Engaging Men as Allies in Advancing Women's Economic Empowerment in Rural Pakistan

A Qualitative Research Study in Bhakkar and Khushab Districts

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Executive Summary

This research study explores the role of male allyship in advancing women's economic empowerment and access to inclusive open education in rural Pakistan. Conducted in the districts of Bhakkar and Khushab, the study was carried out under the framework of Bedari's initiative "Empowering Women and Girls through Economic Skills." Using a qualitative approach, the study draws on ten in-depth interviews with male participants and four focus group discussions with women to capture the motivations, experiences, and community dynamics surrounding gender-transformative change.

In traditionally patriarchal rural settings, women's participation in economic and educational activities is often restricted by cultural norms and male-controlled decision-making. However, this study finds evidence of a gradual but meaningful shift in attitudes, where men are transitioning from passive bystanders or opponents to active allies. Motivated by economic stress, personal experiences, and exposure to awareness-raising initiatives, many men began supporting women's engagement in skills training, income generation, and open learning.

Women confirmed that male support played a critical role in their empowerment. Those who received encouragement from male family members gained confidence, financial autonomy, and a stronger voice in household decisions. They also observed a reduction in household tensions and greater respect from relatives. However, this support was often conditional and varied across communities, with continued resistance from some family members and neighbors.

The study applies a gender-transformative lens and draws on social norms theory to interpret how informal community attitudes shift alongside formal program interventions. Findings indicate that while ideological commitment to gender equality may not always be present, men's practical support—grounded in lived realities—can still enable substantial change.

Key recommendations include the intentional and sustained engagement of men in gender programs, the establishment of local training and education centers for women, ongoing community dialogues, peer-led role modeling, and financial mechanisms such as microloans for women-led businesses. The study also calls for longer-term programming that allows communities the time and space to navigate complex cultural shifts.

By centering the voices of both men and women, this research offers a nuanced view of how male allyship can serve as a lever for inclusive development. It contributes to the growing discourse on gender-transformative change by showing that engaging men as partners—not just gatekeepers—is essential for sustainable progress in rural Pakistan. Bedari's work demonstrates that with consistent community engagement and cultural sensitivity, men can become powerful allies in advancing women's rights and opportunities.

Table of Contents

Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing recognition within development discourse that advancing gender equality requires not only empowering women and girls, but also meaningfully engaging men and boys. Traditionally, many gender-focused programs have targeted women exclusively, assuming men as either passive bystanders or active obstacles to women's advancement. However, evidence is increasingly showing that men can also play a constructive role in transforming gender norms, particularly when they are engaged as allies. This is especially important in patriarchal societies like Pakistan, where men often serve as gatekeepers to women's mobility, education, and economic participation.

In rural areas of Pakistan, women's access to education and economic opportunities remains severely limited due to social restrictions, lack of local infrastructure, and entrenched cultural beliefs. Although efforts by development organizations have led to some improvements, significant challenges persist—particularly in communities where early marriage, school dropouts, and economic dependency continue to limit women's and girls' potential. In such contexts, male support—whether from fathers, husbands, or brothers—can be a decisive factor in enabling women to access education or participate in income-generating activities. Yet, the role of men as positive change agents remains underexplored in both policy and academic research.

This study responds to this gap by examining male allyship in rural communities of Pakistan, with a particular focus on its influence on women's economic empowerment and access to open education. The research was conducted in two districts—Bhakkar and Khushab—where the NGO Bedari has been implementing community-based programs aimed at enhancing women's skills, literacy, and livelihood opportunities. While the program targeted women directly, it engages with men too. Therefore it led to observable shifts in male attitudes and behavior, offering a rich context to explore how and why such changes occur.

The rationale for focusing on male allyship is grounded in the understanding that sustainable gender-transformative change requires the involvement of entire communities. Male support can enhance the effectiveness of women-focused interventions by reducing household resistance, providing logistical and emotional support, and influencing wider community norms. By studying the perspectives and experiences of men who support women's economic and educational advancement, this research aims to generate actionable insights into how such allyship can be encouraged and sustained.

Research Objectives

1. To explore men's experiences in supporting women's economic participation and open education.
2. To assess how male allyship impacts women's financial independence and household dynamics.
3. To identify strategies that can foster inclusive, sustainable gender-transformative economic initiatives.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions, aligned with its three primary objectives:

1. What are the key motivations and experiences of men who support women's economic participation and access to open education in rural communities?

2. How do men perceive their roles in promoting women's financial independence and educational advancement, and what challenges do they face in becoming effective allies?
3. In what ways does male allyship impact women's financial independence, their participation in household financial decision-making, and overall household dynamics?
4. What changes have women observed in their economic participation and family relationships as a result of male support?
5. What successful strategies have emerged from the experiences of male allies in fostering women's economic empowerment and access to education?
6. How can communities and organizations effectively encourage and sustain male engagement in gender-transformative economic and educational initiatives?

This study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of male allyship as an emerging force for gender equality in Pakistan's rural landscape.

Literature Review

Efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment have increasingly recognized the importance of engaging men as allies rather than framing them solely as barriers. Globally, development literature has evolved to acknowledge that gender transformation cannot occur in isolation from men's roles and attitudes. Initiatives such as the MenCare campaign and programs led by Promundo and UN Women have demonstrated that male engagement can challenge gender stereotypes, reduce violence, and foster shared responsibilities at home and in the workplace.

A growing body of literature frames male allyship within gender-transformative approaches—programs that aim not just to include women, but to shift power relations and challenge harmful social norms. The Gender at Work framework and Social Norms Theory provide useful analytical lenses. Gender-transformative approaches aim to question and restructure unequal power dynamics, while Social Norms Theory highlights how individuals conform to behavioral expectations based on perceived community standards. These frameworks underline the need for community-wide strategies that engage both men and women in dialogue and practice.

In South Asia, and Pakistan in particular, the literature on male engagement in women's economic empowerment remains limited but is expanding. Studies by organizations like Rozan, Oxfam, and IRC have shown that involving men in women's livelihood programs improves outcomes. These findings suggest that when men support women's participation in income-generating activities or education, women face fewer restrictions and gain greater confidence and autonomy. However, most existing programs remain focused on women alone, leaving a critical gap in systematically engaging men at the household and community levels.

Despite some promising models, there are clear gaps in the literature. Few studies deeply examine rural men's lived experiences of allyship, especially in the context of informal learning and subsistence economies. The motivations, challenges, and transformations that men go through—particularly in conservative areas—remain underexplored. Moreover, the impact of male allyship on community-wide attitudes toward open education and non-traditional learning models for women is largely absent from current research.

This project (and the study) contributes to filling these gaps by centering men's perspectives alongside women's voices. It adds to the discourse on gender-transformative change in rural Pakistan and offers

grounded insights into how men can play a constructive role in supporting women's economic agency and educational aspirations.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experiences, perceptions, and actions of men who have supported women's economic empowerment and access to education in rural Pakistan. Qualitative methods were selected to capture the depth and complexity of participants' lived experiences, as well as the nuanced shifts in gender roles and social norms within families and communities. This approach was especially suited to understanding male allyship, which is shaped by cultural, emotional, and relational factors that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods.

Data Collection Methods

In-depth Interviews with Men

A total of ten in-depth interviews were conducted with men—five in Khushab and five in Bhakkar districts. The men were selected purposively, based on their involvement in or support for women's participation in Bedari's initiative "Empowering Women and Girls through Economic Skills." The participants represented diverse backgrounds, including farmers, small business owners, laborers, and socially active individuals.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with Women

Four FGDs were conducted—two in each district—with women who had participated in the same initiative. Each FGD included 8 to 10 participants from different age groups and socio-economic backgrounds.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave verbal consent prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and care was taken to ensure a respectful, non-judgmental environment during data collection. Women participants were interviewed in safe spaces, with the option to withdraw at any time. The research upheld principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, and dignity for all respondents.

Findings and Analysis

The findings presented in this section are organized into three parts. The first explores the perspectives of men based on in-depth interviews, focusing on their motivations, actions, and evolving roles as allies in women's empowerment. The second presents women's views gathered through focus group discussions, highlighting their experiences, challenges, and the impact of male support. The final part offers a comparative analysis of insights from both groups to identify common themes, contrasts, and emerging patterns across the two districts.

Perspectives of Men (In-depth Interviews)

This analysis brings together insights from ten in-depth interviews—five each from Khushab and Bhakkar—with men engaged in Bedari's initiative to support women's economic empowerment and access to education. The respondents came from varied work and educational backgrounds. Despite contextual differences, the data shows a common pattern of changing mindsets and growing support for women's roles in earning and learning.

Men across both districts reported a shift in how they and their communities viewed women's work. Previously seen as inappropriate or a sign of family weakness, women's participation in income-generating activities became more acceptable when men were exposed to Bedari's awareness sessions and witnessed financial pressures at home. Real-life examples of successful women-led efforts further changed perceptions.

Triggers for this shift included rising inflation, poverty, and the burden of family responsibilities. Personal experiences—such as raising daughters or coping with a spouse's hardship—also influenced men's thinking. In Bhakkar, some men went further, forming peer groups to promote girls' education and supporting their wives in starting micro-businesses.

Men supported women by accompanying them to training sessions, sharing household duties, marketing their products, and advocating within families. These acts challenged long-standing patriarchal norms and enabled women to contribute economically.

Resistance from relatives and neighbors was common, but many men responded with patience, logic, and by pointing to visible improvements. Over time, they noted increased acceptance of women's expanded roles.

The impact was transformative. Men reported better household income, less financial stress, and improved relationships. Women gained confidence and took part in financial and family decisions. Several men expressed pride in the success and independence of their wives and daughters.

Education emerged as a key theme. While some men actively enrolled their daughters in school or distance learning programs, awareness of such options remained limited, particularly in Bhakkar.

To continue this progress, men recommended ongoing awareness for males, local training and education centers, long-term programming, and stronger collaboration with NGOs and government actors.

In sum, these interviews reflect a powerful shift from resistance to allyship. With the right support, rural men can be vital partners in achieving gender-transformative change.

Perspectives of Women (FGDs)

This combined analysis draws on four focus group discussions conducted with women beneficiaries of Bedari's initiative in Bhakkar and Khushab.

Barriers to Participation and Gradual Shifts

In both districts, women initially faced resistance from male family members who associated women's work with dishonor or a disruption of norms. As women began contributing to household income, some men moved from opposition to support. This change, though slow and inconsistent, was seen as significant. Male support ranged from verbal encouragement to assistance with business activities. Bedari's awareness sessions were often cited as a key factor in this shift.

Empowerment through Skills, Income, and Recognition

Women learned income-generating skills such as tailoring, block printing, hairstyling, and detergent-making. For many, it was their first experience of financial independence. They expressed pride in earning and contributing to expenses, which improved their confidence and gave them a stronger voice in household decisions. Some became informal mentors for other women in their communities.

Shifts in Household and Community Dynamics

Participants reported improved family relationships, reduced financial stress, and greater respect from relatives. While not all men changed, those who did became examples within the community. Women observed that successful cases inspired other families to support female empowerment.

Access to Education and Aspirations

Women in both districts valued education and expressed a desire for continued learning, especially through open or non-formal systems. Some had helped others enroll, but many faced barriers like distance, mobility restrictions, and social expectations. The need for local learning centers was consistently emphasized.

Role of Male Allies

All FGDs highlighted the crucial role of male support. Women shared how some men helped them attend trainings or advocated on their behalf. This support often followed men witnessing the benefits of women's earnings. Participants stressed that without men's cooperation, long-term change would be difficult.

Recommendations for Sustainability

Women called for regular training, ongoing organizational support, access to small loans, safe spaces for sharing, and community programs that also engage men to change gender norms.

Conclusion

Women's empowerment in both districts is evolving into a collective transformation. Continued male engagement and structural support are essential to ensure this progress becomes permanent.

Comparative Analysis: Bhakkar and Khushab

Focus Group Discussions with women from Bhakkar and Khushab reveal striking similarities in how rural women experience empowerment and how male allyship influences their progress. In both districts, women initially encountered resistance from male family members rooted in patriarchal norms. However, exposure to Bedari's awareness-raising efforts, coupled with visible economic benefits from women's work, triggered gradual changes in male behavior and family dynamics.

In both regions, women acquired similar vocational skills—tailoring, mehndi, and detergent-making—and reported improved self-confidence, household stability, and participation in decision-making. Male support ranged from logistical help to moral encouragement and was often a decisive factor in sustaining women's participation in training and enterprise.

Notable differences emerged in community readiness and access. Women in Khushab reported slightly more openness from male allies, including support for girls' re-enrollment in open schooling programs. Bhakkar women, though equally skilled, shared more accounts of ongoing resistance and expressed a greater need for localized education and economic infrastructure.

Across both districts, male allyship was a key catalyst for inclusive education and economic empowerment. When men supported women's learning or income-generating efforts, it normalized new gender roles, enhanced women's social standing, and encouraged others in the community. However, where male support was absent, women's mobility and progress were noticeably limited.

In conclusion, while progress varies slightly across the two districts, the evidence clearly demonstrates that meaningful, sustained male engagement significantly enhances women's ability to access education

and contribute economically. Programs like Bedari's are critical for activating and sustaining this change at the household and community level.

Discussion

This study explored the evolving role of male allyship in promoting women's economic empowerment and inclusive education in rural Pakistan. Drawing from in-depth interviews with men and focus group discussions with women in Bhakkar and Khushab, the findings shed light on changing gender dynamics, persistent barriers, and the potential for transformative male engagement.

Interpretation of Findings in Light of the Research Questions

The first research question focused on men's experiences in supporting women's economic participation and education. In both districts, men described a shift from passivity to active support. Economic necessity, personal experiences, and exposure to Bedari's community-based sessions were key triggers. Men shared how they escorted women to trainings, helped at home, and supported small businesses. These actions highlight that male allyship, even in conservative contexts, is both possible and influential.

The second question explored the effects of male support on women's autonomy. Women reported improved self-confidence, financial independence, and greater decision-making roles at home. Men noted reduced household stress, better relationships, and greater mutual respect. These findings confirm that male support creates tangible space for women's agency.

The third question asked about strategies for sustainable, gender-transformative change. Respondents recommended male sensitization, local access to training and education, long-term engagement, and peer role modeling. Informal community dialogue and storytelling were also emphasized as ways to shift norms.

Alignment with or Divergence from Existing Literature

The findings align with global literature emphasizing the importance of engaging men in gender equality. Research from Promundo and UN Women confirms that men can shift norms and promote shared responsibility. The Gender at Work framework also highlights informal norm change as central to structural transformation—reflected here in changing household roles.

However, this study highlights a practical rather than ideological pathway to allyship. In rural Pakistan, men often support women's empowerment because of necessity or experience, not ideology. While this diverges from rights-based frameworks, it demonstrates that change rooted in lived realities can still produce meaningful results.

Contribution of This Study to the Discourse on Gender-Transformative Change

This study adds to the gender discourse by focusing on rural male perspectives often overlooked in development work. It shows allyship as an evolving, context-driven process, not a fixed position. It challenges the binary framing of men as "for" or "against" women's rights and highlights how attitudes can shift with appropriate interventions.

Combining male and female perspectives also ensures a more accurate understanding of how support is felt and practiced. This dual perspective strengthens the case for community-based, inclusive change.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest that programs should engage men as partners, not just gatekeepers. Long-term, community-rooted strategies are needed to shift norms. Rural women must also be supported with

accessible skills training and flexible education options. Donors and NGOs should invest in programs that allow gradual, sustained change.

Male allyship is proving to be a powerful lever for advancing women's autonomy in rural Pakistan. With continued investment and dialogue, this change can grow deeper and more lasting.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study explored the role of male allyship in promoting women's economic empowerment and access to education in rural Pakistan, focusing on the districts of Bhakkar and Khushab. Through in-depth interviews with men and focus group discussions with women, the research revealed a gradual but significant transformation in gender dynamics, household decision-making, and community perceptions. While patriarchal norms remain strong, the findings clearly demonstrate that men—when engaged meaningfully—can serve as crucial allies in fostering inclusive, gender-equitable development.

The conclusions drawn from the data point to several core insights. First, male allyship often begins not from ideological commitments to gender equality but from practical recognition of the economic benefits of women's participation. Men who once resisted their wives' or daughters' engagement in skills training or education came to support these initiatives after witnessing improvements in household finances, reductions in stress, and increased family stability.

Second, the process of transformation is highly contextual and often uneven. Some men transition quickly to supportive roles, while others remain skeptical. Women's experiences also vary—some gain recognition and autonomy, while others continue to face social scrutiny or limited mobility. Despite these differences, one common thread emerges: the shift in attitudes is strongest where community-based organizations like Bedari have maintained consistent engagement, education, and follow-up.

Third, the evidence shows that male support is not only symbolic but instrumental. When men accompany women to training sessions, help with household duties, or advocate for their daughters' re-enrollment in school, it signals a powerful shift in gender roles—one that women perceive as enabling, respectful, and transformative.

Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed for NGOs, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to scale gender-transformative programming:

1. Engage Men Intentionally and Continuously

Male sensitization should be an explicit objective in all women's empowerment initiatives. This includes organizing awareness sessions for men, creating peer discussion spaces, and highlighting the economic and emotional benefits of gender equality using culturally relevant messaging.

2. Invest in Community-Based Learning and Skill Centers

Women in both districts expressed strong demand for local training and education opportunities. Establishing village-based centers offering vocational skills and open education options will increase accessibility, reduce dropouts, and build local ownership of change.

3. Promote Role Models and Peer Influence

Highlighting stories of male allies and economically empowered women can inspire others to follow. This can be achieved through community storytelling, local champions, and exposure visits.

4. Support Women's Economic Initiatives with Financial Access

Providing small grants or microloans for home-based businesses will sustain women's income generation beyond training. Linking women with local markets and mentorship opportunities can further expand their economic mobility.

5. Institutionalize Long-Term, Inclusive Programming

Short-term interventions are insufficient to shift entrenched norms. Programs must be long-term, inclusive of entire families, and embedded within local structures. Collaboration with religious leaders, school systems, and health workers can help reinforce gender-equitable messages.

In conclusion, this study affirms that men in rural Pakistan can become catalysts for change. By understanding their motivations, supporting their engagement, and creating enabling environments for women, development actors can pave the way for sustainable, community-driven gender equality. The path is neither quick nor easy—but it is visible, possible, and well worth pursuing.

Annexures (Available on Request)

- Interview Guides
- FGD Guides