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Effect of Vocational Training on Women Empowerment: A Pilot Study in Kheshgi Payan, District Nowshera, Pakistan

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Abstract

Women's empowerment is a critical element of social and economic development in Pakistan, where women constitute nearly half of the total population but remain underrepresented in the labor force. Rural women in particular face structural barriers, including illiteracy, poverty, limited mobility, and lack of access to productive resources. This study investigates the effect of vocational training on women's empowerment through a pilot project titled "Zama Hunar Zama Gata", conducted in Kheshgi Payan, District Nowshera (KPK). The program provided training in tailoring and embroidery to 150 disadvantaged women, enabling them to acquire marketable skills. Using a quasi-experimental, pre-post design, data were collected through structured questionnaires measuring four empowerment dimensions: personality development, income-earning opportunities, contribution to society, and quality of life. Findings show that women reported enhanced self-confidence, increased income opportunities, greater participation in household and community decision-making, and improvement in living standards. The study highlights vocational training as a practical, low-cost intervention for rural women's empowerment. It offers evidence-based insights for policymakers, NGOs, and development practitioners to scale similar initiatives in Pakistan.

Keywords: vocational training, women empowerment, rural, tailoring, embroidery, TVET

Introduction

Women's empowerment has become a global priority in development discourse, yet in Pakistan, women continue to face multifaceted challenges that hinder their participation in social and economic life. With a population exceeding 220 million, Pakistan is the sixth most populous country in the world, and nearly 48% of this population consists of women (World Bank, 2021). Despite their numerical strength, women's labor force participation rate remains low, particularly in rural areas, where cultural restrictions and structural barriers intersect to limit opportunities. The absence of education and employable skills compounds these challenges, leaving women dependent on male family members and reinforcing cycles of poverty.

Vocational training (VT) represents a strategic solution to bridge this gap. Unlike formal academic education, VT emphasizes practical skills that can be applied immediately in the labor market. Skills such as tailoring and embroidery are not only culturally acceptable but also demand-driven within local communities, allowing women to generate income without significant capital investment. Moreover, these trades can be practiced from home, offering flexibility for women constrained by mobility or domestic responsibilities.

In Pakistan, gender disparity in education and training continues to widen socio-economic inequalities. Rural women face multiple disadvantages: lack of literacy, patriarchal norms, limited access to credit, and weak institutional support. Empowering women through skill-based training can directly improve household productivity, enhance food security, and elevate living standards. Importantly, empowerment is not limited to economic independence—it extends to personality development, self-confidence, and the ability to participate in decision-making at family and community levels.

This study focuses on Kheshgi Payan in District Nowshera, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), a rural area characterized by poverty, limited educational facilities, and gendered restrictions on women's work. Through the pilot initiative Zama Hunar Zama Gata, tailoring and embroidery training was provided to disadvantaged women, with the aim of fostering empowerment. This paper contributes to the growing body of evidence linking vocational training to empowerment outcomes in Pakistan. It also addresses the research gap on rural women's empowerment through context-specific interventions, highlighting pathways for sustainable social and economic development.

Literature Review

The role of vocational training in empowering women has been widely discussed in global development literature. Mufadi Al-Momani (2019) emphasized the importance of vocational and technical education in empowering Jordanian women, noting significant improvements in employment ratios and self-confidence. Similarly, Sulaiman et al. (2015) highlighted challenges and successes of Technical and Vocational Education (TVE) programs in Malaysia, underscoring the need for policy support and gender inclusivity.

In South Asia, Gupta (2016) examined India's skill development programs and their impact on women entrepreneurs, concluding that VT fosters economic participation and enables women to transition from unpaid labor to entrepreneurship. Diwakar and Ahamad (2014) further argued that skills and knowledge are the foundation of national competitiveness, with particular benefits for marginalized groups such as rural women.

In Pakistan, however, the literature indicates a persistent gap in women's access to TVET. Kamran and Qurat-ul-Ain (2018) showed that family support and targeted training programs in Lahore improved women's empowerment, yet such programs remain limited in rural areas. The National Education Policy (2017–2025) identifies youth skill development as a national priority but acknowledges the gender gap in TVET facilities. Studies by Oxenham et al. (2002) and Munir (2017) stressed the lack of industry participation and mismatch between training supply and labor market demand as critical challenges.

While urban-focused studies demonstrate positive outcomes of VT for women's empowerment, rural contexts remain underexplored. Rural women face not only economic barriers but also cultural constraints, where mobility restrictions and male-dominated social structures limit access to training and employment. The present study addresses this gap by implementing and assessing a pilot program in a rural KPK setting, thereby providing much-needed empirical evidence on localized empowerment outcomes.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study employed a quasi-experimental, pre-post design to evaluate the effect of vocational training on rural women's empowerment. A true experimental design was not feasible due to ethical and logistical challenges, as random assignment was impossible in the rural context. The quasi-experimental design was therefore considered the most appropriate because it allowed for measurement of change over time within the same group of participants. Pre-training data established a baseline, and post-training data assessed the outcomes of the intervention. This design is widely used in education and training research in developing countries (Belli, 2014), particularly where disadvantaged groups are targeted and controlled experiments are impractical.

Research Philosophy and Approach

The study followed a positivist research philosophy, focusing on observable, measurable outcomes of vocational training. The approach was deductive, as the study began with theoretical assumptions drawn from prior research on women's empowerment and vocational training, and tested these through empirical evidence. By applying structured measurement and statistical testing, the research adhered to a quantitative, objective lens, reducing subjectivity and bias.

Population and Study Area

The population for this study consisted of women living in Khesghi Payan, District Nowshera, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan. This area was purposively selected because it represents a typical rural community with low female literacy rates, high unemployment, and limited access to skill development facilities. The socio-cultural context of Khesghi Payan is male-dominated, with women largely confined to household responsibilities. Many women in this area are illiterate or semi-literate, and lack marketable skills. Thus, the community provided a relevant setting for studying the empowerment potential of vocational training.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Given the nature of the target population, the study used non-probability convenience sampling. Women were enrolled based on willingness, availability, and fulfillment of minimum selection criteria (aged 18 years or above, residing in the area, and motivated to acquire skills). While convenience sampling has limitations in terms of generalizability, it was justified for this pilot due to cultural sensitivities, accessibility challenges, and resource constraints.

The final sample size was 150 participants, which is adequate for statistical analysis, including regression and correlation tests, in social sciences research (Hair et al., 2010). The sample represented diverse age groups (18–45 years), marital statuses, and household income categories, reflecting the heterogeneity of rural women in the region.

Training Intervention

The intervention was delivered through a pilot project titled “Zama Hunar Zama Gata” (My Skill, My Pride). The training ran for three months, focusing on two modules:

- Tailoring: learning garment preparation, cutting, stitching, and finishing techniques.
- Embroidery: learning basic and advanced decorative stitching patterns for home-based products.

Training sessions were conducted in three daily shifts to accommodate all participants. The training venue consisted of three rooms equipped with 50 sewing machines (both manual and electric), adequate lighting, ventilation, and a generator to address load-shedding issues. Safety measures, including first-aid kits and occupational health protocols, were observed.

Nine experienced trainers were recruited, each responsible for 15–20 trainees. The trainers adopted a competency-based training (CBT&A) approach, emphasizing practical skills rather than theory. Women learned by doing, producing garments and embroidery samples under supervision.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire designed in English and translated into Urdu for clarity. The questionnaire included five sections:

1. Demographics (age, education, marital status, household income).
2. Personality Development (confidence, decision-making, self-efficacy).
3. Income-Earning Opportunities (ability to earn through tailoring/embroidery).
4. Betterment of Society (participation in family and community welfare).
5. Quality of Life (perceived improvements in health, comfort, and happiness).

Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Pre-training questionnaires captured baseline data, while post-training questionnaires measured changes after three months.

Validity and Reliability

The instrument was validated by three experts in vocational training and social sciences. A pilot test was conducted with 20 women from a nearby village not included in the main study. Based on feedback, minor adjustments were made to wording for clarity. Reliability of the scale was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, with values above 0.70 for all dimensions, confirming internal consistency.

Data Analysis

Data were coded and analyzed using STATA 15.0. Analysis followed multiple stages:

- **Descriptive Statistics** to summarize demographics.
- **Paired t-tests** to compare pre- and post-training means.
- **Correlation Analysis** to examine relationships among empowerment dimensions.
- **Multiple Regression Analysis** to assess the effect of tailoring and embroidery training on empowerment outcomes (personality, income, society, quality of life).

This combination of tests ensured both descriptive and inferential insights, strengthening the robustness of findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the affiliated institution's review board. All participants gave informed consent, and confidentiality was strictly maintained. Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time. Cultural sensitivities were respected by engaging female trainers and ensuring safe learning environments.

Methodological Limitations

While the methodology was carefully designed, several limitations should be acknowledged:

- Convenience sampling reduces generalizability.
- Self-reported data may be influenced by social desirability bias.
- The three-month duration may not capture long-term empowerment effects.
- No control group was included, limiting causal attribution.

Despite these limitations, the chosen methodology was considered appropriate for a pilot study in a culturally sensitive, rural context.

Results

Table 1 Demographic Profile of Participants (N = 150)

Variable	Category	%
Age	18–24 years	21
	25–40 years	61
	41+ years	18
Marital Status	Married	72
	Single	19
	Widowed/Divorced	9
Education Level	No schooling	54
	Primary	29
	Secondary+	17
Monthly Household Income	< PKR 15,000	47
	PKR 15,001–25,000	39

Variable	Category	%
	> PKR 25,000	14

Note. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Table 2 Pre-Post Mean Scores of Empowerment Dimensions

Dimension	Pre-Training M	Post-Training M	t	p
Personality Development (PD)	2.11	3.94	14.82	.000
Income Opportunities (IEO)	1.89	3.77	16.25	.000
Betterment of Society (BOS)	2.03	3.62	13.41	.000
Quality of Life (QOL)	2.18	3.88	15.74	.000

Note. Paired-sample t-tests indicate significant improvements across all dimensions.

Table 3 Correlation Matrix of Empowerment Dimensions (Post-Training)

Variable	PD	IEO	BOS	QOL
PD	1	.66	.59	.62
IEO	.66	1	.68	.71
BOS	.59	.68	1	.64
QOL	.62	.71	.64	1

Note. All correlations are significant at $p < .01$.

Table 4 Regression of Empowerment Dimensions on Training Modules

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	β	t	p
Personality Development (PD)	Tailoring	.43	4.82	.000
	Embroidery	.29	3.95	.001
Income Opportunities (IEO)	Tailoring	.51	6.14	.000
	Embroidery	.34	4.77	.000
Betterment of Society (BOS)	Tailoring	.36	4.28	.000
	Embroidery	.32	3.98	.001
Quality of Life (QOL)	Tailoring	.48	5.97	.000
	Embroidery	.38	4.83	.000

Note. Standardized beta coefficients report.

Discussion

The present pilot demonstrates that a short, competency-based vocational training (VT) program focused on tailoring and embroidery can catalyze multi-dimensional empowerment among rural women in Khesghi Payan, District Nowshera. The pre-post gains in personality development, income-earning opportunities, betterment of society, and perceived quality of life are large and statistically significant, indicating that even time-bound, low-cost interventions can shift agency and outcomes when they are culturally aligned and market relevant.

Interpretation of key findings: The strongest quantitative improvements were observed in income-earning opportunities (IEO) and quality of life (QOL). This pattern is consistent with a practical theory of change in which skill acquisition lowers entry barriers to self-employment, unlocking near-immediate earning potential through piecework, alterations, and bespoke garments. As income begins to flow, women report improved household consumption (nutrition, small durables), greater ability to contribute to children's education and health expenditures, and enhanced bargaining power within the household—manifesting as higher perceived QOL. Personality development (PD) also rose sharply, which aligns with the literature on mastery experiences and self-efficacy: repeated successful task completion (e.g., producing saleable items) builds confidence, assertiveness, and willingness to participate in decision-making.

Alignment with prior evidence: These results mirror evidence from Pakistan and the wider region. Urban and peri-urban studies have found that Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) improves women's employability and self-confidence, especially when family support is present and training matches market demand (e.g., Kamran & Qurat-ul-Ain, 2018). South Asian work emphasizing the role of skills as a driver of inclusive growth similarly anticipates gains in household welfare and agency (Gupta, 2016; Diwakar & Ahamad, 2014). From a development economics perspective, increases in women's earnings often correlate with gains in intra-household decision-making and human capital investments (Duflo, 2012), which our QOL and BOS (betterment of society) measures indirectly capture. Finally, policy analyses for Pakistan have long identified under-supply of gender-responsive TVET and weak industry linkages as binding constraints (Munir, 2017; Government of Pakistan, 2017–2025); this pilot's outcomes reinforce the case for scaling women-focused, market-linked programs in underserved districts.

Mechanisms: why tailoring and embroidery work. Several features make these trades especially potent in rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. First, cultural acceptability: garment production and decorative stitching align with local gender norms and can be performed within the home, circumventing mobility constraints. Second, low fixed costs: a basic toolkit (needle set, thread, scissors) and shared access to a machine can start production with minimal capital. Third, predictable local demand: routine alterations, school uniforms, bridal trousseau items, and seasonal orders provide steady micro-markets. Fourth, positive social spillovers: visible products and customer feedback create social recognition, amplifying confidence and encouraging peers to participate. These mechanisms explain simultaneous improvements in PD, IEO, and BOS.

Heterogeneity of effects and inclusion: Although the pilot was not powered for granular subgroup analysis, program observations suggest that younger women (18–30) adopted new techniques quickly and were more likely to experiment with design variety, while older participants (31+) leveraged stronger social networks for word-of-mouth orders. Women with some primary education reported faster comprehension of measurement and pattern-reading, but illiterate participants also progressed when instruction used demonstration-first pedagogy and peer mentoring. Marital status mattered for timing and volume of work—married women with young children often favored small, repeatable pieces, while single or older participants took on larger commissions. These patterns imply that VT centers should offer differentiated pathways (e.g., basic, advanced, and business add-ons) and flexible scheduling.

Program design and delivery insights. The competency-based training (CBT&A) approach was central to outcomes: by emphasizing observable skills and iterative practice, CBT&A compresses the time-to-earn. Trainer-to-learner ratios of ~1:15–20, three daily shifts, and adequate equipment utilization (50 machines across rooms) maintained learning momentum. Additionally, safety, lighting, and backup power were not incidental—they protected machine uptime and enabled consistent practice, which is critical for skill consolidation. Going forward, embedding micro-entrepreneurship modules—pricing, simple cost accounting, quality control, and customer relations—could further increase conversion from skills to sustainable income.

From training to markets: the missing middle. A well-known failure mode in TVET is skill acquisition without market access. The regression results indicate tailoring slightly outperforms embroidery on IEO and QOL, plausibly because tailoring directly maps to high-frequency local demand. To avoid post-training drop-off, programs should establish structured market linkages: (i) producer groups/cooperatives to aggregate orders and standardize quality; (ii) partnerships with local boutiques, school uniform vendors, and wedding planners; (iii) periodic buyer–seller meets; and (iv) basic digital selling support (WhatsApp catalogs, Facebook/Instagram pages managed by a hub facilitator). For embroidery, curated product lines (table runners, cushion covers, dupattas) and design mentorship can command higher margins and diversify income beyond alterations.

Finance and assets. Access to micro-assets (own sewing machine, starter kit) is a pivotal bottleneck. Pairing training with asset grants, lease-to-own, or zero-interest microloans would raise post-program productivity. Revolving funds managed by women's groups can finance raw materials in bulk, reducing unit costs and stabilizing cash flow. Evidence from microfinance in Pakistan suggests that when credit is combined with skill upgrading, women's enterprises are more resilient and growth-oriented (Zafar & Habib, 2021).

Certification, recognition, and progression. Formal recognition (certificates aligned to national competency standards) can improve credibility with buyers and employers. Over time, a ladderized curriculum—Level 1 (basic), Level 2 (intermediate tailoring/embroidery + finishing), Level 3 (entrepreneurship + quality assurance)—would enable progression and retain alumni engagement. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) should be offered to experienced artisans to accelerate their movement into advanced modules or trainer pipelines, helping address the chronic shortage of female TVET instructors.

Monitoring, evaluation, and data systems. While the pilot used pre–post surveys, future iterations should incorporate longitudinal tracking (6–12 months) to measure income durability, customer retention, and re-investment. Simple mobile data tools—monthly order logs, cost/revenue sheets, and client feedback—can populate a light Management Information System (MIS). This evidence base will help calibrate cost per graduate, cost per sustained job, and income uplift, metrics increasingly required by donors and government programs.

Policy and systems implications. At the system level, the findings support three policy shifts. First, decentralize TVET by funding community-scale centers in union councils with high female inactivity, ensuring proximity and cultural acceptability. Second, co-finance post-training supports—asset access, market linkages, and childcare—because these complements unlock most of the income effects. Third, align curricula with industry via local advisory boards (tailors' associations, fabric wholesalers) to keep syllabi current and demand-driven. These shifts align with the National Education Policy's emphasis on employability and could be integrated into provincial TVET authority strategies.

Limitations revisited and avenues for future research. The quasi-experimental design without a control group limits causal attribution; external events (e.g., seasonal demand, price fluctuations) could contribute to observed gains. Convenience sampling in a single village constrains generalizability. Self-reported measures carry social desirability risks. Future studies should introduce comparison groups (matched non-participants), use difference-in-differences or propensity score matching, and blend qualitative methods (life histories, focus groups) to unpack changes in agency and norms. Measuring heterogeneous treatment effects—by age, education, baseline confidence, and household constraints—would refine targeting. Finally, cost-effectiveness analyses comparing alternative delivery models (center-based vs. mobile trainers; grant vs. lease-to-own machines) would inform scale decisions.

Synthesis. Overall, the pilot confirms the plausibility and promise of a skills → income → agency → welfare pathway (Kabeer, 1999), with tailoring and embroidery serving as credible vehicles for rapid empowerment in rural Pakistan. The quantitative improvements are substantial, the mechanisms are intelligible, and the operational lessons are actionable. With thoughtful extensions—market integration, finance, progression, and rigorous evaluation—this model can be scaled within provincial TVET systems and NGO programs to close persistent gender gaps in economic participation.

Conclusions

This pilot study shows that targeted, culturally compatible vocational training can deliver rapid and meaningful empowerment for rural women in Khesghi Payan. After three months of competency-based training in tailoring and embroidery, participants reported higher confidence and decision-making capacity, significant gains in income-earning opportunities, greater contribution to family and community life, and improved perceived quality of life. These results align with national policy priorities to expand gender-responsive TVET and demonstrate that small, well-executed programs can produce outsized welfare impacts when linked to real demand.

For practice, three ingredients are decisive: (i) market linkage from day one (buyer networks, cooperatives, digital catalogs), (ii) asset access (machines and working capital via grants or lease-to-own), and (iii) progression pathways (advanced modules, certification, and entrepreneurship support). For policy, decentralizing TVET centers to underserved union councils, co-financing post-training supports, and formalizing industry advisory input will accelerate scale and sustainability.

Future research should add comparison groups and longer follow-up to verify durability and cost-effectiveness, and test complementary interventions (microfinance, childcare, design mentorship). With these refinements, women-focused VT can become a cornerstone of inclusive, locally-led development across rural Pakistan.

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