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FOR WOMEN**

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**Socio-economic Empowerment of  
Women through Apricot Farming  
in Hunza, Pakistan**

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**Principal Investigators: Shagufta and Noor Fareeha**

**Supervisor: Professor Dr. Sharin Shajahan Naomi**

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## **Abstract**

Hunza is an agrarian society where women are actively engaged in farming apart from looking after their homes and raising their children. Apricot farming has been practiced for here decades which women learn as a home chore just like cooking or any other work. Most families own Apricot orchards and women utilize these resources to generate income. This study seeks to explore women's economic and social empowerment through Apricot farming in Hunza. Mix method was used to collect data. 35 women were interviewed who are involved in Apricot farming. The primary data was collected by providing single page questionnaire to the participants. Moreover, in depth Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted. We used Naila Kabeer's definition of women empowerment to relate it to our study. We defined social and economic empowerment using indicators such as mobility in community and control over the money earned from Apricot. Our findings show that through Apricot farming women in Hunza Valley experience relational aspect of empowerment. They assist each other in picking, collecting and drying they come together and they work together for hours that helps them to interact with one another. This bonding gives them confidence, networking and social capital. They have access to markets in order to sell the Apricots which indicates that they have mobility in the society. In addition, they can use the money on their own choice for family and child care.

## **Background and Introduction**

Hunza is a mountainous valley situated in the extreme north of Pakistan surrounded by world famous mountain ranges Karakoram and Himalayas. Hunza shares its border with the Republic of China and Afghanistan. Hunza is strategically very important for Pakistan due to China Pakistan Economic corridor (CPEC), which will connect China to Europe via the shortest route and it is under construction. The climate in Hunza is extremely cold in winters and moderate during summers as compared to other parts of Pakistan. Weather is the main factor which contributes to a variety of fruits such as cherries, walnuts, peaches, apples, grapes and apricots. Sidky(1997) states that Agriculture is the main source of wealth in Hunza(p.250). People in Hunza utilize resources to generate income.

Apricot is a cash crop in Hunza so its production is usually higher than other above mentioned fruits except cherries. Moreover, Apricot trees can be grown in every kind of soil unlike cherries and peaches that grow in very fertile soil. Fresh apricots are perishable thus people sun dry it to preserve for a long period of time. The favorable weather for apricot farming starts from May and it ends in August. Apricot farming has been practiced in Hunza for decades. Almost all the families in Hunza have apricot orchards owned by themselves thus there are a number of families who sell apricots both dried and fresh in order to generate income.

Women in Hunza have been actively involved in Apricot farming for a very long time. Deitz (2007) during his visit to Karimabad Hunza observed that there were open shops along the way to a historical fort and the shops had baskets overflowing with dried apricots (p.473). Apricot selling started when Hunza was opened to tourists due to its ancient forts as well as greenery. Before that Apricots were collected to dry and stored as a source of food in winters by families themselves. It was one of the main sources of food when there was no or little access to markets. People produced food at their homes and once markets were open gradually people started buying food items from shops. After that production of food at homes declined and then selling Apricots in market became a trend.

Women in Hunza are also involved in other small scale businesses such as carpentry, gems cutting and many have their own shops. In addition, some women have opened small restaurants where they usually sell traditional food items, which assist them in economic empowerment.

However, Apricot business emerged long before than all other small scale businesses. In addition, there is a need for investment in the new businesses while apricot farming there is no initial financial investment. The purpose of the study is to highlight the empowerment of women through apricot farming in both economic and social sector. In our study we integrated social and economic empowerment in the context of social mobility and decision making power together. Moreover, this research will also identify the challenges that women face in apricot farming from different dimensions. In this study, economic empowerment refers to the women's decision making power over the money that is earned through apricot farming. The term Social empowerment refers to social mobility of women and strengthen good connections within families, communities and among women themselves. Throughout the study we will highlight how women involved in apricot farming are empowered in society and to what extent they are empowered economically.

The present study will recognize the importance of Apricot farming that empowers women in Hunza. The role of women in agriculture sector is more as compared to men but their efforts are less appreciated. This research will be helpful in acknowledgment of women's work in agriculture.

## **Literature Review**

Women empowerment is defined in different ways in different settings. In a western society women individual empowerment might not be similar to understanding of women empowerment in Asian society. Empowerment is not solely a term it is collection of different indicators, which vary from place to place. Kabeer (1999) defines women empowerment using different indicators such as mobility, access and control to resources (p.436). Access to resources does not guarantee empowerment however it is one of the indicators that can be used to understand the case of women involved in apricot farming access to market to sell the apricots can be seen as an indicator in this study. Pettit (2012) defines social empowerment of women as "sense of autonomy and self value, which is important to preserve her bodily integrity, demand for a return of her efforts and take maximum advantage of public services such as education"(p.4). In the context of a traditional patriarchal society it is important to understand that socio-economic empowerment of women refers to freedom of mobility, self

confidence, decision making power in households and participation in the job market, which we will observe throughout the study. Moreover Kabeer(2001) states that empowerment is the ability to make choices(p.8). The choices that a woman makes may be influenced by other family members including her children. Having said that if a woman is taking a decision based on her own interests and her consent that shows she is empowered.The authors define that “Empowerment is a multidimensional process it enables women to realize their potential in development”(Khan &Bibi, 2011,p.136). Potential of women in development does not only refers to the development of the economy it means development of women as an individual who is capable of making a decision based on her own consent. It also refers to the changes that a women can bring in families and communities when she has power within the family and community, gains social recognition and have increasing voice over decision making in family affairs (Doney et al.,2019) .

Sayed(2010) found that “Overwhelming majority of economically active women in Pakistan are in agriculture(65%) followed by services (20%) and industry (16%)”(p.117). Women living in cities actively participate in small scale businesses such as Handicrafts, Parlours, boutiques etc. On the other hand women in rural areas are more into agriculture sector. Some have small poultry forms and few sell vegetables and fruits grown in their farms. Afzal et al.(2009) mentioned that “Rural women still don’t have ownership on land and due to this they can’t make independent decisions on various agricultural aspects”(p.64). Since women do not own the land so legally they are not the owners of land and that means utilization of land, production of crops and even selling the crops is not merely done by women independently. Deitz (2007) emphasizing on the women’s role in household states that “In the traditional society of Hunza Valley, the powerful position of women stems from control over the crops and the harvest as well as the preservation and distribution”(p.472). Power does not only mean physical power rather it is the power to make choices. Research by Hussain et al.(2017) claim that women in Chitral part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa spend more time in production of fruits apart from the major chores at home such as cooking, taking care of children and maintaining the home(p.15). Furthermore, the authors state that fruit marketing is done by men and women have low participation in marketing unless dealers go to their homes (p.15).In most provinces of Pakistan, rural women have less role in market places due to the strict culture and traditional society.

Although are involved in the production of fruits and crops but they are not socially empowered to sell them in markets by themselves.

There is less literature on specifically Apricot farming in Hunza. In one of the studies done by Afzal et al (2009) they found that the socio-economic values of work of rural woman is underestimated and not often documented (p.65). However research has been done on women empowerment through economic participation in other sectors. The previous research focuses on the efforts of profit and non-profit organizations such as Aga Khan Rural Support Programme and Local support organization(LSO) in empowering women. Our research will highlight the empowerment of women as individuals. The concept of socio-economic empowerment of women involved in apricot farming combines both social and economic indicators of empowerment - how they make decisions as an individual and how they build self esteem and self confidence are considered as indicators of empowerment. Khan and Ali (2016) stated that“ the impact of these LSOs services enable women to be financially stable and resulted in empowering them in decision making in their child's education, marriage, political freedom and expression of interest”(p.462). Another research also emphasizes on the role of organizations in empowering women in Gilgit Pakistan mentioned that 73% of females’ reported that they were more respected and asked for advice after they took training from rural programs(Malik, 2018, p.161).The research is mainly focused on empowerment through organizations rather than individual women. There is no extensive study that shows that apricot farming is one of the ways in which women are empowered as an individual entity. This research will guide us to do more research in terms of apricot farming and its impact on empowering women in Hunza. In addition, it will also be helpful for organizations, which work for rural development through agriculture sector in Hunza to understand and design comprehensive projects for maximizing participation of women in apricot farming in the region.

## **Methodology**

### **Study sites:**

This present research is carried out in three different sites of central Hunza that includes Altit, Karim Abad and Aliabad. These three sites are few kilometers away from each other among

them Aliabad is a commercial area. Majority of the people residing in all three of the sites are natives except few tenants in Aliabad and few families in Altit.

### **Sampling and Data Collection Method:**

Our sample included women who were native's of the place. The sample size is 35 participants who are engaged in Apricot farming. The research was carried out through random sampling. One inclusion criterion, which was strictly followed that woman should have done apricot farming at least once in her lifetime.

The data in the study was collected from primary and secondary resources. Primary information was collected through field work that was carried out for two weeks in the month of July. Mixed method was used to collect information from participants. The data is both qualitative and quantitative. It was collected through door knocking method in above mentioned three locations. Well structured open ended and closed ended questions were designed under the supervision of advisor related to the social and economic empowerment of women through apricot farming. One page questionnaire was developed and it was provided to participants with an attached consent form. Questions were precise and simple vocabulary was used. Since most of the participants were illiterate we translated the questions into the local language. The local language that is spoken in three of the study sites is Burushaki, which is also our mother tongue so it was easy for us to translate from English to Burushaki. Translation of questions make it easy for the participants to actively participate in the survey. It took 15-20 minutes for the recruited participants to fill the form. The study also included focused group discussions (FDGS) in one of the study sites, which is Altit due to availability of participants at the same time. There was a specific spot in Altit where women specially the senior citizens came together in the evening to spend their leisure time. Focus group discussions added in deeper understanding of subject matter. Inclusion criteria was made for FDGs, participants who are involved in FDGs were young women who are engaged in Apricot farming as well as four old women who did Apricot farming in the past. Thus any women who did apricot farming even once in her life time was included in the study. Two focused group discussions were organized in Altit for the women who are engaged in Apricot farming. The participants actively participated in the FDGs so we got diverse opinions. Secondary resources were also used for

data collection such as online publications from reliable and valuable databases such as jstor and Google scholar. Scholarly articles related to our research were reviewed in the literature review to make our study more effective and credible.

### **Data analysis method:**

The study included qualitative and quantitative data. Textual analysis and content analysis were used to analyze the qualitative data. Content analysis was used to analyze and interpret focused group discussions and the contents of open ended questions of the questionnaire. Similarly, textual analysis was used to analyze and interpret the case studies of the participants. These research methods were more reliable and effective to the present study because the data of the study is collected through mixed method. Additionally, the questionnaire provided to the participants had closed-ended questions. These closed-ended questions were Yes/No questions which were more quantitative. The data collected from these questions is represented using pie graphs, tables and bar graphs in order to do descriptive analysis.

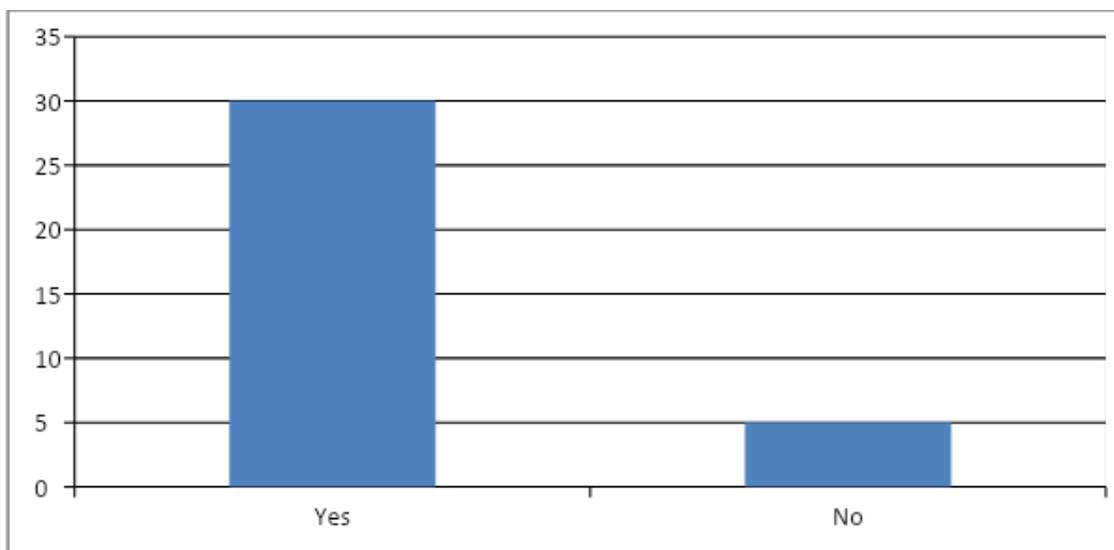
### **Findings**

The first question in the interview was that what is the reason behind starting Apricot farming. Most of them mentioned that they started after marriage since husband owned Apricot orchards so they utilized the resources. Some women said that they started Apricot farming to earn money whereas others said it has been part of culture for women to look after the Apricot farming. About the money that women earn from Apricot farming and where they utilize it majority of them earned between \$35-\$65 per month. Few of them earned greater than 65\$ monthly. Some of the participants did not mention at all. In addition while discussing expenditures the women mentioned that they spend the earned money in health, children's education and buying household stuff. In the open ended questions we also asked them if they face challenges from community and family members surprisingly all of the participants said that they never faced any issue in regard to Apricot farming. While focusing on social mobility of women within community we asked them about the interaction of women with relatives and

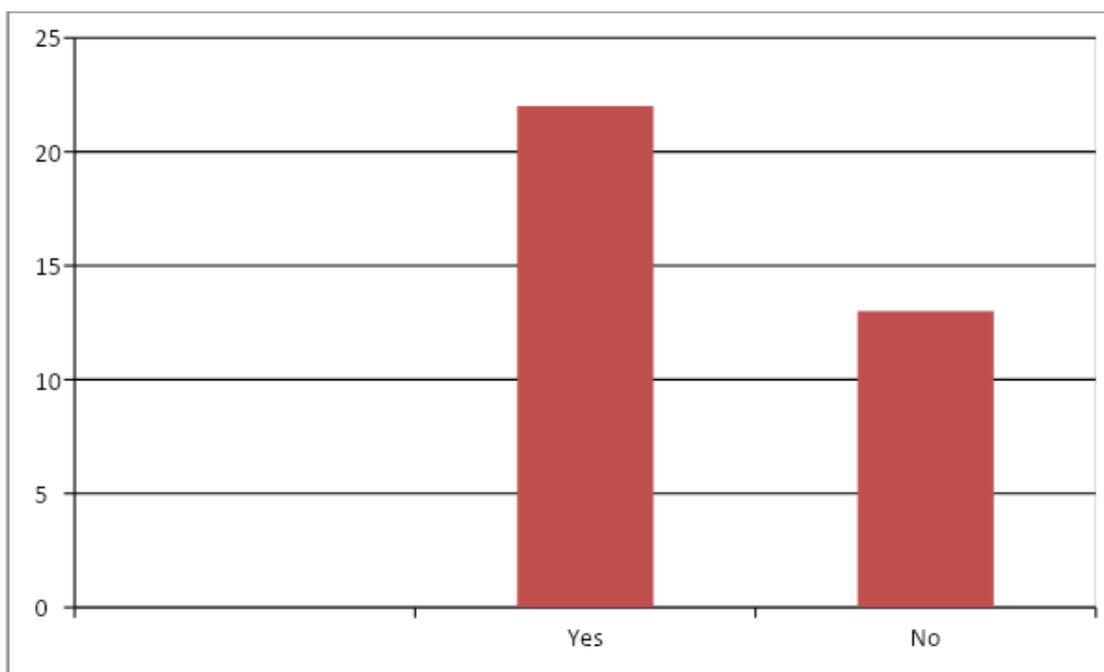
family members during Apricot farming they responded that usually they talk about daily life matters and it gives them a good chance to discuss issues and achievements.

The findings of the focus group discussion showed that most women learned apricot farming from mothers. They also mentioned that Apricot farming has decreased over time due to influence of other businesses. They mentioned that due to climate change the apricot farming declined in the last few years.

In the focus discussion there were 4 senior citizens above 75 years old and they mentioned that in past apricot farming was done in an organic way which is gradually decreasing nowadays. They stated that Apricot farming was done with zeal and zest. Women went to the Apricot orchards early in the morning and they helped each other. One of the members in focus group discussion in Altit explained how she started a business with a small amount of money that she earned by selling Apricots after the death of her husband. She further stated that “ *After his departure I became responsible to raise my children and there was nobody else to support me. My husband owned a very small portion of land which was insufficient to grow apricots thus my parents gifted me a large apricot farm. I started working hard. I use to wake up early in the morning during apricot season to make sure that I pick the apricots on right time and dry them. My kids also woke up in the morning to help me because they knew that apricot farming was the only source of income. I earned enough money during the season which I spent on my children’s education. All of them were going to schools and they wanted to continue education so I worked hard for them. In addition to apricot farming I started a small business with the money that I earned from farming. I opened a tea stall nearby home since my home is in a tourist place so my business plan was successful and gradually I saved enough money to build a new house, the older one was damaged because it was a simple mud house. It took me almost 3 years to build the new house. Within this time my eldest child completed his higher education and he started doing a job. I extended my business and I never left apricot farming because it was the only way towards my success. Apricot farming was the only help during my bad days. I did not go to help others due to my own apricot work but I always gave them ideas as how to dry them properly*”. Amazingly, she is still fond of working in Apricot orchards.



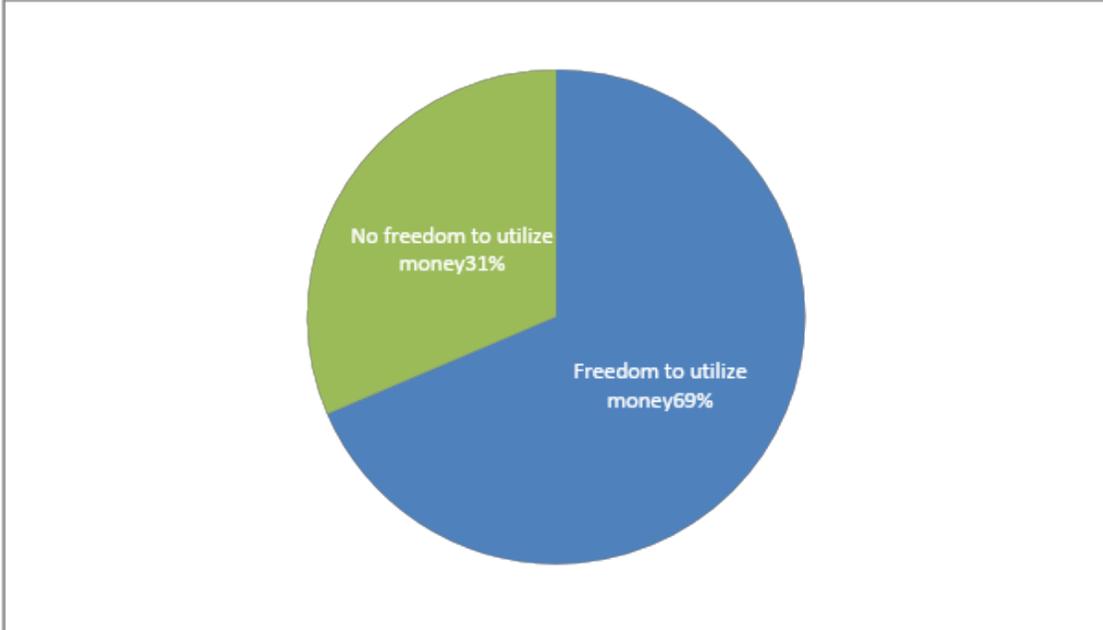
**Figure 1: Financial in-dependency of women through Apricot farming**



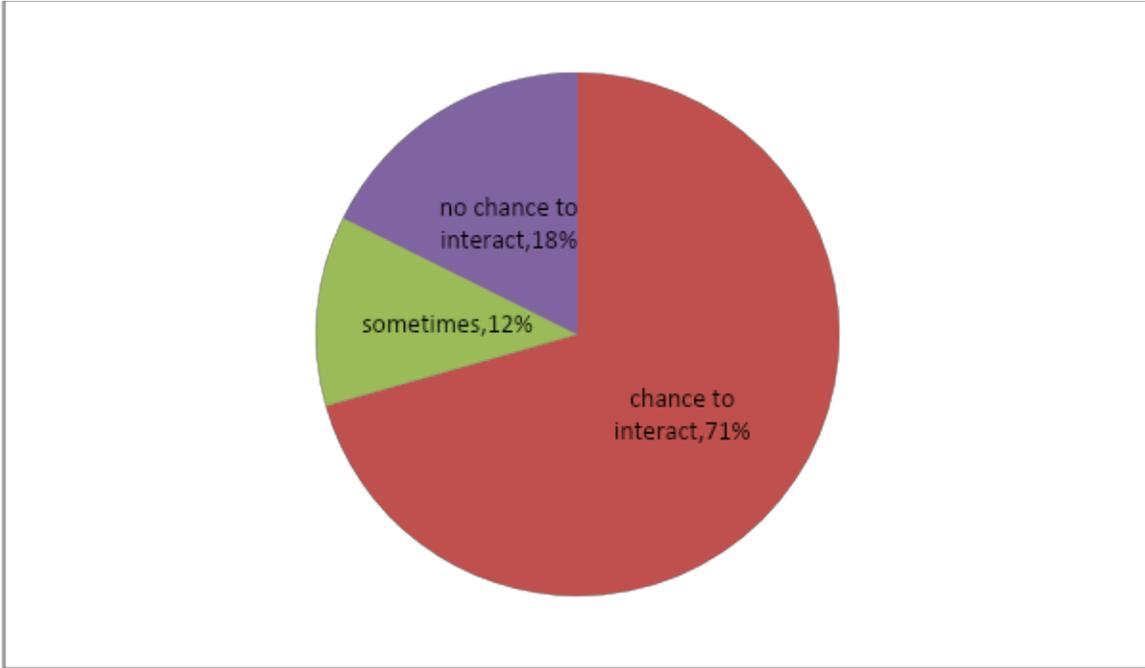
**Figure 2: Prioritization of Apricot farming over other household chores**

Spending money on others	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	34	97.14%
No	1	2.85%

**Figure 3: Utilization of money earned from Apricot farming by women for other family members**



**Figure 4: Money earned from Apricot farming and freedom to use the money**



**Figure 5: Apricot farming and chances of interaction among women**

Most women did not face any substantial challenge from family and community. The women involved in Apricot farming is highly respected and praised. However, few women mentioned that the productivity has declined due to climate change. There are irregular rainfalls and snow falls due to which the Apricots are damage. The worms attack the Apricot. They became black and they are useless. It is a great loss to income when there is a change in climatic conditions.

The other challenge is increasing trend of going for small scale businesses, which is more cost effective, and profitable .In the focused group discussion some raised this concern that Apricot farming has declined.Women have started small restaurants of their own, some have started tailoring, few are also engaged in handicrafts and gem cutting. These businesses are relatively new and women have started involving in these business sectors. Thus some women have stopped apricot farming and working in agriculture sector.

## **Discussion**

Women in Hunza are engaged in agriculture sector although the production of crops and livestock is less as compared to other parts of Pakistan but they sell the products to earn money. Deitz (2007) explaining women's role in household states that "In the traditional society of Hunza Valley, the powerful position of women stems from control over the crops and the harvest as well as the preservation and distribution"(p.472). Women are not only responsible for household chores rather they work outside in the Apricot fields.They have control over the crops that means women are responsible for doing all sorts of work starting from sowing seeds to harvesting the product. They pick the apricots from the trees and carry them in conical baskets to homes where they sun dry the Apricots. They play a central role in household due to their work in the agriculture sector which shows that they are empowered socially. Moreover, the findings showed that Apricot farming helps them to interact with other women. Figure 5, which indicates the percentage of women who responded to the question that asked if they see apricot farming as an opportunity to interact with other women.71% of women responded that Apricot farming provides a good opportunity to interact with others. 12% said it is not always a good chance of interaction but sometimes where 18% mentioned that it is not really a good chance because they do not go to help others due to their own workload. Women give a hand to one another in picking and sun drying Apricots, which takes hours. They sit together and while

working they discuss their daily life matters. They discuss different problems and talk about society. It also helps them to reflect upon their society and can assist them to find solutions to the problems. As the study done by Kabeer (1999) suggests mobility as another indicator of empowerment our findings also relates with her research work. Women go to help others as well as go to market to sell the Apricots by themselves and their family members do not put restrictions in their mobility during Apricot work. It is seen as a respectful work in society. so women are actively engaged and socially empowered. Deitz (2007) citing Margaret H. Mayer an anthropologist claims that in Hunza, a woman is greatly respected and treated as equal to man because of the unique roles that she plays as a farmer, cook and dispenser of resources (p.473). Women in Hunza are empowered because along with their home chores they are highly involved in agricultural activities. In addition, Pettit (2012) defines social empowerment of women as a sense of autonomy and self value (p.4). Both authors claim self respect is linked to empowerment. Women in Hunza are respected when they go out to work in Apricot orchards family members and relatives respect them due to which they are becoming more empowered in their society. Moreover, their opinion is also taken care of and they have a vital role in society. When we asked women if they prioritize apricot farming over household chores 22 out of 35 responded “Yes” while 13 out of 35 said that they prefer household chores, which includes cleaning the house, cooking, laundry and looking after family and children over Apricot farming. This result is shown in Figure 2. It depicts that women have an option either to go out for Apricot work or stay at home to work. Women have choice and whichever she choose the family has no sayings or complains against it. Because both types of work has a good reputation in the community. As Kabeer (2001) states that empowerment is capability to make choice (p.8). Apricot farming gives them choice and they do it based on their own interests which goes parallel with Naila Kabeer’s findings. However, Afzal et al.(2009) finds that women can’t make independent decisions in the agricultural sector since they don't own the land itself (p.64). While in Hunza women work on the husband’s and father’s land and generate income for themselves. Thus we can claim that women in Hunza are socially empowered in households and communities.

Women in Hunza who are engaged in small scale businesses including Apricot farming earn some amount of money that assists them in economic participation indirectly it is empowering

women. As the Khan and Bibi (2011) mentioned that empowerment is a process that assists women to realize their capability in development (p.136). Our findings from the focus group discussion also states that women involved in apricot farming have earn money and they feel they are assisting their husbands in household expenditure which is bringing them more agency and voice in decision making process household. It shows a relational aspect of women empowerment where women have more power within the family and community through social recognition, and self respect (Doneys et al.,2019).

Some women engaged in apricot farming have transformed their lives in both economic and social terms. Majority of the women in the study responded that they are financially independent due to apricot farming. Figure 1 depicts that 30 out 35 participants said they are financially independent while remaining said they is the influence of their families. In few households women gives accountability of earned money to inlaws so they are bound to utilize money independently. Furthermore, the results in figure 4 presents the freedom of usage of money. 69% of the recruited women in the study said that they have freedom of utilization of money while other 31% said they have no freedom. In one of the interviews a lady mentioned that “On an average I earn 3000PKR-50000PKR. I saved the money in my personal account and sometimes I spend the money on household expenditures. Moreover, I spend it on my children’s education. I spend the money wherever I want my husband never asks me about the money. I do not give accountability to anyone because that money is my own I worked hard to earn it. If I have to buy clothes or any other useful thing I can buy that with my own money. The money that I earn from apricot farming makes me independent and empowered”. Her story reflects that she has freedom over utilization of money that gives her decision making power in the household. The amount of money that women generates ranges between \$35-\$65 monthly, there were few exceptions who earned above 65\$ monthly and 35\$. Some of them refrained to mention the exact amount because it changed over time. The women said they utilize the money anywhere they want such as children’s education and buying clothes. Most of them spend money on other family members and relatives rather than spending on themselves. Figure 3 highlights the utilization of money earned from Apricots. The results shows that 97.14% said they spend money on others while remaining said they spend it for their own needs such as buying clothes etc. As Kabeer (2001) mentioned decision making power and choice as an

indicator of empowerment (p.8). Thus most women in Hunza have the choice to spend money wherever they want so we can infer that women in Hunza are empowered.

The study is conducted in a short period of time and it is a cross-sectional study, thus we can not clearly state the cause and effect relationship between socio-economic empowerment and Apricot farming. Furthermore, the sample size is small, thus we can not generalize the results to other parts of the country.

## **Conclusion**

In the context of *Hunzai* society we can observe that women empowerment is more related to self respect, mobility, negotiation and having a voice in decision making of family and community, Empowerment for women farmers in Hunza are more relational in nature than western individualistic model. Our findings showed that Apricot farming is an ancestor occupation for almost all women. They have practiced Apricot farming for years. Their ancestors planted the trees and women collected Apricots. Since beginning they have been responsible to do Apricot farming, they have a concept of women empowerment which gives them voice and agency over expenditure and decision making in the family, at the same time, brings respect from family and community. In Hunza, women have been controlling over resources as mentioned above such as crops, which means they have decision making power from the beginning in the household. The independent decision making power of a woman is empowerment but it is rarely understood by people. The money that women earned by selling Apricots go to their hands and they decide how to use and where to spend. Therefore, they are economically empowered. Women help each other in the Apricot work which is a good opportunity to interact with other women. They sell dried Apricots to the local dealers in the market so they have mobility within communities. This reflects their social empowerment. Women can contribute equally in the development of society so empowering women in social and economic sector should be part of the Agricultural policies. Governmental and non-governmental organizations in Hunza are working for women empowerment they should focus agriculture more specifically Apricot farming. They should train women to do more organic Apricot farming and connect them to national and international market.

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