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Autonomy and Empowerment of Christian Women in Pakistan: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

The study examined the autonomy and empowerment of Christian women in urban and semi-urban areas of Sargodha in the context of the interplay of gender, religious identity, family structure and socio-economic factors. The study was qualitative, under the light of interpretivist paradigm, feminist viewpoints and phenomenological perspective. The data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with 31 Christian women from different age groups in urban and semi-urban areas of Sargodha. The purposive sampling method was used to select the participants. The data was analyzed narratively and thematically through six-phase approach developed by Braun and Clarke. The results were presented under several themes including personal autonomy, education, employment and access to opportunities, gender roles and patriarchal limitations, religious identity and discrimination, socio-economic barriers and coping. The results showed that women's autonomy was negotiated in the context of their family and community relationships. Moreover, patriarchy limited women's role in the decision-making process, movement, access to resources, education, job, and public life. Furthermore, women's confidence, recognition and bargaining power was improved by their economic participation and provided them partial control over their income and household decision making.

Keywords: Religious Minority, Social Inclusion, Autonomy, Socio-economic Empowerment, Patriarchy, Gender Equality.

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Introduction

Empowering women is a key feature of inclusive and sustainable development. Women have ability to participate in decision-making, access resources and opportunities, and influence the conditions of their lives. Empowerment, defined by Naila Kabeer, is a process of resources, agency, and achievements which is a cycle whereby individuals have access to resources (material, human, social) which helps to build the ability to make self-choices and action, subsequently creates achievements (Kabeer, 1999). It is multiple inequalities stemming from the construction of gender, social, cultural, economic and religious identities of women (Majeed et al., 2025; Muñoz-Puig, 2024). Gender Equality Strategy of the United Nations Development Program 2026-2029 also refers to gender equality and women's empowerment as mutually reinforcing goals and highlights the need to tackle structural barriers and multiple forms of discrimination that perpetuate unequal power dynamics (UNDP, 2026).

The issue of women autonomy and empowerment is significant in the context of Pakistan, as gender disparities affect women's rights to education, employment, economic resources, mobility, decision making, leadership and public participation. Women's autonomy is a more pronounced theme that shows the link between resources, achievement, hurdles and resilience as dimensions of empowerment. The resources of education, employment, income, property, information, social networks and institutional support enhance women's capacity to set goals, make decisions, negotiate relations, and take action (Lwamba et al., 2022).

In 2023, Pakistan population census stated that Christians comprise approximately 1.37% of the total population. Christian leaders who advocate for human rights, and non-governmental organizations claim this represents an under-count (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023; National Commission for Justice and Peace, 2024). Most of the Christians live in Punjab, particularly in large cities, including Lahore, Faisalabad, and Rawalpindi but there are also some communities in Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Many of the Christians are known as Dalits or "*Chuhra*" who suffer from the burdens of caste-related occupations in sanitation among other things, and other manifestations of poverty in this context (Shirazi, 2021).

Education is also acknowledged as an important avenue for women to gain autonomy and empowerment. High literacy rate expands the knowledge and confidence then eventually opportunities of employment increased with right awareness and social participation also wider through education. Educational inequalities in Pakistan continue to closely related to wider inequalities of women's participation in the socio-economic sphere (UN Women, 2024). Christian women's educational experiences are addressed in terms of access to educational institutions, effect of education on their aspirations, job opportunities, relationships within the family, their ability to make decisions, and how education leads to increased self-worth.

Research Objectives

The study was based on the following objectives:

- i. To examine the socio-cultural, religious, and economic factors that influence the autonomy and empowerment of Christian women in Pakistan.
- ii. To investigate the ways in which Christian women navigate gender, empowerment and autonomy in their daily lives.

- iii. To analyze the social barriers for basic needs and the strategies of resilience and resistance employed by Christian women in various spheres such as family, community, church, and workplace

Literature Review

Autonomy is a fundamental concept about empowerment, meaning that a person has the ability to responsibly make decisions about their life without external restraint or coercion. In women's studies, autonomy is typically explored in the contexts of household decision-making, control over finances, freedom of movement, and reproductive rights (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001). As socially constructed norms that prioritize power in men, constrain freedom of movement for women, and limit women's participation in the public space, these domains are limited in Pakistan.

Empowerment is wide process of resource acquisition, capacity enactment and attainment of valued ends. Whereas autonomy is based on the deciding, empowerment is the process of generating the deciding. For Christian women in Pakistan, autonomy and the empowerment process are inter-related. For example, a lack of autonomy in the household further impedes the empowerment process, while structural barriers of discriminatory laws, occupational segregation, and threats of violence hinder the empowerment process altogether. Security issues, including targeted harassment and organized communal violence, also influence the abilities of Christian women to participate in civic, economic, and political activity. Forced conversions and forced marriages reported by both UN agencies and local rights organizations are also the most extreme degradation of autonomy because they deprive women of availability to control their religion, relationships, and their future. The relationship between control and empowerment is directly linked with the lived realities of Christian women's lives (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2024).

Literature suggests that the legal framework of Pakistan has provisions intended to protect human rights and it also includes laws against blasphemy and against the different religious communities. These laws are used selectively and mainly aimed against minority groups in the country. Monitoring organizations pointed out that there were some patterns about mob violence due to accusations, arrests based solely on accusations and constraints in the conduct of activities by Christians and other minority groups (Iftikhar et al. 2025). According to the report from USCIRF (2024), a number of reasons exist for the declining state of religious freedom in the country, including mob violence, killings, and destruction of places of worship. According to the report of State Department of the USA (2023), it was reported that people were murdered and attacked because of their religious identity. All this makes it harder for Christians to participate in political processes and makes women refrain from public participation due to safety fears.

Literature also highlighted those motivated religious conversions, sometimes associated with early and underage marriages, represented significant violations of the rights of Christian women in Pakistan. Reports from the UN Human Rights Council (OHCHR 2022) indicated that several cases were recorded each year about abduction of minor Christian girls, in some cases aged only 12, who were forced to convert to Islam and marry their abductor. Some NGOs such as the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ, 2023) believed that the actual number of cases of conversion is higher due to unreported cases owing to fear of reprisals, social stigma, and the police not taking any action. Most of these cases were reported from Punjab and Sindh, where with little enforcement of provincial child marriage law, the perpetrators exploited conversion as a loophole to avoid the legal requirement of age for marriage.

Previous research data also identified that accessibility of education is one of the vital steps in the empowerment of women. In Pakistan, it is evident that Christian girls are affected by various institutional barriers that prevent them from achieving their education and autonomy. Studies carried out by the Centre for Social Justice indicate that Christian girls suffer from different interrelated obstacles like poverty, living in segregated communities, and educational discrimination. Many of these girls attend poorly funded state schools in areas where minorities reside. Most of these schools are marked by absent teachers and an inadequate school environment. The report on Pakistan education statistics shows that the literacy rate for girls of minority communities is far lower than average and girls often stop going to school early because of their involvement in child labor at home or their parents' worries that it will be unsafe for them. However, the efforts of civil society organizations, religious networks, and NGOs in meeting the needs of Christian women in Pakistan concerning empowerment and protection that hardly overestimated in situations where governmental agencies do not perform adequately. One of the most notable organizations delivering legal aid is the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), which works in partnership with the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and the National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP). It provides an extensive range of legal assistance in cases concerning forced conversions, harassment at work, domestic violence, and accusations of blasphemy (HRCP, 2022; CSJ, 2023). These organizations offer safe shelter and relocation services as well as psychological assistance making a great contribution in terms of protection of victims of abuse in Pakistan who can hardly get that kind of assistance from state institutions.

Literature also highlights that the church has taken many community-based initiatives, such as literacy courses, vocational classes, and microfinance programs, to enhance the economic independence and social involvement of women (NCJP, 2021). International NGOs like Open Doors and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) are partnering with local organizations for conducting advocacy programs and capacity-building workshops focused on women from minorities. However, there are limitations to dependence on non-governmental organizations. Many projects depend on donating finances for their funding, which limits their sustainability, and many legal aid organizations are overwhelmed with too many cases. Additionally, church initiatives curb the independence of women by promoting protection rather than freedom of action.

Research Methodology

The research used a qualitative research methodology based on a feminist research framework to explore the autonomy and empowerment of Christian women in Pakistan. Qualitative methods were appropriate for this research due to in-depth understanding of participants lived experiences, perceptions, and their social realities. An interview guide was developed and in-depth interviews were conducted with 31 women respondents on the basis of data saturation. Narrative and thematic analysis techniques were used to analyze the research data. The qualitative research methodology was very helpful to explore themes related to autonomy, empowerment, gender roles and inequality, religious marginalization, and socio-economic disadvantage. Moreover, qualitative research allowed for the collection of complex emotional information, personal narratives and the context-based meanings of empowerment.

Results & Discussion

The research data was based on interpretivist and feminist ideology. The participants provided the data to share their daily experiences that offered insights into social structures in general. Their experiences indicated that autonomy and empowerment were not set standards, but were continually negotiated in the family, community, religious and economic arenas. The research

demonstrated that the lives of Christian women were not only difficult in terms of their gender, but also influenced by their identity as religious minorities, wives, daughters, mothers, workers and members of various socio-economic groups at the same time. The findings presented the process of empowerment as an ongoing and contextually bound process and not as one of moving from dependence to independence.

Theme 1: Personal Autonomy and Household Decision-Making

One of the most salient aspects of the participants' experiences was their sense of personal autonomy. However, autonomy was found neither non-existent nor fully existed in the interviews. Rather, women had varying levels of decision-making power based on the type of decision, marital status, family structure, economic role, age, and education and close ties to other family members. While women were more likely to be able to make decisions about household purchases, children's education, health care and everyday domestic issues, husbands or older family members were more likely to make decisions about work, larger financial decisions, transportation, property and major family issues.

A participant from a semi-urban area (married, Age 38) shared her experiences, *“I can have my opinion, but important decisions are made by my husband, because he makes the money, so he feels like he should make the decisions on how it gets spent; I do the household and I do the kids, but I don't have any money of my own, so I can't always say the thing I think is best”*.

The narration highlights that resource access is key to women's agency, as put forward in Kabeer's (1999) argument. It also aligns with findings from studies conducted in Pakistan that indicate that economic reliance may restrict women's authority in the decision-making process in Pakistan (Sathar & Kazi, 2000; Tarar et al., 2022).

Another respondent (Age, 35, married) shared, *“Since I began working, I no longer need to ask my husband for money for anything, even just a small amount. Now I'm able to help with the expenses and he listens more than ever before. I think I'm more confident and have more power to make decisions now”*.

Literature suggests that income is a material resource and also an agent, as seen in this account. It reinforces Kabeer's (1999) resource-agency framework and the conclusion that women's financial autonomy can boost their bargaining power within the household (Tarar et al., 2022).

Another respondent (Age 37, married) shared, *“Sometimes the hardships are not just due to my gender, but also due to my background as a Christian family. I think there are fewer options available for women like that, and it's hard to find secure work. If you don't have a good amount of money or support outside the family, you have to compromise because you can't have as many options”*.

The respondent's narrative reflects that gender inequality, religious-minority status and economic insecurity could potentially interact to limit the autonomy and household bargaining power of Christian women. According to Pakistani literature, the financial capability of women, their job and occupation, ownership of property and access to resources are some factors that make the difference in the bargaining power of women in the family (Tarar et al., 2022). Likewise, Sathar and Kazi (2000) observed that men had more autonomy in making decisions regarding large expenditures in the household and women's decision-making autonomy was correlated with economic independence and education. Socio-economic marginalization and religious discrimination can exacerbate such constraints for Christian women.

There are studies documenting barriers to employment, education and wider socioeconomic opportunities in poverty and social exclusion studies in Pakistan, as well as studies focused on Christian communities (Zahra & Zafar, 2015; Suleman, 2020). These structural disadvantages can limit women's ability to earn an independent income, receive assistance from others, and have other choices of how to avoid the need for family support. When no outside help or financial means are available to support women, they must “compromise”, as the respondent states, which can diminish their negotiating power over household decisions. Further factors which may affect autonomy include low income, insecure employment, limited mobility and unequal domestic demands, while education, employment, supportive social networks and available institutional resources can buffer against it. These results indicate that it is important to consider the role of patriarchal relations with family members in the context of the broader economic and social system that affects Christian women's opportunities in order to gain insight into their agency in the household. Hence, enhancing women's bargaining power must not only involve ensuring gender equality in intra-household decision-making, it should also involve tackling gender discriminatory obstacles to women's employment, education, land ownership and social protection.

Theme 2. Gender Roles, Patriarchal Expectations and Domestic Responsibilities

The second key theme was around gender roles and expectations. The participants referred to a social atmosphere where women were to dedicate themselves to household duties, keep to family relations, take care of children, be patient and obey their husbands. Such expectations were especially high for women who lived in joint or extended families. Those who worked outside the home reported that domestic responsibilities were their main duty in general. This meant that paid work was no guarantee to bring a redistribution of household labor.

A research participant (Age 48, married) shared her life experience about the opportunities for Christian women:

“As I got older, I realized that these expectations had been influencing my confidence, choices and opportunities since my childhood, and that my brothers had been encouraged to pursue their ambitions while I was encouraged to cook, clean and look after younger children. I realized that although there might be restrictions on women's choices, there were also expectations, and these expectations had embedded themselves in me since my childhood. I felt guilty for thinking about studying further, or doing something for myself, because rural society often saw women in such circumstances as being neglectful of her family responsibilities”.

The participant's experience reflects the gender discrimination which established from childhood and continued to different shape of women's opportunities and self-perceptions after marriage. Tajammal et al. (2024) found that in rural and semi-urban Pakistan, girls are often associated with household responsibilities and caregiving, while gendered expectations limit their educational opportunities and reinforce the belief that a woman's primary role is within the family. Similarly, Zulfiqar and Kuskoff (2024) found that Pakistani women continue to face strong family expectations to prioritize domestic and caregiving responsibilities, even when they have educational or professional aspirations. These findings support the participant's account of being socialized to prioritize household duties over education, personal interests, and self-development, demonstrated gender expectations learned during childhood persisted into married life and influence women's sense of self and available opportunities.

Theme 3. Education, Employment and Access to Opportunities

The results highlighted that education and employment influenced autonomy of Christian women. The interviews also showed that opportunities for education were not equally available for all the participants. Factors such as economic status, family expectations, gender norms and religious minority status affected educational and occupational pathways.

A participant (Age 24) narrated her life experience as,

“I regret that my parents did not continue my education beyond secondary school because they thought that daughters would eventually marry and leave behind, but as I grew up I realized that education can enhance my employment opportunities, financial independence and have a stronger voice within a family education is not just about employment it also builds confidence, independence and a stronger voice within a family even though my parents had financial constraints, I believe education should be given to daughters equally as it is given to sons”.

Literature highlights that gender gaps in educational opportunities are a key concern in Pakistan, as the resources available within a household, gendered expectations on household roles, and perceptions of the future can shape education investments. Studies on women empowerment in Pakistan have identified that women lack control over resources, mobility and household decisions, which indicates that education and economic empowerment is interlinked with the overall social status of the women (Khan et al, 2025).

There is also very specific research on Christian women and girls that highlights how gender-based oppression can further limit educational and employment access for religious minorities in Pakistan. Suleman (2020) looks at the experiences of Christian women and girls who are subjected to multiple forms of discrimination, and Shamas (2023) investigates religious identity and gender-related issues amongst Christian female students studying at university in Lahore. These studies give context to the role of these family expectations and broader social barriers on women's educational journeys.

The participant's narration highlights the potential of interplay between gendered expectations and economic pressure to disrupt girls' education. Her brothers were seen as a more worthwhile investment as they would have to work and bring in money to the family, while her future marriage was seen as a reason to restrict her educational opportunities. This is typical of how girls' potential is assessed based on the role they are expected to play in the home and marriage, instead of on their own desires. Importantly, the effects of lack of education go beyond the lack of employment opportunities that is identified in the participant reflections. She thinks of education as a way to build confidence, independence, awareness and a way to take part in decisions that impact her life. Her hesitation to pin the situation squarely on her parents, too, highlights just how complicated family choices are when they are under financial strain, even as it doesn't diminish the inequities faced by daughters.

There is more literature available to provide a wider context to these experiences, especially in the context of gendered expectations and religious minority disadvantage in the context of Pakistan. The participant's account, however, is to be interpreted as a cross section of Christian women's experience, not as typical of them all. Overall, the results indicate that the issue of equality in education is not only an economic one, but an extremely important one for the dignity, self-confidence and ability of women to influence their own lives. The participant's experience reflects how economic constraints and gendered family priorities can interact to restrict girls' access to higher education, with consequences that extend into adulthood. Tajammal et al. (2024) found that

in Pakistan, girls' education may receive fewer household resources because families associate daughters primarily with marriage and domestic responsibilities, while boys are more often viewed as future economic providers.

Theme 4. Economic Empowerment, Financial Dependence and Control over Resources

The autonomy was closely related to the economic conditions. Those who relied exclusively on husbands or other family members tended to report the lowest level of opportunities for making independent financial decisions. Meanwhile, women who were earning a living did not always have equal access to their earnings. The results suggest that the concept of economic empowerment needs to be defined in a way that involves not only income generating, but also the control, use and decision making over resources.

The participant from rural area (Age 33, married) shared her experiences as,

“I’m a full-time homemaker and financially depended on my husband. My husband is working to give us the income that we need for our household and the income is what I use to pay the bills and meet the needs of our family. The money is not mine but it is my responsibility to make decisions about spending it. I have to ask my husband to get money for my personal needs, such as purchasing something for myself or covering a personal need. It feels uncomfortable to justify my need for the money, even when it is small. I have to balance the family budget and ensure that the family's needs are met but do not have any personal savings or income that I could access. In hard situation where my money is not in the hands of my husband. It is not something I'll think much about when financially stable, but when my hubby is struggling, I'm more upset and stressful. In those times I know that if there is a crisis that I need money for, while personal income or savings to fall back on. Sometimes I wish that I had a means to earn some money for myself, even a little, just enough for it to feel secure and confident”.

This participant's narrative highlights the difference between managing household money and having financial autonomy. Although she controls household spending, she has no independent income or savings and must depend on her husband for personal and emergency needs. This is consistent with Maqsood et al. (2024), who found that women's economic dependence in Pakistan is reinforced by unequal divisions between paid and unpaid work. Similarly, Khan et al. (2024) showed that access to flexible income-generating opportunities can strengthen women's financial empowerment. Thus, her experience demonstrates that financial empowerment requires not only responsibility for household budgeting but also independent access to financial resources.

Theme 5. Religious Identity, Discrimination and Social Marginalization

Another significant aspect of the participants' experiences was their religious identity. Participants were Christian women and they shared about religious identity impact their lives in schools, jobs, communities and broader society. But the experiences of the participants were not identical experiences of religious marginalization. Direct experiences of discrimination were reported by some and indirect experiences of discrimination or feeling different were reported by others.

A participant (Age 33, married) shared her experiences,

“I have learned that sometimes discrimination is not always obvious or overt, and that it may be hidden in the form of assumptions made by people that may make them feel different or feel excluded from my community. This does not make me ashamed of my Christian identity, but it is a way of avoiding misunderstandings and unnecessary judgments when people make assumptions about my community without knowing or understanding it”.

Another participant (Age 35, married) shared, *“I am comfortable in stating my Christian identity, but I am not comfortable in some situations, because I think people misunderstand what I believe and what I practice. I have learned that discrimination comes in a way other than the overt insult and sometimes it comes in form of attitudes and assumptions”*.

This participant’s narratives illustrate indirect religious discrimination and strategic management of Christian identity. Their experiences of assumptions, insensitive questions, and possible judgment have made them more selective about when and with whom she discusses their faith. This supports Aftab et al. (2024), who found that Christian women in Pakistan experience social exclusion through everyday interactions and religious identity. Similarly, Suleman (2020) highlights how religious identity intersects with gender and social inequalities in shaping Christian women’s experiences. Thus, her selective silence can be understood as a coping and self-protection strategy rather than rejection of her Christian identity.

Theme 6. Leadership, faith, institutional support and legal protection

The interviews also indicated low level of engagement of women in formal decision making and leadership structures. The participants shared about leadership opportunities in the family, workplace, community and church. Some women felt confident to speak and participate, while others felt their views were not as valued due to their gender, age or socio-economic status. Legal awareness also varied, especially among women with low educational attainment and/or limited access to information.

A respondent (Age 40, married) shared,

“As I learned to participate in community and educational activities, I slowly gained the confidence to express my views on issues affecting women, children and society and found myself being interrupted in my suggestions or advice or being ignored, but that had given me the experience to speak confidently and persistently, so I now believe that in the right environment, women can challenge gender roles and have a meaningful contribution to society’s development”.

The narrative demonstrates how community participation strengthens women’s confidence and voice in public decision-making. Her transition from remaining silent to actively expressing her views reflects a gradual development of confidence through educational and social engagement. This aligns with Bajwa (2025), who highlighted the active role of Christian women in community participation and social engagement in Pakistan. Similarly, Zulfiqar and Kuskoff (2024) show that women can negotiate traditional gender expectations and gradually challenge norms that restrict their participation. Thus, her experience suggested that continued participation build women’s confidence and challenge the perception that community decision-making is primarily a male responsibility.

Another respondent (Age 35, married) shared,

“At first, I was reluctant to attend community meetings as a Christian woman because I felt that women’s opinions weren’t listened to. As I started to get involved in church and community activities I gradually got more and more confident to express my views and opinions on education, women’s welfare and the needs of children and this was not always recognized but it was a way in which as a woman I can make a positive contribution to change”.

Shahbaz Malik (2025) also found church networks as sources of emotional, informational and practical support for Christians in Karachi. But this kind of support should not be expected to be the same in every Christian community or to eliminate the broader structural issues facing women.

A respondent (Age 31, married) shared,

“It has been through the Christian community that I have been able to help others through church activities, and social gatherings with women, where I have discussed family issues, children's education, and the challenges women face in everyday life; helping to build my confidence and awareness of my rights, but I believe that women need opportunities outside their immediate community to be involved in a wider social and public life, where their voices can be heard”.

The recent studies conducted on the role of Christian women in Pakistan corroborate the perspective that community involvement can create opportunities for developing confidence, support and involvement in the community. But it does not ensure the elimination of gender and religious barriers that may be faced by women. Khan and Qurban (2025) explored the sociopolitical status of Christian women in Lahore, through the lens of the barriers to their substantive participation despite constitutional provisions and legislative efforts. Their review also emphasizes the need to go beyond the formal recognition of girls to their meaningful participation in decision-making within the school and in the wider community. This is a point from which the participant who has experienced learning to speak confidently in community activities in some way derives from this. In a graduate research project on the Christian community in Karachi, Malik (2025) discovered that church-related networks can help to offer emotional, informational and practical support in the setting of discrimination. Participants felt supported to stay connected and build resilience with such support. Khan and Qurban (2025) list several limitations in the sociopolitical inclusion of Christian women in Lahore, and Ashfaq (2024) highlights the lack of representation of religious-minority women in public discourse. These studies, taken together, demonstrate the need for providing opportunities for Christian women to belong to their local communities and to shape public conversation and decision-making. However, the involvement of the community and church may have opportunities and constraints. Apart from the general issues of Christian women in Pakistan, Ali et al. (2022) also talk about the control of the church institutions by the male dominated society. This implies a religious community can be a community of solidarity but is also may mirror gender hierarchies that can limit women's leadership.

Theme 7. Resistance, Resilience and Coping Strategies

The last significant subject matter was about the tactics of Christian women that employed to counter structural impediments. From participants' narratives, it was clear that they were not victims of gender, religious or economic injustices. A participant of 32 years old shared her thoughts:

“As a married woman living in a semi-urban environment, I gradually learned to express my needs and opinions within my family. During my younger years and the early period of my marriage, I usually followed the decisions made by my husband and other family members, particularly regarding visiting relatives, shopping, or participating in voluntary activities, because I feared that expressing disagreement might create conflict. Over time, I realized that remaining silent did not help me achieve what I needed, so rather than directly confronting my husband, I learned to negotiate by explaining the importance of my requests, choosing an appropriate time to discuss them, and presenting my suggestions in ways that reflected the family's interests. I also became more comfortable expressing my views firmly without feeling that doing so meant disrespecting my husband's authority. Through this process, I developed greater confidence in communicating my wishes and stopped viewing my needs as unimportant simply because I was a woman and wife. Although I still consider my family's opinions, I now feel more capable of participating in

decisions that affect my life and have realized that empowerment can occur through everyday negotiation, effective communication, and gradual changes in how women express their choices while maintaining family relationships”.

The participant's narration emphasized that women could stand up for themselves in their everyday communication, persuading, timing, and compromising instead of facing them with direct confrontation. Her silence regarding family decisions was giving way to her voice and saying what she would prefer to do in existing family and marital relations, a sign of confidence and choice building up. Her experience showed that there is no resistance, no resistance is meant there is no empowerment. Instead, women renegotiated gendered expectations through subtle and strategic actions, in an effort to maintain vital relationships. It was similar to what was found by Zulfiqar and Kuskoff (2024) who discussed empowerment of Pakistani women from the context of cultural expectations and boundaries set by traditional gender roles.

Conclusions

The study concluded that the process of Christian women's autonomy in rural and urban Sargodha is a relationally and contextually constructed one and is influenced by gender relations, religious-minority status, socioeconomic condition and education, employment and family relations. The results show that women still have limited access to family finances and that the decisions on children's education and health care, children's mobility, and social participation are still influenced by the patriarchal family system. However, women are not simply victims of these restrictions, but they engage in bargaining with family members, asserting their desires, going to school, working, and negotiating more for the family. They show how autonomy is negotiated continuously in the context of social and familial power relations. The results also indicate that economic involvement can boost women's confidence, skills and household bargaining power, but not that income is enough to ensure that women have control over financial resources or have the same decision-making power. There is also a complex influence of religious identity as Christian women can be subjected to discrimination and lack of opportunities in education, work and public life, and religious networks and community can offer emotional support, solidarity and a sense of belonging. It is important to look beyond religious minority status and socioeconomic disadvantage to see gender inequality in these experiences, and to acknowledge the different situations and opportunities of women. In general, the study conceptualizes autonomy and empowerment as two processes of decision-making, financial control, self-confidence and access to educational, occupational and social opportunities that are meaningful. They are dependent on the social and economic environment that allows women to make meaningful choices as well as their capacity. Hence, strengthening of the autonomy of Christian women in Pakistan necessitates enabling their household decision-making, better access to education and decent job opportunities, more financial autonomy, protection from religious discrimination, and stronger institutional and community support. The study foregrounds women's lived experiences to help understand the ways gender, religious identity, and material inequalities affect women's opportunities to engage in family and public life in a context-sensitive way.

Recommendations

Based on the result of the study, the following recommendations are given;

- i. Institutional support, scholarships and family engagement should all be encouraged for Christian women and girls to pursue higher (vocational and professional) education to build their confidence, skills, economic independence and decision-making capacity.

- ii. The employment support measures should be designed specifically to enhance the employment prospects of Christian women, with a view to overcoming the negative practices of recruitment, occupational segregation and workplace harassment.
- iii. Greater financial autonomy for women should be promoted through access to financial services, banking facilities, property ownership, financial education and economic opportunities, so that participation in the economy leads to increased ownership of their own economic resources and decision-making in their households.
- iv. The family should be sensitized to encourage the action of household decision making, especially in relation to financial management, children's education and care, women's employment, mobility and social life.
- v. Government institutions and employers must take steps to implement protections from religious and gender-based discrimination, including through complaint processes that are accessible, recruitment processes that are transparent, and through institutional accountability.
- vi. Social protection programs, legal and justice services, health and livelihood support for Christian women should be strengthened by targeted outreach, streamlining of procedures and awareness of the entitlement.
- vii. Community and religious leaders should be involved in promoting gender equality, women's education and economic participation and increasing women's dignity, inclusion and autonomy through strengthening supportive community networks.
- viii. Social barriers to women's mobility and participation in public life should be tackled through promoting safe transport, accessible childcare, and secure educational and occupational settings.
- ix. There is a need to create mentoring, leadership development and counselling programs at universities, civil society and social welfare institutions to increase the confidence, professional goals, knowledge of rights and involvement of Christian women in community decision-making.
- x. Provincial development planning should include gender-sensitive policies and policies that address the needs of religious minorities, and access to education, employment, financial resources, social protection and decision-making in the household should be monitored regularly to identify gender inequalities that persist and inform evidence-based policies and actions.

Conflict of interest

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