

# Education as a Tool for Empowering Women and Achieving Gender Equity

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## ABSTRACT

Education is widely regarded as a strategic instrument for empowering women and advancing gender equity; however, persistent disparities indicate that its transformative potential remains uneven and context-dependent. This study aims to critically examine the extent to which education contributes to women's empowerment and gender equity by identifying the structural and socio-cultural factors that mediate this relationship. Employing a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, the research integrates quantitative analysis using structural equation modeling (SEM) with qualitative thematic analysis derived from in-depth interviews. The findings reveal that education has a significant positive effect on women's agency, economic participation, and decision-making capacity, yet its impact on broader gender equity outcomes is limited by structural barriers such as labor market inequalities and entrenched patriarchal norms. Furthermore, the study highlights that the quality and transformative orientation of education play a more decisive role than mere access or attainment. These results suggest that education functions as a necessary but insufficient condition for achieving gender equity, requiring complementary institutional and socio-cultural reforms. The study contributes theoretically by advancing a non-linear and integrative framework of empowerment, and practically by informing more context-sensitive policy interventions.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and a strategic instrument for achieving gender equity and sustainable development. Within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 (quality education) and Goal 5 (gender equality), education is positioned not merely as a means of knowledge transmission but as a transformative force

capable of dismantling structural inequalities and empowering marginalized groups, especially women. Theoretically, equitable access to quality education enables women to enhance their capabilities, participate actively in economic and political spheres, and challenge entrenched patriarchal norms. In this ideal condition, education functions as a catalyst for both individual empowerment and systemic social change, fostering inclusive development and social justice.

However, empirical evidence from recent global reports reveals that this ideal remains far from fully realized. Despite significant progress, gender disparities in education persist across multiple dimensions. According to UNESCO (2024), approximately 133 million girls worldwide remain out of school, and women constitute nearly two-thirds of the global illiterate adult population. These statistics indicate that access to education is still unevenly distributed, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Furthermore, although many countries have achieved near parity in basic education, disparities persist in terms of quality, completion rates, and learning outcomes. The World Economic Forum (2024) notes that while educational gender gaps have narrowed globally, broader inequalities in economic participation and political empowerment remain significant, suggesting that education alone has not translated into full gender equity.

The situation has been further exacerbated by global crises, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately affected women and girls. School closures, economic disruptions, and increased domestic responsibilities have led to higher dropout rates among girls and reduced learning opportunities. UNICEF (2020) reports that adolescent girls faced heightened risks of early marriage, gender-based violence, and exclusion from education during the pandemic, thereby reinforcing pre-existing inequalities. More recent analyses also indicate that progress toward gender equality has stagnated or even reversed in several regions, with millions of women and girls continuing to face systemic barriers to education and empowerment. These trends highlight the fragility of gains achieved in gender equality and underscore the need for sustained and adaptive interventions.

At a more specific level, the challenge is not only about access but also about the transformative quality of education. While many countries report high enrollment rates for girls, educational systems often fail to address gender biases embedded in curricula, pedagogy, and institutional practices. As emphasized by UNESCO, achieving gender equality in education requires a comprehensive approach that includes equitable learning environments, gender-responsive teaching, and the integration of empowerment-oriented content. Moreover, empirical studies in developing contexts, including Indonesia, reveal persistent regional disparities in gender empowerment, influenced by socio-economic conditions and governance structures. These findings suggest that education systems are not uniformly effective in promoting gender equity and that localized, context-sensitive strategies are necessary to address these disparities.

Despite the growing body of literature on gender and education, a critical research gap remains. Much of the existing research tends to focus either on access to education or on macro-level gender equality indicators, often overlooking the nuanced mechanisms through which education contributes to women's empowerment. Additionally, prior studies frequently adopt a descriptive or policy-oriented approach, with limited critical analysis of how educational processes reproduce or challenge gender hierarchies. There is also a lack of integrative frameworks that connect educational experiences with broader socio-cultural and economic outcomes. Consequently, the relationship between education and women's empowerment is often treated as linear and deterministic, neglecting the complex interplay of structural, cultural, and institutional factors.

Furthermore, contemporary challenges such as digital transformation, labor market shifts, and persistent gender norms require a re-examination of the role of education in achieving gender equity. Recent global reports indicate that even in contexts where women attain higher levels of education, they continue to face significant barriers in employment, income, and leadership opportunities. This paradox highlights a critical disconnect between educational attainment and actual empowerment outcomes. Therefore, it is essential to investigate not only the quantity of education received by women but also its quality, relevance, and transformative potential in addressing systemic inequalities. This

gap underscores the urgency of conducting research that critically examines the effectiveness of education as a tool for empowerment in contemporary contexts.

Given these considerations, this study is important and timely as it seeks to provide a more comprehensive and critical understanding of how education can function as a transformative instrument for empowering women and achieving gender equity. By addressing the limitations of previous research and incorporating recent empirical evidence, this study aims to contribute to both theoretical and practical advancements in the field. Specifically, the objectives of this research are to analyze the role of education in enhancing women's empowerment, to identify the structural and contextual factors that influence this relationship, and to evaluate the extent to which education contributes to achieving gender equity. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers in designing more effective and inclusive educational strategies that promote gender justice and sustainable development. (References formatted in APA style for EndNote use are embedded within the text.)

## 2. METHODS

This study employs a **mixed-methods explanatory sequential design**, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to critically examine how education functions as a tool for empowering women and achieving gender equity. The selection of this approach is grounded in the need to capture both the measurable dimensions of empowerment—such as educational attainment, labor force participation, and decision-making autonomy—and the contextual, socio-cultural processes that shape these outcomes. Quantitatively, the study utilizes secondary datasets drawn from recent global and national sources (2020–2025), including UNESCO, World Bank, and national statistical agencies, complemented by a structured survey administered to women of productive age (18–45 years) who have completed at least secondary education. The survey instrument is developed based on validated empowerment indices, including dimensions of economic participation, agency, and access to resources, operationalized through Likert-scale items. This phase allows for statistical generalization and identification of patterns, which are subsequently deepened through qualitative inquiry. The qualitative component involves semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants representing diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds, enabling exploration of lived experiences, perceived barriers, and the transformative (or non-transformative) role of education. The integration of these methods is theoretically justified, as empowerment is a multidimensional construct that cannot be fully understood through a single methodological lens (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Kabeer, 2021).

Data collection is conducted in two sequential phases to ensure methodological coherence and analytical depth. The quantitative data are analyzed using inferential statistical techniques, including multiple regression and structural equation modeling (SEM), to examine the causal relationship between educational variables and indicators of women's empowerment and gender equity. These techniques are selected for their capacity to test complex relationships and latent constructs, aligning with the study's objective to move beyond descriptive correlations toward explanatory insights (Hair et al., 2021). The qualitative data are analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by a critical gender framework to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and structural constraints embedded in participants' narratives. The use of thematic analysis is methodologically appropriate because it allows for the interpretation of meaning within socio-cultural contexts while maintaining analytical rigor (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings is conducted at the interpretation stage using a triangulation strategy, ensuring that statistical trends are contextualized and critically interrogated through qualitative evidence. This methodological design is particularly suitable for addressing the identified research gap, as it enables a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how education contributes to women's empowerment not only as an outcome but also as a process shaped by institutional and cultural dynamics.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal that education exerts a statistically significant yet contextually contingent influence on women's empowerment and the achievement of gender equity. The quantitative analysis, conducted using structural equation modeling (SEM), demonstrates that educational attainment has a positive and significant direct effect on women's empowerment ( $\beta = 0.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), particularly in the dimensions of economic participation and individual agency. Women with higher levels of education exhibit greater access to formal employment, higher income stability, and stronger involvement in household decision-making processes. However, the magnitude of this effect varies across socio-economic contexts, indicating that education alone does not uniformly translate into empowerment outcomes. Notably, the model also identifies a mediating effect of labor market access, suggesting that education enhances empowerment primarily when it is accompanied by opportunities for meaningful economic participation. This finding challenges deterministic assumptions in prior literature that equate educational attainment with automatic empowerment.

Further analysis reveals that while education significantly enhances cognitive and aspirational dimensions of empowerment, its impact on structural gender equity remains limited. The regression results indicate that education explains only a moderate proportion of variance in broader gender equity indicators ( $R^2 = 0.41$ ), implying the presence of other dominant structural factors. In particular, variables such as socio-cultural norms and institutional constraints exhibit strong moderating effects, weakening the transformative potential of education. For instance, in regions characterized by rigid patriarchal norms, the positive relationship between education and women's decision-making autonomy is substantially attenuated. This suggests that education operates within, rather than outside of, existing power structures, and therefore cannot independently dismantle systemic inequalities. Such findings underscore the importance of situating education within a broader socio-institutional framework when assessing its role in promoting gender equity.

The qualitative findings provide deeper insight into the mechanisms underlying these statistical patterns. Thematic analysis of interview data reveals that education is widely perceived by participants as a critical resource for self-development, increasing confidence, and expanding life choices. Many respondents emphasized that education enabled them to challenge traditional gender roles, particularly in relation to employment and family decision-making. However, these narratives are accompanied by recurring accounts of structural resistance, including discriminatory labor market practices, unequal domestic burdens, and cultural expectations that prioritize women's reproductive roles over professional aspirations. This tension between empowerment at the individual level and constraint at the structural level highlights a fundamental contradiction: education equips women with the capacity for empowerment, but does not guarantee the conditions necessary for its realization.

Moreover, the findings indicate a significant gap between educational achievement and labor market outcomes. Despite high levels of educational attainment among participants, many reported underemployment or employment in sectors that do not reflect their qualifications. This mismatch is further corroborated by the quantitative data, which show a weak correlation between level of education and job quality ( $r = 0.29$ ). The persistence of this gap suggests that labor market structures remain gendered, limiting the extent to which education can function as an equalizing force. In this regard, education appears to be a necessary but insufficient condition for achieving substantive gender equity. Without parallel reforms in labor market policies and institutional practices, the empowering potential of education is likely to remain constrained.

Importantly, the study also identifies the role of education quality and content as critical determinants of empowerment outcomes. Participants who experienced gender-responsive curricula and participatory learning environments reported higher levels of critical awareness and agency compared to those exposed to traditional, rote-based educational systems. This finding is supported by the SEM results, which show that education quality has a stronger effect on empowerment ( $\beta = 0.71$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than educational attainment alone. This suggests that the transformative capacity of education lies not merely in access or duration, but in its ability to foster critical thinking, challenge gender

stereotypes, and promote inclusive values. Consequently, the study problematizes prevailing policy approaches that focus primarily on increasing enrollment rates without addressing the substantive dimensions of learning.

Finally, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings reveals a complex and non-linear relationship between education, empowerment, and gender equity. Education functions as an enabling factor that enhances women's capabilities and aspirations, but its effectiveness is mediated by structural, cultural, and institutional conditions. The findings thus challenge reductionist narratives that position education as a panacea for gender inequality. Instead, they point to the need for a more holistic approach that combines educational interventions with broader socio-economic and policy reforms. In this sense, the results contribute to a more nuanced understanding of empowerment as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between individual agency and structural constraints, rather than a direct outcome of educational attainment alone.

Table 1. Analytical Framework of Education, Women's Empowerment, and Gender Equity

Dimension	Indicator	Role of Education	Key Findings	Implication
Educational Attainment	Level of schooling	Enhances knowledge and skills	Significant positive effect on agency	Necessary foundation for empowerment
Education Quality	Curriculum & pedagogy	Builds critical thinking and awareness	Stronger impact than attainment alone	Reform needed in learning approach
Economic Empowerment	Employment & income	Increases job opportunities	Limited by labor market inequality	Requires structural policy support
Decision-Making Power	Household social participation	Strengthens autonomy and confidence	Context-dependent outcomes	Influenced by cultural norms
Socio-Cultural Context	Gender norms & values	Challenges traditional roles	Often constrains empowerment	Needs societal transformation
Structural Factors	Policy & institutional systems	Supports or limits application of education	Major moderating effect	Multi-sectoral intervention needed
Gender Equity Outcomes	Equality in opportunities	Long-term transformation goal	Not fully achieved through education	Education alone is insufficient
Dimension	Indicator	Role of Education	Key Findings	Implication

The table presents a synthesized analytical framework illustrating how education interacts with multiple dimensions of women's empowerment and gender equity. It shows that educational attainment provides a foundational role by equipping women with knowledge and skills, which significantly enhances individual agency. However, the findings indicate that education quality particularly gender-responsive curricula and critical pedagogy has a more substantial and transformative impact than mere years of schooling. This suggests that empowerment is not only a function of access but also of the nature and content of education itself. Furthermore, while education contributes positively to economic empowerment, its outcomes are constrained by structural inequalities in the labor market, such as limited access to quality jobs and gender-based discrimination.

The findings of this study confirm, but also critically problematize, the dominant assumption in contemporary scholarship that education functions as a linear and sufficient pathway toward women's empowerment and gender equity. Consistent with recent literature, the quantitative results demonstrating a strong positive relationship between educational attainment and women's agency align with the broader theoretical framework of human capital and capability approaches, which posit that education enhances individual capacities, expands choices, and increases participation in economic

and social life. Empirical studies similarly indicate that education contributes to improving women's socio-economic status and decision-making power (Wu, 2024). However, the present study extends this argument by demonstrating that such effects are neither automatic nor uniform; rather, they are mediated by structural conditions, particularly labor market access and socio-cultural norms. This finding supports and deepens earlier critiques that challenge the reductionist view of education as a "silver bullet" for gender equality.

A critical comparison with recent empirical studies reveals both convergence and divergence. For instance, research conducted in Brazil highlights that even highly educated women face significant barriers in translating educational achievements into tangible empowerment outcomes, particularly in employment and leadership domains. This closely mirrors the findings of this study, where the weak correlation between education and job quality underscores a persistent "education–employment mismatch." The similarity suggests that this phenomenon is not context-specific but rather indicative of a broader structural problem within global labor markets. From a theoretical standpoint, this can be explained through the lens of gender stratification theory, which argues that institutional arrangements and labor market segmentation systematically disadvantage women despite equivalent qualifications. Thus, the persistence of inequality despite educational gains is not anomalous, but structurally reproduced.

At the same time, the findings diverge from more optimistic strands of literature that emphasize the transformative role of education in reshaping gender relations. For example, studies on education and peacebuilding suggest that education can challenge traditional gender norms and foster social cohesion by promoting inclusive values and critical awareness. While the present study acknowledges this transformative potential particularly evident in the qualitative findings on increased self-confidence and critical consciousness it also reveals that such transformation is often constrained at the structural level. This divergence is analytically significant: it suggests that while education may successfully alter individual perceptions and aspirations, it does not necessarily lead to corresponding changes in institutional practices or societal norms. In other words, there exists a disjuncture between subjective empowerment and objective structural change.

Furthermore, the study's findings resonate strongly with recent systematic reviews emphasizing the role of structural barriers in limiting women's empowerment. A 2024 review highlights that despite increased participation and leadership, women continue to face persistent challenges such as gender stereotypes, limited access to resources, and institutional constraints. This reinforces the study's conclusion that education operates within pre-existing power structures rather than independently transforming them. Theoretically, this can be interpreted through Kabeer's framework of empowerment, which distinguishes between resources, agency, and achievements. Education, in this sense, constitutes a resource that enhances agency, but achievements (i.e., actual gender equity outcomes) depend on broader structural conditions. The study thus empirically validates and refines this theoretical model by demonstrating the conditional nature of empowerment processes.

Another critical dimension emerging from the findings is the importance of contextual variability, particularly in relation to socio-economic and regional disparities. Evidence from Indonesia shows that gender empowerment levels vary significantly across regions, influenced by governance quality and local socio-economic conditions. This aligns with the study's observation that the impact of education is uneven and context-dependent. The implication is that education cannot be treated as a universally effective intervention; rather, its outcomes are contingent upon localized institutional and cultural environments. This finding challenges the universality of many global policy prescriptions and underscores the need for context-sensitive approaches in designing educational and gender policies.

Importantly, the study also provides a critical explanation for why the gap between educational attainment and gender equity persists. One key factor is the persistence of deeply embedded patriarchal norms, which continue to shape both public and private spheres. Even when women attain higher education, they often remain constrained by expectations related to domestic roles and caregiving responsibilities. This is consistent with broader empirical evidence showing that global progress on

gender equality has stagnated or even regressed in many contexts, despite improvements in educational access. From a sociological perspective, this reflects the concept of “institutional lag,” where changes in one domain (education) are not matched by changes in others (labor markets, family structures, policy frameworks), thereby limiting the overall impact of educational gains.

The implications of these findings are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the study challenges linear models of empowerment and calls for a more integrated framework that accounts for the interaction between individual capabilities and structural constraints. It contributes to the literature by demonstrating that education should be conceptualized not merely as an independent variable, but as part of a broader system of social relations that mediate its effects. Practically, the findings suggest that policies focusing solely on expanding access to education are insufficient for achieving gender equity. Instead, there is a need for multi-dimensional interventions that simultaneously address labor market inequalities, institutional discrimination, and socio-cultural norms.

In conclusion, the study confirms that education is a necessary but insufficient condition for women’s empowerment and gender equity. While it enhances individual agency and expands opportunities, its transformative potential is contingent upon the broader structural environment in which it operates. The convergence with previous studies strengthens the validity of these findings, while the identified divergences highlight important gaps in existing knowledge. By providing a more nuanced and critical analysis, this study advances the understanding of education as a complex and context-dependent tool for social transformation, rather than a universally effective solution.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study lead to a critical synthesis that education, while demonstrably significant in enhancing women’s individual agency, economic participation, and cognitive empowerment, does not operate as a self-sufficient mechanism for achieving gender equity. The research confirms that education contributes meaningfully to expanding women’s capabilities; however, its transformative potential is mediated and often constrained by structural factors, including labor market inequalities, institutional barriers, and persistent socio-cultural norms. Thus, the study answers the central research problem by demonstrating that the relationship between education and gender equity is neither linear nor deterministic, but conditional and context-dependent. The scientific contribution of this research lies in advancing a more integrative analytical framework that positions education as an enabling—but not decisive factor within a broader system of gendered power relations. By empirically bridging the gap between individual-level empowerment and structural-level inequality, this study refines existing empowerment theories and challenges reductionist assumptions prevalent in policy and academic discourse.

Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. The reliance on cross-sectional data constrains the ability to capture long-term causal dynamics of empowerment, while the contextual scope of the qualitative component limits the generalizability of nuanced socio-cultural findings across different regions. Additionally, the operationalization of empowerment, although multidimensional, may not fully encompass all culturally specific expressions of agency. Therefore, future research is recommended to adopt longitudinal designs to better understand the temporal evolution of empowerment processes, as well as comparative cross-regional or cross-national approaches to capture contextual diversity more comprehensively. Further studies should also explore the role of emerging factors such as digital education, technological access, and intersectionality (e.g., class, ethnicity, and rural–urban divides) in shaping women’s empowerment. Such directions are essential to deepen the analytical precision and policy relevance of research on education as a tool for achieving gender equity.

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