

FEMALE WORK FORCE CONTRIBUTION IN PAKISTAN: OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIVITIES OF WOMEN SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN PAKISTAN

Asif Ali¹, Sidra Pervez², Dr Sadia Khanum³

¹GCWU, Faisalabad, ^{2,3}IQRA University, Islamabad Pakistan

*¹registrar@gcwuf.edu.pk ²sidrapervez@iqraisb.edu.pk, ³sadia.khanum@iqraisb.edu.pk

Corresponding Author:*

Received: 02 August, 2023 Revised: 29 August, 2023 Accepted: 03 September, 2023 Published: 12 September, 2023

ABSTRACT

This research paper is a descriptive study based on systematic review methodology, which involves a comprehensive search and analysis of the relevant literature from credible sources, such as academic research, government data, think tank reports and news articles. The study aims to explore the technological barriers that limit the participation of women social media influencers (WSMIs) in digital entrepreneurial activities in Pakistan. The research is conducted using thematic analysis technique to identify key themes, including the gender gap in labor force participation, the potential for digital entrepreneurship opportunities for women in Pakistan, and how the WSMIs participation in labor force can be fostered by overcoming barriers they face in Pakistan. The paper also presents a thorough review of existing literature, highlighting the challenges/barriers for women entrepreneurs in general and particularly for WSMIs in Pakistan. The study primarily discusses the technological barriers faced by WSMIs while beginning their entrepreneurial ventures in Pakistan. These challenges/barriers include such as limited access to technology including reliable and affordable internet connection, cyber harassment including online safety risk, lack of necessary digital skills including less opportunities to relevant training and skill development opportunities, social and cultural constraints imbedded in conventional family system, lack of education due to gender gap, and access to funding resources to capitalize digital entrepreneurial startups. The findings of the study indicate that WSMIs have the potential to leverage their online presence to create successful businesses in Pakistan through their participation in labor force, but they face several challenges/barriers. The paper concludes with recommendations for addressing the existing challenges/barriers for WSMIs including measures to increase access to technology and funding sources, provision of necessary educational and training opportunities, and creating supportive policies and programs which may provide an equal playing field for WSMIs to play their positive role in building strong economy and to bring effective change in the socio-economic landscape of Pakistan.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers, Women Empowerment, Digital Entrepreneurship, Digital barriers

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Perspective

Pakistan's underutilization of its abundant labor resources and talent becomes evident through its low "Female Labor Force Participation" (FLFP) rate (World Bank, 2022). The Pakistan's labor-rich demographic structure remains untapped due to prevailing gender-based conventions that hinder

Pakistani's women integration into the workforce. This paper explores the potential benefits in terms of entrepreneurial opportunities and Grass domestic product (GDP) growth that could be achieved by closing the gender gap in the FLFP rates in Pakistan compared to its peer countries. The findings suggest that by addressing this gap, Pakistan could

potentially create seven to nineteen million new employment opportunities for women, leading to a corresponding increase in GDP ranging from five to twenty-three percent. The magnitude of these gains would depend on the implementation of complementary labor market policies. It is noteworthy that Pakistan currently exhibits significantly lower FLFP rates compared to a country at its level of development. (Dhar, 2022).

Extensive research has revealed that FLFP tends to exhibit a U-shaped economic progress curve with higher participation rates at both ends of the income spectrum and lower rates at intermediate income levels. However, Pakistan deviates from this trend significantly, as its current FLFP stands at a mere twenty three percent. This situation is deeply concerning since the constrained participation of women in the labor force can have tangible economic costs. To achieve higher economic growth, it is imperative for Pakistan to effectively utilize the talents and resources of its female population. Women empowerment and enhancing their economic participation, Pakistan can unlock immense potential and contribute to overall socioeconomic progress (Amber and Chichaebilu, 2023). This entails creating an enabling environment that addresses the barriers hindering women's engagement in paid employment, such as gender-based discrimination, cultural norms, limited access to education, let alone training, lack of affordable childcare facilities, and inadequate legal protection. It is essential for policymakers and stakeholders to prioritize efforts aimed at breaking these barriers and fostering gender equality in the labor market. Furthermore, investing in quality education and skills development for women, promoting inclusive and flexible work arrangements, and implementing gender-responsive policies are critical steps towards promoting greater FLFP in Pakistan. By recognizing the value and importance of women's contributions to the economy and society, Pakistan can foster a more equitable and prosperous future for all its citizens (World bank, 2022).

Pakistan must overcome deep-rooted social norms that hinder women's amalgamation into the labor market. By addressing these barriers, the country can harness the potential of its abundant labor force and talent. Surveys have estimated that shrinking employment gap among Pakistani female with its

peers could result in the creation of between seven and nineteen million new jobs for women and could boost the country's GDP by anywhere from five to twenty-three percent, contingent on complementary labor market policies (Hasan, 2023). To gain insights into the impact of different factors on (FLFP) in Pakistan, such as digital connectivity, education, physical mobility and inadequate skills, the burden of childcare, work from home, and sectoral specialization.

It is crucial to examine studies like Goldin's (1994). It was among the pioneering works that examined the economic indicators behind the U-shaped relationship between FLFP and economic development. Pakistan belongs to this group of exceptions with only twenty three percent FLFP. In the past, within the per capita GDP range of four to eight thousand dollars at 2017 PPP prices, only two countries had lower FLFP rates than Pakistan. Overall, there were nine countries with lower FLFP rates compared to Pakistan. Economy is bearing cost of suppressed labor supply of women (Cuberes, & Teignier, 2014), productivity enhancement needed to encourage female population to be party of labor force (World bank, 2022).

1.2 Pakistani Perspective of Labor Market

A study conducted by Elveren, Moghadam, and Dudu (2022) reveals that Pakistan has made some advancements in improving FLFP in the last thirty years. In 1993 the FLFP rate was extremely low at only thirteen percent. However, by 2019 it had increased to twenty four percent as indicated in Table 1.1. While there was an increase in female unemployment during this period from one to three percent of the labor force it remained relatively insignificant when compared to the whole population of employed phase. This consequently showed a rise in female engagement through FLFP, enhancing the growth to twenty three percent of the entire women workforce.

The rise in employment opportunities for women predominantly manifested as unpaid work, experiencing an increase from eight to thirteen percent among the women of employable age. Paid employment, including wage workers, employers, and the self-employed. Also saw growth from five to eleven percent. However, since 2000 there is no change in wage-based jobs for women which usually offer greater productivity on average. This suggests

that there is a tradeoff between increases in FLFP and the quality of available jobs.

The following table 1.1 will summarize the FLFP in Pakistan over past three decades:

Table 1

Source: PBS Survey for Labor force 1992/93, 1999/00, 2005/06, 2012/13, and 2018/19

Time Period	Increase
1993-2019	13-24 % FLFP
1993-2019	13-23 % Employment
1993-2019	5-11 % Paid Employment

According to Hsieh, et al (2019). Pakistan has the potential to gain an additional 19.3 million jobs if it reduces gender barriers that hinder female labor force participation. However, the slow progress in this regard indicates that there are still several barriers that persist. These barriers include cultural and social norms, lack of education and training opportunities, discrimination, and bias. Insufficient childcare options and support services, as well as legal and policy hurdles. Despite the potential benefits it is crucial to focus on tackling these obstacles to enhance FLFP in Pakistan.

1.3 Female Labor Force Participation Encountering Challenges

- i. In Pakistan, prevailing social attitudes, and beliefs present significant barriers to women's participation in paid employment. The World Values Survey (2020) provides compelling evidence, revealing that a substantial majority of Pakistanis believe. It showed that around eight five percent of informants prefer men to do a job than a woman. According to the same survey, eighty percent are of view that offspring experience hardships when mothers work; and seventy three percent of the informants skeptical that earning more money than her husband, wife faces problems in this society. It is noteworthy that both men and women exhibit similar levels of agreement with these statements. These prevalent social norms severely limit women's autonomy to make independent decisions regarding their participation in the labor market. (Cho, Y., & Majoka, 2020). Across both rural and

urban settings in Pakistan, it is common for the father or household head to hold the authority to decide whether a woman can pursue or continue paid employment. This decision-making power is observed in more than seventy percent of rural areas and 65 percent of urban areas. In contrast, a minority of women, comprising less than 15 percent in rural and urban areas respectively and less than 20 percent in cities, have the autonomy to make their own decisions regarding employment. Hence, in various contexts, a significant proportion of females are reliant upon seeking permission from the men in their households to engage in work. (Gauci, et al. 2022). Amir et al. (2018) identified trifold circumstances in which women are more likely to grant consent to work. One of these circumstances is poverty, where the necessity to contribute to the overall family income becomes a driving factor for women to seek employment.

- ii. The acceptability of work for women presents another rigid condition for obtaining authorization. Even if women possess the required qualifications and skills, they may still face barriers to employment if the specific area or sector they aspire to work in carries a strong social stigma. Certain occupations or industries may be deemed inappropriate or incompatible with societal expectations, limiting women's access to such opportunities.
- iii. Additionally, the ability of women to make independent decisions regarding their work is influenced by the progressive mindset within their own families. When families hold more progressive attitudes, women are empowered to exercise autonomy in deciding whether to pursue employment or not. This implies that a supportive and open-minded family environment plays a crucial role in enabling women to make their own choices regarding work.

1.4 Barriers to Women Social Media Influencers As Digital Entrepreneurs

Casaló et al. (2020) define WSMIs as female social media figures who demonstrate opinion leadership by creating and disseminating opinions about brands and products, with the aim of influencing the attitudes and purchasing behaviors of consumers. WSMIs are considered digital entrepreneurs who use their social media platforms to build and grow their own businesses. These influencers can generate income through various digital platforms by promoting products and services of various brands, also selling their own through entrepreneurial ventures, and through sponsorships and partnerships (Suseno and Abbott 2021). Digital technologies and societal shifts are reconfiguring traditional forms of work (Robinson, 2017). The last two decades have witnessed a trend towards diverse technological changes in entrepreneurship (Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2021). However, it was after Covid-19 pandemic that entrepreneurs started moving towards digital innovation and the adoption of new technologies all over the globe when the pandemic restricted physical movement of the people (Bai et al., 2021). Covid 19 additionally fueled the use of technology in entrepreneurship and related business activities (Secundo et al., 2021). In the same context, the social media influencers market went significantly in growth and booming industry. Resultantly, data shows that the global influencer marketing market size is expected to exceed US\$ 373.5 million by 2027 (Statista, 2020). Extant research has confirmed the effectiveness of social media influencers in boosting brand awareness, encouraging adoption of innovation, building strong relationships and emotional intimacy with consumers, and maximizing campaign reach through their social network (Casaló et al., 2020a, Lou and Yuan, 2019). However, there are a range of barriers for those women who aspire to be social media influencers (hereafter referred at WSMIs). This has been identified both in academic research and industry practice. Keeping in view the current scenario of low FLFP indexes as highlighted in introductory part of the study, the attendant study emphasizes to unveil and discuss the digital barriers/challenges faced by WSMIs in their entrepreneurial activities in the context of Pakistan. As thousands of women are breaking traditional beliefs about what women should be like by openly sharing their lives online. Indeed, the prevailing reality in Pakistan is that a significant portion of

society upholds traditional beliefs, wherein the ideal woman is expected to be reserved, unassertive, and maintain a private life to safeguard the honor and safety of her family.

1.4.1 Digital connectivity

Digital connectivity access in Pakistan is inadequate among women, as highlighted in research conducted by Mustafa et al. in 2019. This study found that minor proportion of employable women had used a computer (6 percent) or accessed the internet (15 percent) within the previous three months. In comparison, computer use of employable men 10 percent higher proportion and 28 percent internet use.

Despite a substantial gender disparity persists, mobile phone ownership is comparatively prevalent. Approximately 30 percent of employable women have a mobile phone, compared to 80 percent of employable men. The gender disparity in internet usage and computer access varies across different geographical setups and age groups. The gap in computer access is most pronounced among urban adults, while the difference in internet use is around 15 percentage points in urban areas and among rural youth, and slightly narrower among rural adults. These findings highlight the need to address the gender digital divide in Pakistan, ensuring that women have better access to technology and digital connectivity. Efforts should focus on improving infrastructure, promoting digital literacy programs, and creating an inclusive environment that encourages women's participation in the digital realm. By reducing the gender gap in technology access, we can foster greater opportunities for women's empowerment and economic participation in the digital age.

Table 1.2
summarizes the Gender gap in mobile access and internet usage: -

Mobile/Computer ownership	Gender Gap in Internet usage
Women 30%	Women 6-15%
Men 80%	Men 10-28 %

Source: PSLM/HIES 2018.

Moreover, according to the (GSMA) there exists a significant digital gender gap in Pakistan where approximately <40% of women are less likely than

men to own a smartphone, and <60% do not use mobile internet. Furthermore, there are drastic differences in levels of ICT access between different population groups, particularly the rural and marginalized women.

1.4.2 Digital Skills

Among Pakistani women, the use of the internet for digital entrepreneurial purposes is extremely limited. In contrast to 5 percent of male internet users, only 1 percent of working-age female internet users identified work as a primary reason for using the internet. Most female internet users cited communication and entertainment (49 percent) as the primary use of the internet, followed by education, research, and information-seeking (11 percent).

Even among the women interviewed who owned a computer or mobile phone, their usage was primarily focused on accessing social media platforms or engaging in entertainment activities. The utilization of digital tools for entrepreneurial activities remains low among women, indicating the need to address barriers and promote greater awareness and training regarding the potential for using the internet for work-related purposes.

Efforts should be directed towards enhancing digital literacy, promoting the benefits of digital entrepreneurship, and providing support and resources to encourage women's engagement in online business ventures. By doing so, we can unlock the untapped potential of Pakistani women in leveraging the internet for entrepreneurial pursuits and economic empowerment.

Table 1.3
summarizes the Gap in Digital Skills

Purpose of Use	Women vs Men
Internet use for entrepreneurial purpose	Women 1% Men 5%
Education and Research purpose	Women 11% Men 49%

Source: GSMA, 2021.

With respect to entrepreneurship related to the STEM and ICT sectors, Pascall (2012) examines new participative competences and networks and how to link and support entrepreneurial activities. She argues that engendering ICTs entails the presence of women as part of the dynamic communities shaped by the rapid development of technology, since the new world is characterized by the formation of these

communities which lead to an ever-increasing demand of ICT services.

Digital skills are crucial to driving innovation and modernization, making them an important element for the future economic sustainability of Pakistan. However, a digital skills crisis looms large, with factors contributing to digital exclusion and the increasing importance of digital skills for entrepreneurial activities, employment, access to services, and more. In their 2020 research, Kamberidou and Pascall highlight the persistent gender imbalance in the ICT and related sectors. They argue that gender imbalance in ICT and related sectors is still prevalent, particularly regarding women's exclusion from the digital market economy. To address this, it is necessary to engage women as digital entrepreneurs, technology professionals, leaders, policy makers, producers, and researchers. Despite efforts to attract, recruit and retain women in ICT and STEM fields, women remain underrepresented and digitally excluded, which reinforces the three gender gaps: participation, pay, and leadership. These gaps are a result of the deeply rooted gender order, reflected in the Global Gender Gap Report and Index. Additionally, exclusion from the digital market is compounded by combining the gender dimension with other exclusionary factors such as disability, age, race, and socioeconomic background.

1.4.4 Insufficient Training and education Opportunities

According to government of Pakistan less than three percent of young women have received any training in last one year. Access to formal training for women is often dependent on the provision of free transport or need based scholarships. Despite scholarships and other supporting factors, various hinderances women facing for enrolling in training programs. In Punjab Pakistan, seventeen percent women stated that financial constraints were as a reason for not undergoing training, while approximately <10 percent mentioned difficulties in commuting. However, the most common reasons mentioned by women were household responsibilities and lack of cooperation from their spouse (Ali & Qazi, 2022). In Pakistan, there exists a significant gender gap in both basic and higher educational attainment, which becomes even more pronounced in the case of technical education and skill development

opportunities for women. In 2018, more than half of working-age women were uneducated, while the corresponding figure for working-age men was 28 percent. Education gap among women and men is different in rural and urban areas, it is extensive in rural areas but smaller in urban areas. This suggests that prioritizing access to education for women and girls is crucial in narrowing the education gender gap in Pakistan.

The recent pandemic (COVID-19) has potentially had a detrimental effect on girls' educational outcomes in Pakistan. The crisis led to a significant number of students, including girls, discontinuing their education during this period. Moreover, remote learning, implemented as an alternative to traditional in-person schooling, proved to be inadequate for most students (Ahmad, 2023).

1.4.3 Risk of Cyber Harassment

The utilization of digital tools for women's employment opportunities is hindered by the risk of cyber harassment and cultural norms surrounding their use. Pakistan is facing widest gender gaps in using internet and mobile phones (Henshaw, 2023). Women reported that men within their households disapproved of their use of phones to access social media applications or potential employers due to concerns over their safety. There is a prevalent belief among men that the use of cell phones and social media platforms exposes women to negative social consequences, such as harassment, cyberbullying, and blackmail. Men may perceive women as ill-equipped to handle such situations and, therefore, advocate for restricting their access to these technologies to protect them.

These cultural norms and perceptions surrounding the use of digital tools create barriers for women in accessing employment opportunities and impede their ability to leverage the potential benefits of technology. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive efforts to educate and raise awareness about digital safety and empower women to navigate online spaces confidently. It is essential to challenge and change the prevailing gender norms to create an inclusive and safe digital environment that supports women's employment and economic empowerment. The COVID pandemic has highlighted the need for inclusive digital access and safe online spaces for women to fully participate in the workforce.

However, the risk of cyber harassment is a serious issue over different social media platform which has significant impact on WSMIs to perform their digital entrepreneurial activities. Social media platforms are particularly vulnerable to cyber harassment for young female entrepreneurs due to the visibility and public nature of their work. This can include receiving abusive comments, messages and even threats from followers or other users. Women in any profession can face discrimination and harassment, but the anonymity and distance of online interactions can create a more hostile environment. Women digital entrepreneurs can face abusive comments, sexual harassment, and other harmful behavior, which can be demoralizing and negatively impact their business. However, research and studies have shown that women are disproportionately affected by cyber harassment and online abuse.

Table 1.4

Summarizes the Cyber Harassment: -

Cyber Harassment	Women vs Men
Pew Research Center (2021)	Women 41% Men 37%
United Nations (2020)	Women 73% Men 49%

1.4.5 Social/ Cultural Norms

Social norms are a set of unwritten rules or expectations that govern behavior and influence how people interact with each other. These norms can have a significant impact on WSMI as digital entrepreneurs, particularly in terms of the challenges/barriers they face in starting and growing their businesses. Pakistani society is a male dominated society, men are more likely to have access to mentorship and networking opportunities through male-dominated industries and professional organizations (Adeel et al., 2016).

Women mostly bound to traditional gender roles that are deeply entrenched in Pakistani society and women are expected to priorities their duties as wives and mothers over any other personal pursuits. The use of social media and pursuing social media influencing for entrepreneurial purposes may distracted them from these responsibilities and some men view it as a threat to tradition role women in family. Following marriage, women experience a manifold increase in responsibilities, leading to

significant time constraints, particularly after having multiple children. Consequently, the likelihood of engaging in market activity decreases. This highlights the prevalence of unpaid work that many women are involved in, which further limits their participation in paid employment. According to a recent report by the International Labour Organization, Asian men allocate the lowest proportion of their time to unpaid care work. In Pakistan, men spend approximately 28 minutes or 8% of their total working time in a day on unpaid care work, while in India, the figure stands at 31 minutes or 7.9%. These statistics underscore the unequal distribution of unpaid care responsibilities, with women disproportionately shouldering the burden.

Pakistani society is deeply conservative, and many people believe that women should be modest and refrain from interactions with men outside of their family. WSMI may facilitate their communication with stranger men, and it considers breach of family norms.

1.4.6 Financial Constraints

Women aspiring to become entrepreneurs, particularly in the digital domain, face notable constraints when it comes to accessing the economic resources necessary for their ventures. Securing capital is a prominent challenge, and they often find themselves relying more on informal networks that are predominantly male dominated. Numerous studies, including those by Derera, Chitakunye, and Neill (2014), Andriamahery and Qamruzzaman (2022), and Al-Qahtani, Fekih Zguir, Al-Fagih, and Koç (2022), have extensively underscored the limited access to capital for women entrepreneurs during the establishment and expansion phases of their entrepreneurial endeavors. According to an article in *Forbes* by Cheng (2018), one of the major obstacles faced by women in entrepreneurship, particularly in the digital landscape, is the scarcity of funding opportunities. Digital startups often necessitate significant initial investments in technology, software development, inventory procurement, and marketing. Consequently, the importance of adequate access to capital becomes paramount in these circumstances. Insufficient financial resources can impede women entrepreneurs from fully realizing their business potential. The dearth of funding options and support disproportionately affects women, curbing their

ability to initiate and grow their digital ventures. Women entrepreneurs encounter substantial hurdles in accessing the economic resources required for entrepreneurship, especially in the digital sphere. Insufficient capital access poses a significant challenge, given the considerable upfront investments demanded by digital startups. This limitation hampers the growth and success of businesses led by women in the realm of digital entrepreneurship.

Inadequate funds make situations challenging for women to develop and launch products or service, acquire customers, and perform operations. In addition to this, it is worth mentioning that because of gender-defined social positioning, men can also be more effective in dealing with government officials (Ramadani et al., 2022) while securing loans for initiating or extending entrepreneurial setups. Another study pointed out that access to easy and affordable finance and marketing is identified as prominent challenge by majority of women entrepreneurs. Hefty prices of raw materials, burdensome procedures of licensing and registration and exclusion from banking and financial services also create obstacles for WSMIs who aspire to be entrepreneurs (Vallaster et al., 2019).

Secondly, here is empirical evidence that a woman's decision to start a business contingent on her social background (Ahl, 2006). Women in entrepreneurship can be epitomized by the social roles and stereotypes that are socially assigned to different genders. According to the social role theory (Eagly, 1987), gender stereotypes can make a person socially tolerable. When a role is socially associated with men, women are not suited to that role because they are considered not to have necessary skills. The behavioral differences related to gender specific perceptions and preferences could explain the different inclination of men and women toward entrepreneurship.

Koellinger et al. (2011) conducted an analysis in seventeen countries showing a inferior entrepreneurial propensity for women due to various constraints. In addition, the authors provided empirical evidence of gender differences related to self-efficacy and fear of failure. Societal restriction, family policies and burden of household responsibilities poses a serious challenge for women. Social conditioning renders women to be shy and

introvert more concerned with family obligations. Shyness in business interactions, low achievement motivation, risk aversion attitude, lower level of education, gender bias at the levels of family and society. Moreover, infrastructural bottlenecks, lack of advisory and business development support services, unawareness regarding existing provisions of government support and poor technical skills strongly impede development of women in developing countries (Dhameja, S. K. 2002).

1.4.6 Work from Home in worse work environment

Participating in home-based work presents unique challenges and can result in declining working conditions for women involved in such activities. Although it offers greater work schedule flexibility, the working conditions within their homes frequently prove to be unfavorable. A survey conducted among women engaged in home-based work in the Lahore city area revealed that many of them face being "invisible and unrecognized" in various aspects.

Firstly, these women are deprived of essential social protection and legal rights, which makes them susceptible to unfair treatment and unfavorable working conditions. Consequently, they often find themselves laboring for extremely low wages and in substandard environments. Secondly, the workload imposed upon them is frequently excessive and detrimental to their health. These women endure long working hours while simultaneously shouldering domestic responsibilities, adding to the burden they bear. Moreover, they face additional pressure from intermediaries who assign work to them on behalf of employing companies. This combination of responsibilities and external pressures further challenges their work-life balance and overall well-being (Sohail, 2014). Thirdly, women are not considered full time works, their contributions always undermined and perceived often they work in leisure time. Lastly, a significant disadvantage of working from home for these women is the diminished interaction with colleagues, resulting in missed opportunities for learning and professional growth.

In summary, while working from home may offer flexibility, it presents women engaged in home-based work with challenges such as lack of social protection, unhealthy workloads, societal

perceptions, and reduced opportunities for interaction and learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A systematic literature review was conducted in the following databases: Scopus, Web of Science and google Scholar. The research terms used were, female labor force participation, digital entrepreneurship, social media influencers, Pakistan, barriers. The search was limited to studies published between 2010 to 2022 and written in English. Collected data articles were analyzed by using thematic analysis technique. Two reviewers independently read through the data to identify key themes related to challenges/barriers and how to overcome the challenges/barriers for digital entrepreneurial activities of WSMIs in Pakistan. The themes were then compared with each other and discussed to reach a final set of themes that was agreed upon.

Table 1.4
Summary of article selection and inclusion

Full text articles	Excluded articles	Included articles
Accessed n=126	Excluded n=80	Included n=46

DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Challenges/Barriers to FLFP have been a long-standing issue in Pakistani society and barriers women face in entering and remaining in workforce have been a topic of research and policy discussion for decades. Despite significant progress in recent years, women still face of a range of challenges/barriers when it comes to their participating in labor force whether as an employee or as entrepreneurs. Gender-based discrimination and family-based responsibilities prevent women from fully participating in work force resulting in wastage of a significant amount of talent and expertise. Like other women in workforce and entrepreneurship ventures, WSMIs are facing approximately similar or greater challenges. Women’s entrepreneurial journey is difficult, even in the emerging digital landscape. Studies on women entrepreneurs of the 21st century—as those of the late 20th—indicate that women are continuing their quest for a work–life balance, personal fulfillment

and meaning through entrepreneurship rather than profit first, consequently choosing to become micro-entrepreneurs or home-based entrepreneurs. Besides rigid family norms, male dominance, and domestic work burden, the WSMIs additionally face technological barriers including but not limited to wide gender gap in digital connectivity, access to internet, necessary ICTs education and skills development opportunities and cheaper internet connection positively correlated with women work force participation. Digital connectivity can open new opportunities for WSMIs and women as whole to take advantage of online jobs and online learning opportunities.

Additionally, WSMIs have less privilege to use cell phones or mobiles, insufficient digital skills and training opportunities that are the core prerequisites to perform their digital entrepreneurial activities.

It is important to underline a few ways in which digital skills can be of great help for such women who want to excel in their entrepreneurial ventures through digital platforms. It includes content creation, audience engagement, monetization (a core feature that is necessary to start earning through their digital activities) and business analytics. Having necessary skills, WSMIs have competitive advantage and digital support to make them stand out in an increasingly competitive marketplace for online businesses. In addition to this, technology savvy WSMIs will be considerably less vulnerable to cyber harassment and online bullying as they are aware of their rights and strategies to secure themselves and their digital entrepreneurial activities from negative elements.

Overall, these challenges/barriers in digital world especially for women and generally for everyone in digital entrepreneurship have serious consequences for societies. By understanding the challenges/barriers that WSMIs face and by carefully examining the existing set of policies that have been developed to overcome these challenges, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable economy that benefit for everyone with maximum FLFP.

CHALLENGES/BARRIES

The findings of the study indicate that WSMIs have the potential to leverage their online presence to create successful businesses in Pakistan for their substantial participation in labor force, but they face several challenges and barriers in doing so particularly with respect to digital perspective such as digital connectivity problems, lack of digital skills, lower training opportunities, inadequate awareness to handle cyber harassment and secure their digital ventures.

1-Digital Connectivity Problems: One of the major barriers that women in Pakistan face is a lack of access to digital connectivity. In many parts of the country, women do not have access to the internet, which limits their ability to participate in online work and access online training and educational resources.

2-Lack of Digital Skills: Even when women have access to digital technologies, a significant barrier they often face is the lack of necessary digital skills to utilize these technologies effectively. This can include skills such as basic computer literacy, social media marketing, and e-commerce, which are essential for many online jobs and businesses.

3-Lower Training Opportunities: Women in Pakistan have fewer opportunities for training and upskilling than men, which can limit their ability to take advantage of digital opportunities. This is often due to social and cultural norms that prioritize men's education and professional development over women.

4-Inadequate Awareness to Handle Cyber Harassment: WSMI is often targeted by cyber harassment and online abuse, which can be a major barrier to their participation in online work and business. Many women may lack the awareness and knowledge to protect themselves from these threats, which can limit their willingness to engage in online activities.

5-Inadequate Awareness to Secure Digital Ventures: Similarly, WSMI may lack the knowledge and resources to secure their digital ventures, which can make them vulnerable to fraud and other online scams. This can limit their willingness to engage in online business and entrepreneurship.

Addressing these challenges/barriers will require a multi-faceted approach that involves improving digital infrastructure, providing training and education opportunities for women, and raising awareness about online safety and security. By

taking these steps government and organizations assist to ensure that women in Pakistan can fully participate in the digital entrepreneurship and realize their full potential in the labor force.

4.1. Overcoming barriers for WMSIs and closing gap for FLFP

It has been discussed in detail in previous parts of the research paper that female participation could significantly boost GDP and national economy by encouraging FLFP through digital facilities, yet there are significant other barriers in Pakistan including socio-cultural, safety and access to finance which hinder FLFP. Further, inadequate digital connectivity, insufficient family support and digital skills, social dignity and socially acceptable profession, in-sufficient women involvement in decision making etc. are controlling factors. This existing scenario suggests that interventions that more broadly encourage more participation of women in the labor force and drastic measures to promote activities which may help to change mindset and shift behavior are essential.

In this regard, the following activities or areas can be prioritized including improving monitoring with data disaggregated by gender and providing more flexible capital can also facilitate entrepreneurial capacity of low-income female borrowers (Dimble and Mobarak 2019).

1-Encouraging financial institutions: Implementing disbursement strategies that empower the recipient to exert control over grant or loan funds can lead to a decrease in misappropriation of funds allocated to women. The biometric verification process of the BISP has demonstrated that granting women some level of control over withdrawn funds can serve as a crucial initial measure towards enabling women to participate in making household decisions.

2-Oversight and Advisory mechanism: By ensuring that committees overseeing loan program progress have improved gender representation, the presence of women in these committees can instill confidence in female loan applicants. When women are represented in the committees, communication becomes easier and more comfortable due to the shared gender experience, making the loan application process more accessible to women.

3- Set targets: To promote gender inclusivity, initiatives should be introduced, which may vary across provinces to address differing societal norms. Media awareness campaigns are also needed to create awareness and increase visibility. In addition, the teaching community should be engaged to motivate female students to leverage their education and skills. Finally, motivational speakers and religious leaders should play a role in inspiring and encouraging women to participate in the labor force.

4- Improve chances of women borrowers utilizing loan programmes: To make the loan application process more accessible to women borrowers, it is necessary to ensure that it is user-friendly, even for those without access to a cell phone. One way to achieve this is by developing "use cases" that illustrate how to access and utilize the loan application process, which can help encourage more women to take advantage of it.

5-Need to focus on digital connectivity: Increase existing efforts to improve digital literacy for women and mentoring programs for women. Provide them with small loans to buy digital gadgets such as phones and laptops. Introduce affordable internet packages for women digital entrepreneurs. Need to focus on digital infrastructure building so that women from remote also engage in digital entrepreneurial activities.

6- Legislation: Need to legislate and aware women about digital harassment and protective measures: Digital harassment is a serious issue have a serious impact on the live the WSMI and personal lives of that women. There is a dire need to address this problem through legislation and awareness campaigns. By creating a legal framework and promoting awareness around digital harassment, we can promote a safer and more welcoming online community for everyone, not just women. This can have positive ripple effects in society by reducing the incidence of online bullying, threats, and harassment.

7-Secure and Safe Transport: Take conveyance related initiatives that assist to lessen both mobility and safety concerns for women, so they can participate more fully in training and/or in the labor force and advance their entrepreneurial activities.

8- Overcome the Stigma of a female workers: The stigma of a female breadwinner is often based on outdated stereotypes about women's roles in society. By overcoming this stigma, we can challenge these

stereotypes and promote more modern and progressive views about female in workforce and WSMIs.

KEY FINDINGS /CONCLUSION

The key findings of the study indicate that WSMIs have the potential to leverage their online presence to create successful businesses in Pakistan for their substantial participation in labor force, but they face several challenges and barriers in doing so particularly with respect to digital perspective such as digital connectivity problems, lack of digital skills, lower training opportunities, inadequate awareness to handle cyber harassment and secure their digital ventures. The paper concludes with recommendations for addressing these barriers, including increasing access to technology and funding, providing education and training, and creating supportive policies and programs which may provide an equal playing field for women to play their positive role in building national economy and create effective change in society at large. Overall, this descriptive study also highlights the need such policies, initiatives, and programs that support WSMIs participation in digital entrepreneurship activities, particularly in the context of Pakistan. To advance as an economically independent nation, it is imperative to adopt an aggressive approach to enhance FLFP. It would be possible to elevate women literacy levels and equipping them with practical skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS/REFORMS

The paper concludes with recommendations for addressing these barriers, including increasing access to technology and funding, providing education, and training, and creating supportive policies and programs which may provide an equal playing field for women to play their positive role in building national economy and create effective change in society at large. Overall, this descriptive study also highlights the need such policies, initiatives, and programs that support WSMIs participation in digital entrepreneurship activities, particularly in the context of Pakistan. WSMIs in Pakistan are struggling on multiple fronts. Here are some recommendations on how ought to be supported by them.

Family level:

Encourage families to support women's participation in digital entrepreneurship activities: Women often face resistance from their families when it comes to pursuing careers in digital entrepreneurship. It is important to engage with families and raise awareness about the benefits of women's participation in these fields. Moreover, provide support for women who are managing work and family responsibilities: Women in Pakistan often must balance multiple responsibilities, including caregiving and household tasks. Support programs that help women to manage these responsibilities can be helpful in allowing them to focus on their digital ventures.

Community level

Foster a supportive community for women in technology and entrepreneurship: Women can benefit greatly from supportive networks of peers and mentors who can offer guidance, advice, and support as they navigate the challenges of digital entrepreneurship.

Promote awareness and understanding of women's rights and the importance of gender equality: Cultural and social norms in Pakistan can be a significant barrier to women's participation in digital entrepreneurship. Efforts to promote awareness and understanding of women's rights and the importance of gender equality can help to shift attitudes and create a more supportive environment for women.

Technical Level:

Provide education and training opportunities to help women develop technical skills: Women often lack the technical skills needed to succeed in digital entrepreneurship. Providing access to education and training programs can help to bridge this skills gap and give women the tools they need to succeed.

Promote access to affordable technology and resources: Many women in Pakistan lack access to the technology and resources they need to launch and grow their digital ventures. Efforts to provide access to affordable technology and resources can help to level the playing field and create greater opportunities for women.

A joint effort is required at every front to facilitate and manage this social change.

Fathers, guardians, and husbands:

Family support is essential for women to succeed in digital entrepreneurship. Fathers, guardians, and

husbands can play a critical role in creating a supportive environment for women, by providing them with the necessary resources, encouragement, and support.

Educational Institutions And NGOs:

Educational institutions and NGOs can provide women with access to education and training programs that help them to develop the necessary skills to participate in digital entrepreneurship activities. These organizations can also provide financial and technical support and help to create supportive networks of peers and mentors.

Motivational speakers and religious clerics:

Motivational speakers and religious clerics can help to raise awareness about the importance of women's participation in digital entrepreneurship activities and promote greater understanding and acceptance of gender equality.

Media:

The media can play a critical role in promoting awareness about women's participation in digital entrepreneurship activities and showcasing success stories of women who have succeeded in this field. This can help to create a more positive and supportive environment for women.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The main limitation of this is potential for publication bias, as only studies published in English and mainly conducted on Pakistan included. In addition, the quality of the included studies varied, which could have affected the validity of the findings. Another limitation of findings of the study based on secondary data primary data is not used for analysis and conclusion in future studies can incorporated primary and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques. This have focused only on the barriers to digital entrepreneurial activities of women social media influencers in Pakistan and may have neglected the other factors that may affect female labor force participation in Pakistan.

REFERENCES

- Adeel, M., Yeh, A. G. O., & Zhang, F. (2016). Gender inequality in mobility and mode choice in Pakistan. *Transportation*, 44(6), 1519–1534.
- Amber, H., & Chichaibelu, B. B. (2023). Patterns and Causes of Female Labor Force Participation: An Age–Period–Cohort Analysis for Pakistan. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 42(2), 20.
- Ahl, H. (2006). Why research on women entrepreneurs needs new directions. *Entrepreneurship* 30, 595–621. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-6520.2006.00138.x
- Ahmed, D. (2023). COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery: Putting Youth of Pakistan at the Forefront. *Beyond the Pandemic: Leaving No One Behind*, 187.
- Ali, A., & Qazi, I. A. (2022). Digital Literacy and Vulnerability to Misinformation: Evidence from Facebook Users in Pakistan. *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media*, 2.
- Al-Qahtani, M., Fekih Zguir, M., Al-Fagih, L., & Koç, M. (2022). Women entrepreneurship for sustainability: Investigations on status, challenges, drivers, and potentials in Qatar. *Sustainability*, 14(7), 4091.
- Amir, S., Kotikula, A., Pande, R. P., Bossavie, L. L. Y., & Khadka, U. (2018). Female Labor Force Participation in Pakistan.
- Andriamahery, A., & Qamruzzaman, M. (2022). Do access to finance, technical know-how, and financial literacy offer women empowerment through women's entrepreneurial development? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 776844.
- Casaló, L. V., Flavián, C., & Ibáñez-Sánchez, S. (2020). Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership. *Journal of business research*, 117, 510-519.
- Cheng, M. (2018). 8Major challenges women face in business. *Forbes* <https://www.forbes.com/sites/margueritacheng/2018/10/31/8-major-challenges-women-face-in-business/?sh=32e8b3446461>
- Cho, Y., & Majoka, Z. (2020). Jobs Diagnostic Pakistan: Promoting Access to Quality Jobs for All. World Bank Group.

- Cho, Y., Li, J., & Chaudhuri, S. (2020). Women entrepreneurs in Asia: Eight country studies. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 22(2), 115-123.
- Cuberes, D., & Teignier, M. (2014). Gender inequality and economic growth: A critical review. *Journal of International Development*, 26(2), 260-276.
- Derera, E., Chitakunye, P., & O'Neill, C. (2014). The impact of gender on start-up capital: A case of women entrepreneurs in South Africa. *The Journal of Entrepreneurship*, 23(1), 95-114.
- Dhameja, S. K. (2002). Women Entrepreneurs: Opportunities, performance and problems. Deep and Deep Publications.
- Dhar, S. (2022). Relationship between Women Empowerment and Economic Development-A Comparative Analysis of South Asia and Southeast Asian Economies. Available at SSRN 4145791.
- Dimble, V., & Mobarak, A. M. (2019). Saving microfinance through innovative lending. *IGC Growth Brief Series*, 17.
- Eagly, A. H. (1987). Sex Differences in Social Behavior. A Social-Role Interpretation. New York, NY: Psychology Press. *economics*, 49(1), 11-30.
- Elveren, A. Y., Moghadam, V. M., & Dudu, S. (2022, September). Militarization, women's labor force participation, and gender inequality: Evidence from global data. In *Women's Studies International Forum* (Vol. 94, p. 102621). Pergamon.
- Gauci, P., Peters, K., O'Reilly, K., & Elmir, R. (2022). The experience of workplace gender discrimination for women registered nurses: A qualitative study. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 78(6), 1743-1754.
- Goldin, C. (1994). The U-shaped female labor force function in economic development and economic history.
- Hasan, A. (2023). IMPACT OF FEMALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF PAKISTAN. *Reviews of Management Sciences*, 5(1), 78-91.
- Henshaw, A. (2023). Addressing the Digital Gender Gap. In *Digital Frontiers in Gender and Security* (pp. 42-62). Bristol University Press.
- Hsieh, C. T., Hurst, E., Jones, C. I., & Klenow, P. J. (2019). The allocation of talent and us economic growth. *Econometrica*, 87(5), 1439-1474.
- International Labour Organization. (2020). World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2020. In International Labour Organization.
- Jafari-Sadeghi, V., Garcia-Perez, A., Candelo, E., & Couturier, J. (2021). Exploring the impact of digital transformation on technology entrepreneurship and technological market expansion: The role of technology readiness, exploration and exploitation. *Journal of Business Research*, 124, 100-111.
- Kamberidou, I., & Pascall, N. (2020). The digital skills crisis: engendering technology-empowering women in cyberspace. *European Journal of Social Sciences Studies*, 4(6), 1-33.
- Khanna, G., & Lee, M. (2019). High-skill immigration, innovation, and creative destruction. In *The Roles of Immigrants and Foreign Students in US Science, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship* (pp. 73-98). University of Chicago Press.
- Koellinger, P., Minniti, M., and Schade, C. (2011). Gender differences in entrepreneurial propensity. *Oxf. Bull. Econ. Stat.* 75, 213-234. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0084.2011.00689.x
- Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media. *Journal of interactive advertising*, 19(1), 58-73.
- Mustafa, M., Batool, A., & Raza, A. A. (2019). Designing ICT interventions for women in Pakistan. *Communications of the ACM*, 62(11), 46-47.
- Ramadani, V., Rahman, M. M., Salamzadeh, A., Rahaman, M. S., & Abazi-Alili, H. (2022). Entrepreneurship education and graduates' entrepreneurial intentions: Does gender matter? A multi-group analysis using

- AMOS. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 180, 121693.
- Rashid, S., & Ratten, V. (2020). A systematic literature review on women entrepreneurship in emerging economies while reflecting specifically on SAARC countries. *Entrepreneurship and organizational change: Managing innovation and creative capabilities*, 37-88.
- Robinson, J. (2017). *Economic philosophy*. Routledge.
- Secundo, G., Gioconda, M. E. L. E., Del Vecchio, P., Gianluca, E. L. I. A., Margherita, A., & Valentina, N. D. O. U. (2021). Threat or opportunity? A case study of digital-enabled redesign of entrepreneurship education in the COVID-19 emergency. *Technological forecasting and social change*, 166, 120565.
- Sohail, M. (2014). Women empowerment and economic development-an exploratory study in Pakistan. *Journal of Business Studies Quarterly*, 5(4), 210.
- Suseno, Y., & Abbott, L. (2021). Women entrepreneurs' digital social innovation: Linking gender, entrepreneurship, social innovation and information systems. *Information Systems Journal*, 31(5), 717-744.
- Vallaster, C., Kraus, S., Nielsen, A., and Merigo Lindahl, J. M. (2019). Ethics and entrepreneurship: a bibliometric study and literature review. *J. Bus. Res.* 99, 226–237. doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.02.050
- World Bank Group. (2022). *From Swimming in Sand to High and Sustainable Growth: A Roadmap to Reduce Distortions in the Allocation of Resources and Talent in the Pakistani Economy*. World Bank.
- World Bank. (2016). *Doing business 2017: Equal opportunity for all*. The World Bank.

