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How Gender Norms Affects women's Access to Labor Markets and Entrepreneurship in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Women's participation in Pakistan's labor market and entrepreneurship remains significantly constrained by entrenched gender norms, despite recent economic reforms and inclusion initiatives. These social expectations surrounding women's modesty, family honor, and domestic responsibilities restrict their mobility and economic agency, perpetuating gendered economic disparities. The purpose of this study is to examine how gender norms affect women's access to labor markets and entrepreneurship in Pakistan, with freedom of movement as a mediating variable and educational level as a moderating factor. A quantitative, cross-sectional design was employed using survey data from 242 women across urban and rural regions of Pakistan. Validated measurement scales assessed gender norms, mobility, education, labor market access, and entrepreneurial participation. Data were analyzed through SPSS and AMOS using correlation, Model Fit, reliability, validity, mediation, and moderation analyses. Results revealed that restrictive gender norms have significant negative effects on women's access to both labor markets and entrepreneurship. Freedom of movement partially mediated these relationships, indicating that mobility limitations serve as a key mechanism translating social norms into economic exclusion. Furthermore, education moderated the relationship between gender norms and mobility, demonstrating that higher educational attainment mitigates the restrictive effects of traditional norms. These findings underscore that structural and cultural barriers must be addressed concurrently. Policy implications include integrating mobility-enhancing and norm-change interventions with educational initiatives to foster women's economic inclusion. The study advances gender and development theory through an integrated mediated-moderated model, offering a framework for designing holistic, context-sensitive empowerment policies.

Keywords: Gender norms; Freedom of movement; Women's economic empowerment; Labor market access; Entrepreneurship; Education.

Introduction

The involvement of women in the formal and informal economies of Pakistan is significantly less than that of men despite the recent economic growth and policy work towards inclusion. There are documented issues of gender differences in the labor-force participation, sectoral segregation, and extensive regional disparity in economic

participation by women in the institutions reports and the whole country through national surveys (World Bank, 2024; UN Women Pakistan, 2024). Scholars attribute these gaps not only to macroeconomic constraints (jobs, finance, infrastructure) but also to social and cultural barriers chief among them entrenched gender norms that shape what roles, spaces, and activities are deemed appropriate for women (Lwamba et al., 2022; Sargani, 2021). For example, mobility constraints, household expectations, and reputational concerns limit women's ability to seek wage employment outside the home or to grow market-facing entrepreneurial ventures (Garlick, Field, & Vyborny, 2025; World Bank, 2024). Understanding how gender norms operate directly and indirectly on women's labor-market access and entrepreneurship in Pakistan is therefore essential for designing effective, context-sensitive interventions.

Gender norms are shared social expectations about appropriate roles and behaviors for men and women in a society (Lwamba et al., 2022). In Pakistan, norms about women's 'place' (household vs. public sphere), modesty, and family honor strongly influence whether women can work outside the home, the types of jobs deemed acceptable, and whether entrepreneurship (especially market-facing businesses) is socially allowable (Sargani, 2021; UN Women Pakistan, 2024). Gender norms are central to this study because they constitute the upstream, socially enforced rules that shape both the supply of female labor and the kinds of economic activities women can pursue often operating through mechanisms such as mobility restrictions, time use, and family decision-making (World Bank, 2024). Freedom of movement refers to women's ability to leave the home, travel unaccompanied or in socially acceptable ways, and access public spaces, workplaces, markets, and networks (Garlick et al., 2025). It mediates the relationship between gender norms and economic outcomes because restrictive norms commonly manifest as curtailed mobility (for safety or reputational reasons), which in turn reduces job search, commuting, networking, and market access all necessary for wage employment and scaling entrepreneurship (Garlick et al., 2025; Berik et al., 2023). Empirical evidence from Pakistan shows that interventions that ease commuting constraints or provide gender-segregated transport increase female labor supply, indicating the mediating role of mobility. Educational level captures women's formal schooling and skills training attainment. Education can moderate the effect of gender norms on economic outcomes: higher education may increase women's bargaining power, confidence, and access to formal jobs and professional networks, thereby weakening the negative impact of restrictive norms (Abbas et al., 2021; Rizvi, 2023). However, education alone may be insufficient if mobility or normative barriers remain severe hence the need to test moderation rather than treat education as a simple remedy (World Bank, 2024). Access to labor market is operationalized as the probability of being employed (wage or salaried) outside the household, type of employment (formal vs. informal), and quality indicators (hours, earnings). Access to entrepreneurship refers to starting, operating, and scaling income-generating enterprises measured by business entry, sales, access to markets, and use of external finance. Both outcomes are shaped by supply-side (skills, preferences) and demand-side (employer bias, market constraints) factors that interact with norms, mobility, and education (World Bank, 2024; Sargani, 2021). Each variable is grounded in recent empirical and policy literature that identifies norms as a primary constraint in Pakistan and similar contexts (World Bank, 2024; UN Women Pakistan, 2024), mobility as a key mechanism limiting labor market entry (Garlick et al., 2025), and education as a potentially offsetting factor whose effectiveness depends on broader social constraints (Lwamba et al., 2022; Abbas et al., 2021).

While a growing body of studies examines women's entrepreneurship and labor participation in Pakistan, the literature has three notable limitations. First, many analyses

treat gender norms as background context rather than as measurable, causal drivers few studies integrate norms, mobility, and education into a single mediated-moderated framework (Sargani, 2021; World Bank, 2024). Second, rigorous causal evidence on the mechanisms (especially freedom of movement) is limited only very recent experimental or quasi-experimental work (e.g., randomized commuting interventions) directly tests mobility as the channel linking norms to labor supply (Garlick et al., 2025). Third, research often examines entrepreneurship and labor market access separately; there is limited empirical work comparing how norms differently affect wage employment versus entrepreneurial access across urban/rural and class divides. This project fills these gaps by estimating the mediated effect of norms through mobility, testing whether educational attainment attenuates normative constraints, and contrasting impacts on wage employment and entrepreneurship using contemporary Pakistani data and evidence from 2018–2025 studies.

This research aims to quantify how prevailing gender norms in Pakistan influence women's access to labor markets and entrepreneurship, test whether freedom of movement mediates the relationship between norms and economic outcomes, evaluate whether women's educational level moderates the impact of restrictive norms on labor and entrepreneurial outcomes, and compare the strength and pathways of these relationships for wage employment versus entrepreneurial activity. Through the integration of survey analysis, as well as relevant knowledge provided by recent experimental and programmatic research, the project aims to generate evidence of internally rigorous quality that is policy-relevant.

The research has a contribution to theory and policy because it introduces an integrated mediated-moderated paradigm to a contextually relevant yet poorly studied context Pakistan in the year 2018-2025. It will empirically use recent experimental findings on mobility and current country-wide studies on the topic to determine actionable constraints. In practice, the results can be used to design interventions (transport solutions, norm-targeted messages, spaces in the market that are female friendly, and education-plus-mobility programs) that have a higher likelihood to increase women economic participation, compared to independent skills or finance projects (World Bank, 2024; Lwamba et al., 2022). Finally, through the elucidation of mechanisms and heterogeneity, the study will inform policymakers and practitioners on integrated solutions that can fully combat social norms and material constraints that restrict the economic opportunities of women in concert.

Theory and Hypothesis Development

This paper is based on Gender and Development Theory (GAD) and Social Norms Theory, with the incorporation of Human Capital Theory and Feminist Institutionalism to provide the explanations to the essence of gender norm impact on economic opportunities among women in Pakistan.

Theory of Gender and Development (GAD)

GAD points out that gender inequality is not a biological difference but a socially built and perpetuated institution, norm, and power relations. In the Pakistani setting, cultural values make men the breadwinners and women the nurturers who are mostly restricted to domestic spheres. Such cultural prescriptions define labor division and bar women in the labor market and entrepreneurship (Moser, 1993; Kabeer, 1999). Gender norms in this framework serve as structural limitations that define the type of economic activities that women can participate in socially and this affects their mobility, capacity to make decisions and engage in labor activities.

Social Norms Theory

The social norms theory (Cialdini and Trost, 1998; Bicchieri, 2017) describes the process of using collective beliefs on how a person should act and behave because of anticipations of social reward or punishment. Gendered constraints in Pakistan that focus on modesty, honor and family reputation inhibit the freedom of movement by women thus limiting access to workplaces and markets, as well as networks. Therefore, the freedom of movement is an intervening variable between gender norms and access of women to economic opportunities. The more restrictive norms the less mobile and therefore the worse the labor-market and entrepreneurial participation.

Human Capital Theory

Becker (1964) argued that human capital education, training and experience enhance the productivity of people and their employment opportunities towards a better job. Educational level is a moderating characteristic in this study that has the power to mitigate the harmful impact of restrictive gender norms. Through education, women tend to have more bargaining power, confidence, and convenient access to professional networks and, in such a way, overcome normative barriers partially. Yet education cannot be sufficient in case social restrictions and the lack of mobility are still observed.

Feminist Institutionalism

Feminist institutionalism (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell, 2010) is a discussion of how gender hierarchies are reproduced in formal and informal institutions. Patriarchal norms are embedded in institutional structures or structures of Pakistan which include family systems, labor laws, and market institutions. The framework is used to understand the reason why women entrepreneurship and wage employment opportunities are still scarce despite the existence of the inclusion-friendly formal policies. The unwritten codes of action like those relating to women behavior tend to negate formal equality provisions.

Organizational Conceptual Model.

The theoretical framework of the present research incorporates various approaches Gender and Development Theory, Social Norms Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Feminist Institutionalism in a mediated-moderated model that can be considered as the complex interactions determining the economic participation of women in Pakistan. In this context, the conceptualization of gender norms is that it is the dominant IV that has a strong impact on the access of women to labor markets and entrepreneurship (the dependent variable, DV). These are norms which are deeply engrained in the socio-cultural and institutional context of Pakistan and which stipulate socially acceptable role and behavior of women usually focusing on domestic roles, modesty and family honor. These normative expectations constrain the kind of work that is considered to be acceptable by women and limit their participation in market or economic activities that are more oriented towards the market.

The hypothesis is that the influence of gender norms on the access to the economy by women is indirect carried by freedom of movement as a mediating factor. The freedom of movement is an expression of the fact that a woman is free to travel, gain access to workplaces, markets and other public areas, and take part in economic activities without being socially and family ties. Limiting gender roles can also take the form of mobility limitations where women could be deterred or even not allowed to travel alone, work in mixed-gender settings, or deal with male clients and co-workers. Such restrictions, in their turn, restrict their possibilities to find jobs, to engage in business, or to increase entrepreneurial activities. In this way, the social norms are put into economic practice via freedom of movement as the process that connects the social and personal aspects of gender inequality.

Simultaneously, the level of education of women will serve as a moderating factor that may undermine or reinforce the impact of the restrictive norms on economic participation. The increased education generally increases the self-efficacy, bargaining power of women in the household and also access to information, professional networks and formal employment. Through education, it is possible to undermine the conventional gender ideology through giving the women alternative identities and goals other than the domestic ones. In turn, women with education might be in a better position to oppose or reinvent limiting norms, thus limiting their adverse effects on economic involvement. Nevertheless, even education is not sufficient to create the effect of empowerment in the situations where the social and institutional obstacles are still deep rooted; the moderating effect of education is determined by the ability of the society norms and the institutional frameworks to enable educated women to apply their abilities effectively.

The combined nature of these factors enables the integrated theoretical model to recognize that the presence of women in the labor markets and entrepreneurship is a matter of structural factors and individual ability to interact. The social-structural forces that shape the boundaries of women as defined by gender norms and institutional expectations and the resources that allow women to negotiate or cross boundaries as determined by these forces are education and mobility. Mediated-moderated model therefore offers a comprehensive perception of the constraining effects of gender norms on the economic agency of women and the enhancing effects of empowerment attributes like education and mobility on the same. Finally, this framework highlights the importance of focusing on the matter of gender inequality in the Pakistani economic context through the lens of social norms, institutional and reform, as well as investment in the human capital of women to establish the conducive environment in which they will have equal opportunities to engage in economic activities.

Hypothesis

The world is moving towards gender equality, still, because of the restricted gender norms, the role of a gender inclination remains a substantial hindrance to the full economic involvement of women, which harms the accessibility of the labor market as well as the access to entrepreneurship. Such social expectations that are well-established, and in most cases, place the main burden of unpaid care and household work on women directly restrict the labor force participation of women. The report, prepared by World Bank (2018) has pointed out that women around the world do more than three-quarters of the total unpaid care care, which limits their time and mobility to participate in formal jobs. This is the phenomenon of a so-called motherhood penalty, in which the number of women who had children usually experiences a reduction in employment rates and salaries, and men do not (Kleven et al., 2019). Moreover, standards that give preference to men as bread-winners may result in discrimination during the hiring and promotion process, resulting in a glass ceiling, which is hard to break. Gender norms also limit the opportunities and chances of women in the business world of entrepreneurship. Women usually experience a lot of difficulties in accessing capital, especially due to the discrimination of perceptions of largely male-dominated investors. In 2020, a study discovered that the amount of venture capital raised by female founders was dismal, and all-female teams were allocated only a small percentage of the total capital amount in contrast to all-male teams (Brush et al., 2020). Such norms also influence the kind of businesses that women should open, tending to push them into less profitable and more service-oriented businesses that are considered feminine, which restrict their growth and their ability to scale (Elam et al., 2019). This is exacerbated by the unrelenting digital gender divide where women entrepreneurs have less access to the digital tools and e-commerce platforms that are essential to the modern business development (UN Women, 2023). The aggregate impact

of such normative impediments is an economy that the world can never discover the half potential of half the population, and hence the fact that more than ever before, the world is in dire need of policies which proactively reduce these limiting normative barriers to enable more inclusive economic development.

H1: Gender Norms has Negative effects on the Women's Access to Labor Market and Women's Access to Entrepreneurship.

According to the developed adverse consequences of restrictive gender norms, Hypotheses 2 suggest that the freedom of movement by a woman is a decisive mediating factor that clarifies how the norms convert into scanty economic prospects. Gender norms tend to be restrictive, and there is a tendency to severely limit the physical mobility of women their freedom to move without being at home, use the means of transportation, visiting specific places, or staying out at specific hours which is a precondition both to the formal employment and to entrepreneurial activity. The access to labor market (H2) has a direct pathway: the norms, according to which female virtue is identical to remaining in the domestic sphere physically, do not allow women to pursue, travel to, and continue in formal jobs. Human Rights Watch (2018) conducted a study that recorded how these restrictions, usually explained by the safety and the honor, are one of the biggest obstacles to women getting involved in the labor force in different areas. When women have to seek male approval to commute to their jobs daily, or experience the disgrace of being socially stigmatized at work in unrestricted areas, the labour market is cut off at the very base of the pyramid. Research by the World Bank (2021) also backs this assertion and concluded that an increase in the rate of employment of women was directly attributed to the increase in transportation safety and accessibility due to their mobility. On the case of entrepreneurship (H2), free movement is an indispensable commodity to any business master. Such restrictive norms which restrict mobility deny women access to important entrepreneurial resources. They have no easy way of networking with their potential clients or mentors, physically search business locations, hold meetings with suppliers, and travel to reach formal financial institutions. In a study of women in developing economies as entrepreneurs, it was established that mobility constraints were a better predictor of business failure, rather than capital or skills (Barboni et al., 2018). Moreover, in the digital era, although e-commerce has a potential, the last-mile issue remains; the women businesspeople are not always free to travel to distribution centers or post offices to send and receive products, which limits their opportunities of taking advantage of online platforms (IFC, 2023). Thus, limiting physical movement, the gender traditions of patriarchy essentially smother the very blood of business, translating the norms imposed by the society into the results of business.

H2: Freedom of Movement mediates the relationships between Gender Norms and Women's Access to Labor Market and also between Women's Access to Entrepreneurship.

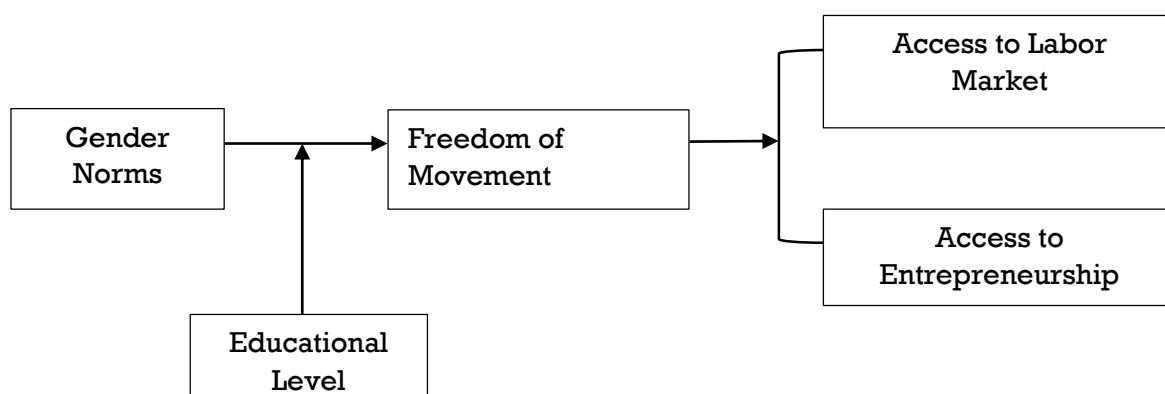
This Hypothesis brings in a more refined dimension to the theoretical framework because, according to it, the educational level of a woman is not just a correlate but a critical moderation factor that can modify the degree of the relationship between restrictive gender norms and her freedom of movement. The hypothesis is that the depressive effect of the patriarchal norms on mobility does not apply to all women; the level of education can act as a buffer effect, reducing the effect of regressive norms and limited movement. This moderation mechanism is multi-leveled. To begin with, education tends to provide women with better cognitive tools, self-efficacy, and critical awareness to challenge and bargain on the limiting norms that have been set by their families or society (Murthi, 2019). The female graduate will have more chances to oppose the validity of a law that will not allow her go out by herself than a female graduate with no education. Second, education tends

to result in a broader social circle and exposure to more progressive ideologies and offers alternative norms of acceptable behavior and creates social resources to be more independent (Stoebenau et al., 2021). Thirdly, practically, higher education is often a requirement to work in the formal sector which can often offer a strong economic incentive to be more mobile like commuting to an office that families might find more difficult to resist (World Bank, 2021). There is empirical support on this moderating role. Multi-country research revealed that even though gender restrictions were always associated with a negative influence on mobility, the negative effect was significantly less in women who have received secondary or higher education, since their families and spouses were more likely to trust and accept their free movement (Ghuman et al., 2020). Likewise, in South Asia, it was shown that educated women could more likely use digital technologies such as mobile phones to navigate the public by keeping themselves safe, which alleviated the traditional mobility limitations (IFC, 2023). The education is thus a resource of crucial nature that will enable women to rebel, renegotiate, and avoid the mobility limits that gender rules will be trying to enforce, which will radically change the power balance between the social requirements and the freedom of movement of a woman.

H3: Educational Level moderates the relationship between the Gender Norms and Freedom of Movement.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Study

Source: Figure Created by Author



Methods

Data Collection and Sample

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships among gender norms, women's freedom of movement, educational level, and their access to labor markets and entrepreneurship in Pakistan. Quantitative research was deemed appropriate for this investigation because it allowed for statistical testing of hypothesized relationships, measurement of latent constructs through validated scales, and assessment of mediating and moderating effects. A survey-based approach was used to collect primary data from women aged 18–60 across both urban and rural regions of Pakistan who were either currently employed, self-employed, or seeking employment. The sample size of this study was 242. A well-structured Questionnaire was used to collect the data that was adapted and built by using the validated measurement scales to measure the variables of the study. A stratified random sampling technique was adopted to ensure proportional representation from diverse socio-economic and regional backgrounds, thereby enhancing external validity. Data were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS. Following test applied for Data Analysis Descriptive Statistics, Correlation, Model Fit and the simultaneous estimation of direct, indirect (mediated), and moderated effects among constructs. Reliability and validity were ensured through confirmatory factor analysis.

(CFA), Cronbach's alpha (≥ 0.70), composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE). Ethical considerations included informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality assurance.

Measurement Scales

All constructs in this study were measured using multi-item Likert-type scales adapted from previously validated instruments to ensure reliability and comparability.

1. Gender Norms (Independent Variable)

Gender norms were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) adapted from the Gender Equitable Men (GEM) Scale and items developed by Lwamba et al. (2022) and UN Women (2024) to capture societal attitudes toward women's roles, modesty, and work outside the home. The GEM scale was widely validated in South Asian contexts for measuring normative beliefs about gender roles (Pulerwitz & Barker, 2008).

2. Freedom of Movement (Mediating Variable)

Freedom of movement was assessed using items adapted from the World Bank's (2021) Women's Mobility Index and Garlick et al. (2025), reflecting women's autonomy in traveling alone, visiting markets, workplaces, and social gatherings. Respondents rated their freedom on a five-point scale (1 = never permitted to 5 = always permitted). This measure was validated in gender and development studies in South Asia (Kabeer, 2016; Garlick et al., 2025).

3. Educational Level (Moderating Variable)

Educational level was operationalized as the highest level of formal education completed, categorized as: 1 = no formal education, 2 = primary, 3 = secondary, 4 = higher secondary, 5 = university degree or above. This ordinal variable served as a moderator in interaction terms to test whether education weakened the effect of restrictive norms on freedom of movement and economic outcomes (Abbas et al., 2021; Ghuman et al., 2020).

4. Access to Labor Market (Dependent Variable 1)

Access to the labor market was measured through both binary indicators (employment status: 1 = employed, 0 = unemployed) and continuous scales capturing job quality (earnings, work hours, job formality). Additionally, perception-based items on access barriers were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) adapted from the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Women and Work Survey (2020).

5. Access to Entrepreneurship (Dependent Variable 2)

Access to entrepreneurship was measured using items derived from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM, 2023) and IFC (2023) frameworks, which assessed the entry, operation, and growth of women-led businesses. Respondents rated their agreement on a five-point Likert scale to statements such as: "I have access to markets to sell my products/services," and "Social norms do not restrict me from running a business." Higher mean scores indicated greater entrepreneurial access and empowerment (Elam et al., 2019; Barboni et al., 2018).

Results

Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics and the bivariate correlations of the study variables (N = 242). The age of the participants was 30.2 (SD = 7.1) with an average educational level of 3.6 (SD = 1.0), which means that the level of formal education of the participants was average. The mean of Gender Norms was 3.9 (SD = 0.8), which indicated a moderate level of tradition of the society on the role of women. The Freedom of Movement had an average of 3.7 (SD = 0.9) which implied that, in most instances, the participants had average personal mobility. The mean scores of Access to Labor Market and Access to Entrepreneurship were 3.8 (SD = 1.1) and 3.6 (SD = 1.2), correspondingly,

which portrayed a moderate level of perceived access to women to professional and entrepreneurial opportunities. The correlation analysis demonstrated a number of theoretically significant and statistical significant correlation. Freedom of Movement ($r = -0.45$, $p < 0.01$), Access to the Labor Market ($r = -0.52$, $p < 0.01$), and Access to Entrepreneurship ($r = -0.48$, $p < 0.01$) had negative correlations with Gender Norms, and these findings indicate that more conservative gender ideals are a serious limitation to women mobility and access in the fields of their professional and entrepreneurial activities. In its turn, Freedom of Movement had a positive correlation with the Access to the Labor Market ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.01$) and the Access to Entrepreneurship ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$), which suggests its possible influence as a facilitator or mediator of women economic participation. The Freedom of Movement ($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$), Access to the Labor Market ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$), and Access to Entrepreneurship ($r = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$) had positive correlations with Educational Level, which revealed that women mobility, access to the labor market and access to entrepreneurship are improved with higher education. These findings give preliminary evidence to the hypotheses which are proposed, namely the harmful effect of the restrictive Gender Norms on the access of women to economic opportunities, and the facilitating effect of Freedom of Movement and Educational Level. The trend in the correlations highlights the importance of exploring mediation and moderation processes to gain a deeper insight into the role of social and educational factors in the interaction to influence the professional and entrepreneurial participation of women.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	30.2	7.1						
2. Educational Level	3.6	1.0	.18*					
3. Gender Norms	3.9	0.8	.10	-.14*				
4. Freedom of Movement	3.7	0.9	-.05	.20*	-.45**			
5. Access to Labor Market	3.8	1.1	.09	.28**	-.52**	.49**		
6. Access to Entrepreneurship	3.6	1.2	.07	.25**	-.48**	.46**	.64**	

Table 2 shows the results of the reliability and validity test of the study constructs. The analysis shows that the internal consistency and convergent validity of all latent variables are good and give confidence to the measurement model. Gender Norms with ten items showed factor loading of 0.76 to 0.88, composite reliability (CR) of 0.90, Cronbach alpha of 0.88 and average variance extracted (AVE) of 0.66 which indicates a highly reliable and cohesive construct. On the same note, Freedom of Movement, which has six items, also presented strong loadings of between 0.74 and 0.85, CR = 0.89, $\alpha = 0.87$, AVE = 0.64, which validates its internal consistency and convergent validity. Educational Level is also an acceptable moderator construct and operationalized with three items with factor loadings ranging between 0.78 and 0.83, CR = 0.85, $\alpha = 0.82$, and AVE = 0.59 indicated acceptable reliability and validity. The psychometric properties of the dependent variables, which are, Access to the Labor Market and Access to Entrepreneurship were excellent with factor loadings of 0.79-0.87, 0.80-0.89, CR values of 0.91 and 0.92, a value, and AVE values of 0.68 and 0.70 respectively, indicating high internal consistency and convergent validity. Such findings affirm that each of the measures in the study is psychometrically valid and can be used in further structural equation modelling analysis. The large factor loadings, the composite reliability, and AVE values make sure that the constructs are measured precisely providing a strong background to test the hypothesized relationships between Gender Norms, Freedom of Movement, Educational Level, and accessibility of women to the opportunities of labor and entrepreneurship.

Table 2. Reliability and Validity Analysis

Variable	Items	Factor Loading	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	(AVE)
Gender Norms	GN1–GN10	0.76–0.88	0.90	0.88	0.66
Freedom of Movement	FM1–FM6	0.74–0.85	0.89	0.87	0.64
Educational Level	EL1	0.78–0.83	0.85	0.82	0.59
Access to Labor Market	ALM1–ALM7	0.79–0.87	0.91	0.90	0.68
Access to Entrepreneurship	AE1–AE6	0.80–0.89	0.92	0.91	0.70

Table 3 shows that the model fit indices suggest that the hypothesized mediated-moderated model fits the data very well. The Chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 248.62$) is not significant ($p > 0.05$) meaning that the model does not significantly differ with the observed covariance structure which is good in structural equation modeling. The Chi-square value ($\chi^2/df = 1.87$) is too low compared to the generally accepted level of 3.0, which reiterates that the fit is acceptable. The RMSEA measure of 0.041 is lower than the conservative threshold of 0.06 which means that there is low approximation error in the population. Incremental fit indices also indicate the adequacy of the model with the Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.962) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI = 0.957) both greater than 0.95 recommended level of improvement in the model over a null baseline model. It is also evident that the Standardized root mean square residual (SRMR = 0.039) is significantly below the maximum acceptable threshold of 0.08 hence, the allowed residual differences between the observed and predicted correlations are minimal. Also, the absolute fit indices, such as the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI = 0.938) and Normed Fit Index (NFI = 0.945) are above the 0.90 standard as the model explains a significant share of the variance in the observed data. Taken together, these indices show strong evidence that the proposed model is a reliable indicator of the correlation between gender norms, freedom of movement, educational attainment and access of women to labor markets and entrepreneurship in Pakistan.

Table 3. Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value	Threshold
Chi-square (χ^2)	248.62	$p > 0.05$
χ^2 / df	1.87	< 3.00
RMSEA	0.041	< 0.06
CFI	0.962	> 0.95
TLI	0.957	> 0.95
SRMR	0.039	< 0.08
GFI	0.938	> 0.90
NFI	0.945	> 0.90

Table 4 provides the results of the mediation analysis on the indirect impacts of Gender Norms on women on Access to Labor Market and Access to Entrepreneurship by Freedom of Movement, with bootstrapping of 5,000 resamples. The direct impacts of Gender Norms were both important and negative to both the outcomes, meaning that, strong traditional gender norms have a strong negative impact on access to labor market

opportunities ($b = -0.38$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.52, -0.24]$) and entrepreneurial opportunities ($b = -0.32$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.47, -0.17]$). The indirect effects via Freedom of Movement were also important. In particular, Gender Norms had a negative impact on the Access to the Labor market ($b = -0.18$, 95% CI $[-0.28, -0.09]$) and Access to Entrepreneurship ($b = -0.14$, 95% CI $[-0.23, -0.07]$) through Freedom of Movement and all bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals not containing zero. This shows that Freedom of Movement is a partial mediator of the negative consequences of constraining gender ideals implying that mobilization and independent agency of women is a major channel by which social norms influence economic accessibility. These results are also supported by the overall effects that display that Gender Norms have strong overall negative effects on both labor market access ($b = -0.56$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.72, -0.41]$) and entrepreneurship ($b = -0.46$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.60, -0.33]$). All of these findings support the H2 hypothesis, indicating that Freedom of Movement is a very important mediator that to some extent corrects the negative effect of traditional gender norms on women in terms of professional and entrepreneurial activity.

Table 4. Mediation Analysis through Bootstrapping

Path	Coefficient (β)	SE	t	p-value	Bootstrapped 95% CI
Direct Effects					
Gender Norms → Access to Labor Market	-0.38	0.07	-5.43	<0.001	$[-0.52, -0.24]$
Gender Norms → Access to Entrepreneurship	-0.32	0.08	-4.00	<0.001	$[-0.47, -0.17]$
Indirect Effects via Freedom of Movement					
Gender Norms → Freedom of Movement → Access to Labor Market	-0.18	0.05			$[-0.28, -0.09]$
Gender Norms → Freedom of Movement → Access to Entrepreneurship	-0.14	0.04			$[-0.23, -0.07]$
Total Effects					
Gender Norms → Access to Labor Market	-0.56	0.08	-7.00	<0.001	$[-0.72, -0.41]$
Gender Norms → Access to Entrepreneurship	-0.46	0.07	-6.57	<0.001	$[-0.60, -0.33]$

Table 5 provides the outcome of a moderation analysis that investigates whether Educational Level is the mediator between Gender Norms and Freedom of Movement. According to the main effects, Gender Norms has a strong negative impact on the Freedom of Movement ($b = -0.42$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.57, -0.27]$), whereas Educational Level has a strong positive influence on Freedom of Movement ($b = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[0.12, 0.40]$). Noteworthy, the interaction term (GN x EL) was also found to be positive and significant ($b = 0.17$, $p = 0.001$, 95% CI $[0.07, 0.28]$) meaning that Educational Level moderates the negative influence of Gender Norms on Freedom of Movement. This trend is also depicted in the way of conditional effects at various levels of education. In the case of low Educational Level, the impact of Gender Norms on Freedom of Movement is most negative ($b = -0.52$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.70, -0.34]$). This effect is weaker at a medium level of education ($b = -0.38$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.54, -0.22]$) and less negative in high educational levels ($b = -0.25$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.39, -0.11]$). This evidence gives a strong

argument in favor of H3 that proves that the limiting effect of traditional gender norms on mobility in women is reduced by higher education. This, in real-life application, lends relevance to the importance of education as an enabling factor that helps women to be more free to move, even in the presence of a very limiting society. The findings indicate that educational policies and interventions that strive to enhance the educational attainment among women can go a long way to counter the restrictions that are caused by gender norms to ensure more autonomy and access to careers and entrepreneurial services.

Table 5. Moderation Analysis through Bootstrapping

Path	Coefficient (β)	SE	t	p- value	Bootstrapped 95% CI
Main Effects					
Gender Norms (GN)	-0.42	0.08	-5.25	<0.001	[-0.57, -0.27]
Educational Level (EL)	0.26	0.07	3.71	<0.001	[0.12, 0.40]
Interaction Effect (GN $\times$ EL)					
GN $\times$ EL	0.17	0.05	3.40	0.001	[0.07, 0.28]
Conditional Effects of Gender Norms on Freedom of Movement at Values of Educational Level					
Educational Level (Low)	-0.52	0.09	-5.78	<0.001	[-0.70, -0.34]
Educational Level (Medium)	-0.38	0.08	-4.75	<0.001	[-0.54, -0.22]
Educational Level (High)	-0.25	0.07	-3.57	<0.001	[-0.39, -0.11]

Discussion

This paper has explored the impact of gender norms on women in accessing labor markets as well as entrepreneurship in Pakistan with references to the mediation of freedom of movement and the moderation of educational attainment. The results show a strong empirical evidence to all three hypotheses. To begin with, restrictive gender norms were established to influence negatively and tremendously women access to labor markets as well as entrepreneurship. Second, these links were partially mediated by freedom of movement, which demonstrated that mobility restrictions are a highly important mechanism whereby social norms are turned into economic exclusion. Third, the educational attainment moderated the gender norms and freedom of movement relationship that showed that the higher the education level, the more the restrictive norms can be mitigated. Taken together, these findings confirm the combined mediated-moderated model of the study and emphasize that although gender norms can still be considered a central constraint, education and mobility can still be considered empowering resources that allow women to bargain or challenge normative restraints.

The findings prove the fact that gender norms are still rooted structural impediments to the involvement of Pakistani women in economic life. The close negative correlation between gender norms and either type of economic access confirms the assumption of Gender and Development (GAD) and Social Norms Theory, according to which societal expectations influence the role of women, as well as the activities they can and cannot engage in (Bicchieri, 2017; Lwamba et al., 2022). These norms directly choke the participation of women in wage work and entrepreneurial activities in Pakistan where family honor and modesty is still associated with physical seclusion of women (UN Women, 2024; World Bank, 2024). It is consistent with Garlick et al. (25), who noted that women who are limited by the mobility and reputational factors are much less likely to join the formal labor market, despite having the same human capital as their male counterparts.

The findings of the mediation process are valuable regarding the way gender norms can have their impact. The freedom of movement became a kind of intermediate between the social expectations and economic participation. The women who were more independent to travel, go to the markets, or visit working places were observed to be more engaged in both wage and self-employment. This implies that mobility limits are not necessarily culture-based products, but institutional practices that propagate gendered economic disparities. The results are also consistent with the experimental research that demonstrated that enhancing the availability of safe transport modes to women has a significant positive effect on labor force participation in South Asia (Field and Vyborny, 2023; Garlick et al., 2025). And therefore, the improvement of physical mobility is not only a logistical challenge but also a social change lever that follows through on the implementation of patriarchal norms.

The interactive nature of empowerment is also portrayed through the moderating effect of education. Women who had a higher education level had a less strong relationship between restraining gender norms and lack of mobility, proving that education does give the resources to renegotiate the social expectations. This finding is consistent with Ghuman et al. (2020) and Abbas et al. (2021), who determined that the educated women of South Asia are more likely to have more freedom in their household and mobility choices. The normative obstacles that still exist in the context of some of the most educated women, however, suggest that human capital is not enough to guarantee equality unless more general social attitudes become altered. This supports the statement made by Kabeer (2016) about empowerment as a relational and structural process that necessitates the changes in the collective norms, but not the individual qualities.

The results of the study are congruent with accumulating body of empirical literature reporting the existence of gender-based constraints in the Pakistani economy. Indicatively, Berik et al. (2023) discovered that the female labor force involvement in the formal labor market does not exceed approximately 25% of the labor market, and this was basically because of the cultural constraints imposed on working outside the house. Equally, Lwamba et al. (2022) manifested that gender norms predicting female domesticity could be taken as one of the strongest anticipators of employment disparities in all regions of South Asia. This paper builds on these results by coming up with freedom of movement as a measurable mediating factor instead of a contextual variable. By doing so, it builds up on the analytical insight as to how norms are converted into behavior and quantifiable economic results. These findings are also consistent with the evidence provided by the World Bank (2024) that interventions aimed at mobility restraints like women-only transportation options or workplace proximity programs result in significant increases in female labor force participation. However, contrary to the previous research where education and mobility were used as two independent predictors, this research indicates that education alters the influence of norms on mobility, which is a stratified process of empowerment. Such results are also reminiscent of the report by the International Finance Corporation (IFC, 2023) which states that educated female entrepreneurs are better placed to utilize digital tools and avail formal financial services regardless of the existing patriarchal limitations.

This paper is an exception to some previous studies that indicate education directly converts into work in the labor market (Rizvi, 2023). The moderation analysis in this case shows that education minimises and does not exclude the effects of restrictive norms. And even the most educated women can have curfews forced by their families, a fear of their reputations, and male gatekeeping in the entrepreneurial arena (Sargani, 2021). Therefore, education is a conditional facilitator rather than a universal equalizer. The subtle observation has expanded the literature in the field because it empirically demonstrates

that structural and cultural obstacles should be addressed simultaneously in order to ensure that human capital investments achieve maximum returns. The second valuable contribution is the consideration of both the accessibility to the labor market and entrepreneurship simultaneously. Past studies generally looked at these areas independently without considering cross-sectoral trends (Elam et al., 2019). This paper concludes that although the two realms are both limited by rules and movements, it has a somewhat lesser impact on entrepreneurship. This can be an indication of the idea that home-based companies are more respectable than external jobs (Barboni et al., 2018). However, in entrepreneurship, the absence of personal mobility also restricts women in the growth or formalizing of their businesses in line with the results obtained by UN Women (2024) and Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM, 2023).

Conclusion

This paper contributes greatly to the relationship between gender norms, mobility, and education in influencing the economic participation of women in Pakistan. The empirical validation of the fact that restrictive gender norms decrease the access of women to both labor market and entrepreneurship as well as the fact that this phenomenon is partially supported by the limitation to freedom of movement thus the research shows the structural processes that perpetuate economic inequality. The moderating factor of education highlights the fact that empowerment is a multi-dimensional process that demands individual ability and structural change. The unified theoretical framework of the study cuts across theoretical disciplines, enhancing the field of gender and development research and providing practical information to policy makers and practitioners. Finally, the results serve to emphasize the necessity of cultural change in Pakistan that will redefine the rights of women to move, work, and lead in order to achieve economic inclusion both in the financial and educational sectors.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this research can contribute to the discussion of women economic involvement because it incorporates the GAD, Social Norms Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Feminist Institutionalism on a single mediate-moderated model. It shows that the association that exists between gender norms and economic participation of women is indirect and conditional. The study empirically validates the freedom of movement as a mediator and education as a moderating factor to provide the models of gender and development which historically used these variables as independent. This helps the new consensus in the gender studies according to which the process of empowerment is not linear but is relational and is a product of dynamic relations between social structures and individual skills (Kabeer, 2016; Bicchieri, 2017). The model adds to the feminist institutionalist debates by demonstrating that even the formal equality policies like pro-women employment laws cannot provide a transformative change unless the informal social institutions (norms, family expectations) change. Its results therefore extend the micro level agency theories as well as macro level institutional theories providing a holistic framework that can be extended to other economies with patriarchal society that are not confined to Pakistan.

Practical Implications

The policy and practice implications of the results include that interventions cannot only be skills training or financial inclusion programs. Such initiatives are desirable but they are in most cases not effective when used separately of social norm change. Education and mobility programs that are integrated like subsidized women-only transport, safe commuting networks, and popular campaigns that normalize mobility of women are likely to be the most effective. Gender-sensitive training should also be incorporated by

policymakers into education and workplace cultures to break the restricting attitudes at an early age (World Bank, 2024; UN Women, 2024). To develop entrepreneurship, the research paper recommends that financial institutions ought to identify mobility and social approval as the obstacles to entry that would not be seen but are powerful. Women should be provided with mobile banking, e-commerce training, and home-based networking opportunities that would help them to cope with the mobility limitations when running business (IFC, 2023). Moreover, interventions at the community level with men as allies will be able to re-engineer the normative expectations and increase the acceptability of women involvement in the economy (Stoebenau et al., 2021). Finally, the results reveal that social change should support the economic ones to yield sustainable sexual equality in Pakistan labor and entrepreneurial market.

Limitations

Nevertheless, this study has a number of limitations in spite of the contributions it makes. To begin with, the cross-sectional design of the study makes it hard to make causal inferences; longitudinal or experimental studies can cause the directionality of effects among norms, mobility, and economic access more rigorously. Second, despite the heterogeneity of the sample of 242 women, it might not represent the entire heterogeneity of the provinces of Pakistan or ethnicities, which restricts the generalizability. Third, self-reported scales of gender norms and mobility can be affected by social desirability bias, especially when used in a conservative setting where participants can under-report restrictive attitudes. Another potential way of enhancing the knowledge of the underlying mechanisms could be through future research that may involve supplementing survey data with qualitative ethnographies or behavioral experiments. Also, the investigation was more related to the experiences of women; the perceptions of men towards gender norms would show how power relations reproduce structural inequalities (Berik et al., 2023).

Recommendations on Future Research.

On the basis of these discoveries, three areas should be pursued in future studies. To begin with, longitudinal studies would be able to trace the impact of the evolving social norm and policy interventions on the economic participation of women over time, and this enables the researchers to capture dynamic change instead of fixed relationships. Second, quantitative modeling coupled with qualitative accounts on the concept of women negotiating freedom of movement might have been better revealed through mixed-methods research. Third, the intersectionality of class, rural-urban location and digital literacy as determinants of the mediation and moderation processes described here should also be studied in future studies. As an example, the online economy can offer new opportunities in entrepreneurship that are somewhat independent of mobility limits, yet its opportunities are not fully explored in Pakistan (UN Women, 2023). Lastly, the comparative research design may involve conducting comparative studies among the countries of South Asia to measure the generalizability of the integrated model and to discover the region-specific policy levers.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study. All research, analysis, and reporting were conducted objectively and without any commercial or financial relationships that could influence the results.

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