teachers attempted to break this stigma to fulfil their professional commitments. Rabia was appointed as the head teacher at a primary school located in the neighbouring village. The walk to and from school was about an hour long, on a steep, rocky dirt road, which at some places was quite deserted. Besides this geographical hardship, the social stigma attached to “a woman walking alone” was a major concern for Rabia and her family. Initially, Rabia’s father-in-law (owing to her husband’s prolonged absence) accompanied her, but this was not really feasible, and Rabia decided to walk alone. She described this experience in one of the interviews:

*Initially, I felt scared walking alone. There are many traders from other cities during the potato-harvesting season. Some of them are just very unreasonable. While we [women] are walking on the road, they reduce the speed of their vehicle just enough to make us feel that it is coming to a halt as it approaches us. I used to walk at the edge of the road, thinking if something happens [they try to get her in the vehicle] I would jump down from the road into the terraced fields or to the bottom of the gardens. I was really very fearful then. Then I tried and got Sara [another teacher from her village] for my school. So I got her company. We walk back and forth together. Now there is no problem. Even if I have to walk alone, I don’t have any fears [smiling]. I can kill someone if they try to harm me. On my way home, there is a particular deserted place with many trees. Previously, I was frightened of that place and would almost run as I reached there. But now I have no fears; on the contrary, I walk confidently with personal pride. (RB.Int.5/24)*

A discussion with her about the changes in terms of overcoming the personal fear of strange men and developing confidence in herself, confirmed its roots in her being educated. As many women continue to conform to the dominant image of women's dependency, model teachers like Rabia are in the process of manipulating these relationships. She distinguished herself as a teacher and appropriated the "inappropriate" behaviour of "walking alone" on a public space such as the roadside.

Despite women teachers' willingness to shed this dependency model for social mobility there were occasions when they displayed conformity to the dominant model for the sake of approval. Occasionally, as the head teacher Rabia had to travel to her organization's Field Education Office located three villages away. Most of the time, she travelled alone to the office (half an hour's travel in a minivan). At times, her uncle, who owned a shop at the main road in her school village, stopped the public minivan for her when he saw her waiting for it. Both were aware that Rabia travelled independently, yet they enacted this social behaviour for the approval of the broader society and out of respect for personal relationships. Rabia's act of waving to a minivan to stop in the presence of her uncle, would have received immense disapproval from the onlookers. Nevertheless, Rabia never let this conformity to patriarchy govern her social movements. To enjoy the freedom of social mobility, Fatima enacted traditional gender relationships when required:

*My husband had a job in another village ... he would not bother about it anyway ... sometimes when the children got sick I had to take them to the hospital ... at the roundabout in the busy place I had to wait for a long time for the rarely available minivan. Often neighbours or relatives (men) would see me and ask why I was standing there alone in the middle of a bazaar and where was my husband ... mostly I would tell them that my husband had just gone to a shop nearby for a quick purchase and would be back soon. (FT. Int.5/05)*

These examples identify the social pressures that women confront in their pursuit of transforming traditional gendered roles and images. Here, women's "bargaining with patriarchy" (Kandiyoti, 1997) or the parallel strategies of conforming and resisting dominant patriarchal control (Ashraf, 2004) are also explicit. To meet their personal and professional needs, they successfully employed these strategies, which boosted their confidence as educated women.

These two accounts also entail the women's enhanced ability to resist societal pressure that previously governed their lives. For instance, their discontinuation of education was due to community pressure, which disapproved of adolescent girls going to school instead of getting married. Zehra's access to a college for further education was particularly hindered because her close relatives considered its environment inappropriate for grownup girls. For instance, two of these women were denied better marriage prospects outside their clans and were pushed into forced marriages within their natal families. The intention was to allow their own families to benefit from these women's economic gains.

Similarly, their families also generally directed the women's choices of profession. The women teachers' attempts to take up jobs in an organization that offered better monetary incentives were rejected by their immediate families and communities because it required them to travel away from their families and interact with men not related to them. Teaching remained the approved job because of its ability to harmonize with women's familial ascribed roles. Interestingly, a recently graduated daughter of one of these teachers (who was once constrained to switch jobs), took up a job in the same organization and was actually engaged in frequent travelling and job-related interactions with the wider community. The mother of this girl informed us that in the past her parents and she herself lacked the ability to resist pressure from the community. Hence she could not accept a job in the same organization when she was offered one, whereas her daughter was now working there. As an educated

mother, this teacher fully supported her daughter's decision and patiently resisted pressure from neighbours who inquired about her absence and job-related regular travels to various parts of the country.

### Education and Women's Empowerment

The life histories of these five women teachers do affirm that education added another dimension to women's traditionally ascribed roles. They were not only fulfilling their ascribed familial role (household, family care, farming and cattle rearing), but these women were also earning cash income like the male members of their families. Their cash income earning ability did not change traditional expectations from them because social and family structures with associated norms and family traditions remained consonant. This situation intensified women teachers' lives. They were constantly engaged in negotiating their different needs with their extended families through the strategy of reciprocity in the form of compensatory work and contributing to the family's income pool.

Women teachers were also engaged in negotiating their position as educated women in the patriarchal mountain communities. They attempted to reshape traditional task division by engaging their male offspring and husbands in traditionally feminine tasks. It gave them confidence and ability to negotiate their position in society. Similarly, they appropriated the inappropriate tasks of "women walking alone in public" which Kandiyoti (1982) calls "bargaining with patriarchy". This bargaining with patriarchy affirms Kabeer's (1999) assertion that empowerment cannot be reduced to a single aspect of process or outcome. How women exercise choices and the actual outcomes depend on the individuals. Choices will vary across class, time and space. Women's access to education and employment exhibit the transitions and modifications in their position in the mountain communities. Though, gender relationships are being examined in the light of the current changes in these communities, resistance to any revision or modification of women's position is still discernible. Women teachers' struggle to improve their positions by modifying their roles in their families is, in essence, an effort to resist society's patriarchal norms that control relationships between men and women.

As discussed earlier, time and space for women in indigenous mountain communities are of great significance. Therefore, they need some reflection in order to examine how education empowered women to influence gender relationships. For instance, Fatima's and Khadija's apparently successful modification in gendered task division in the family did not happen during their initial years of teaching and marriage. Any attempt to involve their husbands in childcare or household chores faced resistance from their mothers-in-law. Only at a certain age (in Fatima's case establishing a nuclear household), these women were able to modify gendered task division. With their age, experience and number of offspring, Khadija and Fatima appeared to assume the role of the head woman, which allowed them certain authority and control over household affairs, meaning strategies to perform household chores. As educated head women, their decision-making sphere went beyond ordinary household matters. The decisions teachers made were exclusively about their children's education, while they gave in for their professional aspirations because of pressure exerted from their extended families and immediate communities. With changing time, these women also developed the ability to withstand the pressures of the wider community. For instance, Fatima was able to choose a profession for her daughter, which she was once prohibited to pursue because her extended family and community then considered it inappropriate.

A reflection on the relationship between education and women's empowerment in the context of these five women's life histories requires an understanding of how empowerment was defined earlier in this paper. Keeping in view the embeddedness of "power" within the concept of empowerment, Batliwala (1994) defines empowerment as a redistribution of power whether between nations, classes, castes, genders, or individuals. Women were actually engaged in gaining more decision-making capacity within their families, and a deepening of an understanding of the gender relations that

were affecting their lives. Walters and Manicom (1996) consider these two processes as dimensions of empowerment. The women teachers' acts of continued affiliation with their paid job, constant negotiations with their families to accommodate their individual and different circumstances, and taking over the matters of their children's education appeared to establish their individual identity as educated women in patriarchal communities. The women were neither able to demonstrate complete autonomy nor were they able to gain control over the conditions (patriarchy) that had always governed their lives. Their education, nevertheless, did enable them to be persistent in challenging gender division of labour within their families.

Transforming the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination as the goal of women's empowerment (Batliwala, 1994; Patel, 1996) through education will remain a distant dream because these women with their education are tiny factors in the formation and structuring of a patriarchal society. Owing to everyday constraints they faced in fulfilling the requirements of their paid jobs, they changed certain practices of not travelling unaccompanied (e.g. walking alone to their workplace or going to the doctor). Out of necessity, in the same circumstances, they tried to involve their husbands and male offspring in doing "women's work". They began questioning patriarchal ideology as a result of their daily confrontations caused by having different working patterns from other local women. In the same way, family structures also gradually became flexible to accommodate women whose paid jobs were of greater benefit to their families.

Indigenous family systems complicated matters for these women by monitoring strict adherence to prevailing gender relationships. The positive examples of Khadija's and Fatima's attempts to redefine gender relationships were not present in the experiences of Saira and Zehra. Unlike Khadija, and Fatima, they had to conform to the traditional gender structure and strict observance of gendered task divisions. After reviewing the life histories of these five women teachers, the term 'empowerment' seems an ideal state of being. There is a strong relationship between these five teachers' lives and the broader social and cultural context of the region. Without an attempt to unpack and analyse ideas taken for granted about women in specific material, historical, and cultural contexts (Olesen, 2000), striving towards the goal of women's empowerment through education would be equal to ignoring the various other dimensions of women's lives. The data suggest that women teachers, despite their reasonable education and gainful employment could not have the empowerment to fully control their lives.

Robinson-Pant (2004) states that it has become common-sense knowledge that education can be a pathway to better jobs and hence a better life. That is, the more education you have, the better your chances in life would be. Similar ideas about education do prevail in the northern areas. The monetary outcomes of women's education could be one explanation for the flexibility shown by the families of women teachers. This attitude, if true, falls in the modernization paradigm of development where education and literacy are considered tools to improve and increase women's efficiency in their existing roles for the benefit of the economy, rather than for education to transform gender relations or lead to greater gender equity (Robinson-Pant, 2004).

In the past, women contributed to agriculture, which was the family's subsistence economy. Now with education, women are doing the same job efficiently. Their salaries directly went to their families' income pools, while they received pocket money for their immediate needs. As a matter of fact, men in the family handled their bank accounts. The education that these women received enabled them to secure employment and contribute to the family's economy. Thus, the life histories of these women teachers and our general observations of women's status in the region, affirm that education with a paid job can create conditions for women to take some control over their lives.

To achieve the desired link between education and women's empowerment, the nature of education these women received also needs some scrutiny. Questioning gendered task divisions, in the context

of these five women's life histories, appeared to be rooted in the tensions they faced resulting from the addition of a new role to their traditionally ascribed role. The education system they attended in the region fosters rote-learning and fact-memorization without developing the skills of critical thinking in students. Also dominant gender issues are not integrated in the curriculum, which rarely gets revised. To claim a relationship between education and women's empowerment will remain a dream, unless the education system is transformed for greater awareness, and the transformation of patriarchal communities into a more female-friendly societal system takes place. This can lead to a greater balance of household responsibilities such as childcare and domestic work, which can in return foster equity and provide more time for professional pursuits such as teaching (Stacki and Pigozzi, 1995). The interrelationship between the women teachers' various domains of activities (i.e. familial, professional and communal) is a vital category of analysis for the development stakeholders.

The life histories of these women teachers have implications not only for theorizing women's lives by recognizing their diverse experiences across the wide cultural, geographical and ideological spaces. Examples from these help us reconceptualize the discourse of development to inform us that using women as a "singular category of analysis" (Mohanty, 2003) can endanger the discourse about women's lives. To understand whether or not education leads to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability, the development discourse needs to see the relationship between the individual and society in the creation and perpetuation of gender norms and the dynamics of power relations between men and women (Personal Narrative Group, 1989).

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