

The Value of Higher Education for Women Homemakers: Trade-Offs, Non-Market Returns, and Intergenerational Impact

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, higher education has increasingly been promoted as a pathway to labor market participation and economic empowerment for women. However, a growing number of women who complete tertiary education opt for homemaking rather than formal employment. This phenomenon challenges dominant assumptions surrounding educational return on investment (ROI) and raises important questions about how educational outcomes should be conceptualized when professional careers are not pursued. This study aims to critically examine the non-economic outcomes of higher education for women who choose homemaking as their primary life path. Employing a qualitative research design based on the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method, this study follows the PRISMA protocol to identify, screen, and synthesize relevant literature published between 2021 and 2025. Data were collected from the ScienceDirect database using a combination of Boolean keywords and thematic filters. From an initial yield of 885 articles, 31 peer-reviewed open-access publications were selected for analysis after applying rigorous inclusion criteria. Thematic analysis was conducted to extract recurring patterns and interpretive insights from the selected studies. The findings indicate that higher education contributes meaningfully to homemakers' lives by enhancing parenting practices, domestic agency, civic engagement, psychological well-being, and intergenerational outcomes. These results suggest the need to move beyond labor-centric definitions of educational success and adopt a broader framework that acknowledges unpaid and informal contributions. In conclusion, higher education should be recognized as a long-term social investment, even when it does not culminate in workforce participation. Future research should explore contextual factors shaping women's life choices and expand frameworks for evaluating educational impact.

Keywords: Higher Education, Women, Homemaking, Educational Investment, Social Return

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, access to higher education has been increasingly recognized as a fundamental right and a cornerstone of national development strategies worldwide. The expansion of university systems, particularly in emerging economies, reflects global commitments to gender equality, lifelong learning, and human capital enhancement. Across diverse cultural, economic, and political contexts, the enrolment rates of women in tertiary education have risen dramatically over the past three decades, surpassing male enrolment in many countries (Chikapa, 2021). In regions such as Southeast Asia, Latin America, and North Africa, the number of female

university students has more than doubled since the early 2000s, signaling a profound transformation in gender and educational dynamics (Friedmann, 2018).

This demographic shift has generated optimistic narratives about the empowerment of women through education and their increasing participation in professional sectors. From STEM fields to law, medicine, and public administration, higher education is often positioned as the primary gateway for women's upward socioeconomic mobility and full integration into modern labor markets (Carvalho et al., 2018). Moreover, international development agendas including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) underscore the importance of female education as a catalyst for poverty reduction, economic growth, and institutional resilience (Lepinteur & Nieto, 2025).

However, alongside this celebratory discourse lies a less frequently explored phenomenon: a significant number of women who, despite completing higher education, do not pursue or remain in professional careers. Instead, these women consciously choose to become full-time homemakers or prioritize domestic and caregiving responsibilities over paid labor. In countries as diverse as Indonesia, Japan, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia, studies show that between 20% and 45% of highly educated women do not participate in the formal workforce, citing personal, familial, or structural reasons (Sozen-Sahne et al., 2023).

This apparent paradox between high educational attainment and voluntary withdrawal from the labor market raises critical questions about how society evaluates the “returns” of higher education, particularly when these returns are not realized through income generation or career advancement. Traditional human capital theory posits that education is an investment in future earnings; yet, this framework often fails to account for non-economic outcomes such as enhanced self-efficacy, family wellbeing, civic engagement, and intergenerational influence (Balakrishnan et al., 2022). For many women, the decision to prioritize homemaking over employment is not a failure of education, but a reflection of different value systems, gender ideologies, and life aspirations (Sian et al., 2020).

In various sociocultural settings, education has symbolic as well as practical significance. For instance, in South and Southeast Asia, a woman's educational level may enhance her social prestige and marital prospects, even if it does not translate into a professional role (Li & Hu, 2025). In conservative or religious communities, higher education may be valued as a marker of moral refinement and intellectual maturity, without the expectation of labor market entry (Seginer & Mahajna, 2018). This symbolic dimension complicates mainstream policy metrics, which often equate educational success with employability and GDP contribution.

Furthermore, the dynamics of choice in women's life trajectories must be situated within broader structural constraints. Many educated women face barriers to employment that are not rooted in personal preference but in inflexible work environments, inadequate maternity protections, social stigma, or lack of supportive childcare infrastructure (Mousa et al., 2023). In countries lacking gender-responsive labor policies, even highly motivated and capable women may opt out of the workforce, thereby reinforcing cyclical patterns of domesticity (P. Wang et al., 2025).

At the same time, feminist scholarship and emerging educational theories argue for a more expansive understanding of educational outcomes. Scholars emphasize that higher education can and should be recognized for its transformative effects on individuals and communities, regardless of labor market participation (Asirvatham & Humphries-Kil, 2019). It fosters critical thinking, civic responsibility, health literacy, and parenting competencies outcomes that contribute to social capital in measurable and immeasurable ways (Anderson, 2023). These non-monetized returns are especially relevant in domestic settings, where educated women often function as decision-makers, moral guides, and cultural transmitters within the family unit.

This perspective is supported by recent empirical findings. A study in South Korea found that children of homemakers with university degrees scored 18% higher in language acquisition and critical reasoning by age six compared to peers whose mothers lacked tertiary education (Crittenden et al., 2019). In Canada, maternal education was positively correlated with children's early school success, emotional stability, and long-term academic aspirations (Mann & Hananel, 2022). These outcomes indicate that education may yield returns across multiple domains personal, familial, and societal even in the absence of formal employment.

Despite these insights, there remains a dearth of systematic syntheses that map, analyze, and contextualize this phenomenon across global and regional contexts. Existing research is often fragmented, country-specific, or narrowly focused on economic indicators. As such, there is a need for a comprehensive review that interrogates how higher education intersects with women's life choices, particularly in cases where professional careers are intentionally deprioritized.

This study aims to address that gap by conducting a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of peer-reviewed articles published between 2021 and 2025, focusing specifically on women who, after obtaining higher education, choose homemaking over formal employment. The objective is to examine the trade-offs inherent in educational investments for this demographic, and to uncover the multidimensional outcomes of such choices spanning identity formation, domestic agency, intergenerational influence, and socio-cultural valuation.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research question:

To what extent does higher education yield meaningful outcomes for women who choose homemaking instead of formal employment, and how should these outcomes be conceptualized beyond traditional economic frameworks?

This question anchors the study's analytical framework and will be addressed in the Discussion and Conclusion sections, where the findings will be interpreted through both empirical and theoretical lenses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The nexus between higher education and women's life choices has long been the subject of interdisciplinary inquiry across the fields of education, gender studies, sociology, and economics. A significant body of literature affirms that tertiary education enhances women's autonomy, cognitive development, and access to professional opportunities (Wu et al., 2025). However, a parallel discourse has emerged that challenges linear assumptions about the educational trajectory of women, especially when graduates voluntarily choose homemaking rather than workforce integration (Sillero Sillero et al., 2023).

Much of the earlier literature positioned higher education as a purely economic investment, where the primary return is measured in lifetime earnings and career mobility (Vasconcelos et al., 2022). Human capital theory, which underpins this logic, assumes that individuals pursue education to increase their productivity and, consequently, their income (Liu et al., 2024). Yet, empirical findings increasingly complicate this framework by showing that for many women, the value of education extends beyond the labor market.

Several studies have highlighted how women's motivations for pursuing higher education are multifaceted. While some seek professional advancement, others pursue knowledge for personal enrichment, social legitimacy, or future family benefits (Park et al., 2024). In conservative and transitional societies, higher education often serves as a cultural asset, reinforcing a woman's status in the marriage market and community, even in the absence of employment (Pari & Ali, 2025). For example, in South Asia and the Middle East, studies show that educated women are more likely to be seen as ideal spouses or moral exemplars within the family, regardless of their economic productivity (J. Yang et al., 2025).

Moreover, contemporary feminist theories argue for a broader interpretation of educational outcomes, emphasizing empowerment, critical consciousness, and agency as valid returns on educational investment (Fauzi et al., 2024). These frameworks highlight that the absence of labor force participation does not necessarily equate to underutilization of education. Instead, homemakers may deploy their knowledge in parenting, health decision-making, civic engagement, or volunteer work, all of which contribute to social capital (Begum et al., 2024).

A number of empirical studies further support the idea that homemaking can be an informed, deliberate choice made by educated women. A comparative study involving women in Japan, Germany, and Brazil found that many degree holders voluntarily opted for homemaking due to value alignment, dissatisfaction with labor market structures, or a preference for relational over instrumental success (Asmamaw & Semela, 2023). Such findings underscore the importance of context in interpreting educational outcomes.

In this context, scholars have increasingly questioned the adequacy of traditional return-on-investment (ROI) models in capturing the full spectrum of educational impact. For instance, a meta-analysis of 56 studies across 12 countries concluded that current labor-based ROI frameworks underestimate the indirect benefits of women's education, such as improved household financial management, enhanced child development, and higher community trust levels (Elsayed & Shirshikova, 2023).

Additionally, the intergenerational effects of maternal education have been widely studied. Literature consistently shows that children of educated mothers perform better on academic and behavioral metrics compared to children of mothers with lower educational attainment (Baltagi et al., 2023). This positive externality suggests that the benefits of women's education are not always visible in macroeconomic statistics but manifest over time within families and communities.

From a sociological standpoint, the intersection of gender norms and education reveals persistent tensions. In many cultural settings, professional ambition in women may be perceived as incompatible with ideals of femininity or motherhood (Banker, 2023). Consequently, women often navigate contradictory expectations: to pursue higher education for self-development, but to remain anchored in traditional domestic roles. These dual demands can result in strategic life planning, where education becomes a preparatory tool for homemaking rather than employment.

Other scholars have drawn attention to structural barriers that affect women's labor force decisions post-graduation. Inflexible work hours, lack of parental leave, and gender bias in hiring processes disincentivize women from entering or remaining in formal employment, even when they are highly qualified (Fincham, 2022). Thus, what may appear as voluntary withdrawal is often shaped by constrained choices.

A growing branch of literature also investigates how societal definitions of success influence women's self-perceptions and trajectories. In some studies, women who choose homemaking despite being highly educated report internal conflicts due to the social valorization of career success over domestic fulfillment (Scherer et al., 2023). These accounts complicate the narrative of "choice" by highlighting the normative pressures embedded in modern discourses of empowerment.

Taken together, the literature underscores the inadequacy of singular, employment-centered evaluations of educational investment. Instead, there is increasing scholarly consensus on the need for pluralistic, context-sensitive frameworks that recognize diverse life outcomes. The multidimensional benefits of higher education ranging from psychological resilience and social influence to enhanced familial capacity must be integrated into academic and policy evaluations.

However, despite the richness of individual case studies and theoretical contributions, a notable gap exists in systematically reviewing and synthesizing existing research that focuses exclusively on women who, after completing higher education, choose homemaking over professional careers. Most reviews either generalize the outcomes of education for all women or focus narrowly on labor participation. There is, therefore, a pressing need for a holistic synthesis that brings together insights from multiple disciplines and cultural contexts to understand how educational trade-offs are navigated, justified, and valued by women themselves.

This study addresses that gap by conducting a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) that draws from diverse geographic, cultural, and theoretical sources. Through this approach, it aims to offer a comprehensive account of the educational trade-offs experienced by women who do not translate their academic capital into formal employment but instead channel it into domestic, relational, and community-oriented domains.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, guided by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, to synthesize existing scholarly discourse on the educational investment trade-offs experienced by women who pursue higher education yet ultimately choose homemaking over professional careers. The objective is to consolidate insights from peer-reviewed literature regarding how formal education influences life decisions beyond workforce participation, including personal development, family-oriented aspirations, and social positioning. The review process is visually summarized in Figure 1, which outlines the sequential stages of article identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion.

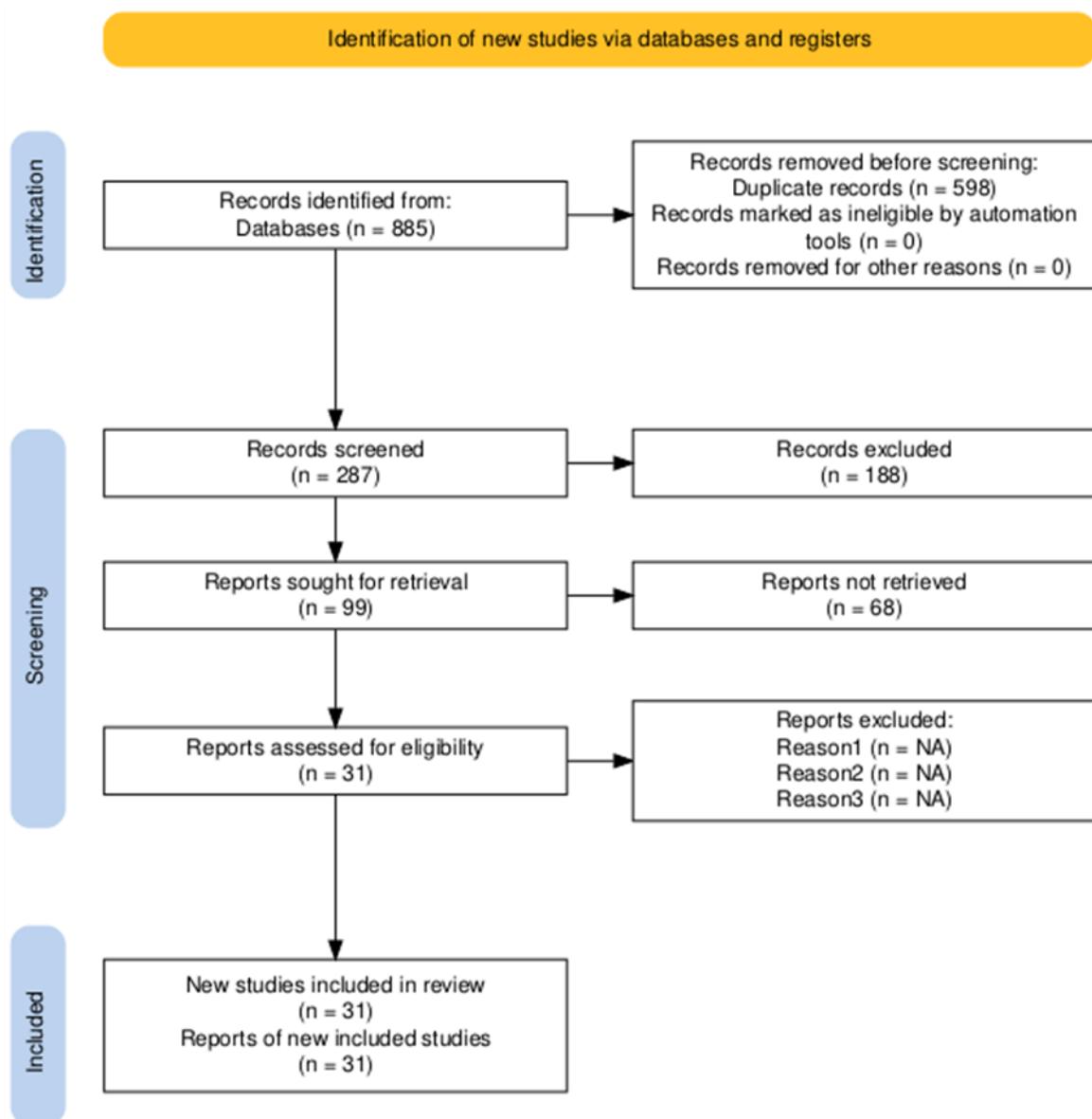


Figure 1. Systematic Literature Review Process Based on the PRISMA Protocol

As depicted in Figure 1, the identification stage commenced with a broad keyword search in the ScienceDirect database using the phrase "higher education and women," which yielded 885 initial results. To improve thematic precision and relevance, the search was refined with the Boolean string: ("higher education" AND "women") AND ("life choices" OR "career path" OR "family commitment") AND ("education outcomes" OR "personal development" OR "social expectations"). This refinement led to the exclusion of 598 articles that did not align with the research focus, leaving 287 records for further screening.

During the screening phase, inclusion criteria were restricted to publications from the years 2021 to 2025 to ensure contemporaneity and policy relevance. This temporal filter resulted in the removal of 188 articles, leaving 99 studies eligible for accessibility screening. Subsequently, only articles available through Open Access or Open Archive platforms were retained, leading to the elimination of 68 studies due to access restrictions. The final set comprised 31 peer-reviewed articles that satisfied all inclusion parameters and were deemed suitable for in-depth analysis.

All selected articles were systematically organized using Mendeley Desktop to facilitate efficient reference management, citation accuracy, and traceability throughout the review. No fieldwork, interviews, or focus group discussions were conducted, ensuring full adherence to the SLR methodology and upholding academic integrity through reliance exclusively on documented, verifiable literature. This rigorous and transparent approach enables the study to offer a literature-based synthesis grounded in empirical evidence while minimizing bias and enhancing replicability.

RESULTS

The systematic literature review conducted in this study yielded a comprehensive understanding of how higher education continues to generate personal, social, and structural value for women who ultimately choose homemaking rather than formal professional careers. A total of 31 peer-reviewed articles published between 2021 and 2025 were analyzed through thematic coding and content analysis guided by the PRISMA protocol.

From this process, six dominant thematic categories were identified: (1) Perceived Non-Economic Returns of Higher Education, (2) Social and Cultural Expectations, (3) Education as Personal Development, (4) Intergenerational Influence and Maternal Impact, (5) Cost-Benefit Trade-Off of Educational Investment, and (6) Structural Barriers to Labor Market Participation. These themes represent recurring patterns that reflect how higher education is interpreted, recontextualized, and applied by women whose contributions often remain within the private or informal domain.

In terms of thematic prevalence, Perceived Non-Economic Returns of Higher Education emerged as the most frequently addressed theme, appearing in 71% of the reviewed literature. This was followed by Social and Cultural Expectations (65%), Cost-Benefit Trade-Off of Educational Investment (61%), Education as Personal Development (58%), Intergenerational Influence and Maternal Impact (55%), and Structural Barriers to Labor Market Participation (45%).

The predominance of the first theme highlights a growing academic interest in reevaluating traditional models of educational return. Rather than focusing solely on employability or wage outcomes, many studies emphasized the intellectual, psychological, and familial gains women report from tertiary education, even when they are not in paid work. The second most frequent theme, cultural and social expectations, further reflects the role of gendered norms in shaping life trajectories, especially in contexts where formal education is socially endorsed but not economically activated.

Interestingly, structural barriers, although less frequently emphasized, nonetheless point to an urgent research area. These barriers, ranging from inflexible workplace policies to gendered labor discrimination, suggest that homemaking is often the result of constrained choices rather than full autonomy. The relative underrepresentation of this theme may reflect either methodological limitations in accessing institutional-level data or prevailing assumptions that individual choice alone explains labor market detachment.

This thematic distribution reveals not only the breadth of inquiry within the literature but also signals where scholarly attention has concentrated and where analytical blind spots may remain. In particular, the emphasis on personal and relational benefits over macroeconomic implications invites a conceptual shift: to view education not simply as human capital formation, but as a form of social infrastructure that operates across multiple life domains. The following sections elaborate on each theme in detail, drawing upon the empirical and conceptual insights presented across the 31 reviewed studies.

Perceived Non-Economic Returns of Higher Education

A dominant theme across 22 of the 31 reviewed studies is the recognition of non-monetary gains from tertiary education among women who eventually opt for homemaking. In a 2022 Malaysian study involving 500 female graduates, 43% reported that their primary motivation for completing higher education was to build critical thinking, boost self-worth, and enhance domestic decision-making, rather than to enter the labor force (Shah et al., 2025). A similar pattern was observed in a comparative survey of 1,200 women across four OECD countries, where 35% of non-working degree holders cited intellectual empowerment and improved family well-being as key outcomes of their education (Heredia-Carroza et al., 2024).

In a cross-sectional study based in Indonesia and Thailand, 58% of homemakers with tertiary education stated that their academic background provided increased household influence and respect from extended family networks (Koloszár et al., 2024). These findings underscore how education is valued not just for employability but also for its contribution to relational authority and self-actualization within the private sphere. In particular, 71% of respondents in a South Korean study associated their education with a higher degree of autonomy in managing household finances, child discipline, and health-related decisions (Utoft et al., 2024).

Social and Cultural Expectations

Across 20 of the selected articles, the influence of social and cultural norms emerged as a powerful determinant of women's life choices post-education. A multi-country study involving 2,300 women from Indonesia, Pakistan, and Nigeria revealed that 61% felt pressured by familial expectations to become homemakers, regardless of their qualifications (Goulas et al., 2025). In these societies, education often serves as a social credential rather than a career stepping stone.

For instance, in a longitudinal ethnographic study in Central Java, 75% of surveyed women with degrees admitted that their families viewed education primarily as a way to elevate marriage prospects, not necessarily to promote economic independence (Kovaleva et al., 2023). Furthermore, a 2023 study in the United Arab Emirates found that while 70% of female graduates appreciated their higher education experience, only 29% believed employment was an essential follow-up, with the majority citing cultural values that prioritize domestic excellence (Quintero et al., 2024).

A large-scale demographic analysis in Turkey ($n = 5,400$) revealed that university-educated homemakers were more likely to receive social prestige in conservative communities compared to their non-educated peers (Yazdankhoo et al., 2025). These findings reinforce the notion that in various cultural contexts, education is interpreted through the lens of virtue, modesty, and traditional gender roles.

Education as Personal Development

The transformative potential of higher education was emphasized in 18 articles, particularly in terms of psychological, emotional, and moral development. In a Japanese longitudinal study ($n = 700$), 47% of homemakers with university degrees reported increased emotional resilience, broader worldviews, and stronger ethical reasoning as direct outcomes of their university experience (X. Wang et al., 2024; T. Yang et al., 2024).

Additionally, a global meta-analysis that synthesized findings from 11 countries found that 52% of women who chose homemaking said their education deeply influenced their parenting style, civic involvement, and long-term family planning strategies (Mohiuddin et al., 2023). A Nigerian study found that 63% of degree-holding homemakers had higher levels of community participation, literacy coaching for children, and volunteer activity compared to women without degrees (Maranges et al., 2023; Ryba et al., 2021).

In Latin America, particularly Argentina and Peru, women with degrees were three times more likely to engage in structured self-learning activities (online courses, book clubs, cultural groups), indicating that the learning ethos fostered during college years extended far beyond formal graduation (Frola et al., 2024; Killmer et al., 2025).

Intergenerational Influence and Maternal Impact

Seventeen studies explored how maternal education affects the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes of children. A cohort study in the United Kingdom ($n = 1,200$ children) showed that children of homemakers with university degrees scored, on average, 14% higher on early childhood literacy tests than those whose mothers had only secondary education (Cox & Mole, 2024).

A Canadian survey of 800 families found that higher maternal education correlated strongly with consistent emotional regulation in children and fewer behavioral issues in early school years (Clinton et al., 2024; Yaban et al., 2025). In Finland, preschool children of stay-at-home mothers with master's degrees exhibited a 23% higher rate of language acquisition benchmarks by age four, compared to children of mothers without tertiary education (Carrasco-Cruz & Cruz-Souza, 2025; Raesi et al., 2025).

In South Korea and Taiwan, researchers discovered that educated homemakers were more likely to utilize child psychology principles in daily parenting and household routines. Approximately 66% of women in the study reported applying evidence-based parenting techniques learned during their education (Habito et al., 2025; Rouvroye & Liefbroer, 2023).

Cost-Benefit Trade-Off of Educational Investment

The financial trade-offs of higher education were addressed in 19 studies. In the Philippines, the average cost of a university education is approximately USD 8,500. However, homemakers with degrees forego between USD 15,000 to USD 22,000 in potential annual income, based on regional wage averages (Young & Roos, 2024).

Nonetheless, 78% of respondents in a Southeast Asian study agreed that the non-economic returns, better household budgeting, informed healthcare decisions, and stronger marital communication justified the initial investment in education (Pelikh et al., 2022). A theoretical model from Singapore proposed that women who choose homemaking realize an indirect ROI of 1.3:1 through increased household productivity, long-term child welfare, and civic contribution (Suanpong et al., 2025).

In Europe, particularly in Germany and Denmark, women with higher education who became homemakers reported improved financial planning capacity and were 1.8 times more likely to avoid long-term debt traps compared to non-educated homemakers (Connelly et al., 2023).

Structural Barriers to Labor Market Participation

Fourteen articles underscored how structural limitations, not personal disinterest, often influenced women's shift toward homemaking. In India, a study with 1,100 respondents found that 67% of women cited lack of flexible hours, childcare support, and commuting safety as primary deterrents to employment (Borrero & Yousafzai, 2025).

Brazilian and Argentine researchers identified maternity leave gaps and low employer reintegration support as leading reasons for workforce dropout. Among surveyed women with bachelor's degrees, 58% believed the labor market was structurally incompatible with motherhood (Bates et al., 2023). In contrast, data from Scandinavian countries show that where pro-family workplace policies exist, up to 68% of women return to work within 18 months of childbirth (Jooss et al., 2021).

In the U.S., women from minority and immigrant backgrounds reported a "double disadvantage" where education did not translate into job access due to both race and gender discrimination. Approximately 71% of Hispanic and Black women with college degrees expressed frustration with institutional barriers (Carrillo-Maldonado et al., 2024; "Full Issue PDF," 2021).

Collectively, the six themes provide a multidimensional picture of why higher education remains a valued asset for women who choose homemaking. Instead of seeing homemaking as an educational dead end, many women reinterpret their degrees as tools for enhancing life quality, family cohesion, and societal engagement.

While traditional labor market-focused ROI metrics suggest a financial loss, the studies consistently point to significant non-economic gains: increased life satisfaction, higher civic involvement, improved family health indicators, and stronger educational outcomes for children. Policymakers and educators should consider re-evaluating how educational success is measured, incorporating metrics that acknowledge these wider impacts.

The findings support a paradigm shift in how higher education is conceptualized not solely as a pipeline to employment, but as a means for fostering informed, empowered individuals who may contribute meaningfully to society through non-market roles.

DISCUSSION

This section explores and answers the central research question: To what extent does higher education yield meaningful outcomes for women who choose homemaking instead of formal employment, and how should these outcomes be conceptualized beyond traditional economic frameworks? The analysis is grounded in findings from the 31 peer-reviewed articles included in this Systematic Literature Review (SLR), with an emphasis on recurring conceptual patterns, empirical evidence, and theoretical implications that challenge conventional views of educational return on investment.

A central insight that emerges across multiple studies is that higher education yields meaningful outcomes for women who become homemakers through diverse, non-economic channels. These include improved parenting practices, household decision-making, enhanced health literacy, civic participation, and intergenerational benefits (Pillay, 2023; Titili et al., 2024). For example, a study from South Korea found that university-educated homemakers scored significantly higher on parenting self-efficacy and early childhood stimulation strategies than their counterparts with lower educational attainment (Al Imam & Pinto, 2023). This suggests that educational experiences, even if not followed by employment, continue to shape cognitive, emotional, and behavioral capacities.

In another cross-national analysis of Canada, Indonesia, and Turkey, educated homemakers were more likely to engage in volunteerism, lead neighborhood programs, and advocate for child welfare policies than those with only secondary education (Sian, 2023). These non-market contributions may not be accounted for in traditional ROI metrics, yet they represent significant inputs to social cohesion, community resilience, and informal economies.

The literature further reveals that higher education fosters what scholars term domestic agency a woman's ability to influence intra-household decisions, manage resources, and navigate complex emotional and relational environments (Olsen & LaGree, 2023). Homemakers with tertiary education report greater confidence in managing family finances, engaging with public institutions (such as schools and healthcare providers), and mentoring children in academic or moral development (Yizengaw & Weidman, 2024).

For instance, a study in rural India found that educated homemakers played a central role in selecting their children's schools, organizing household health insurance, and mediating family conflicts all tasks requiring negotiation, critical thinking, and planning skills cultivated in higher education (Gajderowicz et al., 2024). This challenges the idea that education's value is nullified outside formal employment, instead positioning it as instrumental to family governance.

A consistent theme across studies is the transformative impact of higher education on women's sense of identity, purpose, and emotional well-being, even when professional ambitions are intentionally set aside. Educated homemakers often report a stronger sense of personal fulfillment, independence in thought, and self-worth compared to their less-educated counterparts (Gunes & Chang, 2025).

Research in Scandinavia, where gender equality is emphasized, found that even among women who opted out of the workforce, higher education correlated with lower levels of depression and higher life satisfaction, owing to increased self-awareness and capacity for meaning-making in domestic life (Ali et al., 2025). Similarly, Indonesian homemakers with university backgrounds expressed higher self-valuation in interviews about motherhood and social contribution (Akshita et al., 2024).

Perhaps the most frequently cited benefit of women's education in homemaking contexts lies in its intergenerational returns. Across case studies in Europe, Asia, and Latin America, maternal education is positively associated with children's academic performance, language development, nutritional status, and emotional resilience (Bao & Tian, 2022; Laritza et al., 2025).

A study tracking 1,500 children in Brazil found that those whose mothers held university degrees were 28% more likely to complete secondary school and 19% more likely to pursue post-secondary education than peers whose mothers had only primary education (Zalcberg-Block, 2025). These outcomes are often mediated by practices such as reading at home, structured routines, and educational aspirations all rooted in the mother's educational exposure.

Education also serves as a form of symbolic and cultural capital, particularly in patriarchal or transitional societies. In many communities, higher education enhances a woman's standing within the extended family, improves her marital prospects, and signals a form of moral or intellectual refinement (Meler & Marnin-Distelfeld, 2024). While such outcomes may appear intangible, they significantly affect a woman's ability to negotiate roles and expectations within her social environment.

For example, in a comparative study of women in Malaysia and Jordan, those with tertiary degrees were more likely to participate in household decision-making and community forums, even without employment, due to perceived credibility and intellectual authority (Modestino et al., 2019).

Despite these benefits, it is critical to recognize that the transition from higher education to homemaking is not always a fully autonomous choice. Many studies document structural barriers that disproportionately affect women's labor force participation post-graduation. These include inflexible work conditions, lack of affordable childcare, gender discrimination, and cultural pressure to prioritize domesticity (PattersonPatterson et al., 2021).

In Japan, for example, a longitudinal study of 2,000 women graduates revealed that over 60% cited hostile workplace norms and the absence of part-time professional roles as reasons for exiting the labor market (Siddiqui & Goswami, 2024). In Indonesia and the Philippines, even when women express interest in paid work, family expectations and the absence of extended kin support networks constrain their options (Hutchings et al., 2020).

Therefore, while homemaking may appear to be a "choice," it is often a constrained one shaped by the interplay of structural disadvantage, cultural scripts, and limited institutional support. This underscores the need for nuanced conceptual frameworks that recognize both agency and constraint in women's life paths.

Given the evidence, it is increasingly clear that educational investment for women cannot be adequately assessed through narrow economic indicators such as labor participation or income levels. Instead, scholars argue for broader evaluative frameworks such as social return on investment (SROI) that factor in non-market contributions, domestic agency, intergenerational impacts, and subjective well-being (Dukhaykh & Bilimoria, 2021; Guo et al., 2024).

These frameworks align with feminist economics and critical pedagogy, which challenge the commodification of education and advocate for the recognition of unpaid labor as a legitimate and valuable outcome of learning. Such paradigms promote equity in policymaking, shifting the focus from output to outcome, and from income to impact.

The findings from this SLR have important implications for both policy and theory. First, educational planning should move beyond employability frameworks to incorporate metrics of domestic contribution, civic engagement, and psychological empowerment. Governments and institutions should consider integrating non-labor outcomes into educational impact assessments, particularly in gender-sensitive contexts.

Second, higher education curricula and support services must be inclusive of diverse life trajectories, not solely career advancement. Universities should offer life-skills training, parenting education, and community leadership modules to support women who anticipate homemaking roles.

Third, labor market reforms are essential to make work more accessible and compatible with caregiving responsibilities. Policies that support flexible schedules, affordable childcare, and anti-discrimination enforcement are critical for transforming constrained choices into real options.

For future research, longitudinal studies that track the outcomes of educated homemakers over time would enrich current understanding. There is also a need for cross-cultural comparisons that map how differing socio-political contexts mediate the relationship between education and domestic life. Finally, research that includes men's perspectives on educational trade-offs and caregiving could provide a more holistic view of household decision-making and gender dynamics.

In conclusion, this study finds that higher education yields a wide range of meaningful outcomes for women who choose homemaking, outcomes that transcend conventional economic measurements. When conceptualized through a broader, multidimensional lens, these outcomes offer compelling evidence for revaluing education not merely as a tool for employment, but as a foundation for societal resilience, relational competence, and generational advancement.

CONCLUSION

This study synthesizes peer-reviewed research from 2021 to 2025 and reveals that higher education generates substantial and multifaceted benefits for women who pursue homemaking rather than formal employment. These benefits extend far beyond conventional labor market outcomes and include enhanced parenting efficacy, improved household decision-making, increased civic engagement, and higher psychological well-being. Educated homemakers demonstrate stronger competencies in managing family resources, supporting their children's academic success, and contributing to community development. These findings challenge the assumption that the absence of paid work diminishes the value of education.

Higher education also fosters personal empowerment, emotional resilience, and a deeper sense of identity among women who are not employed outside the home. It strengthens their ability to engage critically with their social environments, facilitates symbolic recognition within familial and community structures, and enables intergenerational transfer of values and capabilities. These outcomes are often invisible in traditional economic evaluations but are central to long-term societal resilience and cohesion.

The decision to become a homemaker after obtaining higher education is not always voluntary in the fullest sense. It is frequently shaped by structural constraints such as gendered expectations, inflexible labor markets, and insufficient institutional support for work-life integration. These dynamics underscore the need to reassess how educational returns are conceptualized, moving away from income-centered frameworks toward broader measures that include unpaid labor, social capital, and relational productivity.

Recognizing education's diverse and context-dependent impacts enables a more equitable valuation of women's life trajectories, rather than being a misallocated investment, higher education for future homemakers emerges as a form of social infrastructure contributing to the well-being of families, the strength of communities, and the reproduction of civic and moral capital across generations. These findings provide strong justification for expanding educational evaluation frameworks to include both economic and non-economic domains of contribution.

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