

**GENDER AND GOVERNANCE: ASSESSING WOMEN'S ROLE IN PUBLIC POLICY FORMULATION IN  
PAKISTAN**



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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis discusses the structural, institutional and policy issues that inform women participation and influence in the formulation of Pakistani public policies. This thesis employs a qualitative research method and thorough examination of policy documents, institutional practices, and secondary sources, the research determines deep-rooted patriarchal norms, male-dominated political and bureaucratic systems, restricted access to resources as the main factual limitations to women turning to the sphere of governance. It also points out notable policy loopholes, including poor enforcement of gender structures, lack of accountability, and failure to have gender responsive plans, which lead to the long-term gender policy gap in the country. Although institutional initiatives as well as legislative quotas have increased the number of women in the political arena, their effectiveness is still minimal because of the social norms, the ability of the elite to control the political arena and the lack of institutional encouragement. The study concludes that meaningfully include women in government, policy implementation and institutional responsiveness needs to be strengthened and socio-political transformation on a larger scale needs to be done so that the practice of gender-biased decision-making can be overcome in Pakistan.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
IGC	Institute for Governance and Development
LHW	Lady Health Workers
MoHR	Ministry of Human Rights
NCSW	National Commission on the Status of Women
NGPF	National Gender Policy Framework
PDHS	Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey
PSLM	Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement
PWEP	Punjab Women Empowerment Package
SECP	Securities and Exchange Commission
SDPI	Sustainable Development Policy Institute
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the 21st century, the notion of inclusive governance and equitable representation has become a global priority, especially in the matter of gender equality. Although the need for women's participation in governance and policymaking is widely acknowledged, there remains a large gender gap and women have not been effectively and fully involved in decision making structures on the public level. Women are underrepresented in leading government institutions around the globe and particularly in developing nations such as Pakistan. This gender imbalance not only undermines the democratic legitimacy and representativeness of the governance structures, but also deprives those nations of the women's valuable perspectives and talents. This has led to the emergence of the critical area of scholarly inquiry and policy intervention in the area of policy reforms in enhancing women's role in governance and making decisions.

The processes, institutions, or mechanisms through which public policies are formulated, implemented and evaluated are called governance. Formal structures included parliaments, bureaucracies and ministries; informal norms on who controls power, and who makes decisions. Exclusion of women from these processes renders governance less inclusive, less responsive and less effective. The fact that women are not represented in decision making roles is hardly about social justice or equity: It is critical to improve institutional performance, enhance democratic governance and contribute to sustainable development. Specifically, Goal 5 on gender equality and Goal 16 on inclusive institutions both refer explicitly to the full and effective participation of women in leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life.

While globally progress has been made, including the implementation of gender quotas and affirmative action policies in a number of countries, the progress is still slow. Although provisions of the constitution and the making of several policy initiatives by government aimed at achieving gender equality in governance, structural and institutional barriers persist to

undermine this agenda. These challenges include cultural norms, patriarchal institutions, inadequate access to networks and resources, and discriminatory practice that they face prevents

women into not participating in the public life. Additionally, gender policy remains fragmented, mis implemented or lacks genuine political will, in which case policy reforms fall short of eliminating the persistent gender policy deficit.

This research tends to examine the success of policy changes meant to increase women's influence in Pakistan's public policy creation. It looks at the institutional and structural barriers preventing women from engaging in governance, points up policy flaws, and examines the difficulties applying gender-responsive changes. Although the study acknowledges the necessary requirement for such changes, it makes the case that their effectiveness in advancing gender equality is much dependent on the larger sociopolitical climate and institutional openness to welcome change. In addition to thorough and enforced changes, it is essential that women at all social levels be empowered and patriarchal norms abolished in order for society as a whole to make real progress.

## **1.1 Background**

On the basis of its complex socio-political scenario, history of democratic transitions and evolving gender policies, Pakistan offers a compelling case study to examine gender and governance. In recent generations, women in Pakistan have made considerable progress, especially through constitutional amendments, including the partisan reservation of national and provincial assembly seats for women. In addition, National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women (2002) and Gender Reform Action Plan (2005) demonstrate evidently that state acknowledged gender dismissal in governance. Nonetheless, women continue to be significantly low in occupying key decision-making posts, including those at the highest levels in government and state such as cabinet posts, senior bureaucratic posts, and in leadership in local governance.

The difference shines light on a gap between the desired and the observed. Gender-focused governance reforms frequently overlook institutional cultures and power structures that do not yield to change. Moreover, the introduction of these reforms is severely limited by the absence of mechanism for its gender sensitive implementation that would generate accountability and capacity building initiatives necessary. In most cases, women's participation is often symbolic or tokenistic and have little influence in the policy direction and resource allocation. Not only are gender inequalities reinforced, but also democratic governance and inclusive development are exposed to a weaken.

Furthermore, the legal exclusion of women in governance structures is not the only reason for gender discrimination in governance structures; gender discrimination is entrenched in subtle institutional practices, recruitment patterns and informal norms supporting male leadership. Women are skipped over for promotions, ignored when appointed to policy circles, given role for which they have little to no decision-making authority. They are compounded by the barriers of the very fact that women face societal expectations of mobility restrictions, family responsibilities, and lack of political mentoring and support for women generally.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

Pakistan is signatory and a key participant in international commitments i.e. Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, CEDAW (UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals). Despite of these agreements Pakistan comprises both the implementation and outcomes of these legal reforms, by pinpointing not only the fact that legal reforms exist but also the implementation gaps and the reality of these reforms. Persistent challenges have led Pakistan to rank 145<sup>th</sup> out of 146<sup>th</sup> countries in the global gender equality index, continuing to highlight both formal and informal institutions deepening the gender policy gap. The problem further exacerbates when 48.54% of the population constituted by women in Pakistan face significant challenges to participate in decision making roles, highlighting the intangible realities of gender policy reforms. This draws attention towards the need to translate these policy commitments into tangible action. To

achieve gender justice, democratic governance and inclusive development, it is important to know why current reform measures have not been delivered and how they can be improved.

### **1.3 Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is both academic and practical. By providing an institutionally oriented discourse on policy, it makes an important contribution to the growing gender and governance debate about women in leadership decision making roles. The findings can practically be used to inform policymakers, civil society actors, and the international development organization with whom gender reform is planned to design more effective and context specific gender policy reforms. On the basis of Pakistan, complex socio-political scenario, history of democratic transitions and evolving gender policies, it offers a significant case study to examine gender and governance.

### **1.4 Research Objectives**

This study is guided by the following key objectives:

1. To assess the key structural and institutional factors contributing to gender discrimination, and their impact on women's participation and advancement in governance.
2. To identify and analyze the policy gaps contributing to the gender policy deficit and limit women's leadership roles in policymaking processes
3. To examine effective policy reforms have been in enhancing women's participation and leadership in governance and what are the main challenges faced by them.

### **1.5 Research Questions**

1. What are the key structural and institutional factors contributing to gender discrimination, and how do they impact women's participation and advancement in governance?
2. What are the policy gaps contributing to the gender policy deficit and limit women's leadership roles in policymaking processes?

3. How effective policy reforms have been in enhancing women's participation and leadership in governance and what are the main challenges faced by them?

## **1.6 Research Methodology**

### **1.6.1 Research Design**

This thesis is based on a qualitative research design; the study seeks to explore the role, involvement and place of women in the governance and the public policy in Pakistan. The qualitative design will be especially suitable since the study aims to comprehend the gendered issues functioning within institutions, and not to quantify the participation in terms of numbers only.

The qualitative method is useful to explore in-depth meanings, interpretations and institutional behaviors that influence the accessibility and power that women have in the process of policymaking. Following Feminist Institutionalism, the design allows the study to go beyond the formal structures and legal provisions to analyze the interaction between informal rules and traditions and formal institutions alongside gendered expectations. Therefore, the qualitative design will be quite effective in revealing the hidden and unseen processes by which gender inequalities are perpetuated within the governance structures in Pakistan.

### **1.6.2 Research Approach**

This study utilizes a case study approach to explore women's involvement in the formulation of policies in Pakistan. The research adopts a case study design, in which Pakistan is the main case, to analyze the role of women in the process of formulating public policies in a particular socio-political and institutional environment. The case study approach has been found especially useful in the analysis of the difficult social and political phenomena wherein the institutional settings, cultural practices and individual agency are closely intertwined.

The research analyses the governance institutions in Pakistan as a case that are defined by patriarchal traditions, path-dependent practices, and informal power networks. This method makes it possible to focus on the analysis of formal gender inclusive policies functioning in

practice and on the way women find their ways in the institutional restraints. Another approach that is the aim of Feminist Institutionalism is the case study approach, which highlights the view of institutions as a gendered and historically embedded institution as opposed to an administrative one.

### **1.6.3 Data Collection Techniques**

This research draws upon both primary and secondary data sources to investigate and evaluate the contributions of women in the formulation of public policy in Pakistan. The information has been collected through an extensive examination of academic literature, government publications, policy documents, and analytical reports from various national and international organizations. This method fosters a comprehensive grasp of the current scholarly discussions, institutional structures, and real-world experiences related to gender and governance in Pakistan.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of women's political participation, governance structures, and gender-sensitive policymaking, a variety of pertinent books and journal articles have been reviewed, focusing on theoretical frameworks, historical developments, and empirical findings. Extensive use was made of academic databases including JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, Springer, and Google Scholar to access scholarly resources related to gender studies, public administration, political science, and development studies.

The study also examines official documents and policy reports produced by government ministries, commissions, and development agencies, alongside academic literature. The materials encompass national development plans, gender policy frameworks, legislative records, and publications from various institutions, including the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW), the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, and the Ministry of Human Rights. Additionally, a thorough examination of reports and research papers from international organizations such as UN Women, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank has been conducted to explore global perspectives and comparative insights.

### **1.6.4 Data Analysis Method**

The information gathered from various sources, including books, journal articles, policy documents, and case studies, undergoes a thorough and systematic analysis. This approach entails recognizing consistent themes, patterns, and discursive frameworks present in the existing literature and documented evidence to gain insight into the ways women interact with and shape public policy structures in Pakistan.

Both Inductive and deductive analytical approaches were used. Feminist Institutionalism and similar gender and governance theories directed deductive analysis, which allowed the study to explore the ideas of the gendered institutions, informal norms, path dependency, and institutional resistance. Simultaneously, inductive analysis gave themes to be formed naturally out of the data and capture context-specific dynamics and patterns that were not fully described by the previously known theories.

Such a mixed method of analysis reinforces the capability of the study to describe the difference between the official gender equality promises and the impact of policy in practice, as well as to emphasize the agency of women in restricting institutional settings. The approach, therefore, guarantees both analytical rigor and thoroughness of the theoretical coherence and also attentive to the realities of the Pakistani governmental environment.

#### **1.6.5 Ethical consideration**

This research ensures all data have been accurately cited and referenced to honor the original authors and prevent any instances of plagiarism. The research emphasizes the importance of respectfully representing gender-related issues, especially in the context of policies or practices that impact marginalized communities. If interviews are conducted confidentiality of all participants will be maintained and protected. Moreover, efforts have been made to utilize credible, verified, and publicly accessible sources to uphold both academic integrity and ethical transparency.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW/THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As per the requirement of the thesis the literature review is divided in to 4 sections.

#### 2.1.1 Marginalization in the policy making

In this paper Gallagher (1997) critically evaluates the structural obstacles within the United Nations' human rights framework which marginalize women. However, she argues that this was not the case as institutional prejudices and a lack of male agendas had historically held the women back, no matter how global a UN's mission seems. An active female participation in human rights agencies and gender mainstreaming is supported by Gallagher. Her work emphasizes that women's rights need to be rooted in the center of the international human rights debate, and in order to bridge the gap between normative pledges to gender equality and actual implementation, institutional change is required.<sup>1</sup>

The author Brodie (1998) analyzes how changes in Canada's economic restructuring leading to these neoliberal changes political marginalized women by reducing the area within which women might participate politically as women. She maintains that these social changes switched the discussion towards individualism, which therefore strongly affected the women's political voice and representation. Brodie provides thought on how systemic marginalization comes linked to socioeconomic instances influencing political agency, and not just political representation, and on how economic policy is linked to gender.<sup>2</sup>

In his attempt to understand the term "marginalized women", Nigam (2014) asserts that the term actually unifies many experiences and identities. However, she emphasizes the way in

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<sup>1</sup> A Gallagher, *Ending the Marginalization: Strategies for Incorporating Women into the United Nations Human Rights System*. (Human Rights Quarterly, 1997), 283–333.

<sup>2</sup> J Brodie, "Restructuring and the Politics of Marginalization.," *Women and Political Representation in Canada*, 1998, 2–6.

which the production of marginalizations caused from caste, class, religion, as well as sexuality intersect to disrupt its own definition of 'women.' Nigam supports such a complex and inclusive worldview by questioning, through a more correct female narrative, prevailing female narratives which fail to acknowledge these differences.<sup>3</sup> Her participation makes the conversation better by indicating how policy and lobbying have to be multiplex while navigating the sociopolitical reality rather naively.

In 2013 Kerevel and Atkeson explored how legislatures disadvantage women structure. But they argue that in addition to the effect restriction of women's effect by official and informal institutional practices such as male dominated networks, unjust leadership structures and exclusion from key committees in election settings was also adding to this. Their empirical results indicate that numerical representation of women does not directly imply high level of involvement and provide evidence that the changes in system necessary to empower women to have influence in legislative procedures are systematic. The institutional responsibility demands for change from this outlook also seem credible.<sup>4</sup>

According to Naheed et al. (2021), the number of obstacles women face in Pakistan political and decision-making platforms such as patriarchal norms, low education, constraints in finances as well as political tokenism. The writers argue that, although legislative systems are supposed to be one method of encouraging women's participation, cultural opposition and poor implementation normally underlie these efforts.<sup>5</sup> This paper highlights the importance of grassroots movement to support top-down policy initiatives and the influence of society views. It draws attention to the pragmatic and social obstacles preventing women from fully participating in politics.

Emphasizing both development and ongoing inequality, Bano & Akhtar (2023) provide a policy-oriented study of women's political engagement in Pakistan. Although they applaud recent

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<sup>3</sup> Shalu Nigam, "from the Margins: Revisiting the Concept of 'Marginalized Women,'" September 3, 2014, <https://doi.org/dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2490983>.

<sup>4</sup> Yann P. Kerevel and Lonna Rae Atkeson, "Explaining the Marginalization of Women in Legislative Institutions," *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 4 (October 2013): 980–92, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022381613000960>.

<sup>5</sup> K Naheed et al., "Women's Participation in Politics and Decisionmaking Process of Pakistan: Challenges and Barriers," *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews* 9(1) (2021): 185–95.

proactive initiatives like legislative changes and appointed posts, they contend that without thorough policy integration and execution systems, these steps are inadequate.<sup>6</sup> The writers support thorough gender-sensitive laws along with institutional support, political training, and education. Their work advocates a change from symbolic to substantive inclusion, therefore strengthening the argument for ongoing legislative attention to close the distance between women's constitutional rights and daily political reality in Pakistan.

### **2.1.2 Women in politics and policy making**

Particularly in underdeveloped nations, Hora (2014) investigates the institutional, financial, and sociocultural constraints preventing women's involvement in leadership positions. She notes important obstacles like gender stereotypes, poor access to education, and little financial independence. Hora underlines that many times, masculinity is connected with leadership, which discourages women's participation and tenacity in positions of power. Her work makes case for structural changes as well as attitudinal changes to create settings fit for gender-inclusive leadership.<sup>7</sup>

Emphasizing that the framing itself impacts the success of gender-related policies, Lombardo, Meier & Verloo (2012) examine how gender is framed within policymaking procedures. Policies, they contend, may depoliticize gender concerns by considering them as technical rather than structural problems. By ignoring the power relations at work, these depoliticizing undercuts feminist goals. Their work challenges legislators to embrace reflexive and intersectional strategies that give gender justice top political importance rather than a bureaucratic formality top importance.<sup>8</sup>

Critelli (2010) Women in Pakistan continue to face major obstacles when it comes to their engagement in political activities. The low number of eligible women candidates results in

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<sup>6</sup> S Bano and M. N Akhtar, "POLITICAL PARTICIPATION of WOMEN: A POLICY PERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS in PAKISTAN ," *International Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2(2) (2023): 44–55.

<sup>7</sup> E. A Hora, "Factors That Affect Women Participation in Leadership and Decision Making Position," *Asian Journal of Humanity, Art and Literature* 1(2) (2014).

<sup>8</sup> E Lombardo, P Meier, and M Verloo , " Policymaking and Gender. ," *FREIA–Feminist Research Center in Aalborg Aalborg University*, 2012.

fewer women taking seats in national and decision-making positions. Despite the systematic job quota for women in Pakistan's elected assemblies the number of women politicians fails to produce meaningful impact on policy development. Reserved seats for women have little effect on influencing policymaking because they represent only a small percentage of total seats in Pakistani parliament. Several institutional and cultural factors prevent women from achieving complete political participation by blocking their active political involvement through entrenched traditional norms and violence against women and deep-rooted patriarchal establishment rules.<sup>9</sup>

Singh et al. (2003) evaluate the gender dynamics in water policy and illustrate how women, although being main consumers and managers of water, are often left out of water governance choices. They contend that voices of women in resource management provide more fair and sustainable results.<sup>10</sup> This paper shows how inclusive decision-making benefits both social and ecological systems by tying environmental policy with gender equality. Their research backs up the more general assertion that development efficiency depends on gender-sensitive policies.

A study conducted in Pakistan by Hou and Ma (2013) looked at the relationship between maternal health care utilization and the decision-making power of women in the home.<sup>11</sup> They discover that the usage of maternity care increases dramatically when women have autonomy in choices about their health. This empirical data supports the case that empowering women is not just a pragmatic development tool but also a rights issue. Their research advocates policies that boost women's agency at all levels, therefore bridging the gap between household decisions and national health results.

Akhtar (2022) contrasts women protection and participation legislation in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, finding that while all three nations deal with similar issues, Pakistan may benefit from the way its neighbors have handled things. She stresses public awareness, gender-

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<sup>9</sup> Filomena M. Critelli, "Women's Rights=Human Rights: Pakistani Women against Gender Violence," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 37, no. 2 (June 1, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> N Singh et al., "Women and Water: A Policy Assessment," *Water Policy* 5(3) (2003): 289–304.

<sup>11</sup> X Hou and N Ma, "The Effect of Women's Decision-Making Power on Maternal Health Services Uptake: Evidence from Pakistan," *Health Policy and Planning* 28(2) (2013): 176–84.

sensitive court systems, and enforcement tools.<sup>12</sup> Akhtar's comparative approach emphasizes how, if localized properly, regional cooperation and legal benchmarking may increase women's involvement and provide a strategic prism through which Pakistan's legal change can be seen. In Pakistan, Hussain & Qureshi (2018) investigate how social media is progressively influencing policy-making. They contend that social media channels challenge established gatekeepers by offering women fresh channels to participate in political debate and activism. Although internet activism has restrictions, it provides venues where underprivileged voices could be heard.<sup>13</sup> Their research indicates that, particularly when backed by offline mobilization and institutional transparency, using digital technologies may assist close the gender disparity in policy influence.

Advocating the convergence of religious principles, financial empowerment, digital media, and governance changes to promote women, Jafree (2023) offers a whole framework for sustainable social policy in Pakistan. Policies should, she contends, reflect religious and cultural settings while nevertheless advancing gender equality. Jafree's multidisciplinary approach is pragmatic and culturally sensitive, which supports inclusive, sustainable development strategies using contemporary tools to empower women along with traditional ones.<sup>14</sup>

### **2.1.3 Gender issues and gender mainstreaming**

Cornwall (2003) questions “participatory development” by querying whose voices are heard and whose choices are selected. She contends that in development rhetoric, gender is sometimes used as a tool, therefore marginalizing the actual reality of women and supporting current structures.<sup>15</sup> Cornwall underlines that involvement needs to be based on context,

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<sup>12</sup> N Akhtar, “Comparative Analysis of Women Protection and Participation Laws in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh: Lessons for Pakistan,” *KJPP* 1(1) (2022): 43–48.

<sup>13</sup> F Hussain and B Qureshi, “Social Media and Policy Making in Pakistan,” *Pakistan Administrative Review* 2(1) (2018): 208–21.

<sup>14</sup> S. R Jafree, “Sustainable Comprehensive Social Policy for Women in Pakistan: The Way Forward with Religion, Social Media, Finances, and Governance.,” *Social Policy for Women in Pakistan* Springer Nature Switzerland. (2023): 315–51.

<sup>15</sup> Andrea Cornwall, “Whose Voices? Whose Choices? Reflections on Gender and Participatory Development,” *World Development* 31, no. 8 (August 2003): 1325–42.

power-aware, and really inclusive if it is to be meaningful. Her work supports closer interaction with underprivileged voices in development planning and acts as a warning against tokenism.

D'Costa et al. (2013) compile a varied collection of case studies looking at women's political efficacy in democratizing governments. The editors argue that democratization does not always result in gender equality especially in cases where structural inequalities are not resolved by legislative reforms.<sup>16</sup> The chapter emphasizes how political effectiveness determines both formal inclusion as well as informal power relations. It underlines how continuous lobbying, coalition-building, and systems of accountability help women to sustain their political successes.

Staudt (1998) discusses how women have consciously navigated political structures to advance policies. She argues that effective gender activism must mix institutional participation with grassroots action. Staudt's method is positive about change but realistic about the resistance women face in realms of policy.<sup>17</sup> Especially in bureaucratic or male-dominated regimes, her emphasis on political learning and coalition-building offers helpful direction on preserving female successes.

2009 saw Jabeen & Jadoon closely investigate the involvement of local government women in Pakistan. While quotas have enabled numerical representation to rise, they argue that practical engagement is still limited because to patriarchal structures, insufficient training, and sociopolitical constraints. This disparity between involvement and representation calls for institutional improvements and capacity-building that will help women to act, not only exist, within systems of government.

Furthermore, adding to previous studies by Jabeen and Iqbal (2020) is their recommendation that women's skill development will enable them to participate more in local governance.<sup>18</sup> Their research shows how institutional assistance, mentoring, and training could narrow the symbolic and substantive participation divide. Emphasizing that empowerment must be

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<sup>16</sup> B D'Costa et al., *Governing Women: Women's Political Effectiveness in Contexts of Democratization and Governance Reform* (Routledge, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> K. A Staudt, *Policy, Politics & Gender: Women Gaining Ground*. (Kumarian Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> N Jabeen and M. Z. I Jadoon, "Gender and Local Governance in Pakistan: Representation vs. Participation," *International NGO Journal* 4, no. 5 (2009): 264–76.

deliberate, methodical, and ongoing to produce durable change, the writers support grassroots level integrated gender-sensitive policy development.

Nasreen and Ali (2016) look at Pakistan's health policy through the lens of gender, saying that even though the government says it cares about equality, health policies often don't take into account the unique needs of women.<sup>19</sup> They underline the dearth of gender budgeting, separated statistics, and women's involvement in health planning. The paper advocates a rights-based approach to health policy including women's input at all phases—from conception to execution.

According to Anwar, Nazir & Islam, gender equality in Pakistani law has made progress but still faces legal-cultural obstacles. They agree on reserved seats and protective laws but contend that patriarchal legal interpretations, cultural hurdles, and poor enforcement nevertheless restrict women's rights.<sup>20</sup> To reach significant equity, their study emphasizes the necessity of coordinated legislative changes and awareness initiatives.

Emphasizing the special limitations and possibilities experienced by women in Pakistan, Jabeen & Mubasher (2017) look at the junction of gender and local government in South Asia.<sup>21</sup> Their participation demonstrates that while local government offers a possible forum for women's empowerment, institutional architecture, training programs, and political culture must be changed holistically. They advocate regional policy discussions to exchange ideas for increasing women's involvement all over South Asia.

Examining gender mainstreaming in Pakistan's National Internal Security Policies, Kamal & Makki expose an obvious lack of gender viewpoint in security policy. They contend that security stories typically ignore women's responsibilities in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and

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<sup>19</sup> S Nasreen and A Ali, “ a Gender Analysis of Health Policy in Pakistan ,” *Pakistan Journal of Applied Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (2016): 111–21.

<sup>20</sup> Andleeb Anwar, M. A Nazir, and Sania Islam, “Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges,” *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2022): 14–61.

<sup>21</sup> N Jabeen and U. E. F Mubasher, “ Gender and Local Governance in Pakistan,” *In Women in Governing Institutions in South Asia: Parliament, Civil Service and Local Government* , 2017, 285–304, [cham: Springer International Publishing](#).

community resilience.<sup>22</sup> Their efforts inspire the integration of gender-sensitive frameworks to solve comprehensively human security and the engagement of gender specialists in security decisions.

The Punjab Women Empowerment Package (PWEP) 2012–2016 is policy analysed in Jabeen, Omer & Zaheer (2022). Although the package had great aspirations, they discover that poor coordination, little follow-up, and little grassroots participation restricted its effectiveness. Future gender-sensitive programs should, the authors contend, be co-designed with women beneficiaries, sufficiently financed, and monitored under unambiguous gender indicators.<sup>23</sup> Their studies emphasize how successful policies are in turning aspirations into real advantages for women.

#### **2.1.4 Gender related issue in Pakistan**

True & Mintrom (2001) draw attention to how transnational advocacy networks help to spread gender mainstreaming ideas beyond boundaries. They demonstrate using policy diffusion theory that intergovernmental organizations and worldwide feminist movements are essential in integrating gender concerns in state policies.<sup>24</sup> Their results highlight how domestic policy change is shaped by international standards, therefore highlighting the interdependence of local and global gender discourses. Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo propose in their study a "gender+" approach to policymaking that considers various aspects of inequality instead of just gender. They advocate inclusive, multidimensional policies and question simplistic, one-dimensional gender concepts.<sup>25</sup> Their research emphasizes how inclusive equality may be

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<sup>22</sup> Kainat Kamal and Muhammad Makki, "Gender Mainstreaming in Policymaking: A Case Study of Pakistan's National Internal Security Policies," 2021, <https://repositories.nust.edu.pk/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/41185/Kainat%20Kamal%20MS%20Thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>23</sup> Sadia Jabeen, Sonia Omer, and Muhammad Zaheer, "Gender-Sensitive Public Policy Initiatives: An Analytical Study Of The Punjab Women Empowerment Package (PWEP) 2012–2016," *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan* 29, no. 1 (June 22, 2022): 85–96, <https://doi.org/10.46521/pjws.029.01.0113>.

<sup>24</sup> Jacqui True and Michael Mintrom, "Transnational Networks and Policy Diffusion: The Case of Gender Mainstreaming," *International Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (2001): 27–57, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3096100>.

<sup>25</sup> E Lombardo, P Meier, and M Verloo, "Policymaking from a Gender+ Equality Perspective," *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 38, no. 1 (2017): 1–19.

mainstreamed into political institutions, therefore enabling more fair and representative policies.

Emphasizing among the key elements' education, income, and social capital, Khan & Awan (2011) provide a contextual analysis of women's empowerment in Pakistan. They argue that systematic patriarchy restricts a multilayered process of empowerment. Their work requires targeted interventions in the spheres of health, education, and employment to provide women an environment suited for their prospering.<sup>26</sup>

Salman, Jadoon & Jabeen (2016) utilize a governance approach to examine the Pakistani public policy. Policy making is still seen to be so centralised, exclusive and often misguided by concerns of gender.<sup>27</sup> As a corollary to good governance, the authors suggest that participatory governance and institutional changes will enhance the participation and make the policymaking responsive to the needs of women, thus merging gender sensitive approaches with governance.

In 2016, Butt & Asad provide a situational analysis of social policy and the effect of social policy on Pakistani women's status. They said that legislation and legal frameworks may be present, but implementation and cultural resistance do not allow women to escape discrimination.<sup>28</sup> They draw attention to the crucial importance of political will and bureaucratic support to make gender sensitive policies translate into useful outcomes.

In Umar Daraz et al. (2025) they focus on how education is solving the dichotomy between what women contribute to the public sphere and the house in Malakand, Pakistan. Education would help women to gain confidence, be aware of their rights and participate in local

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<sup>26</sup> Safdar Ullah Khan and Rabia Awan, "Munich Personal RePEc Archive Contextual Assessment of Women Empowerment and Its Determinants: Evidence from Pakistan," 2011, [https://mpra.ub.uniuenchen.de/30820/1/Contextual Assessment of Women Empowerment and Its Determinants Evidence from Pakistan.pdf](https://mpra.ub.uniuenchen.de/30820/1/Contextual_Assessment_of_Women_Empowerment_and_Its_Determinants_Evidence_from_Pakistan.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Nasira Jabeen, Zafar Jadoon, and Yaamina Salman, "Revisiting Public Policy Making Process and Strategies in Pakistan: A Governance Perspective," *South Asian Studies a Research Journal of South Asian Studies* 31, no. 2 (2016): 413–22, [http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/csas/PDF/2\\_31\\_2\\_16.pdf](http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/csas/PDF/2_31_2_16.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Beenish Ijaz Butt and Amir Zada Asad, "Social Policy and Women Status in Pakistan: A Situation Analysis," *Orient Research Journal of Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2016), <https://gcwus.edu.pk/wp-content/uploads/3.-Social-policy-Women-Volume-1-Issue-1.pdf>.

governance, according to their studies.<sup>29</sup> These results help to support educational initiatives targeted at conservatively and rural driven communities to equip women.

Moheyuddin (2005) documents fundamental cultural, religious, and structural origins of inequality in gender issues of Pakistan. He argues that the change in policy has to come to terms with the deepest of societal norms that lie beyond legislative change. The approach of his all-encompassing call is for government initiatives, then grassroots group collaboration and then education.<sup>30</sup>

Nosheen et al. (2009) investigate socioeconomic investment decisions of genders at the rural level of Punjab, though participation by women was low but increasing. They argue that women who are financially involved have more resources at their disposal and the power to make decisions. The report goes on to say that participation of women in rural development would be an empowerment path.<sup>31</sup>

Noreen & Musarrat (2013) examine Pakistani legislative activities on women's rights. Both agree on legislation but cannot agree on enforcement.<sup>32</sup> Grunig, Hon & Toth (2013) emphasize ongoing obstacles women encounter in leadership positions and examine how gender influences public relations practice. They contend that even if women are more represented in the sector, males still control most leadership roles.<sup>33</sup> This gap highlights structural problems in corporate cultures and supports the necessity of gender-inclusive leadership development. Examining gender equality in European public service media, Nenadic & Ostling (2017) note improvements in female representation but ongoing glass barriers in decision-making positions.

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<sup>29</sup> Umar Daraz et al., "Empowering Voices: Education's Role in Bridging Women's Domestic and Public Decision-Making Divide in Malakand Division, Pakistan," *Dialogue Social Science Review (DSSR)* 3, no. 1 (2025): 208–30, <https://www.thedssr.com/index.php/2/article/view/163>.

<sup>30</sup> Ghulam Moheyuddin, "Background, Assessment and Analysis of the Gender Issues in Pakistan," 2005, [https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/683/1/MPRA\\_paper\\_683.pdf](https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/683/1/MPRA_paper_683.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Farhana Nosheen et al., "Assessing Gender Role In Decision Making Regarding Socioeconomic Activities In Rural Punjab," *Pakistan Journal of Agriculture and Science* 46, no. 1 (2009): 73–76.

<sup>32</sup> N Noreen and P. D. R Musarrat, "Protection of Women Rights through Legal Reforms in Pakistan," *Journal of Public Administration and Governance* 3, no. 4 (2013): 119–42, <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.5296/jpag.v3i4.5059>.

<sup>33</sup> L. A Grunig, L. C Hon, and E. L Toth, *Women in Public Relations: How Gender Influences Practice*. (Routledge, 2013).

Their study emphasises the importance of internal responsibility systems and quotas to support female leadership in media companies—insights relevant both worldwide and in Pakistan.<sup>34</sup> Using discourse analysis, Rabia Ali & Batool (2015) dissect the ways in which Pakistani media perpetuate sexist portrayals of women. They contend that media often presents women as limited to home duties, emotional, or docile, therefore restricting their apparent public action. The writers urge a critical review of media narratives to advance powerful images of women.<sup>35</sup>

In 2014 Munir, Shehzad & Sahi examine how Pakistani media presents women's political engagement. They contend the media does not show women as significant political players and find limited coverage and stereotyped images. To support gender-sensitive reporting, the research advises proactive media policy and journalist training.<sup>36</sup>

Zaheer (2016) looks at how Pakistani women protection laws interact with media discourse. She says that public discourse is not generated by media coverage and that it is usually shallow. Zaheer emphasizes the importance of strategic media involvement in order to increase popular support of women's rights legislation.<sup>37</sup>

Alam, Taj & Wajid (2021) examine how popular narratives and policy agendas in Pakistan after 2005 are shaped by electronic media. They contend that while media might influence progressive policies, commercial and political concerns usually take the stage.<sup>38</sup> Their study advocates media control that advances inclusive policy debate.

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<sup>34</sup> I Nenadic and A Ostling, "Public Service Media in Europe. Gender Equality Policies and the Representation of Women in Decision-Making Roles," *Comunicazione Politica* 18, no. 2 (2017): 209–32.

<sup>35</sup> Rabia Ali and Saira Batool, "Stereotypical Identities Discourse Analysis of Media Images of Women in Pakistan," *Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies* 4, no. 2 (June 25, 2015): 690, <https://doi.org/10.17583/generos.2015.1502>.

<sup>36</sup> A. S. Hassan Shehzad, "Media Analysis of Women's Participation in Politics," *Journal of Mass Communication & Journalism* 04, no. 03 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.4172/2165-7912.1000183>.

<sup>37</sup> L Zaheer, "Women Protection Legislation and Media Discourse in Pakistan," *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 53, no. 2 (2016).

<sup>38</sup> Sarah Alam, Rafia Taj, and Abuzar Wajidi, "Influence of Electronic Media on Public Policies and Narratives in Pakistan Post-2005," *South Asian Journal of Management Sciences* 15, no. 2 (2021): 241–53, <https://doi.org/10.21621/sajms.2021152.07>.

In Pakistan, Ziafat & ul Haq provide a comparative study of how print, electronic, and social media shapes public policy. They contend that social media has democratized involvement but also offers problems such false information and online abuse.<sup>39</sup> Their results underline how important media literacy and control are to properly using media for gender-responsive policies.

## **2.2 Literature gap**

Though a considerable body of literature and advocacy exists on gender and governance, there is a big knowledge void around how policy reforms impact governance structures to become more gender inclusive. Studying the institutional and cultural dynamics that sustain exclusion, most existing studies look at legal frameworks or describe rather than necessarily understand women's participation in data but fail to do so. Additionally, the implementation and the impact of gender-focused policy reforms, especially within developing countries like Pakistan, is not critically assessed. This research fills this gap by analyzing in much richer detail the policy reform, the institutional blockages, and providing evidence-based recommendations for reform.

## **2.3 Theoretical framework**

### **2.3.1 Feminist Institutionalism**

Feminist Institutionalism (FI) presents an analytical framework that integrates feminist theory with new institutionalism, aiming at examining the ways in which gendered power dynamics develop within political and social institutions. The famous writers of this theory include **Amanda Gouws, Radha Wagle, Soma Pillay, and Wendy Wright**. Their perspective is based on the understanding that institutions, whether they are formal entities such as parliaments, laws, or bureaucracies, or informal structures like social norms, networks, and cultural expectations,

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<sup>39</sup> Sadia Ziafat, "Role of Media in Influencing Public Policy: An Analysis of Print, Electronic and Social Media in Pakistan – PIDE Thesis," Pide.org.pk, 2019, <https://thesis.pide.org.pk/thesis/role-of-media-in-influencing-public-policy-an-analysis-of-print-electronic-and-social-media-in-pakistan/>.

inherently reflect gendered dynamics.<sup>40</sup> Instead, they mirror and perpetuate deeply rooted gender hierarchies that have developed over time. One fundamental premise of feminist institutionalism is the recognition that institutional structures are intrinsically influenced by gender. Historically, these structures have been crafted by and for predominantly male figures, thereby embedding patriarchal values within their functioning and rationale. Consequently, even when formal reforms are implemented to enhance women's representation, these initiatives frequently fall short of producing transformative results because of the persistent impact of informal institutional norms that either resist or undermine such changes.<sup>41</sup>

Feminist Institutionalists highlight the dynamic relationship between established formal rules and the informal practices that often accompany them. The authors contend that genuine institutional transformation cannot be achieved solely through changes in policy; instead, it necessitates a concurrent challenge to the implicit, culturally ingrained norms that shape concepts of power, leadership, and legitimacy in relation to gender.<sup>42</sup> Another important assumption is that institutions function as dynamic spaces of contestation, where various actors engage in struggles over meanings, resources, and outcomes. In this context, individuals identified by gender, especially feminist activists and reformers, do not merely accept institutional rules; rather, they engage as proactive agents who skillfully navigate, challenge, or transform the limitations imposed by these institutions. FI also incorporates the idea of path dependency, recognizing that institutions often exhibit resistance to change as a result of self-reinforcing mechanisms and established traditions. Reforms aimed at achieving gender equality risk being undermined or weakened within this resistant framework unless they receive robust

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<sup>40</sup> G Holmes, "Feminist Institutionalism Book or Report Section," 2020, [https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/86471/1/Peacekeeping%20and%20Feminist%20Institutionalism\\_Pre-print\\_Holmes%202019%20copy.pdf](https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/86471/1/Peacekeeping%20and%20Feminist%20Institutionalism_Pre-print_Holmes%202019%20copy.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Georgina Holmes, "Feminist Institutionalism Book or Report Section," 2020, [https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/86471/1/Peacekeeping%20and%20Feminist%20Institutionalism\\_Pre-print\\_Holmes%202019%20copy.pdf](https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/86471/1/Peacekeeping%20and%20Feminist%20Institutionalism_Pre-print_Holmes%202019%20copy.pdf).

political support, ongoing advocacy, and thoughtful engagement with both formal and informal institutional aspects.<sup>43</sup>

A number of prominent scholars have played a significant role in shaping and enhancing the field of Feminist Institutionalism. Among the most notable figures are Drude Dahlerup, Mona Lena Krook, Fiona Mackay, Georgina Waylen, and Louise Chappell. The scholars collectively contend that the effectiveness of gender-focused institutional reforms hinges on the capacity to challenge both the overt and subtle norms governing the institutional framework. Feminist Institutionalism goes beyond simply examining whether women are present or absent in politics or policy; it delves into the underlying structural foundations that influence processes of inclusion, exclusion, and resistance. This framework provides a thorough and nuanced perspective on the ways in which institutions perpetuate gender inequalities, while also highlighting the potential for transformative change through intentional feminist involvement. In this context, FI functions as an essential instrument for examining the limitations and opportunities related to gender equity within institutional structures at local, national, and global scales.

### **2.3.2 Theory application**

Feminist Institutionalism (FI) has evolved as a critical analytical paradigm within the larger tradition of new institutionalism, providing novel insights into how political and governance institutions form, and are influenced by, gendered power dynamic. FI offers a convincing prism through which to view the ongoing underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles in Pakistan, where governance institutions are firmly rooted in patriarchal norms and values. Formal gender equality efforts notwithstanding this.<sup>44</sup> This framework is especially relevant to

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<sup>43</sup> Georgina Holmes, "The Open University," *Open.ac.uk*, August 2020, [https://doi.org/Holmes,%20G.%20%3Chttps://oro.open.ac.uk/view/person/gh7884.html%3E%20\(2020\).%20Feminist%20institutionalism.%20In:%20Oksamytna,%20K.%20and%20Karlsrud.%20J.%20eds.%20%20%20%20%20%20%20United%20Nations%20Peace%20Operations%20and%20International%20Relations%20Theory.%20%20%20%20%20Manchester:%20Manchester%20University%20Press.](https://doi.org/Holmes,%20G.%20%3Chttps://oro.open.ac.uk/view/person/gh7884.html%3E%20(2020).%20Feminist%20institutionalism.%20In:%20Oksamytna,%20K.%20and%20Karlsrud.%20J.%20eds.%20%20%20%20%20%20%20United%20Nations%20Peace%20Operations%20and%20International%20Relations%20Theory.%20%20%20%20%20Manchester:%20Manchester%20University%20Press.)

<sup>44</sup> Meryl Kenny, "A Feminist Institutional Approach," *Gender and Political Recruitment*, 2013, 34–62, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137271945\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137271945_3).

the study topic “Gender and Governance; Assessing Women’s Role in Public Policy formulation in Pakistan” since it investigates the deeper institutional cultures and practices influencing women's involvement, so transcending surface-level analyses of policy presence.

FI contends that institutions—formal (such as laws, constitutions, and official processes) or informal (such as norms, customs, and unwritten rules)—are naturally gendered. That is to say, they are historically created in ways that reflect and support male domination, not neutral constructions. Institutions' gendered character affects not just who has authority but also how choices are taken and whose interests come first. Feminist institutionalists contend that even when gender-inclusive policies are legally adopted, they can fail to generate significant change unless accompanied by attempts to destroy the informal practices and cultural standards maintaining gender hierarchy.

When FI is used in the Pakistani setting, several important themes surface. First, the informal institutional opposition that restricts the efficacy of official gender changes contrasts sharply with them. For instance, Pakistan has adopted gender-oriented policies including the Gender Reform Action Plan (GRAP, 2005) and the National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women (2002) and has included constitutional clauses allowing women's representation through reserved seats in the national and provincial assemblies. Although these changes formally acknowledge the necessity of gender inclusion, FI clarifies why they have not led to appreciable rise in women's power inside political systems. Often confining women's presence to symbolic representation rather than allowing significant involvement, informal norms and practices include male-dominated party structures, patronage networks, and gender-biased views of leadership continue to marginalize women.<sup>45</sup>

FI also emphasizes the need of path dependency—the theory that institutions resist change as they are artifacts of past events and ingrained behaviors. In Pakistan, the exclusion of women from the political and administrative realms has produced institutional cultures resistant to simple transformation by new legislation. Even with legislative changes, the continuation of

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<sup>45</sup> Jenny Morrison and Ewan Gibbs, “Feminist Institutionalism and Women’s Political Leadership in Devolution Era Scotland,” *British Politics*, November 21, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-021-00197-1>.

male-dominated political parties, clientelism, and elitist bureaucratic procedures helps to keep women marginalized.

The theory also challenges the idea of "gender-neutral" policy-making, contending that policies devoid of explicit addressing of gendered power relations may support current inequality. Many policy changes in the framework of Pakistani government are presented in technical or legalistic terms, without considering or confronting the strongly rooted gender inequalities that affect their execution. Gender budgets or quotas, for instance, might be instituted without matching initiatives to equip officials with gender awareness or create institutional responsibility systems for gender equality. Consequently, such changes might not be able to produce the expected results.<sup>46</sup>

Feminist Institutionalism provides a useful framework for examining the implementation gap, which is the difference between the presence of gender-inclusive policies and their actual influence on women's involvement. Often the outcome of a bureaucratic inaction, lack of political will, and the predominance of unofficial behaviors undermining official commitments is this disparity. FI lets academics explore not only the institutional limitations but also the ways in which women negotiate, rebel, and occasionally change these systems by stressing both structure and agency.

FI also clarified how formal legislative changes interact with informal institutional practices to influence women's representation and efficacy in Pakistani governance posts. It will direct the examination of institutional and structural hurdles such tokenistic representation, lack of political mentoring, and discriminating hiring policies.<sup>47</sup> It will also enable investigate how institutional rules and practices combine with more general socio-cultural elements, like family expectations and community views, to limit women's political activity.

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<sup>46</sup> Carol Bacchi and Malin Rönblom, "Feminist Discursive Institutionalism—a Poststructural Alternative," *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 22, no. 3 (March 20, 2014): 170–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2013.864701>.

<sup>47</sup> Jennifer Thomson, "Resisting Gendered Change: Feminist Institutionalism and Critical Actors," *International Political Science Review* 39, no. 2 (February 2017): 178–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512116677844>.

## **2.4 Summary: The Global Theory to the Research Gap of Pakistan.**

Together, Feminist Institutionalism offers a strong theoretical framework in the explanation of why formal statements of gender equality often do not result in material empowerment in governance structures. Although the theory has been used widely to study the gendered aspect of political institutions in comparative and western contexts, its use on Pakistan is minimal and scattered. The current Pakistani articles are mostly confined to the descriptive representations, legal reform or even policy listing without the recognition of the richer interaction between formal institutional organization and informal norms that still frame the marginalization of women in Pakistani governance. As the theory is applied to the Pakistani situation, the research thesis fills this critical gap in literature by going beyond the surface-level examination of women being included in the process of formulating and enacting a policy to examine the institutional cultures, path-dependent practices, and informal networks of power that limit women influence in the policy-making process. By doing this, the framework facilitates context-sensitive investigation on how gender conscious reforms are diffused, opposed, or watered down in the institutions of Pakistani governance, thus, a theoretically informed explanation on why, despite the repeated failure to connect the commitment of gender policy to the actual impact of their policies. The theoretical accommodation directly guides the empirical focus of the study and explains its concentration on institutional processes as opposed to the presence of the policy.

## CHAPTER 3

### EVALUATING THE KEY STRUCTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO WOMEN EXCLUSIVITY, AND THEIR IMPACT ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND ADVANCEMENT IN GOVERNANCE

#### 3.1 Women's Rights in Pakistan

The Pakistani women situation is still one of the most controversial and complicated sides of the Pakistani political and social life. Pakistan has still yet to come as one of the lowest countries in the world concerning gender equality though it has provisions in the constitution of equality, women are increasingly playing a role in life of the society. World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report 2025 has ranked Pakistan 148 out of the 148 countries, which indicates that the country is strongly unequal in Education, health, economic participation, and political representation.<sup>48</sup> These imbalances can be in great part attributed to the patriarchal norms, institutionalized discrimination as well as the cultural practices which restrict the independence and partaking of women in the social life and their role in the socio-political field.

#### 3.2 The Societal Standing of Women in Pakistan

The Pakistani women are subjected to the patriarchal system that dominates the family and life society. As social conventions dictate, the males are the ones who are supposed to be heads and protectors of the family and the females are the ones who are expected to protect the family honour and stability. The final outcome of these perceptions is the social rules and regulations that restrict the mobility of women, their access to education as well as their participation in any kind of governance. The current studies demonstrate that women possess low autonomy during the decision-making process.<sup>49</sup> In terms of critical decisions, a study

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<sup>48</sup> Andleep Anwar, M. A Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2025): 14–61.

<sup>49</sup> Andleep Anwar, M. A Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2025): 14–61.

conducted in 2020-24 showed that male relatives dominate in around 70 percent of households. Such decisions are medical services, education of the children and the use of money. Before marriage the fathers make decisions and after marriage husbands and sons tend to have responsibility of running the lives of widowed mothers or old mothers. In addition, the gender of the female is viewed in general as an object of the media and popular culture. The women in the TV programs as well as in the advertisements are shown mostly in their traditional roles of either nurses or dependents. These images perpetuate the notion that women possess a worth that is pegged on their obedience and nurturing quality rather than their intelligence and leadership capabilities.<sup>50</sup> This leads to the fact that perception of women is not usually taken into account in the social as well as political life and the freedom to act is limited in view of the needs of the society to remain modest, submissive as well as loyal to their family chores.

### **3.2.1 Gender Disparity in Health**

The condition of gender inequality in health conditions and access to medical care services is a major issue in Pakistan. Women do not have the autonomy, financial independence, and a reproductive health system that helps them; this affects the health of women negatively. The Lady Health Workers (LHW) program and reproductive health care have been increased in the rural areas by the government though these have not entirely bridged the divide. Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) 2022-23 has shown that nearly fifty percent of women have stated that they cannot access healthcare without the consent of a male relative.<sup>51</sup> This is exacerbated in the rural areas by the reality that the women healthcare providers are inadequate as well as lack of transport. The maternal mortality was still high by 154 deaths per 100 000 live births mainly due to the factors that were avoidable and were created by the absence of proper prenatal and postnatal care. This is the key issue in that people do not have sufficient food. In a 2024 UNICEF study, female members of low-income households are at a

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<sup>50</sup> S Bano and M. N Akhtar, "POLITICAL PARTICIPATION of WOMEN: A POLICY PERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS in PAKISTAN," *International Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2(2) (2023): 44–55.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

higher risk of being anemic twice as often as their male counterparts.<sup>52</sup> This is due to the cultural norms which assume that men should be the first to eat. Rape and physical abuse of women contribute to deterioration on physical and mental health of women. The victims of domestic violence are in most cases lack legal and mental health service and the stigma around this issue diminishes their reporting and seeking of the violence.

### **3.2.2 Gender Disparity in Education**

Education is a significant part of the women empowerment, but the achievement of Pakistan in increasing the level of female literacy and school enrolment is slow and irregular. An urban center such as Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad has already advanced at the necessary pace of gender equality, however, rural and tribal regions are very disadvantaged. Literacy levels indicate that 54% of women are literate, which is 75% of men (Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM) Survey 2023-24).<sup>53</sup> In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan literacy level is only 30-35 percent among the women. It is attributable to the cultural and infrastructural factors. Education to girls is still getting less relevant due to traditional values. However, in most rural locations, parents do not find it worthwhile or even worth considering educating their girls because they think that they would turn out to be less obedient or not even good wives. Religious and cultural concepts are typically employed by people to determine the cause of such policies. Part of the local clergy adhere to the fact that further education of the females after some particular point contradicts the tradition of gender and thus, reduces the opportunities of families to send their daughters to school. Safety issues are also very critical. Difficult access of learning institutions, bad transport, and co-ed systems are considered factors threatening the honour of the family. In case they are transferred to remote schools, conservative parents believe that their girls would be the victims of bullying or other types of social ostracism on the part of their peers. This discrimination is supported by the economic factors, in low income families, the males are accorded the priority in schooling due

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<sup>52</sup> S Bano and M. N Akhtar, "POLITICAL PARTICIPATION of WOMEN: A POLICY PERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS in PAKISTAN," *International Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2(2) (2023): 44–55.

<sup>53</sup> Andleep Anwar, M. A Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2025): 14–61.

the perceived role as the future providers. Girls still have too high dropout rate particularly in high school.

### **3.2.3 Gender Disparity in Employment**

The involvement of the women in the economy is a clear sign that the women are empowered; but still, there are few Pakistani women in the labor market. By 2025, the female labour force participation rate will be only 26 per cent which is one of the lowest in South Asia. The statistic for men is 84% (UN Women, 2025). A significant number of employed women are situated in the informal sector, characterized by low wages, poor working conditions, and few legal rights. More than 70% of employed women labour in agriculture, however the majority are either underpaid or designated as "family helpers."<sup>54</sup> Women seeking employment face numerous challenges, including insufficient education or skills, mobility constraints, and discrimination in recruiting and promotion processes. Occupational segregation confines women to "acceptable" professions such as education, healthcare, and administrative roles. The majority of leadership positions remain occupied by men. The Gender Parity Report 2025 (UNFPA) indicates that women constitute fewer than 4% of federal civil service positions, with a minimal number holding decision-making authority.

A significant issue is workplace harassment. Despite the enforcement of the Protection Against Harassment of Women in the Workplace Act (2010), numerous incidents remain unreported due to individuals' fear of retribution or reputational harm. Women are less inclined to maintain long-term employment or establish their own enterprises due to the absence of secure work environments, inadequate facilities for childbirth, and prevailing cultural biases. Women-owned enterprises constitute less than 5% of all registered businesses, despite the promising initiatives such as Women Chambers of Commerce and the Roshni Baji program for female electricians.

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<sup>54</sup> S Bano and M. N Akhtar, "POLITICAL PARTICIPATION of WOMEN: A POLICY PERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS in PAKISTAN," *International Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2(2) (2023): 44–55.

The Pakistani society is highly patriarchal and gender inequality has been passed across generations. At the young age, boys and girls learn their gender roles. Women are also socialized to be modest, obedient and obedient to the family and males to be authoritative and to control the family.<sup>55</sup> The women are still considered inferior to the men due to the reasons that involve an early and forced marriage, being denied inheritance and limited movement.

They still make women to be the victims of violence. Domestic violence and sexual assault has been perpetuated in most provinces, honour killing (Karo-Kari). Despite the development of the legislation, i.e. the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021 and provincial Domestic Violence Acts, their application is not even, especially in rural regions, where informal courts (jirgas) are prevalent. These systems tend to save male offenders and make victims remain silent or otherwise reconcile to them. There are other communities that are still practicing certain cultural practices such as Watta Satta (exchange weddings), Vani (compensatory marriages) and the outdated marriage with the Holy Quran. These rituals show the convergence of the gender and power systems of the Middle Ages. These customs, in addition to depriving women of the freedom that they enjoy, also contribute to the property and lineage management. The media and individuals are still perpetuating gender stereotypes through their discourse. Women are also not spared since they are depicted as the symbol of the dignity and good as opposed to being the agents of change. Conversely, social media has taken the position of the mouthpiece of feminist discourse and online activism. The activism such as Mera Jism Meri Marzi (My Body, My Choice) and Aurat March (Women's March) generated the national controversy about female rights, their bodies, and harassment.<sup>56</sup> The arguments that surround such projects are rather controversial, however, it means that the discussion has shifted and individuals are taking a step towards the equality of the genders irrespective of their age.

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<sup>55</sup> Andleep Anwar, M. A Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2025): 14–61.

<sup>56</sup> Sadia Jabeen, Sonia Omer, and Muhammad Zaheer, "Gender-Sensitive Public Policy Initiatives: An Analytical Study Of The Punjab Women Empowerment Package (PWEPP) 2012–2016," *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan* 29, no. 1 (June 22, 2022): 85–96, <https://doi.org/10.46521/pjws.029.01.0113>.

### **3.3 Emerging Trends and Policy Modifications**

The inclusion of gender has been observed to improve although the woes still persist. Pakistan has accomplished a considerable amount of policy reform in order to secure the social and economic rights of women. The Ministry of Human Rights has drafted three laws: the Maternity and Paternity Leave Act (2023), the Day Care Centers Act (2023), the Gender Equality Policy Framework (2024).<sup>57</sup> These legislations are supposed to liberalize the hiring of women. Various provincial governments have embarked on programs that will make women move and pursue education. The two relevant examples of the activities directed to enhance women safety and independence are the Women on Wheels program in Punjab and the Women Safety App in Sindh. The seats that are assigned to women in the local government have also allowed women to participate in politics even when they are poorly represented in the decision-making process. The young generations are getting more aware of equality and rights of sexes at the societal level. Women-led NGOs and digital literacy have availed individuals with each other so that they can be accountable and stand for their rights. Gradual yet consistent change in the gendered economic roles is a sign of increased numbers of women entrepreneurs in the cities facilitated by micro-finance and online shopping.

### **3.4 Historical Context of Women’s Political Participation in Pakistan**

#### **3.4.1 Women’s role since independence**

The concept of 'Gender discrimination' is a debated topic globally. Gender discrimination defines any circumstance in which an individual is treated differently due to their male or female identity, rather than their competence or skill level. Gender discrimination adversely affects society as a whole and detrimentally influences the economy, education, health, and life expectancy. Women and girls are predominantly affected by the adverse effects of gender discrimination. It encompasses insufficient educational options, diminished societal position, and a lack of autonomy in decision-making for oneself and one's family. Similarly, gender

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<sup>57</sup> Andleep Anwar, M. A Nazir, and Sania Islam, “Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges,” *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2025): 14–61.

discrimination constitutes a significant human rights concern in Pakistan, adversely impacting a substantial proportion of women in the country. More than a half of women in Pakistan do not have access to basic schooling. Besides, Pakistani women are facing a low health and nutrition status. Further, most women are locked up in their homes where they have few or no authority to make decisions, judgements, and choices that have direct impacts on their living standards and family affairs.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, the Pakistani society is considered to be male dominated. Women being subjugated has a negative impact on all their life stages.

This process of Islamization during the reign of Zia-ul-Haq strengthened the patriarchal structures and gender inequality in the society through advancement of false interpretations of Islam on subjection and oppression of women into submission. The post-Zia governments responded positively after they realised the importance of women in the national development. Musharraf considered empowering women a key measure towards economic stability and development of the country. The steps and changes implemented to empower women during the Musharraf rule had potential of success despite the opposition staged by different social, religious, and political groups. The previous governments did not put in place programs that provided education, health, justice and respect because they did not have the support of the society and the political support.<sup>59</sup>

The 1956 Constitution had a provision of Quota seats of women. The investigation of the property rights of women, child custody, marriage, haq mehar, and independent cohabitation were some of the objectives of the commission. Rashid Commission was constituted in 1951 in response to the demands of women to amend family laws and to face the relevant socioeconomic issues related to women. The passage of the Muslim Family Regulations Statute

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<sup>58</sup> Kainat Kamal and Muhammad Makki, "Gender Mainstreaming in Policymaking: A Case Study of Pakistan's National Internal Security Policies," 2021, <https://repositories.nust.edu.pk/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/41185/Kainat%20Kamal%20MS%20Thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>59</sup> Safdar Ullah Khan and Rabia Awan, "Munich Personal RePEc Archive Contextual Assessment of Women Empowerment and Its Determinants: Evidence from Pakistan," 2011, [https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/30820/1/Contextual\\_Assessment\\_of\\_Women\\_Empowerment\\_and\\_Its\\_Determinants\\_Evidence\\_from\\_Pakistan.pdf](https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/30820/1/Contextual_Assessment_of_Women_Empowerment_and_Its_Determinants_Evidence_from_Pakistan.pdf).

1961, which required the marriage and divorce to be registered with the relevant Association Committee, was a great political undertaking on the side of women in the Pakistani history.

Social empowerment of women is a disputed issue in socio-economic development, internationally and in the local scope. The United Nations and a number of humanitarian organisations promote women empowerment and accelerate gender equality in the world. Women socioeconomic status depends on social classes, geographic areas, ethnicities, urban and rural, tribal/ caste, and societal organization like feudalism or industrialization. The rich family members increase the activities of women in business and their access to education resources give women in this group a wider choice of opportunities in finding economic opportunities.

The role of women in different countries is different as there is no generally accepted definition. It may be regarded as a synthesis of many statuses, some superior and others inadequate. Female children hold an inferior status and have reduced privileges in comparison to their male counterparts.<sup>60</sup> Gender disparities in Pakistan stem from social, economic, and cultural impediments. Although the empowerment of women is widely acknowledged as a fundamental objective of development, certain obstacles remain owing to socio-cultural and religious influences in a country like Pakistan. Despite being an Islamic state, the implementation of Sharia law in Pakistan is frequently overshadowed by cultural beliefs.

In November 1999, General Pervez Musharraf maintained authority by instituting the fourth martial law in Pakistan's short history. General Pervez Musharraf articulated his dissatisfaction with Pakistan's historical strategy regarding the Taliban, in a definitive rejection of the elected state leader who had forsaken Islamic Jihad in Kashmir. All extremist elements, limited by Deobandi and its jihadist offshoots, sought to provoke rebellion against a leader allied with Washington State and supportive of India, who could obstruct the financial resources that had enabled their progress and enhanced their power.

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<sup>60</sup> Yann P. Kerevel and Lonna Rae Atkeson, "Explaining the Marginalization of Women in Legislative Institutions," *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 4 (October 2013): 980–92, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022381613000960>.

General Musharraf aimed to advance a liberal and subdued image of Pakistan internationally. He was granted a remarkable opportunity to eradicate the radical factions during the "Battle on Dread." A novel approach to global strategy was launched, and General Musharraf commenced the enforcement of his standards within. He was attempting to fulfil his vision of Illuminated Control. The vision also involves promotion of liberal principles, establishment of a new education system, the management of the delicate international status of Pakistan, the political rights of women and promotion of innovativeness in the electronic media of the state.<sup>61</sup> Social equality between men and women is encouraged by Islam, yet, in Pakistan, there are incidences whereby misogyny serves as a deterrent to the rights of women. The values of Pakistan society put in mind in girls a deep respect to males, including their dads, siblings, and husbands. Women usually depend on the men in making important decisions such as school, work, marriage, planning of families, and moving. Pakistan has a significant gender discrimination that is evident in the rural and remote regions.

The state of women education in Pakistan is worrying and alarming. The involvement of women in education and the growth of higher education can also help each other and lead to the achievement and development of the female population.<sup>62</sup> Limited educational access results in a decreased social mobility, inequality in income distribution, poor participation in the labour force, and unequal distribution of household duties. There is limited access to education among women. Despite the huge efforts made by the government to increase educational opportunities of girls and women, barriers to progress are still there. There is a low representation of women in higher education, compared to their male counterparts, and their tendency to achieve degree completion is less than that of their male counterparts. The attendance of secondary schools by females drops drastically as they continue with their schooling, which means that it may be quite difficult to access and avail secondary education to girls. The concept of empowerment can be expressed using both the concept of static and

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<sup>61</sup> Yann P. Kerevel and Lonna Rae Atkeson, "Explaining the Marginalization of Women in Legislative Institutions," *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 4 (October 2013): 980–92, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022381613000960>.

<sup>62</sup> Andleep Anwar, M. A Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2025): 14–61.

dynamic.<sup>63</sup> The empowerment concept is associated with power and emphasizes the possibilities of women to make decisions and shape their life.

Disempowerment does not befall women isolated due to a lack of consciousness of their rights, but also as a result of discriminatory economic, social and even, cultural practices that reinforce inequity in society. Powerless women can acquire it in outside channels. Empowerment is a gradual process and can be achieved by the women individually or in a group. It is not a gift. Empowerment is the inner voice of personal growth; it signifies the inner power. Intrinsic empowerment strategies are known as internal initiatives, or those that are referred to as bottom-up. Both types of programs should be implemented in order to enhance the economic status of women.

The plan was the Devolution plan 2001 that was approved by General Pervaiz Musharraf. It increased political participation of women by requiring that women be represented in the local governmental bodies such as town halls, organizational boards, area committees, and tehsil chambers in a 33 percent ratio. In the past, 20,007 women were chosen to be in the Punjab Association Chamber, 6,498 to the Sindh Association Board, 3,963 to the KPK Association Committee (previously the NWFP) and 2,374 in the Baluchistan Association Assembly.<sup>64</sup> The female population was 18 percent and 21.6 percent of the Senate and Public Assembly respectively. This marked a new step towards improving the position of women on the issues that affect them, despite the little inclusion that is given to them. Furthermore, he regarded aggression against women with the highest reverence. This was essential in relation to the Beijing Platform for Action, the General Declaration of Basic Rights, and the Conference on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which the Pakistani government has supported from around 1996. Empowering women is crucial for the welfare of people, families, communities, and nations, as well as for sustainable development. Underprivileged nations must prioritize individual-centered development. This study aims to

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<sup>63</sup> Ghulam Moheyuddin, "Background, Assessment and Analysis of the Gender Issues in Pakistan," 2005, [https://mpr.ub.uni-muenchen.de/683/1/MPRA\\_paper\\_683.pdf](https://mpr.ub.uni-muenchen.de/683/1/MPRA_paper_683.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> Andleeb Anwar, M. A Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2025): 14–61.

provide a comprehensive analysis of Pakistan's setting and clarify how traditional sociocultural elements, such as resource accessibility, employment quality, and educational limitations, influence women's empowerment.

In October 1999, a military coup ascended General Pervez Musharraf to power. His philosophy is considered the educational framework on women's rights that followed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

General Musharraf used his Enlightened Moderation program largely to secure the back of women. The Government of General Musharraf made strategies to enhance the unstable position of the Pakistani women. General Musharraf had the official power to uplift the position and status of women in the country. His approach involves numerous activities that seek to liberate women out of challenges that could be holding them back, and bring them faster up the ladder. More so, the percentage of women grew in both public and private legislatures to 17 percent before 2002 election (61 out of 342 members of the public assembly were female). With the 2002 election, the total number of women in politics grew with a large increment in the quota. During the 2002 general elections, 188 women competed to fill the general seats; 101 women were nominated by the political parties and 39 of them were elected to their offices.<sup>65</sup> As compared to the 1997 election, the ratio was nearly 1/3: only 56 women were running, 39 of them had been nominated by political parties, and only 7 of them had won.

### **3.5 Women participation in local government elections**

#### **3.5.1 Gender and Local Governance in Pakistan**

The process of development has greatly evolved within the global sphere within the last 45 years. It has undertaken a number of institutional, structural, administrative and human resource reforms to improve the performance, responsiveness, efficiency and effectiveness of government institutions which include public, private and civil society organisations. There has been a major change in terms of responsibilities of the authorities. The states in the new way of governance play more dynamic, entrepreneurial, facilitative and supportive roles unlike their traditional roles characterized by inertial welfare, command and control as well as direct

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<sup>65</sup> S Nasreen and A Ali, " a Gender Analysis of Health Policy in Pakistan ," *Pakistan Journal of Applied Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (2016): 111–21.

delivery of the public goods and services.<sup>66</sup> Most of these governance reforms have been executed incorporating liberalization, decentralization, devolution, democratization and privatization, and require greater participation, engagement or inclusion by the citizens.

Following the global trends, developing countries such as Pakistan have been able to accept the changes in the market and have embarked on governance reforms. The country has experienced a number of governance reforms to achieve goals of improved performance of the public sector, economic growth, poverty reduction, participation of citizens, and greater accountability and transparency, all of which started in the 1980s. This is because this new wave of governance reform represents a paradigm shift in the developmental thinking with regard to political, economic, social and economic roles of the state and the society. The recognition of civil society and private sector organizations as potential partners in the government has gradually replaced the major role played by the state. The new form of governance whereby people are considered the most important in the development process enhances all institutions and citizens, irrespective of gender to participate in the democratic governance.<sup>67</sup>

The importance of involving the masses in various social, political, and civic issues is a crucial part of enhancing personal empowerment and strengthening the trust in the political institutions. Democratic ways involve group discussions and debates, the voice of the people on various issues relating to the policy making process, the community in the development processes (especially at the local level) and their representation as well as participation in different decision making and implementation forums which is commonly used in fostering citizen participation in the governance process.

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<sup>66</sup> I Nenadic and A Ostling, "Public Service Media in Europe. Gender Equality Policies and the Representation of Women in Decision-Making Roles," *Comunicazione Politica* 18, no. 2 (2017): 209–32.

<sup>67</sup> I Nenadic and A Ostling, "Public Service Media in Europe. Gender Equality Policies and the Representation of Women in Decision-Making Roles," *Comunicazione Politica* 18, no. 2 (2017): 209–32.

The issue of gender equality in terms of representation and participation in most of the governance organisations has attracted international attention. Gender equality and gender-based equitable opportunities are recognized as critical efforts in the development framework in the international community towards achieving sustainable good governance.<sup>68</sup> The principles of governance that have been generally accepted such as equity, accountability, transparency, efficiency, participation, and responsiveness also recognize gender as a basic construction and encourage the inclusion of women and men in various developmental programs.

Conventional Revolutionizing. It is agreeable that the absence of women in governance, which constitutes about a half of the total population in the world, hinders the realization of full human potential in nations. The United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, expressed gender equity in the development and empowerment of women saying, 'We cannot achieve our objectives, and at the same time discriminate half of the human race. As a result, the essential role of female participation in the governance is not only due to the global democratization and liberalization process, modernization process but also as a natural part of human development.'<sup>69</sup>

Having realized their importance, gender issues received more attention during the second half of the 20 th century and saw women acquire more functions in their communities and shifted their traditional roles and relationships in relation to work and family. This has been witnessed in both developed and developing countries such as Pakistan where women have gained greater representation in various forms of public lives. The decentralization reform of 2001 has ensured women are given 33 percent representation in the Local Government in an effort to enhance their participation in the government politically.

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<sup>68</sup> Sadia Ziafat, "Role of Media in Influencing Public Policy: An Analysis of Print, Electronic and Social Media in Pakistan – PIDE Thesis," Pide.org.pk, 2019, <https://thesis.pide.org.pk/thesis/role-of-media-in-influencing-public-policy-an-analysis-of-print-electronic-and-social-media-in-pakistan/>.

<sup>69</sup> Andleeb Anwar, M. A Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2025): 14–61.

The high presence of women in local governance is a historic reform in the Pakistani history, expected to bring new opportunities to Pakistani women in organising the grassroots level and lobby their issues in the policy domain. It is hoped that the work will help women to equally engage in the political, economic, and social decisions that are made, which will possibly help to eliminate deep-rooted gender prejudices in the Pakistani culture. However, the reform has also created a high need in capacity building by women and men both at institutional, organisational and individual levels.<sup>70</sup>

Since Pakistani society has traditionally been male-dominated in politics and that women involvement has taken place as recently as local governance, there is a high need to increase the capacity of all stakeholders in terms of gender awareness, gender sensitivity, and changing roles and responsibilities of both women and men, including the skills and knowledge involved.

The applicability of the capacity training in gender involvement is supported by the fact that even though there are high numbers of women representation in the local governance, social, economic and political changes are yet to be realized. The developed power structure, the relative low position of women, their restricted access to developmental options or education, health, and work, the distortion of religious norms, and the overriding influence of cultural traditions in the Pakistani society have been reported and mentioned as some of the major deterrents to women entering the governance sphere. It is therefore important to empower every possible citizen who is women and men to be aware of the changes present on governance and also to change to suitably contribute properly to the system as an equitable and full contributor in an unending capacity building process.

### **3.6 Trends and Importance of Women's Participation in Governance**

Over the past thirty years of the 20th century, the world has been undergoing a subtle revolution regarding the role of women in the world of politics, economy, social and

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<sup>70</sup> Sadia Ziafat, "Role of Media in Influencing Public Policy: An Analysis of Print, Electronic and Social Media in Pakistan – PIDE Thesis," Pide.org.pk, 2019, <https://thesis.pide.org.pk/thesis/role-of-media-in-influencing-public-policy-an-analysis-of-print-electronic-and-social-media-in-pakistan/>.

administrative spheres. They now take a bigger position in most of the facets of life, and their connection with work and family has been changing. Equal gender representation and participation is regarded as a crucial aspect to the global development. The level of human development, poverty analysis, development and empowerment of the gender, and good governance, including political, economic, and civic aspects, is now dependent on the presence and involvement of women in these developmental programs. The growing involvement and representation of women, which is an international trend, is considered one of the greatest development achievements of the late 20th century. International trends on representation of women in governance regions show that the figure of women in the national legislature across the world has increased in the past thirty years of the 20th century. However, the differences exist between the regions and countries within one region. In wealthy and Nordic countries, the number of women participating in governance grew, and a significant growth was witnessed in the Latin America, Caribbean, and Asia leading to the world growing by 7.4 percent to almost 11 percent between 1975 and 1997.<sup>71</sup>

In Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) 2005, 128 countries were ranked according to female political representation with Rwanda, Sweden, and Norway leading with 48.8, 45.3 and 38.2 respectively. United Kingdom and United States ranked 52nd and 61st with female representation of 18.1 and 15.2 respectively; India was rated 97th with a pathetic representation of 8.3 in the national legislatures.

### **3.7 Condition of Women in Local Governance in Pakistan**

Females constitute 48 percent of the total population of 160 million people in Pakistan. The Pakistani Constitution has ensured women the rights of equality and protection of their rights including the right to vote and to run in elections. In Article 25 of the Constitution, it states that, all citizens are equal in the eyes of the law and they have the right to equal legal protection and there should not be any discrimination on the basis of sex alone. Article 27 protects against

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<sup>71</sup> Sadia Ziafat, "Role of Media in Influencing Public Policy: An Analysis of Print, Electronic and Social Media in Pakistan – PIDE Thesis," Pide.org.pk, 2019, <https://thesis.pide.org.pk/thesis/role-of-media-in-influencing-public-policy-an-analysis-of-print-electronic-and-social-media-in-pakistan/>.

discrimination in employment as it says that no citizen who meets all other qualifications to work with the services of Pakistan shall be discriminated on the basis of race, religion, caste, or sex. The state duty of ensuring that women are fully engaged in all spheres of national life and that affirmative action is allowed exists under Article 34 of the Constitution.<sup>72</sup> However, regardless of these constitutional provisions, very little has been in the past done to enhance the representation of women in governance. Both the constitutions of 1956, 1962, 1970, 1973 and 1985 had provided the seat allocation of women in Provincial and National Assemblies but the actual reservations was minimal between 5 and 10 percent. Furthermore, this provision in the constitution expired in 1988 and negatively impacted on representation of women in the political decision making. Devolution of Power Plan, 2000, stipulated women representation of 33 percent in all the three levels of the local governance through a special quota.

### **3.7.1 Structural Barriers**

Socio-Cultural Factors to Female Voting: some of the gender features have contributed to non-participation of women in the political arena since masculinity is synonymous with leadership whereas femininity is equated with subserviency and lack of strength. The sharing of family labour is also unequal between the two genders, and thus the women become the most disadvantaged group. Since the beginning of pregnancy up to the major commitment of raising a child, women experience the effects of time, which hinders their participation in various activities, including politics. Another issue that prevents women involvement in the political sphere is the socio-cultural dependence of women. Women are often viewed as less worthwhile since they have a reproductive role and they are financially reliant on males.

Women find it very challenging to participate in political activities, because of their roles of handling the household and family responsibilities (Bari, 2005). Women have to spend more days at home compared to men so as to take care of children and do other domestic chores. The result of this is that women are less likely to pursue other non-domestic related activities

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<sup>72</sup> N Noreen and P. D. R Musarrat, "Protection of Women Rights through Legal Reforms in Pakistan," *Journal of Public Administration and Governance* 3, no. 4 (2013): 119–42, <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.5296/jpag.v3i4.5059>.

like politics. Moreover, negative campaign messages in the electoral processes bring in greater challenges against women in engaging in political affairs.<sup>73</sup>

According to Ranjha et al. (2011), female councilors face greater obstacles in the society and politics in comparison to their male counterparts. The key factors that lead to this bias are male dominance, social and economic reliance of women on men, and unavailability of social capital that women can have. According to Ranjha et al. (2011), the study by Drage (2001) revealed that women have significant barriers in the full participation in the political process, such as structural inequality, an insecure political and economic environment, gender discrimination, male dominated political space, and big expenses associated with electoral participation. Yazdani (2004) mentioned additional socio-economic hindrances, such as lack of education, cultural and family restrictions, home or work-related responsibilities and free movement restrictions. Hora (2014) has identified various factors that are pertinent to hinder the participation of women in politics. These reasons are lack of prior experience in making a public decision, having numerous household and childcare responsibilities, a lack of leadership qualities, and absence of precedents and role models that other female leaders in this profession can follow. According to Bhalotra, Clots-Figueras, and Iyer (2018), one of the major obstacles to the participation of new women in politics is that a larger proportion of female candidates seek re-election compared to male candidates.<sup>74</sup>

The mainstream media is equally discriminatory to women since it fails to broadcast events or happenings organised or directly concern women. In addition, the media is not keeping its responsibility to promote the awareness of the rights of women as individuals and equal citizens. The media in the world have failed to appreciate the fact that women are more susceptible to socioeconomic and political changes and are generally marginalized in the

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<sup>73</sup> N Noreen and P. D. R Musarrat, "Protection of Women Rights through Legal Reforms in Pakistan," *Journal of Public Administration and Governance* 3, no. 4 (2013): 119–42, <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.5296/jpag.v3i4.5059>.

<sup>74</sup> I Nenadic and A Ostling, "Public Service Media in Europe. Gender Equality Policies and the Representation of Women in Decision-Making Roles," *Comunicazione Politica* 18, no. 2 (2017): 209–32.

political decision making process. Women and men have to be recognized by the population as equal because they are equal and deserve equal dignity.

### **3.8 Socio-Cultural Practices**

The socio-cultural practices have high influences on the political participation of women in Pakistan, their access to political systems and their agency in the politics of Pakistan. These norms are deeply rooted in the society as well as local customs, patriarchal practices and cultural demands that together suppress the political involvement of women. We should examine the operation of traditional gender roles, patriarchal systems, cultural norms, and social attitudes in conjunction to realize the socio-cultural barriers to women being perceived in politics and being powerful.

The belief that the roles of women are primarily at home is one of the greatest social and cultural barriers. In many parts of the world, women are expected to take care of the house, the kids, and their families, which means they don't have much time for public activities. These expectations are especially strong in rural and tribal communities, where women can't move around or participate in public life because they have to follow strict local norms and conventional gender hierarchies.<sup>75</sup> Even worse is the fact that women are unable to participate in political meetings, campaign activities and even to vote due to cultural practices like purdah, laws that demand that women should not move without an escort and even social practices that are women and men only. These constraints make a false perception that politics is a male territory and therefore, diminishes women to lower propensity of participating in the communal life and harming its political self-esteem.

The patriarchal systems are very much detrimental to the political participation of the women. In most cases, family, community and social institutions are dominated by men and this has an impact on the accessibility of resources, power to make decisions and political networks by women. A majority of families are patriarchal to the extent that men are the decision makers

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<sup>75</sup> N Noreen and P. D. R Musarrat, "Protection of Women Rights through Legal Reforms in Pakistan," *Journal of Public Administration and Governance* 3, no. 4 (2013): 119–42, <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.5296/jpag.v3i4.5059>.

and thus, they decide whether a woman would participate in politics or not. They do this by limiting their freedom of movement, depriving them of their financial provision or by ensuring they are not in the life of the people since they are worried about their safety. Moreover, male dominance is accepted within the society and this provides a space where the opinions of women are not honored or even listened to, therefore they cannot assume administrative positions in political parties or other agencies that are elected. The patriarchal attitude does not only influence some women but the socialization practices and the quality of the society also influence the political culture of the society in general, which is not favorable to women participation.<sup>76</sup>

The cultural practices of early marriages, homemaking and social restrictions of women of what they do in the streets increase the socio-cultural obstacles to political participation. Young marriages reduce the extent of education, promotion of women, their qualifications and willingness to take up political offices. The household chores also take a lot of time and energy that makes women unable to take part in activities of the parties, campaign or even civic activities. In addition, the cultural requirements of modesty, propriety and family honour might place more stress on women, therefore, they are not likely to express themselves in front of the crowd or even pursue a profession that defies their gender roles. Such cultural constraints affect more those women living in rural or poor regions whereby traditional beliefs are adhered more strictly.

Politics are perceived by people as a male dominated, antagonistic and a hazardous environment and this also deters the females. Female leaders who assume societal roles are at risk of harassment, intimidation, or social misdemeanor, so current social and cultural impediments only reinforce them. Political women can be perceived by communities to be violating societal norms leading to social ostracism, reputational damage or even resistance by male dominated organisations. Moreover, lack of role models and mentorship on political sphere limits the ambitions of women and kills their confidence to run, to be elected in office or

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<sup>76</sup> E Lombardo, P Meier, and M Verloo, " Policymaking from a Gender+ Equality Perspective," *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 38, no. 1 (2017): 1–19.

to cope in terms of leadership. Absence of supportive networks and overall prejudice towards women in politics make them incapable of making choices. We must transform the policy and society in general to eliminate socio-cultural barriers. Public awareness, community involvement programs and activities that foster gender equality in civic life can be important to be able to fight restricting norms and promote acceptance of women representatives of leadership positions.<sup>77</sup> Women can be helped to overcome the cultural barriers through programs that educate them on politics, leadership, and attending school. Moreover, the political parties could assist women to overcome these social and cultural obstacles through supportive policies such as mentorship schemes, capacity-building programmes and safe methods of accessing political matters by women.

### **3.9 Institutional Barriers**

#### **3.9.1 The Socio-Political Framework**

The social and political structure of a region significantly impacts the functioning, decision-making, and goals of political parties. The problematic framework in Pakistan is strongly linked to archaic notions, social arrangements, and the traditional political habits. All these combined define the ability or inability of women to engage in politics. Political parties can also be a mirror of the current social context emphasizing the current gender assumptions and dominance. Therefore, the political dominance of men is an outcome and a confirmation of established conventions, which introduces structural obstacles in the politics of women. The social context such as shared concepts of gender roles significantly influence the behaviour of parties. Women are typically considered as less important participants in politics, and they often do not notice how much they can contribute. As a result, political parties have shown tendencies of recruiting and nominating men to fill general election positions, as compared to

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<sup>77</sup> E Lombardo, P Meier, and M Verloo, " Policymaking from a Gender+ Equality Perspective," *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 38, no. 1 (2017): 1–19.

women, who are usually left behind in positions, which are both symbolic and restrict their power.<sup>78</sup>

The political parties in Pakistan may have unsteady, disorganized and hierarchically centralized organizations that also create difficulties in allowing women to participate. Male dominance, dynastic rule and autocratic decision making are some of the characteristics of the current political culture that have resulted in limited chances of fair gender representation. These internal political maneuvers are obvious in informal battles, particularly in selection of the candidates to be given resources and in determining who will be in control. Women wings in political parties are not totally absent, only that they lack much say in the way the party makes decisions, formulates policies, or the way the party strategizes. The centralized party bureaucracies that are usually influenced by the elite interest do not develop mechanisms of equitable access of leadership opportunities. Leaders of the parties would like to ensure gender equality, yet they are challenged by deep-rooted patriarchal traditions and cultural norms, as well as informal sources of power, which makes the change of the structure very difficult. Also, local networks, clan ties, ethnic ties, patronage are significant determinants of political practices in Pakistan. Legal limitations do not only affect the issue of candidate recruitment and political mobilization; informal groups that perpetuate the supremacy of men and inhibit women access to high profile political positions also affect this issue. The inability of women to lead the party, make policies, and select the candidates illustrates the extent to which the biases are so deeply embedded in society and how culture and political systems are intertwined.<sup>79</sup> The social and political system is a gate keeping system that systematically benefits men, limits political representation of women and maintains gendered inequalities in government.

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<sup>78</sup> Safdar Ullah Khan and Rabia Awan, "Munich Personal RePEc Archive Contextual Assessment of Women Empowerment and Its Determinants: Evidence from Pakistan," 2011, [https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/30820/1/Contextual Assessment of Women Empowerment and Its Determinants Evidence from Pakistan.pdf](https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/30820/1/Contextual_Assessment_of_Women_Empowerment_and_Its_Determinants_Evidence_from_Pakistan.pdf).

<sup>79</sup> Yann P. Kerevel and Lonna Rae Atkeson, "Explaining the Marginalization of Women in Legislative Institutions," *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 4 (October 2013): 980–92, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022381613000960>.

### 3.9.2 Fragile Institutional Frameworks and Constrained Female Agency

The political parties in Pakistan have weak institutional structures, which are over centralized, and, many times, undemocratic; therefore, significantly discrimination against the women. Although women wings are officially supported by all major parties, these organisations are all mostly symbolic institutions, which do not have much power or ability to make decisions. Female members of these parties tend to get non-strategic positions, like voter mobilization, running of polling jobs or carrying out administrative tasks, which have no influence on the policy formulation or selection of candidates. This non-recognition depicts generalized organisational tendencies where power is concentrated to few male officials or dynastic elites and therefore the ability of women to play an important role in party affairs is curtailed.

This reliance on hereditary or dynastic political structures limits opportunities to women who are not members of the political dynasties.<sup>80</sup> Women representation in politics is often based on the family ties and continues to imply that women can only participate as an extension of the male family members or political families. Women-only seats, in spite of their attempt to create diversity, often strengthen this process, and political parties prefer those candidates to be on their lists who have the family ties rather than those who may be activists at the grassroots with a political background. This method undermines the very idea of meritocracy and reflects a broader reluctance to include women as full participants in the mainstream political process of decision-making.

The quota system and the elite networks interact to create a political representation of women in Pakistan. It introduced quotas to ensure that women were represented in houses of legislature by reserving their seats. This has been done to ensure that women are represented in the formal political institutions. Although quotas will help in increasing the number of women elected into office, the system will be dominated by influential politicians, and as such,

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<sup>80</sup> Andleep Anwar, M. A Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2025): 14–61.

will not easily bring about a change.<sup>81</sup> The decision on which women are allocated the reserved seats is usually affected by male dominated networks, family relations and personal relations. This favors the candidates who are already related to political dynasties. This dependency on elite mediation reduces the desired democratizing qualities of quotas and promotes the structural benefits enjoyed by women with privileged backgrounds.

Gender quotas exist in more than 100 countries but they have not been effective in Pakistan due to the presence of unofficial power structures in political parties. Women who are invested in assemblies by reserved seats in most cases do not enjoy their own political power since the choice has to be approved by the male party leaders. Due to this, we usually see grassroots women activists being deprived of opportunities to be in control and influence policy due to the fact that system encourages loyalty to elites as opposed to promotion based on merit. This trend indicates that quotas have structural constraints, that is, formal approaches will never suffice to bring about actual gender equality, unless the organization changes its organizational structure, the manner in which decisions are made and how resources are obtained.

The quota system has inequalities that are aggravated by dynastic politics. Women belonging to the politically related families have access to the preferential treatment in the positions of the leaders, decision-making, and participation in the legislative process. Conversely, women who lack such networks experience systemic blockage to access, reduced opportunities of mentorship and excommunication out of party elites.<sup>82</sup> The use of personal networks and elite favors leads to a dual-track process of political inclusion that puts women with social or family ties at an advantage and puts people of common or marginalized origins at a severe disadvantage. This political force continues to perpetuate gender inequality and important to underscore the need to introduce structural changes that focus on transparency, meritocracy, and fair sharing of political opportunities.

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<sup>81</sup> Kainat Kamal and Muhammad Makki, "Gender Mainstreaming in Policymaking: A Case Study of Pakistan's National Internal Security Policies," 2021, <https://repositories.nust.edu.pk/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/41185/Kainat%20Kamal%20MS%20Thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>82</sup> Andleeb Anwar, M. A. Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2025): 14–61.

The correlation between and among elite networks and the quota system demonstrates that the need to have more women in politics has more than the legal aspects. It requires formation of institutional processes that go a long way in empowering women, availing political resources, and developing independent leadership capabilities. In the absence of such measures, quotas can be merely the mere gestures, which maintain the status quo of power and do not actually assist women to enter politics.

### **3.9.4 Religious Interpretations and Absence of Conceptual Clarity**

Pakistani politics has limited women participation greatly due to religious beliefs. Distorted readings of Islamic decrees, particularly that relate to Sharia law, has been used by certain organisations as an excuse to curb the role of women in the public life. These interpretations often give preference to patriarchal structures and keep supporting the belief that the primary role of women is homemaking thus discouraging any form of political activity. Religious bigotry and partisan reading of the scriptures have sometimes been exploited to block the entry of women in to the political game, educational opportunities and in the political decision making frontiers.

Gender equality is central to the Islamic teachings, which postulates that women and men equally possess rights and responsibilities. The fact that religious texts are mostly interpreted and distributed by male experts has allowed selective readings that marginalize women. Political and social discourse is also characterized by misconceptions, and this influences the way people perceive women, and takes the form of decisions made by parties to restrict the representation of women. The absence of proper training in religion and the social structure in which the society adheres to patriarchal principles make the environment hostile, and the political objectives of women appear less valid or even impossible.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Kainat Kamal and Muhammad Makki, "Gender Mainstreaming in Policymaking: A Case Study of Pakistan's National Internal Security Policies," 2021, <https://repositories.nust.edu.pk/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/41185/Kainat%20Kamal%20MS%20Thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

Cultural norms are usually combined with religious regulations as there are usually local traditions and customary interpretations, which intensify the religious restrictions. This means that women in some regions have twice the problem because they have to contend with institutional restrictions and cultural norms. These challenges not only deny women a chance to enter politics, but it also becomes difficult to become a great leader, formulate policies, and manage the government. Explaining religious values and advocating teachings to enhance gender equality is a crucial measure in breaking down such obstacles and ensuring a more pluralistic political society.

### **3.9.5 Psychological and Ideological Obstacles to Women's Political Engagement**

It is clear that psychological and ideological reasons influence the political turnout of women significantly. Women tend to lack self-confidence, absorb social norms, and just do not know how to manage their leadership skills, which all hamper their activities in the public and political arenas. These issues are aggravated by cultural stories that emphasize the leadership and decision-making roles of men since women are conditioned not to think politics is an activity they are incapable of practicing.<sup>84</sup> The apprehension of judgment, harassment, and social dislike reduces the desire of the women to engage in it, perpetuating the cycles of exclusion.

Ideological barrier- Ideologies often come up due to perceptions of politics as a dirty or risky business. There is the connection of political activity and bribery, extortion, and other immoral activities, and because of this, women will not have the desire to be leaders. The fact that few have access to mentors, political education and role models makes these misunderstandings more aggravating and creates a lack of knowledge that restricts the capacity of women to take

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<sup>84</sup> S. R Jafree, " Sustainable Comprehensive Social Policy for Women in Pakistan: The Way Forward with Religion, Social Media, Finances, and Governance. ," *Social Policy for Women in Pakistan* Springer Nature Switzerland. (2023): 315–51.

action. Devoid of sufficient ideological empowerment, women remain vulnerable to external forces and thus it becomes more difficult to remain in the politics.<sup>85</sup>

The combination of psychological and ideological constraints and structural barriers, further propagates gender inequity. Programs to improve female political participation should address the above by instilling confidence, providing civic education, and addressing long held cultural stereotypes about gender and leadership. It is imperative to empower the women to identify themselves as capable political actors to transform their participation into substantive.

The political participation of women has a great impact on ideological and psychological variables. Internalised societal expectations, low self-worth and doubt of their leadership abilities is often met by women, which compound with each other and prevent their inclusion in the social and political arena.<sup>86</sup> Such barriers are exacerbated by cultural discourses that highlight the importance of male leadership and decision-making by training women to consider politics as a field that they cannot perform in. Women would participate even less since they fear being criticised, harassed, or looked down upon by the society. This continues the cycle of exclusion.

Another way through which ideological barriers are depicted is the notion that politics is a dirty or risky profession. The associations that exist between politics and bribery, extortion and other unethical behaviour will lead to women being less willing to be leaders. These stereotypes are reinforced by the lack of access to mentorship, political education, role models because the circle of knowledge is limited and this limits the agency of women.

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<sup>85</sup> S. R Jafree, " Sustainable Comprehensive Social Policy for Women in Pakistan: The Way Forward with Religion, Social Media, Finances, and Governance. ," *Social Policy for Women in Pakistan* Springer Nature Switzerland. (2023): 315–51.

<sup>86</sup> S. R Jafree, " Sustainable Comprehensive Social Policy for Women in Pakistan: The Way Forward with Religion, Social Media, Finances, and Governance. ," *Social Policy for Women in Pakistan* Springer Nature Switzerland. (2023): 315–51.

### 3.9.6 Discrimination, harassment, and safety based on gender

Gender discrimination is still one of the greatest obstacles to successful participation by women in politics. Systemic biases against women in various societal levels, such as families, communities, political parties, and state bodies, limit leadership and influence opportunities of women. The political parties usually reflect the larger social systems, enhancing the male dominance through the recruitment process, selection of candidates, and assigning leadership roles. The women have been relegated to the periphery of decision-making groups and received subsidiary or token roles, restricting their role in assisting in policy-making and running the government.<sup>87</sup> The shortage of women in the elected office, partisan organization, and leadership positions has a grave impact on the gender equality as well as the general development and accountability of the democratic institutions.

There are much more issues of women due to harassment and security concerns. Women in political arena feel threatened and do not want to participate as they are verbally abused and sexually harassed. Political parties do not enjoy the protection of institutions, avenues of launching grievances and accountability mechanisms and this increases the chances of women being exploited and abused. As hard as it can be to work when elected, women may face threats to their lives, harassment and character assassination and this can limit their capacity to advocate greater social change in their jobs. These issues are intensified in the rural and tribal community by the strong culture, lack of proper enforcement of the law and command of the local men and which restrict the freedom of women to move and engage in politics.

The combination of gender discrimination and institutional institutions increases the magnitude of exclusion. Political parties often fail to consider or ineffective consider the unique challenges that female members face, therefore reinforcing structural inequalities. As an illustration, women might not be permitted to participate in leadership discussions, they might not access campaign materials, or they might be systematically overlooked whenever the contenders are selected to compete in the areas of elective offices. These actions represent general tendencies

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<sup>87</sup> Andleeb Anwar, M. A Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2025): 14–61.

of instrumental rationality, where women are valued more because of their ability to amass votes or endorsement, rather than their ability to lead or demonstrate policy savvy. This denial of women in the political arenas not only denies them their individual autonomy but also limits the diversity of opinions in the government thereby compromising on the processes of democracy.

### **3.10 Economic Limitations**

The biggest cause of inability by women to participate in politics is economic constraints. These restrictions usually join together social, cultural and political factors with a view of curbing their authority and influence. The power of women to run office, to compete in political campaigns and remain visible within the political parties is highly influenced by their access to money, education, jobs and property.<sup>88</sup> In most cases politics have become more commercial and this implies that a significant amount of money is required in campaigning, voter turnout and serving constituents. Such economic imperatives put women at a structural disadvantage since they usually lack personal income, credit and wealth. This renders them more difficult to compete with men.

Persistent inequality in education, job, and property possession in Pakistan is a factor that shapes the socioeconomic status of women.<sup>89</sup> Literacy levels in women remain very low and this makes it difficult to understand their rights in politics, to know how the government functions and how to conduct a campaign. The gap in education leads to an opinion that women are incompetent in the position of the leader, which subsequently becomes even less significant that they will be appointed to significant party jobs or elected. Women have access to very limited resources in the form of money and property and even with a good education, they find it difficult to participate in politics in any significant manner. The fact that the agency

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<sup>88</sup> S. R Jafree, " Sustainable Comprehensive Social Policy for Women in Pakistan: The Way Forward with Religion, Social Media, Finances, and Governance," *Social Policy for Women in Pakistan* Springer Nature Switzerland. (2023): 315–51.

<sup>89</sup> S. R Jafree, " Sustainable Comprehensive Social Policy for Women in Pakistan: The Way Forward with Religion, Social Media, Finances, and Governance. ," *Social Policy for Women in Pakistan* Springer Nature Switzerland. (2023): 315–51.

of a woman is subordinated to the standards of patriarchy is often determined by the fact that a person depends on the help of male relatives in terms of obtaining financial resources, which prevents her from pursuing her political ambitions.

Gender prejudice is also manifested in the manner in which political parties use their campaign funds. Male candidates tend to receive a greater amount of party money, support of their constituents as well as assistance in logistics than the female candidates. The women applicants are only occasionally assigned symbolic positions or tasks that do not require much resources. Women can be suggested such jobs as women to vote or outreach but they cannot make decisions which demonstrates that they are still lower in the party hierarchy. This economic marginalization is associated with the politics of patronage, whereby the local elites or local dynastic patronages control the distribution of party resources, party seats and power. Those women who do not belong to such networks find it extremely difficult to ascend the career ladder since they cannot utilize their personal wealth, family contacts, or political favour to do so.<sup>90</sup>

Socioeconomic limits are even more difficult due to cultural and institutional issues that complicate access to jobs and involvement in the public life of women. The limitation of movement of women, social requirements of them to stay at home and feminisation of poverty creates more economic dependence and reduce the chances of women taking part in politics. Females in the rural and marginalized communities often do not have access to networks, information and mentorship that would enable them to engage in political decision making. This has made the political participation of women highly uneven because the majority of the representation is done by women of rich families or politically related families. The women in the grassroots are, however, largely excluded.

Women also find it difficult to remain in politics long due to money issues. Without personal funds, women will be struggling to meet the expenses of outreach, constituency services, and

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<sup>90</sup> Sadia Jabeen, Sonia Omer, and Muhammad Zaheer, "GENDER-SENSITIVE PUBLIC POLICY INITIATIVES: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY of the PUNJAB WOMEN EMPOWERMENT PACKAGE (PWEP) 2012–2016," *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan* 29, no. 1 (June 22, 2022): 85–96, <https://doi.org/10.46521/pjws.029.01.0113>.

public involvement that are involved in campaigning.<sup>91</sup> Although women are elected under quotas or reserved seats, they are unable to develop visibility, policy or constituency as they lack money or party backing. Economic marginalization of women not only limits the individual agency of women, it also affects the inclusiveness and responsiveness of political systems as the perspectives and interests of women with different socioeconomic backgrounds are underrepresented.

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<sup>91</sup> Sadia Jabeen, Sonia Omer, and Muhammad Zaheer, "Gender-Sensitive Public Policy Initiatives: An Analytical Study Of The Punjab Women Empowerment Package (Pwep) 2012–2016," *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan* 29, no. 1 (June 22, 2022): 85–96, <https://doi.org/10.46521/pjws.029.01.0113>.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE POLICY GAPS CONTRIBUTING TO THE WOMEN REPRESENTATION AND LIMITED WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP ROLES IN POLICYMAKING PROCESS

#### 4.1 Introduction

Pakistan has been recognizing the need of women empowerment as a pillar of social and economic development. The country has over the years enacted several gender-oriented policies to encourage equality, ensure more women participate in the government as well as ensuring that gender is included in any social and development initiatives. The Women's Development Policy (2018), the National Policy on Development and Empowerment of Women (2002), and the National Gender Policy Framework (2022) are all the developments that can be seen as progressive measures towards redressing the old-standing inequalities. Such programs focus on increasing women access to education, healthcare, workplaces, and political agendas, and also work to reduce structural inequalities at the same time. Despite such policies, there remain wide gaps between the intentions of the lawmakers and reality. This is due to the issues of enforcement, inter-institutional coordination, operations of resource allocation, and social and cultural integration. The chapter examines the compound nature of gender policy in Pakistan by exploring the nature of policy structure, gender mainstreaming projects, modalities of implementing the project, and structural and normative challenges that perpetuate the gender policy gap. With the recent statistics on the national and international levels, the chapter uses the World Bank Gender Data Portal, the Global Gender Gap Report 2025, and government documents to present an evidence-based evaluation of the gender policy situation in Pakistan and state what should be reformed to be done immediately.

#### 4.2 Gender Policy in Pakistan: Historical and Institutional Context

The gender policy in Pakistan has been influenced by international commitments, national legislations, social and cultural values. Pakistan is signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) since 1996 and pledged to

adhere to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG 5 of which is on gender equality. These international arrangements have established norms of the rights, the participation and the protection of women in the world and they have also provided the policy makers with a guideline. In national levels, the gender policy has shifted its orientation towards the well-being of women to rather broad approaches in which emphasis is made on empowering women, gender mainstreaming, and social change.<sup>92</sup>

The ministry of Human Rights (MoHR) plays a very significant role in defending the right of women, combating violence against women and enabling fair laws. The National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) is a body on its own; it monitors the manner in which policy is implemented and advocates gender sensitive reforms in all sectors. The Provincial Women Development Departments collaborate to ensure that local projects are incorporated in the larger picture of the federal government. These efforts are also assisted by the civil society groups, NGOs and donor agencies through running grassroots initiatives, lobbying to bring about change and training people to be more skilled. A good example is the National Rural Support Programme (NRSP). It has formulated a Gender Mainstreaming Policy and Action plans to ensure that more women are engaged in rural development. The Gender Strategy of UNICEF Pakistan concentrates on the socio-ecological model and examines inequality both at an individual, family, and social level.

### **4.3 Female representation Policy deficit in Pakistan**

#### **4.3.1 Policy for Empowerment of Women**

The empowerment of women in Pakistan has been historically influenced by a combination of laws, social and cultural norms and international obligations. Several programs aimed at enhancing the social, economic and political status of women have been implemented over the years in Pakistan. The National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women (2002), the Women Development Policy (2018), and the province-level programs attempt to address

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<sup>92</sup> Sadia Jabeen, Sonia Omer, and Muhammad Zaheer, "GENDER-SENSITIVE PUBLIC POLICY INITIATIVES: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY of the PUNJAB WOMEN EMPOWERMENT PACKAGE (PWEP) 2012–2016," *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan* 29, no. 1 (June 22, 2022): 85–96, <https://doi.org/10.46521/pjws.029.01.0113>.

the equal opportunities, bridging the gender gap and including women in the mainstream government. Such programs tend to correct the old systemic inequalities through facilitating the women to access education, health care, a job, and political participation. These efforts have not eliminated structural and institutional barriers, which are still a significant issue. The policies of empowering women are not usually implemented in a well-coordinated manner between the federal and provincial agencies. There are also poor implementation techniques in which the policies are being implemented and resources available to implement them are inadequate. Recent statistics released by the World Bank indicate that women in Pakistan continue to find it extremely difficult to secure employment. In 2024, the labor force participation of women stood at approximately 23 percent, almost half of the global average of 47 percent. The poor participation is further aggravated by the socio-cultural barriers, low mobility, and perpetual gender discrimination in organizations and government facilities.<sup>93</sup> Empowerment policies that are aimed at benefitting women have often been idealistic in theory but limited in practice because of these institutional barriers.

#### **4.3.2 Gender Mainstreaming Initiatives**

The international policy that has influenced gender mainstreaming activities in Pakistan includes the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In 1996, Pakistan was a signatory to CEDAW, a move that obliged the government to implement policies that facilitate gender equality in social, economic and political spheres. Over the past few years, the National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 has been working on the inclusion of gender in the sphere of security and governance, the empowerment of women in peacebuilding, in conflict situation resolutions, and in all governmental levels decision-making.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Sadia Jabeen, Sonia Omer, and Muhammad Zaheer, "GENDER-SENSITIVE PUBLIC POLICY INITIATIVES: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY of the PUNJAB WOMEN EMPOWERMENT PACKAGE (PWEP) 2012–2016," *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan* 29, no. 1 (June 22, 2022): 85–96, <https://doi.org/10.46521/pjws.029.01.0113>.

<sup>94</sup> Yann P. Kerevel and Lonna Rae Atkeson, "Explaining the Marginalization of Women in Legislative Institutions," *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 4 (October 2013): 980–92, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022381613000960>.

The concept of gender mainstreaming seeks to make sure that policies, programmes, and projects are systematically checked in regard to implications of the women and man. Nevertheless, in reality, there have been high limitations to gender mainstreaming in Pakistan. There is still no real incorporation of gender view in the policy planning and implementation, which is frequently considered more of a marginal, than a core aspect of government. In addition, there is a lack of gender-disaggregated information necessary to shape effective policymaking, thus, it is hard to track the progress and assess the effect of interventions.<sup>95</sup> As per the recent world bank gender data portal, Pakistan still has one of the widest disparities in gender equality indicators in south Asia which includes education, health and economic participation. The presence of women in leadership positions in ministries and provincial governments is still less than 20 percent, indicating that there is still gender inequality in the decision-making process.

The fact that gender mainstreaming is difficult to work with is further complicated by the socio-political resistance. Bureaucratic and political institutions dominated by men tend to make the voices of women to be silenced, thus, complicating it to achieve gender sensitive changes. There exist entities such as CEDAW reporting systems and UNSCR 1325 implementation committees but they lack proper functionality because they are not as powerful, have no money, or institutional support.<sup>96</sup> This structural weakness demonstrates the significance in making enforcement greater, people responsible and developing the culture of inclusion that truly incorporates the perspectives of women in the development and implementation of policies.

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<sup>95</sup> S. R Jafree, " Sustainable Comprehensive Social Policy for Women in Pakistan: The Way Forward with Religion, Social Media, Finances, and Governance. ," *Social Policy for Women in Pakistan* Springer Nature Switzerland. (2023): 315–51.

<sup>96</sup> Sadia Jabeen, Sonia Omer, and Muhammad Zaheer, "GENDER-SENSITIVE PUBLIC POLICY INITIATIVES: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY of the PUNJAB WOMEN EMPOWERMENT PACKAGE (PWEP) 2012–2016," *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan* 29, no. 1 (June 22, 2022): 85–96, <https://doi.org/10.46521/pjws.029.01.0113>.

#### **4.3.4 Implementation and Monitoring**

Monitoring and implementation is of high importance to bring the gender policies into reality. In order to monitor the implementation of gender-related policies, Pakistan has come up with institutional structures including the Ministry of Human Rights, the National Commission on the status of Women (NCSW), and provincial Women Development Departments. The bodies have the role of coordinating the initiatives, impact assessment and progress reporting. In spite of this, the monitoring mechanisms are often not rigorous, independent, and resourceful to be held accountable. As an example, the information on the participation of women in governance, employment, and education is commonly obsolete, not comprehensive, or not broken down based on geographical area, age, and socio-economic status, which restricts the ability to develop specific interventions.

Recent evaluations have shown that the policy implementation is highly differentiated in different provinces. Punjab and Sindh have achieved comparatively more success in delivering gender-specific programs, but Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are less developed in this area because of the socio-cultural nature and insufficient institutional capacity, as well as, political instabilities. There is also a lack of standardized indicators to compare and determine the impact of the policy, something that also obstructs the monitoring of policy outcomes. In the absence of strong monitoring systems, the gender policies could only be viewed as aspirational and the planned goals of equal participation and empowerment could not be achieved in full.

#### **4.3.5 Gender Policy Deficit**

One of the major deficiencies of the gender policy in Pakistan is that there is no considerable inclusion of women in the policymaking process. The policies are frequently enacted without consulting the people they are intended to assist and it perpetuates the systemic prejudices and renders them ineffective. Men tend to make decisions regarding the way they will spend money, the type of programs to develop, and the nature of laws to be enacted. This implies

that opinions of women are not usually taken into consideration. It is difficult to make real changes even when women are in control and there is a patriarchal hierarchy.

The cumulative impacts of these deficiencies have established openness in the area of leadership. There are also not enough executive, legislative and bureaucratic positions of women, which complicates their influence on the government and the policy. An increase in the female leadership is associated with improved socioeconomic outcomes in the global context.<sup>97</sup> Women in Pakistan are underrepresented in the senior bureaucracy (less than 20 percent) and are represented in the parliament (approximately 21 percent). Some progress has been made by using targeted measures, including quotas of females in local governmental elections and the National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325, but they do not prove to be sufficient and inconsistent in overcoming structural barriers.

#### **4.4 Weak Enforcement of Existing Gender Policies**

Several gender regulations have been formulated in Pakistan, yet it is one of the greatest issues in achieving gender equality since they are not being enforced. Legal and legislative frameworks exist but are not always adhered to due to bureaucratic inertia, political interference and social norms discouraging progressive change. An example of this is the labor laws that guarantee equal wages and protection against harassment in the workplace which are consistently breached leaving women vulnerable to abuse. On the same note, the legislative and local governments have quotas to represent women but they are sometimes achieved at the nominal level, yet the women representatives lack power to exercise.<sup>98</sup>

This poor implementation is closely related to governance issues. It becomes difficult to enroll people and make them accountable due to corruption, favoritism, and the application of

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<sup>97</sup> Nasira Jabeen, Zafar Jadoon, and Yaamina Salman, "Revisiting Public Policy Making Process and Strategies in Pakistan: A Governance Perspective," *South Asian Studies a Research Journal of South Asian Studies* 31, no. 2 (2016): 413–22, [http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/csas/PDF/2\\_31\\_2\\_16.pdf](http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/csas/PDF/2_31_2_16.pdf).

<sup>98</sup> S. R Jafree, "Sustainable Comprehensive Social Policy for Women in Pakistan: The Way Forward with Religion, Social Media, Finances, and Governance.," *Social Policy for Women in Pakistan* Springer Nature Switzerland. (2023): 315–51.

politics in administrative practices, thus making it difficult to implement gender policy. According to the World Bank and UN Women, the lack of financial resources and insufficient institutional capacity issues complicate the process of implementing the programs that should help women get more power. Even programs such as women training programs or microfinance schemes are initiated, they normally never reach and benefit enough women and therefore they leave a large number of women without assistance.

#### **4.5 Lack of Gender Budgeting and Gender-Disaggregated Data**

One of the biggest issues with Pakistan policies is that they are not systematic in gender budgeting and they lack sufficient data that is disaggregated by gender. Gender budgeting refers to investing in initiatives that are directly benefiting women and addressing their issues in a way that ensures that state expenditure is gender-neutral. In Pakistan, there is rarely a gender-sensitive perspective of some budgetary allocation, and most of the resources are unevenly distributed between traditional development priorities like infrastructure or defence.

In addition, the lack of reliable gender-disaggregated information is a potent limitation of evidence-based policies. Data on women employment, political representation, health outcomes, and educational attainment is either very old or reported in such a way that hides the gender-based disparities. According to the Gender Data Portal of the World Bank (2024), Pakistan lags behind other countries in South Asia in terms of such aspects as women in the labor force, secondary education, and digital literacy.<sup>99</sup> Without accurate and current data, it will be difficult to plan specific interventions, track progress, or hold institutions accountable to ensure they adhere to gender policies appropriately.

#### **4.6 Policy at Governance Not Integrated**

The other significant gap is that there is a lack of consideration of gender issues in general government systems. Gender policies are usually simply distinct documents or projects which

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<sup>99</sup> S. R Jafree, “ Sustainable Comprehensive Social Policy for Women in Pakistan: The Way Forward with Religion, Social Media, Finances, and Governance. ,” *Social Policy for Women in Pakistan* Springer Nature Switzerland. (2023): 315–51.

are not included into larger plans concerning the economy, society, or politics. Ministries, departments, and organizations are also commonly considered to be operating in different groups and hence implementing projects are less effective as they fail to work in unison. As an example, local government participation initiatives whose attempt is to increase the number of women in local government might not be compatible with efforts aimed at making women more financially self-sufficient, which might limit their overall effectiveness.

The exacerbation of this policy fragmentation by the decision-making bodies, which are predominantly those of men, is not helped by the fact that they are the ones who do not prioritize gender thinking when making long term plans. Policies may not even be implemented even after they are drafted to accommodate all people due to political differences or due to lack of finances. The socio-cultural barriers and lack of structural policy hinders the effectiveness of solutions because women are not participating and leading in governance.

#### **4.6.1 Absence of Women’s Voices in Drafting Policy**

This is one of the major reasons why the gender policy in Pakistan is so weak because women have no real say in policy making. In most cases, policies are formulated and implemented without consulting the women to be most affected by them. That may result in solutions that do not solve their needs.<sup>100</sup> Men tend to control the legislative process and policy consultations and women employed in government or civil society have little influence in what policies are formulated and which ones they should prioritize.

This silence of the women is what perpetuates structural biases and aggravates gender inequalities. Indicatively, the social protection programs or economic empowerment schemes might not consider the barriers such as lack of mobility, child care, or cultural values, which contributes to their inefficiency. Therefore, to come up with policies that encompass all people, there should be structured means of involving the women in all stages of the process of not

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<sup>100</sup> S. R Jafree, “ Sustainable Comprehensive Social Policy for Women in Pakistan: The Way Forward with Religion, Social Media, Finances, and Governance. ,” *Social Policy for Women in Pakistan* Springer Nature Switzerland. (2023): 315–51.

only determining what they require but also in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of the policies.

#### **4.6.2 Role of Male-Dominated Decision-Making Bodies**

The gender policy does not work well with male dominated decision making bodies. Most of the executive councils, political committees, and administrative boards are made up of men. Their interests more likely respond to patriarchal values rather than gender sensitive government. This imbalance in structure impacts the policies in the sense that, the decisions concerning the spending of money, the way in which the programs should be designed, and what aspects should be given consideration in the legislation are made without considering the views of the women. The impact of this male dominance also extends to the choice of individuals to be leaders in the government organizations.<sup>101</sup> Women even when they are assigned to the positions of power, are faced with male peers who make it difficult to alter the policy or effect reforms. This has caused gender gaps in governance to persist as the decision-making structures comprised mostly of men thus ensuring that women are not well represented at the expense of being sidelined.

### **4.7 Impact on Women's Leadership in Policymaking**

#### **4.7.1 Leadership Gap**

The gap in leadership in Pakistan is loose due to weak enforcement, gaps in policy and the absence of women in leadership. Women are yet to achieve the desired number of executive, legislative and bureaucratic leadership positions, thereby making it difficult to influence the way the government operates and the kind of policies it makes. Nations that have higher numbers of women occupying leadership positions in the world show better social performance, including improved healthcare, education and economic involvement. In Pakistan, however, fewer than two out of five top bureaucratic positions and less than one out

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<sup>101</sup> S. R Jafree, " Sustainable Comprehensive Social Policy for Women in Pakistan: The Way Forward with Religion, Social Media, Finances, and Governance. ," *Social Policy for Women in Pakistan* Springer Nature Switzerland. (2023): 315–51.

of five parliament seats are occupied by women, which demonstrates that structural constraints exist.

This existence of few women in leadership does not only restrain them in influencing the policy, but it also contradicts the greater intention of ensuring that government is more open to all. The policies that fail to consider the views of women would exacerbate gender imbalances since decisions are made without considering the difference in their impact on both men and women. To bridge the leadership gap, we should have more women in leadership positions and system alteration where the real power to decide is given to women.

It has been easy in some situations whereby policy adjustments have enabled women to become even more comfortable in taking up leadership positions. As an example, in 2018, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Elections, gender quotas were established and women began to be elected in local councils much easier.<sup>102</sup> Female has also been provided with training and mentoring through federal programs under the National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 in security and governance positions. However, these benefits are not equal to all people and women frequently fail to employ their right to make decisions. This is an indication of how little policy change can be undertaken without alterations to the manner of doing things, and the manner in which people think.

#### **4.7.2 Effectiveness of Policy Reforms and Main Challenges**

Reforms on policies that were supposed to see more women participate in government have had both positive and negative effects. Although it has become easier now when women can be involved with the help of formal measures such as quotas, reserved seats and empowerment programs, women is still not leading or participating much. The most burning problems include

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<sup>102</sup> N Jabeen and U. E. F Mubasher, "Gender and Local Governance in Pakistan," *In Women in Governing Institutions in South Asia: Parliament, Civil Service and Local Government*, 2017, 285–304, [cham: Springer International Publishing](#).

cultural and social barriers, male dominant institutions, insufficiency of funding, ineffective monitoring and laxity in implementing gender policies.<sup>103</sup>

According to the World Bank and UN Women, both structural and cultural problems have to be addressed with reforms that would be effective. Such reforms as strengthening of institutions, ensuring the equitable sharing of resources, and the methods of holding people responsible are all structural reforms. Cultural reforms are the transformation in the way people are thinking, combat against the patriarchal norms, and campaigning the significance of women leadership by using educational programs and awareness campaigns. Unless Pakistan resolves these related issues, it can never enjoy its gender equality in politics and government.

#### **4.8 Recent gender-policy frameworks**

Several policy pledges and institutional initiatives in the recent years have been undertaken by Pakistan to ensure gender equality and increase the participation of more women in government. However, the statistics and examples provided in the real world indicate that there are gaps in the gender equality in most aspects, and these gaps are widening. According to the report released by the World Economic Forum titled Global Gender Gap Report 2025, Pakistan now ranks as the worst country in the world regarding gender equality with a score of 56.7% as compared to approximately 57 the previous year. In this ranking, it is said that Pakistan is the poorest nation in the world with regard to the bridging of gender gaps.<sup>104</sup>

The four broad sections of the report, which include economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment indicate that problems exist in all the four areas. The score of Pakistan in the economic pillar and opportunity pillar declined by 1.3 percentage points and that indicates that the situation of women in the job market is increasingly worsening. This is because the political empowerment sub index declined

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<sup>103</sup> N Jabeen and U. E. F Mubasher, "Gender and Local Governance in Pakistan," *In Women in Governing Institutions in South Asia: Parliament, Civil Service and Local Government*, 2017, 285–304, [cham: Springer International Publishing.](#)

<sup>104</sup> Umar Daraz et al., "Empowering Voices: Education's Role in Bridging Women's Domestic and Public Decision-Making Divide in Malakand Division, Pakistan," *Dialogue Social Science Review (DSSR)* 3, no. 1 (2025): 208–30, <https://www.thedssr.com/index.php/2/article/view/163>.

by 12.2% in 2024 to 11.0% in 2025. This saw little improvement in the number of women in parliament and no women in the ministerial positions.

The ability to work remains a huge concern. The World Bank estimates some 47 million women in Pakistan are simply not working. The female workforce continues to be approximately 22.8, and the male counterpart is much higher. Not only do they indicate that women are not being employed formally, but it also means that the Pakistani economy is not utilizing the female workforce to its full potential. Further, the contribution of women in non agricultural formal jobs in the private sector is about 10 percent which means that even the working women are put in less secure or informal or low paying jobs.

The financial aspect also makes the task even harder: a recent report on the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) has indicated that only 13 percent of women have a bank account in Pakistan, which is among the lowest rates in the world. This financial marginalization converts into restricted access to credit, investments, entrepreneurship and economic autonomy, which is a vital condition of political involvement and management.

At the educational level, Pakistan also achieved a relatively small improvement: literacy rates among women grew by 46.5 to 48.5 percent and educational parity also grew by 85.1 percent in 2025. Nevertheless, this growth is rather deceptive since part of that was due to a reduction in male enrolment and not the big increase in female participation. The Global Gender Gap Report ranked Pakistan as one of the last (145th in 2024) with a mere 59.3 percent parity in tertiary education enrollment in the tertiary education segment.<sup>105</sup> The statistics are testimony to the fact that though girls are attending primary and secondary schools, the bus to college and professional careers and the leadership positions is poor.

The political aspect is particularly problematic. Although there are reserved seats and quota systems, they have limited substance. Ministerial representation of women fell to zero in 2025 and the representation of women in parliament is still relatively low as representatives of

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<sup>105</sup> S Bano and M. N Akhtar, "POLITICAL PARTICIPATION of WOMEN: A POLICY PERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS in PAKISTAN," *International Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2(2) (2023): 44–55.

women improve slightly. There is a very limited range of women in important policymaking positions; senior bureaucratic jobs, cabinet posts, leading legislative positions. This reflects a larger pattern where women formally participate but they do not have actual influence and power.

These are some of the figures that indicate that despite the existence of gender policy frameworks at paper, there is still a huge disparity in what is written and what is done. Such a gap between the scale of policy ambitions and the outcomes suggests that having gender policies in place is not sufficient but rather there are powerful institutions, well-established monitoring and resource allocations. Institutional commitment should be supported by the measurable indicators, data-based monitoring and targeted interventions in particular, especially in lagging areas and provinces.



Figure 1: Gender Disparity in Pakistan (2024–2025): Employment, Wages, Education, and Politics

The first graph illustrates that men and women do not have equal representation in four key issues of gender inequality in Pakistan namely; employment rate, wage earnings, education

(secondary enrolment) and political representation. The sources of the data are the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2025), the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report (2024), and the World Bank (2024). The bar chart indicates that despite decades of policy reforms, there are between men and women still huge gaps.

At the workplace, there is a male work force of 79.2 and a female workforce of 23.2. This is attributed to structural workers that are not in demand of female labor, rigid norms and enforcement of equal employment opportunities. This implies that nearly every four out of five men are employed, and only one in every four women is. This difference is further enhanced by wage gap, as women are paid lower by 30 percent of men in the same work. Education is improving but there is still disparity. The enrolment rate of women in secondary school is at 63.4 percent of men, which is illustrative that the rate of access and retention is yet to be equal. It demonstrates the fact that Pakistan has nearly equal levels of girls and boys in the primary schools, yet girls continue to face difficulties in progressing to the secondary and higher education, particularly in countries and low-income regions. Finally, there is the biggest variation in the political representation: women occupy 19.3% of parliamentary seats, approximately 6.3% of the ministerial posts, whereas men occupy virtually all of them (80%). This underrepresentation makes it more difficult to have women contributing to the process of policy making and maintains male dominated systems of government.

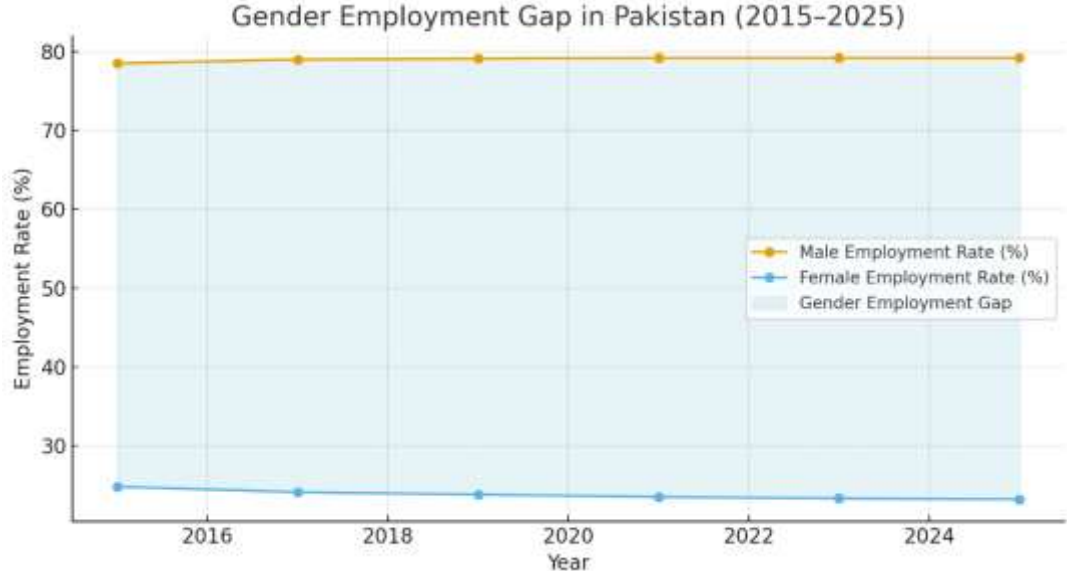


Figure 2: Gender Employment Gap in Pakistan (2015–2025)

The second graph demonstrates the difference in the employment rates of both men and women between 2015 and 2025. It reveals that the gender employment gap remained largely constant and ever broad. The information provided by the reports of the ILO and the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics indicate that the employment rate among men has remained approximately the same at 78-79, and the employment rate among women has remained the same or even decreased slightly, by 24.8 in the year 2015 until 23.2 in the year 2025. The blue region indicates the unchanging gender employment gap that is higher than 55 percentage points- the largest in South Asia. This trend remains the same proves that women occupancy in the labor force in Pakistan has not improved significantly, despite the high number of national gender frameworks and mainstreaming programs, such as the National Gender Policy Framework (2022) and the Women Economic Empowerment Packages. This can be explained in many ways: women are not allowed to work in formal jobs, there is a lack of places where women can leave their kids, the freedom of movement of women is restricted by society, and a good part of women works in the family without payment. Besides this, the lack of education and cultural resistance to a woman working exacerbates this gap in conservative regions. The ten-year-long flat line in the graph is a clear indication that the economy of Pakistan has yet to appreciate the potential of women in terms of their contribution. To seal this difference in employment we must change institutions over the long term, budget gender, workplaces must be safer, more flexible work arrangements should be available, and the application of equal opportunity laws should be increased.

#### **4.9 Institutional and normative foundations**

Pakistan's gender policy landscape is underpinned by both international commitments and domestic institutional architecture. On the international side, Pakistan is a party to major human rights and gender equality instruments (for example, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women – CEDAW), and has formally adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with SDG 5 focusing on gender equality. For example, the UNICEF Pakistan Gender Strategy notes that Pakistan is party to “seven international

human rights treaties, with four focusing extensively on gender equality.” Domestically, on 8 March 2022, the National Gender Policy Framework (NGPF) was launched by the Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives (MoPD&SI) at the federal level.<sup>106</sup> This framework is meant to set out a broad policy direction for gender equality across sectors, emphasising governance, institutional reform, access to services, participation and rights. In parallel, the institutional architecture includes the Ministry of Human Rights (MoHR), which has launched helplines and has the mandate to address violence against women, rights protection and gender-based discrimination. Civil society and donor agencies also contribute significantly through gender-targeted or gender-mainstreaming approaches and aid flows.

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<sup>106</sup> S Bano and M. N Akhtar, “POLITICAL PARTICIPATION of WOMEN: A POLICY PERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS in PAKISTAN ,” *International Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2(2) (2023): 44–55.

## CHAPTER 5

### POLICY REFORMS AND STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNANCE IN PAKISTAN

#### 5.1 Overview of Women's Representation in Decision-Making Roles in Pakistan

Women's participation in decision-making roles within Pakistan's public institutions remains one of the most critical yet underdeveloped dimensions of gender equality. Despite a constitutional guarantee of equality and a series of policy initiatives aimed at empowerment, gender disparities persist across bureaucratic, political, and administrative structures. According to the World Bank Gender Data Portal (2025), women constitute only 23 percent of the total labour force, with their representation in senior and decision-making roles within the public sector estimated at a mere 8–10 percent. This disproportion not only demonstrates the systemic inability to allow the women to enter and advance but also refers to the institutional discontinuities in organizational structures, recruitment processes, and cultures.

The inclusion of women in the civil service in Pakistan has become a little better than this was observed in the early 2000s when women officers occupied less than 5 percent of the entire cadres. The report by the Federal Public Service Commission, however, suggests that although currently women constitute approximately 15 percent of the newcomers to Central Superior Services (CSS), they decrease drastically in the top ranks (BS-19 and above). This loss is mainly explained by the lack of promotion possibilities, institutional discrimination and gender-blind evaluation framework that do not consider the social and structural inequalities that women have in their family and career life.<sup>107</sup> This indicates that the Gender Parity Index on Leadership Positions in Pakistan is as low as 0.23, with that of Bangladesh being 0.58 and Sri Lanka being 0.65, indicating that Pakistan has been doing poorly even within the region.

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<sup>107</sup> Sarah Alam, Rafia Taj, and Abuzar Wajidi, "Influence of Electronic Media on Public Policies and Narratives in Pakistan Post-2005," *South Asian Journal of Management Sciences* 15, no. 2 (2021): 241–53, <https://doi.org/10.21621/sajms.2021152.07>.

In politics, Pakistan has adopted gender quotas to increase the parliamentary representation of women. Article 51 of the Constitution allocates women 60 seats in the National Assembly and 17 seats in the Senate guaranteeing them a minimum representation of 20 percent in the federal legislature. On the same note, the provincial assemblies have 33 per cent of women reserved seats. Although these are numerical gains, there is still little qualitative representation. Women members of parliament do not enjoy the privilege of sitting in decision making committees, leadership positions and resource allocation modalities, and this limits their chances of influencing the country policy agendas. In the report published by Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2025, Pakistan is ranked 112 among 186 countries in terms of women representation in political issues, making it clear that gender hierarchies are still present in the state apparatus.

Women representation at the local government level is a good omen and bad omen at the same time. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has demanded the women to constitute 33 percent of local councils. This is a reform that is supposed to decentralize power and allow people to join government with ease. However, it remains inconsistently implemented particularly in rural sections where strong and entrenched traditional power structures and the conservative nature of people prevent women to run and hold office or even be leaders. National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) has discovered that in certain regions women reserved seats are being left vacant due to lack of candidates or sometimes local elites are compelling them to remain vacant. This reveals that institutional structures are not enough to overcome social and cultural opposition.

In 2017, the Pakistani government introduced the rule by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SECP) according to which all listed companies should have at least one female on the board of directors.<sup>108</sup> This is applicable to the semi-public and the private sectors. Nonetheless, in 2024, the proportion of women in the board of corporates is 13 per cent. This demonstrates that there is not a lot of improvements in the gender-balance in economic

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<sup>108</sup> Andleeb Anwar, M. A Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2022): 14–61.

governance structures. Women are yet to become very powerful in the decisions they make in ministries, commissions and statutory bodies. The majority of the decision-making authority remains in the hands of the male officials.<sup>109</sup> These figures indicate that Pakistan has a long distance to go between men and women in the government as well as in policymaking. Institutional inertia, patriarchal norms, and structural inequality are also the factors that make women under-represented, thus resulting in the creation of policies that often fail to represent gendered realities. Though there are numerous frameworks and even strategies which uphold gender equality, policy translation and institutionalisation remains poor, as the next section elucidates in a more detailed manner. This demonstrates that gender policy has an even greater issue.

## **5.2 Policy and Institutional Framework for Gender Equality**

Pakistan has established several laws and institutions to enhance gender equality and empower women yet they are not effectively collaborating and are not always adhered to. National Gender Policy Framework (NGPF) 2022 was developed by the Ministry of Planning, Development, and Special Initiatives. It is also a full-fledged process of ensuring that the domestic gender policy is compatible with the global obligations such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5). The framework emphasizes that women must be employed in the government, gender-sensitive budget, and institutional reforms to ensure that gender concerns are addressed at every level of government. Nevertheless, the policy, despite the great ambitions, has not been implemented in a very good ways due to the bureaucracy, insufficiency of resources and means to make people responsible.

One of the most important federal agencies that maintain a watch and combat gender equality is the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW). Since its inception in 2000, NCSW has been of great assistance in the legislative advocacy, review of policies and raising

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<sup>109</sup> Rabia Ali and Saira Batool, "Stereotypical Identities Discourse Analysis of Media Images of Women in Pakistan," *Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies* 4, no. 2 (June 25, 2015): 690, <https://doi.org/10.17583/generos.2015.1502>.

awareness campaigns. Some of the changes recommended by the commission include ensuring that the anti-workplace harassment laws are adhered to, gender budgeting, and institutional training. Nonetheless, the fact that NCSW is not financially independent and requires the approval of a minister to execute plans continues to hamper the execution of its functions. According to the 2023 NCSW Performance Review, it was indicated that 40 percent of its recommendations were actually implemented. This indicates that there was poor working relationship between the commission and line ministries.<sup>110</sup>

Meanwhile, the provincial government through the Ministry of Women Development and the Ministry of Human Rights (MoHR) established gender action plans. This was following the 18 th Constitutional Amendment that gave provinces the power over the issues of women. In Punjab (2022) with Women Empowerment Package and in Sindh (2023) with Gender Equality and Women Empowerment Policy, their attempt is to include gender issues in provincial planning. These have not been fully incorporated into local governance systems and are (still) largely being led by donors. This is further worsened by the fact that they are not gender-disaggregated and that their monitoring and evaluation systems are weak.

The country of Pakistan has a lower gender equality indicator than the rest of the countries. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2024, Pakistan ranks as the number 142 among 146 countries. It scores very low about political empowerment (12.6 percent) and economic participation (34 percent). The implications of these rankings, besides unfairness in the society, are that gender policies are not being fully implemented in national institutions. Moreover, the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (2021-2025) of Pakistan, even though stated in rather progressive language, lacks the institutional links that may be necessary to connect gender undertakings to actual governance procedures. The Pakistani institutional structures of gender equality are dualistic in nature, which is typified by strong normative commitments and limited operationalisation.<sup>111</sup> It is the gap between policy craft and policy

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<sup>110</sup> S Bano and M. N Akhtar, "POLITICAL PARTICIPATION of WOMEN: A POLICY PERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS in PAKISTAN," *International Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2(2) (2023): 44–55.

<sup>111</sup> S Bano and M. N Akhtar, "POLITICAL PARTICIPATION of WOMEN: A POLICY PERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS in PAKISTAN," *International Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2(2) (2023): 44–55.

implementation which academics and policymakers refer to as the gender policy gap. It is when good policies do not alter the power issue distribution since the institutions are too inflexible and the society is too conservative. Through this, women are still systematically excluded in the decision-making process through ministries, local councils and corporate boards.

### **5.3 Review of Global and Regional Best Practices**

The experience of other countries shows that to achieve substantive engagement of women in the decision-making process, a complex of legal tools, institutional restructuring, long-term resourcing, and cultural transformation is needed. Individual solutions (such as quotas in isolation) may increase numerical representation but infrequently provide substantive empowerment unless they are part of more systemic changes. Successful cases globally lead to three general groups of lessons: (a) specific legal and quota actions that are both politically embraced and effective; (b) institutional tools that can help the women to transform the representation into power; and (c) social-policy supplements that can eliminate practical obstacles to participation.

The diverse quota systems have worked first, and they have been conceived to rapidly raise the descriptive representation of women. Rwanda has traditionally been referred to as the most dramatic modern example: constitutional quotas and political will together created one of the best proportions of women in parliament in the world, opening opportunities to women to become ministers and take other high-level positions in the state. The example of Rwanda demonstrates that quotas with the clear constitutional support and political leadership can accomplish not only the numerical objectives; they also build the expectations, establish the norm of female leadership, and enable a new pool of experienced women to build up. Scholars, however, warn that the Rwandan case is contextually distinct- post-conflict political order and long-term commitment to state were some of the enabling factors. However, quotas are effective in cases where a long-term political good will and institutional mechanisms are in place to ensure protection and advancement of women once they are in office.

Second, the experience of the Indian Panchayati Raj suggests compelling evidence that even at the local level, reservations may generate policy and welfare effects in one way or another, rather than symbolic representation. Indian reservation in one-third in village councils is empirically evaluated and has improved the provision of public goods that are of importance to women (water and sanitation and school facilities) and the likelihood of women being selected in subsequent non-reserved elections.<sup>112</sup> Strict research points to the fact that the difference is greater when the reservations are not temporary and when the women are trained and visible and thus turn the office into the capability. This indicates that women can make sustainable political career by reserving seats in the local level in addition to capacity building and visibility which leads to better governance outcomes.

Third, Nordic models have shown that to realise gender equality in leadership, whole-of-society policy combinations are needed: family-friendly labour policies and universal childcare, gender-sensitive budgets, and strict implementation of anti-discrimination legislation. Sweden and Norway are among the countries that combine legal requirements with social transfers and labour market reforms that ensure female involvement in the labour force is compatible with care giving roles. The structural policies diminish the trade-offs that always cause women to get outside of the pipeline during their leadership positions and provides a pool of qualified women able to get into the field of administration and politics. The Nordic approach highlights that the question of gender parity in decision-making has a political, economic, and social dimension, which will require redistributive policy.

Fourth, the institutional engineering (developing enduring mechanisms that have brought gender into the governance) has worked well where it is endowed with resources and granted the power. UN instructions and country assessments highlight that gender units should be budget controlled, defined, statutory supported, and be able to influence recruitment and promotion decisions as well as budgetary decisions. The mere establishment of a gender focal point which has no personnel and financial basis can make little change. Examples of best

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<sup>112</sup> Rabia Ali and Saira Batool, "Stereotypical Identities Discourse Analysis of Media Images of Women in Pakistan," *Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies* 4, no. 2 (June 25, 2015): 690, <https://doi.org/10.17583/generos.2015.1502>.

practices include gender focal points and compulsory gender impact assessment of legislation, gender-responsive legislations on budgets, independent oversight organizations capable of auditing adherence and reporting findings. These mechanisms translate rhetoric pledges into administration and provide incentives to line ministries to become gender conscious.

Fifth, capacity building, mentoring and pipeline policies are common in contexts where women make substantive gains. Across successful cases—whether in Bangladesh’s civil service quotas (slow but steady increases), India’s local reservation effects, or corporate board targets—training programs, leadership fellowships, and mentorship networks enable women to perform effectively in senior roles and reduce the “tokenism” problem. Promotion criteria that recognize career interruptions (for childcare, eldercare, etc.), flexible work arrangements, and transparent promotion processes have been decisive in retaining women and ensuring progression into leadership.

#### **5.4 Current Policy Reform Efforts in Pakistan**

In the last few years, Pakistan has made a number of policy changes to make it easier for women to get involved in politics and to fix gender-based inequalities in how the government works. National and provincial assemblies, gender quotas, reforms in national and provincial assemblies, the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW), and reforms initiated by the Election Commission of Pakistan and local governments are all significant aspects in these. These measures indicate that an increasing number of people are beginning to appreciate the necessity of ensuring women are more engaged in politics although it has not always been successful due to social, cultural and institutional constraints.

##### **5.4.1 Gender Quotas in National and Provincial Assemblies**

Reserved seats or gender quotas have been one of the major methods used by Pakistan in legislative bodies to ensure that more women are hired into politics. In the National Assembly, the Constitution now ensures women 17% of seats and in the provincial assemblies proportionate percentages. This quota system was initially introduced in 1956 in the Constitution by a provision that was reinforced by constitutional amendments in 2002 and

subsequent years. This was aimed at assisting women in circumventing issues they encounter during their campaign. The Election Commission of Pakistan estimated that after the 2018 elections, women occupied approximately 20 percent of the National Assembly seats.<sup>113</sup> This is a minimal growth compared to the past decades. In the recent past, attempts have been made to ensure that more women are also running in both the general seats and the reserved seats. This is also particularly so in Sindh and Punjab whereby women are increasingly getting involved in mayoral and union council. The issue is that political parties usually select women to occupy reserved seats and this restricts their freedom and authority in decision making activities.

#### **5.4.2 Role of the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW)**

In 2000, the national commission on status of women established the NCSW. It has the primary role of ensuring gender equality and ensuring that the government is not going against national and international law including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The Commission has been involved in writing laws that draw attention to the gender, advising government agencies on ways of transforming their policies and conducting research into reasons why women find it difficult to be empowered. The latest NCSW reports discuss the efforts of federal ministries to make gender perspectives more widespread, the possibilities of women to be more engaged in the economy, and the safeguard against domestic violence and workplace harassment can be enhanced.<sup>114</sup> Indicatively, the NCSW annual report of 2024 emphasizes the importance of enhancing women economic contribution by offering digital entrepreneurship opportunities, microfinance, revealing that economic empowerment is increasingly becoming an aspect of political participation in totality. Despite all these efforts, the NCSW is limited to perform its duties in terms of lack of funding, political influence and unequal implementation across the provinces.

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<sup>113</sup> Rabia Ali and Saira Batool, "Stereotypical Identities Discourse Analysis of Media Images of Women in Pakistan," *Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies* 4, no. 2 (June 25, 2015): 690, <https://doi.org/10.17583/generos.2015.1502>.

<sup>114</sup> Rabia Ali and Saira Batool, "Stereotypical Identities Discourse Analysis of Media Images of Women in Pakistan," *Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies* 4, no. 2 (June 25, 2015): 690, <https://doi.org/10.17583/generos.2015.1502>.

### 5.4.3 Reforms Under the Election Commission and Local Governments

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has also played a major role in implementing changes that can easily see women participating in politics. ECP has over recent years been making efforts to make elections more inclusive such as digital voter registration campaigns targeting women in rural and urban regions that lack proper focus and efforts to increase awareness on elections that emphasize gender equality. In addition to these, there have also been local government reforms. In 2022-23 as an example, the amendments of Punjab and Sindh mandated women to occupy reserved seats in union councils, municipal committees, and district councils. Gender-sensitive voting systems have also been experimented by local governments, including training of women candidates, campaign money management workshops and initiatives to make people vote in favor of women leaders.<sup>115</sup> The preliminary evaluations have shown that such measures have increased the involvement of female gender in general seat showdowns, but cultural obstacles and deeply rooted patriarchal beliefs continue to limit their full effectiveness particularly in the conservative villages.

### 5.5 Challenges and Limitations

Policy transformation in Pakistan is an indication that the state is interested in having more women enter into politics. Nevertheless, such changes are not as productive due to a series of structural and social problems. Strong political elites usually prevent women access to the decision-making arenas. Women are frequently prevented by cultural backlash and entrenched gender expectations which prevent them becoming leaders. This is particularly so in the rural places, where family approval and local hierarchies make decisions as to who should be allowed to run the office. These issues are also more terrible as there is not much responsibility and a variety of methods to keep an eye on things. Policies tend to be words in papers and they do not necessarily make a person feel stronger. In addition, it has also been discovered that, women with reserved seats usually play tokenistic roles and do not do much to assist in making laws and policies. This indicates that the gap in gender policy still exists.

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<sup>115</sup> Beenish Ijaz Butt and Amir Zada Asad, "Social Policy and Women Status in Pakistan: A Situation Analysis," *Orient Research Journal of Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2016), <https://gcwus.edu.pk/wp-content/uploads/3.-Social-policy-Women-Volume-1-Issue-1.pdf>.

## 5.6 Recent Data and Trends (2024–25)

The latest data of the World Bank and national surveys (2024-25) indicate that approximately 21-22% of women are represented in the legislative bodies of Pakistan on the national level. This is a little but constant improvement. Local government figures indicate a greater impact, where women are up to 30 percent of union council and municipal committee members in some provinces. This demonstrates the effectiveness of quota policies that are targeted.<sup>116</sup> Additionally, online programs and campaigns have made women more aware of the elections and their confidence to participate. Yet comparative analysis reveals that even in Pakistan women have not yet caught up with their regional counterparts, such as Bangladesh and Nepal, in terms of having real political power and becoming leaders in the legislature. This demonstrates that the real change requires more than the increased number of women in government.

### 5.6.1 Current Policy Reform Efforts in Pakistan

In recent years, Pakistan has undertaken a set of policy reforms aimed at enhancing women's political and governance participation. These efforts cluster around three key areas:

- Gender quotas in national and provincial legislature.
- The institutional role of the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW);
- electoral and local-government reforms under the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and devolved authorities.

### 5.6.2 Gender Quotas in National and Provincial Assemblies

Pakistan's gender-quota regime is one of the more visible mechanisms for women's representation. Under the current constitutional and legal framework, reserved seats for women are allocated in the National Assembly and provincial legislatures. According to NCSW documentation, the Legislative Framework for Women's Political Participation review notes

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<sup>116</sup> Andleeb Anwar, M. A. Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2022): 14–61.

that 17 % of seats in the National Assembly (60 out of 342) are reserved for women. Data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union / World Bank shows that in Pakistan around 20.5 % of parliamentary seats are held by women as of early 2024. These reserved seats have helped guarantee a baseline presence of women in law-making bodies. In addition, some provincial governments and local councils have extended quota systems into union councils and municipal bodies, thereby offering more opportunities outside the national legislature. Nevertheless, there are major drawbacks as can be seen through critical analysis. To start with, most women legislators do not have autonomy and limited influence because most of them are not elected directly but are nominated by the political party, thus occupying reserved seats. They very often are reliant on the leadership of their parties and do not have independent electoral legitimacy. Second, the reserved seats alone do not guarantee meaningful participation in decision-making or leadership positions; committees, caucuses and leadership roles often remain male-dominated. Third, while representation numbers improve, the quota mechanism has not fully translated into substantive changes in policy outcomes, legislative behaviour or public accountability. In the 2024 context, despite these mechanisms, women’s voter turnout still lags significantly behind men’s — for example, an estimated 10 million fewer women than men voted in the 2024 general election. Moreover, reform advocates are now calling for higher targets: in May 2025 the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) urged a constitutional amendment to raise women’s quota in political-party decision-making bodies to 33 %. Thus, while quotas have laid a foundation, they alone are insufficient to remove deep structural and normative barriers to women’s equal power in politics.

### **5.6.3 Role of the NCSW**

The NCSW has become the principal statutory body charged with promoting gender equality and monitoring government compliance with national and international commitments (such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women – CEDAW). The Commission, founded in 2000 and empowered by the NCSW Act 2012, has an essential role of reviewing laws, policy change advocacy, conducting research and coordinating gender

mainstreaming efforts among ministries.<sup>117</sup> The NCSW has made significant gains: e.g., it has set the stage of the legislative reviews, created the gender review frameworks of women political participation, and established alliances between reform oriented civil society, bureaucracy, and political leadership (sandwich strategy). It has also been proactive in voter mobilisation and gender sensitive electoral awareness campaign before the 2024 election. However, critical analysis reveals some long-developed flaws. The NCSW is stricken with a limited ability, which is financial as well as enforcement. It does not have effective ways of holding ministries or political parties accountable on gender policy commitments. In April 2024, the Chairperson raised doubts about the validity of the Global Gender Gap Report in Pakistan, stating that data credibility and visibility can be problematic. Moreover, the translation of research and recommendations by NCSW into the real institution reforms is still unsymmetrical. As an example, though the NCSW has been raising the issue of the under participation of women in elections and suggests direct quotas and participation mechanisms, its implementation has been disproportionate across provinces and other local government institutions.

### **5.7 Recent Reforms Under the Election Commission and Local Governments**

Another reform axis is the ECP and local government system that tries to enhance the women presence. During the run up to the 2024 general election, it is reported that the voter registration of women has increased due to targeted campaigns by the ECP, yet the turnout is still low. According to the Institute for Governance and Development (IGD) analysis reports, the number of eligible Pakistani women who had not registered to vote before the 2024 election was estimated to be 3.5 million, which is due to registration and structural factors.<sup>118</sup> Further, the difference in the turnout rate between men and women is still acute: in 2024, research by the University of Bristol showed that there were approximately ten million fewer women voters

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<sup>117</sup> N Akhtar, "Comparative Analysis of Women Protection and Participation Laws in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh: Lessons for Pakistan," *KJPP* 1(1) (2022): 43–48.

<sup>118</sup> Andleeb Anwar, M. A Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2022): 14–61.

than men, which indicates that the electoral process continues to be hindered.<sup>119</sup> In the local government system, provincial legislative amendments (such as those of Punjab and Sindh) have established or strengthened women reserved seats in union councils, municipal committees and district councils. Despite the paucity of publicly available data, there is an initial sign that an increased number of women are now challenging in general highly contested seats on the local level with the support of capacity-building workshops, training programmes, and electoral awareness campaigns. These interventions are indicative of the hope that decentralised political spaces can have more ready points of entry by women. The reforms proposed by ECP have had an effect of improving registration but not substantially bridging the turnout gender gaps. The urban rural disparity in the voter turnout difference continues: in 2024, in metropolitan regions the gender difference in voter turnout was over 10 per cent (20.8 per cent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), and in rural areas the difference is distressing.

## 5.8 Critical Analysis

Although the efforts of the policy reform in Pakistan can be characterized as positive, the criticism should highlight three interrelated problems:

- (a) the dependency on numerical quotas and not accompanied by empowerment or institutional change.
- (b) the distance between representation and substantive influence.
- (c) the socio institutional obstacles that remain out of the official regulations.

To begin with, quotas ensure the representation but not the authority: numerous women are seated on the seats but do not have electorally validated seats, stand-alone platforms, or leadership positions. Without this consideration of party nomination practices, patronage and intra party culture, the quota system is bound to bring about symbolic representation as opposed to governance impact. Secondly, we have mandate institutions such as the NCSW and

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<sup>119</sup> N Akhtar, "Comparative Analysis of Women Protection and Participation Laws in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh: Lessons for Pakistan," *KJPP* 1(1) (2022): 43–48.

the ECP which however do not have enforcement teeth, resources or monitoring structures to enforce policy on practice. The data issue such as the absence of disaggregated gender data, poor monitoring of the performance indicators, and poor transparency compromises accountability.

Third, reforms are not adequate to question socio cultural norms, patriarchal systems, informal networks and male dominated hierarchies limit the recruitment, promotion and leadership of women. Despite the presence of reserved seats and voter registration campaigns, there is still a lot of mobility among women, access to campaign funds, time (where it is the greatest in rural areas) and safety issues. These constraints are exacerbated by the urban-rural divide, class and regional differences.<sup>120</sup>

### **5.9 Identified Policy Gaps in Recruitment, Retention, and Promotion**

Although there has been changes in the policies and gender quotas, there are still structural and procedural gaps in the institutions of the Pakistani public sector especially in the recruitment, retention and promotion of women. Such loopholes do not only curb the advancement of women in the workplace, they also reduce the success of gender-based reforms in governance. Systemic weaknesses, such as civil service regulations, institutional cultures and unofficial hierarchies that sustain male dominated structures of leadership, lie at the core of these struggles.

### **5.10 Recruitment Gaps**

The practice of recruitment in the civil services and other institutions of the Pakistani state which employs individuals in its publics regularly strengthens genderized differences, even though the regulations are formulated as gender-neutral. Entrance tests and other selection procedures including the Central Superior Services (CSS) test are supposedly merit-based, but discriminate against women, through socio-cultural influences. Women with rural or conservative backgrounds are overrepresented in long, centralized testing processes,

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<sup>120</sup> Andleeb Anwar, M. A Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2022): 14–61.

geographic mobility policies, and gender biased evaluation systems, which require women to remain with their families, or face societal disapproval of extended periods of preparation. In addition, the advertisement of recruitment, outreach, and preparatory materials have in historical times focused on urban male candidates, which restricts the awareness of women and their accessibility. In places where affirmative action practices are allowed, such as reserved slots in federal ministries or provincial heads, even the practical obstacles such as giving priority to politically connected male applicants and the obscure party-based nomination systems are weakening the intended effect.<sup>121</sup>

Another policy gap is that women should be retained in the public service positions. The institutional and social factors are associated with high levels of attrition among women especially in the middle-tier administrative positions. Many ministries and agencies still have a male-dominated work environment with no facilities, flexible work schedules, and family-friendly policies that provide accommodation to the dual roles of women at home and in the workplace. Also, cultural practices on mobility, extended working hours, and traveling to field postings are skewed against women and they either leave or are demoted voluntarily. A study by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) (2024) shows that about 28% of women that are hired to work in the federal administration leave their jobs before being able to serve ten years, which is much higher than the percentage of male staff. Not only does this reduction in the number of experienced female administrators take a toll on the overall number of female administrative candidates, but also the long-term objective of establishing a leadership pipeline that is equally represented by both males and females.

The process of civil services promotion in Pakistan is characterized by some gender biases, which are usually subtle, but usually present. The criteria of promotion often focus on seniority, tenure and passing formal exams, but informal networks, mentorship and exposure to high profile jobs have a decisive influence in promotion. Women are often simply not able to access these networks because of social conventions that are gender based and lack of membership to

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<sup>121</sup> S Bano and M. N Akhtar, "POLITICAL PARTICIPATION of WOMEN: A POLICY PERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS in PAKISTAN," *International Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2(2) (2023): 44–55.

the male informal systems. Research by UN Women and World Bank shows that among federal and provincial ministries, women hold less than 10 percent of senior-most administration roles that are highly administrative, which points to a strong vertical segregation. Even in gender-related jobs, including social welfare or education departments, promotion limits can be seen and women can hardly reach the top decision-making posts.<sup>122</sup> Also, performance assessments, which are frequently subtle and hard to document, strengthen the idea that women will not be able to handle high-responsibility work, which reinforces structural inequities.

### **5.11 Structural and Institutional Limitations.**

The loopholes in the recruitment, retention, and promotion are also magnified by the poor application of the gender-neutral or gender-sensitive policies. In spite of the fact that the concept of civil service rules underlies equality, the reality is not uniform in enforcing them across ministries and regions. Grievance redress mechanisms, workplace harassment aversion, or career support are often not well-developed, not available or not effectively monitored. The culture of institutions is still patriarchal where men have the advantage of leadership and career advancement at the expense of women. This policy analysis indicates that unless there is a systemic check and balance, capacity building and accountability structures, the nominal presence of gender policies does not lead to substantive outcomes in terms of diversity in leadership.

### **5.12 Informal Networks and Patronage Systems**

Another important aspect of these holes is the aspect of informal networks and male dominated hierarchies. Patronage, mentorship, and political alignment are very important factors in the career progression in the Pak public sector, where women are not fairly represented. The informal decision-making process tends to lock out women in important decisions, high profile projects, as well as access to resources to enable them to have a professional visibility. This does not only suppress their career development in the short run but

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<sup>122</sup> Rabia Ali and Saira Batool, "Stereotypical Identities Discourse Analysis of Media Images of Women in Pakistan," *Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies* 4, no. 2 (June 25, 2015): 690, <https://doi.org/10.17583/generos.2015.1502>.

also creates cycles of intergenerational imbalance because women are not in positions of power and thus lack mentors to guide the upcoming generations.

### **5.13 Intersectional Barriers**

Besides gender, there are other intersectional issues like class, geographic origin, ethnicity and education which also combine to increase disadvantages during recruitment and promotions. Women in rural or disadvantaged backgrounds are at a greater disadvantage because of their low educational opportunities, lower family support to pursue a career in the government, and because of their limited mobility.<sup>123</sup> Language and cultural prejudice can also play out in provincial governments in recruitment choices and assigning postings and may cause tiers of marginalization that cannot be countered by gender-only policies.

These are consistent gaps that have direct repercussions insofar as governance and institutional efficiency are concerned. Lack of women in decision making would decrease diversity of thoughts, policy development, and sensitivity to the needs of the citizens especially in those areas where women and the marginalized communities are disproportionately impacted. Moreover, the inability to maintain talented female officers defeats the aim of creating capacity building programs to develop an administrative culture that could be either male or more administrative which makes the organization weak in terms of performance.

### **5.14 Gender Policy Deficit in Public Sector Institutions**

Although gender quotas, institutional reforms, and advocacy efforts have been introduced, a significant gender policy gap still exists in the Pakistani public sector, especially in ministries, departments and state-owned enterprises. This gap is being experienced in laxity in the implementation of gender sensitive policies, lack of financial support to women-oriented projects and an ongoing lack of coordination between policy-making and administration. All these loopholes weaken the attempt to ensure that legislative and institutional systems are

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<sup>123</sup> N Akhtar, "Comparative Analysis of Women Protection and Participation Laws in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh: Lessons for Pakistan," *KJPP* 1(1) (2022): 43–48.

translated into real changes in terms of representation, influence and empowerment of women in the public institutions.

One of the fundamental problems in the sphere of Pakistani public is the poor enforcement of gender-sensitive policies. Formal rules and guidelines are usually established by ministries and state-owned enterprises, in terms of anti-harassment policies, maternity leave policies, and flexibility at the workplace. But it is not enforced regularly, in a few cases, or not at all in certain organizations. In the annual review conducted by the NCSW in 2024, less than 40 percent of federal ministries had operational grievance and compliance mechanisms to implement gender-related policies.<sup>124</sup> Likewise, the state-owned firms often have no mechanisms of checking whether workplace norms are gender-inclusive and the paper-based policies have no way of finding their reflection in reality. Such lack of enforcement erodes confidence of women on an institutional support and is a source of attrition, which restricts sustainability of reforms in the long term. Additionally, patriarchal attitude in the bureaucracy usually undermines the formality of structures. The male senior officials who control the decision-making process often give less priority to gender issues or even see the compliance as a choice. This corporate culture of sluggishness continues to create a situation in which harassment, lack of involvement in high-profile projects, and unfair distribution of resources is not questioned, which further institutionalizes the gender policy gap.

The second notable weakness is lack of proper financial and human resources to fund gender-based programs. Although policies and governance programs on gender mainstreaming are existing and there are efforts made to build capacity, develop leaders and empower women, the majority of the institutions in the public sector use a very small percentage of their budget on such activities. According to the World Bank 2024 Pakistan Public Sector Gender Assessment, the proportion of total ministry budgets allocated to women-specific programs or training was only less than 2 percent, and not enough to enable a sustainable institutional change. The shortage of funds also impacts the size and extent of gender sensitization activities,

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<sup>124</sup> N Akhtar, "Comparative Analysis of Women Protection and Participation Laws in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh: Lessons for Pakistan," *KJPP* 1(1) (2022): 43–48.

workshops, and mentoring. The scarce resources limit access to distant areas and women in rural or marginalized backgrounds do not have the opportunity to benefit through professional development.<sup>125</sup> Consequently, in the presence of policy frameworks, the lack of adequate financial resources to carry it out worsens the situation, creating a structural bottleneck that stifles the efforts to achieve gender equality.

One pattern that has been apparent in the Pakistani public sector is the lack of engagement between policy-making and practice. The policies that address gender are often formulated on the federal level, without the presence of operational plans at the provincial or departmental level. As an illustration, a ministry can come up with gender action plan suggesting flexibility at work places or mentorship programs, yet local branches or field offices might not have the authority, knowledge or motivation to institute the practices. The ensuing institutional unevenness adds to institutional inequities and lacks the credibility of gender policies.

Also in most cases, gender mainstreaming effort is more of a symbolic exercise than a part of the organizational strategic planning. The policies can be in forms of reports, frameworks or guidelines but are not often incorporated in the key performance indicators, budgetary decisions or metrics used to evaluate the leadership. Devoid of this kind of integration, compliance would be voluntary instead of mandatory and restrict the ability to measure results. Absence of accountability mechanisms in the institutions also contributes to this loophole, as there is no easy way to see the progress of the work or where the policy has not been implemented successfully.

The policy deficit is further exacerbated by cultural and structural norms in institutions of the public sector. The hierarchies of bureaucracies are largely male dominated which fortifies informal networks and decision-making channels that do not include women. The male career path is usually matched with leadership styles, promotion practices, and mentorship opportunities and women are left behind in major operation and strategic processes. The

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<sup>125</sup> N Akhtar, "Comparative Analysis of Women Protection and Participation Laws in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh: Lessons for Pakistan," *KJPP* 1(1) (2022): 43–48.

research work undertaken by Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in 2024 indicates that women seldom occupy top leadership positions in provincial government despite having quotas in the middle-tier positions. These institutionalized biases create a vicious circle where the voices of women are not adequately represented and the policies that can empower them have not been taken advantage of.

Moreover, there are intersectional variables like socio-economic status, ethnicity, and geographical difference in access to institutional support and opportunities. Women in less privileged families or rural locations are particularly vulnerable to compounded barriers such as inability to access mentorship, social limitations and lack of mobility, which impede their effective use of policies. This intersectionality highlights the importance of subtle policy interventions that are not generic gender equality measures.

### **5.15 Impact on Institutional Performance**

The institutional policy gap causes a real implication on the institutional effectiveness and governance. Poor representation and inclusion of women hinder diversity of thought, innovation and psychological responsiveness to the needs of the citizens especially to those areas that are highly disproportionately involved with the women, children and marginalized populations.<sup>126</sup> Lack of women in the decision-making processes may also undermine accountability mechanisms because the gender perspective tends to be critical in determining and solving systems inefficiencies, societal inequities, and service delivery gaps. Studies by UN Women (2024) show that ministries that have a high number of women in leadership positions report to have better gender-responsive budgets, inclusivity of policies, and participatory engagements of the citizens, which points to the overall governance value of filling in the policy lapses.

Although there has been significant changes in policies and institutional policies to encourage gender inclusion in Pakistan, the adoption of the programs is characterized by intractable

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<sup>126</sup> Andleeb Anwar, M. A Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2022): 14–61.

problems. Political, cultural, and structural forces interrelate to restrict the viability of gender-based policies, which tend to lead to a symbolic compliance and not change. The challenges that are encountered include opposition among political elites, societal and cultural opposition, and lack of effective mechanisms of accountability in institutions of the public sector.

Entrenched political and bureaucratic elites are one of the major challenges towards implementing gender policies. Gender quotas, affirmative action deals and leadership development programs tend to unravel the conventional power networks in political parties, bureaucracies and patronage systems. Most of the senior decision-makers feel threatened by the greater involvement of women, thus they have been found to enforce policies slowly or selectively.<sup>127</sup>

The political elite opposition also goes to the budgetary allocations and prioritization of resources. Governments with male dominated leadership tend to provide insufficient funding to gender specific agenda, which restricts the powers of organizations such as the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) or provincial gender departments. Therefore, policies that are well-planned still have implementation bottlenecks in cases where elite actors hinder or give the implementation a back seat.

In addition to institutional opposition, there is cultural and societal norms which is a great challenge to the execution of gender reforms. Patriarchy traditions, which are strongly entrenched in family set-ups, religious doctrines, and societal demands often restrict the political, governance, and workforce of women in the community. When women seek to take up leadership positions, they face criticism, societal pressure or even threats, which makes taking to active positions and promotion discouraged.

This social resistance is especially high in the rural and conservative areas, where the division of gender roles makes women have little presence in society. According to research by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI, 2024), the number of women nominated to

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<sup>127</sup> Andleeb Anwar, M. A Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2022): 14–61.

local councils in both Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and southern Punjab only 25.30 percent of women nominated to local councils eventually took the office, most often because of opposition by family or community. Besides, stereotypes tend to be reinforced by media representation where women leaders are seen as less competent or with less interest in their work rather than their personal lives which puts away women who may have shown interest in participating.

The third significant issue is the absence of sound accountability mechanisms to oversee, implement, and assess the gender reforms. Although there are laws, quotas, and institutional directives, nothing prevents their lack of effectiveness due to a lack of data, underdeveloped monitoring of performance, and little punishment in case of failure. To illustrate, anti-harassment and gender-sensitivity policies in ministries are usually not exercised evenly and the monitoring mechanisms are either absent or weak. The NCSW has pointed out several loopholes in adherence to gender quotas and workplace inclusion policies, but does not have the enforcement powers to force all provinces and departments to enact the mandates.

Lack of gender disaggregated data is an additional deterrent to accountability. The lack of credible statistics on recruitment, retention, promotion, and participation would prevent policymakers from determining gaps, tracking the progress, and developing specific interventions. As an illustration, despite women having approximately 21.22 percent of seats in the National Assembly (World Bank, 2024), there is limited information regarding their participation in parliamentary committees, leadership positions and policy-making. On the same note, there is not much reviewing of local government reforms and thus one cannot determine whether the women in union councils or municipal committees are actively participating in decision making process.<sup>128</sup>

### **5.16 Political, Social, and Institutional Interplay**

All of these challenges have a connection with one another, making the implementation of reforms a complex environment. Political opposition curtails resource distribution and

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<sup>128</sup> Andleeb Anwar, M. A. Nazir, and Sania Islam, "Gender Equality under Pakistani Law: Progress and Persisting Challenges," *Critical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2022): 14–61.

structural implementation, societal pushback diminishes women agency and action and poor accountability frameworks enable systemic injustices to continue. Consequently, although Pakistan has a progressive policy along with reforms, the country finds it difficult to articulate legal frameworks into practical changes in women representation, empowerment and leadership in the governance and state institutions. Even with constitutional laws, quotas and institutional changes, the role of the women was grossly limited by the entrenched socio-cultural values and inequalities in Pakistan. These obstacles exist in both the societal and institutional levels, which influence the perceptions, opportunities, and access of women in political, administrative, and corporate leadership. It is important to understand these barriers to come up with effective strategies to, in the context of gender inclusion in governance, policymaking and in service to the people.

The society has deeply embedded attitudes towards gender roles which is one of the greatest obstacle to female leadership. Domestic and care giving is traditionally prescribed, supported by family pressures, religious interpretation and communal practices as one of the main roles of women, making them less available to take leadership roles. Women, even highly educated and professionally competent ones, are doubted regarding their abilities to cope with the positions in the society and family life.

The stereotypes concerning the decision-making, the leadership and the visibility of women continue in the rural and urban areas, but in the conservative areas it is more evident. Such biases are further reinforced by media coverage, which, in most cases, presents female leaders as a means of focusing on personal attractiveness or family duties instead of professional skills. The Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI, 2024) found that more than 65 percent of news about female politicians and administrators focused on personal traits, but not policy or leadership accomplishments, a trend that perpetuates cultural scripts that diminish female power.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> S Bano and M. N Akhtar, "POLITICAL PARTICIPATION of WOMEN: A POLICY PERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS in PAKISTAN," *International Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2(2) (2023): 44–55.

Intersectional factors (socio-economic class, geographic origin and educational background) are the barriers to leadership that are compounded. There are several disadvantages that lower-income or rural women encounter as well: they do not have access to good education, they do not have mentoring options, and they are not exposed to professional networks that help them gain a career progression. As an illustration, women have low literacy levels in rural Sindh and Balochistan, which makes it difficult to be involved in the local government or the professional sphere, and social conventions and family responsibilities make their movements and involvement in leadership even more limited.

Ethnic and geographic inequalities are also a factor. The role of women in leadership, in localities that possess a differentiated language or tribal organization, might be limited by the hierarchical structure of local power or local culture denying women a right to exposure. In spite of its critical role, educational attainment does not necessarily lead to success; women with high qualification can still be met with resistance in the male dominated institution or political party which has shown the interplay of socio-economic, regional and cultural factors.

Another important structural barrier is the urban-rural divide. Urban centers, where there is an increased access to education, career networks, and publicity, may provide more opportunities to the women when it comes to becoming a leader. On the other hand, rural regions are under a consistent strain: society is governed by patriarchy, movement is limited, and the opportunity to find support and mentorship or training programs is scarce. This gap causes imbalance in the distribution of women leaders in the country where the leadership is dominated in cities with the rural constituency being underserved. Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP, 2024) statistics show that women candidates in urban union councils were almost twice as likely to be elected than women candidates in rural councils in local government, indicating inequality in the effectiveness of policy reforms concerning geographic and socio-cultural settings.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> S Bano and M. N Akhtar, "POLITICAL PARTICIPATION of WOMEN: A POLICY PERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS in PAKISTAN," *International Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2(2) (2023): 44–55.

Women are also restricted in their leadership by structural barriers in institutions. The bureaucratic hierarchies, political parties, and the institutions of the public sector are still male dominated where access to the resources, promotions, and the position of high visibility is controlled by informal networks and patronage systems. Women are often left behind in the informal decision-making processes where important strategic and operational decisions are made. Women are usually not as fortunate as their male counterparts to access mentorship opportunities which are essential in career development and thus, they may not be able to maneuver a successful journey through an organizational hierarchy.

### **5.17 Effects of Societal and structural barriers on policy and Governance**

The interconnection between the socio-cultural norms and structural barriers are greatly attributable in the conduct of governance and policy outcomes. Lack of women in leadership positions limits the variety of opinions to be represented in the decision-making process and this may result in the development of policies that are inefficient in catering the needs of women or the social issues at large. According to the research conducted by UN Women (2024), women leadership presence has a high correlation with the inclusion policy formulation, especially in the health, education, social protection, and gender-responsive budgeting sectors. Lack of institutional effectiveness and innovation among women is a hindrance when they are not represented in the leadership. Gender equality policies might not be implemented or prioritized, and this will continue to perpetuate equity problems in the system. In addition, female underrepresentation in top positions undermines accountability systems since views that are useful in maintaining transparency, inclusivity, and equity are not well represented.

### **5.18 Strategies to Address Socio-Cultural and Structural Barriers**

Solving these obstacles needs multi-dimensional approaches, which would focus on both social norms and institutional culture, along with structural disparities. There are ways in terms of awareness campaigns and educational programs that can help to change the societal perceptions about the leadership position of women in the society. The key to changing the perception of people is media strategies that focus on professional success of women, but not

on their physical features. Reforms within the institution should aim at providing work environments that are inclusive, increasing mentorship programs, and flexible working arrangements, which accommodate family needs. Women can learn the skills and connections that will enable them to be effective in male-dominated settings through the leadership development programs, specific training programs, and capacity building workshops. Moreover, it can be coupled with gender responsive performance evaluation and promotion regimes, whereby women can be rewarded and appreciated on the basis of their leadership contribution fairly.

The fact that women are underrepresented in law-making and law-enforcing bodies, coupled with the continued lack of policy making and policy implementation, has significant consequences to governance, institutional performance, and national development of Pakistan. The barriers to meaningful participation of women in the decision-making processes are systemic and socio-cultural in nature and they still limit women participation despite legislative changes, quotas, and institutional efforts. Such loopholes do not only result in the restrictiveness of the inclusiveness and responsiveness of the governance institutions, but also extend to larger socio-economic impacts, such as sustainable development, innovation, and public accountability.

The fact that women have not been elected or are not observed in leadership positions directly affects how an institution performs. Having a diverse team of leaders would also promote a more holistic decision-making process because a variety of perspectives, experiences, and pieces of information are considered. Federal ministries, provincial governments and local councils do not give women a broad range of representation in Pakistan and this limits the variety of thinking in the policymaking process. Due to this, institutional strategies do not represent the needs, priorities, and views of half the population.

According to the research by UN Women (2024) and Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI, 2024), ministries and local councils comprised of more women show better priorities towards social welfare policies, education, healthcare, and gender-responsive budgeting. On the other hand, low female representation implies that institutions have less diversity in their

policies, and they tend to focus on areas which were traditionally male dominated, including infrastructure, defense, and finance without taking gender-specific issues into account. Policy gap in leadership therefore limits institutional responsiveness and diminishes the efficiency of service delivery to the marginalized groups especially women and children.

There are also gaps in gender policy that influence transparency and accountability in the institutions. Female leaders will be more inclined towards promoting ethical governance practice, equal distribution of resources, and systems that promote openness. Such measures are not adopted because of the underrepresentation of women in the decision-making committees, which undermine the institutional integrity. In this case, gender balanced leadership teams are depicted to enhance oversight of state finances, lessen bureaucratic incompetencies and facilitate participatory decision making by the government structures unlike male dominated structures which tend to lack checks. Also, the lack of effective implementation of gender-sensitive policies coupled with the presence of informal patriarchal networks promotes the continuation of nepotism, favoritism, and exclusionary policies. This is a dynamic which undermines the public confidence in the structures of governance and reduces institutional credibility. In the absence of women in leadership roles who can support the practice of inclusiveness, accountability mechanisms will be incomplete and ineffective; they will continue to sustain inequality in the service delivery system and implementation of the policy.

#### **5.19 Policy Innovation and Strategic Priorities.**

The underrepresentation of women also limits the innovations in the policies, as well as the agendas of social development. It has been shown that female leaders tend to endorse progressive policies touching on education, health, social protection and gender equity. There is also the issue of limited representation of women in high-level decision making in Pakistan, which has led to the creation of a policy environment that is not usually concerned with long term investments into human capital development.

To illustrate, gender disparities in leadership are one of the reasons why women lack funds in health programs, lack of maternal and child health care in rural settings, and other social safety nets. This policy does not only perpetuate the social inequities, but also curtails the ability of the nation to attain sustainable development objectives and in particular, gender equality, quality education and low inequalities. Lack of women insights in the strategy priorities formulation minimizes governance innovation and policy prism through which the national issues are viewed.

The policy gap on gender has far-reaching economic development. According to the evidence provided by the World Bank (2024), the higher the level of women participation in the governance structure, the greater the economic growth, financial responsibility, and the social outcomes. Women in Pakistan do not have a significant access to leadership roles within the public institutions and decision-making bodies thereby limiting the integration of policies that allow women entrepreneurship, participation in the workforce, and empowerment.

In addition, government institutions are very instrumental when it comes to planning and executing solutions that promote gender-inclusive economic prospects. The policy gaps in recruitment, retention, promotion, and leadership are some of the factors that cause women to be underutilized in terms of their skills, expertise, and perspectives, leading to inefficiencies and lack of diversification and innovation in the economy. In other areas like education, health and social protection, the absence of women in leadership roles has been a drag on the development and implementation of programmes that can strengthen human capital, productivity, and inclusive development.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

#### 6.1 Conclusion

The necessity of inclusive governance and bias representation has become the most important aspect in the 21st century in the formation of democratic institutions in the world. The role of women in governance is no longer a matter of social justice only, and a whole new experience of improving institutional effectiveness, sustaining development, and securing democratic legitimacy. Although there are a variety of constitutional clauses, legislative acts, and policy frameworks that can be used to improve the involvement of women in Pakistan, the nation still has a severe gender imbalance in the leadership arena and decision-making framework. Women are still underrepresented in parliaments, bureaucracies, and other institutions of the state and restrict the inclusivity and responsiveness of the governments. Such underrepresentation not only denies the country the diversity of opinions, skills, and ideas women are capable of bringing to the policymaking process, its implementation, and its review but also denies the country a significant opportunity to benefit from the skills and talents of its women.

The results of this paper indicate that the gender policy in Pakistan is a complex structural, institutional, as well as a socio-cultural gap. The age-old structures of gendered institutions, strong patriarchal beliefs, and informal power networks all contribute to the marginalization of women. Women participation in most instances is symbolic and not substantive even in instances where legislative frameworks (i.e. reserved seats in the national and provincial assemblies or the National Policy on Development and Empowerment of Women (2002) and the Gender Reform Action Plan (2005)) have been introduced. Although crucial in facilitating the initial representation, reserved seats and quotas do not necessarily translate into their influence in policy-making and senior leadership posts because of the presence of deep-rooted male-based networks, discriminatory approaches to promotions, and mentoring opportunities.

Feminist Institutionalism as used in this paper emphasizes that institutional changes through reforms are not enough without at the same time addressing informal rules as well as the wider sociopolitical context that defines the governance set ups in Pakistan.

The second finding, presented in this research, is that sociocultural restrictions are highly crucial in determining the political and administrative agency of women. Women are restricted through gender stereotypes, physical immobility, home duties, and social expectations in the participation of making decisions in society. According to many researchers, such as Naheed et al. (2021) and Bano and Akhtar (2023), the patriarchal spirit inherent in the Pakistani society often comes in the way of policy projects, resulting in low execution and inefficient execution. The systemic challenges that women face in most cases, such as being locked out of policy discussions, tokenism and prejudicial leadership views, limit the effectiveness of their efforts in determining the allocation of resources, legislation issues and strategic administration results. Such results support the existing literature on gender and governance in the world, which stresses that structural representation should be accompanied by actual access to the power of decision making to make a real difference.

The gender policy deficit is also complicated by the institutional dimension. Informal networks dominated by males, civil service regulations, and hierarchical bureaucracies have a tendency of hindering women in their promotion in leadership positions. Although gender-neutral policies appear to be fair, they often do not take into consideration the lived experiences of women in the field of service and thus continue to reproduce the existing inequalities. Women are not only disadvantaged in terms of recruitment but also promoted, retained and professionally developed, in a way that decreases their long term effects on the processes of policy making. This falls in line with the results of Kerevel and Atkeson (2013), who point out that the numerical representation does not necessarily result in policy impacts except through systemic institutional changes.

Moreover, the paper highlights the disconnect between policy making and policy implementation. Although Pakistan has undertaken some effort via the legal tools and gender-specific policy programs, the institutional capacity is weak, funding is inadequate and

accountability mechanisms are poor thus complicating the process of policy implementation. Gender-sensitive initiatives like the Punjab Women Empowerment Package (2012-2016) proved the existence of the positive possibility of changing the women leadership but failed because of the lack of coordination, inability to reach the grassroots, and absence of monitoring systems. Likewise, the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) with all the extremely important advocacy functions is limited in its ability to affect policy outcomes at federal and provincial levels because of weak enforcement capabilities and governance institution structural issues.

Another key area explored by the research is the role of education, economic empowerment, and the inclusion of the digitized world as the means of expanding the agency of women in governance. Investigations conducted by Umar Daraz et al. (2025) and Hussain and Qureshi (2018) highlight that the ability of women to be engaged in the policy-making process and civic leadership could be increased through their educational level, access to financial resources, and interaction with social media sites. The latter, especially economic independence, allows women to overcome the patriarchal restrictions, enter the leadership pipelines and influence within institutions. In addition, democracy of space of public engagement as a result of social and digital media can enable women to bypass these traditional obstacles and engage in policy discussions, advocacy efforts, and even government debates.

Social justice is not the only impact of underrepresentation of women. Systems of governance without women are weaker, less inclusive and less able to solve complex issues in the society. Inclusive leadership is associated with fairer policymaking, better services, and increased institutional resiliency. Further, gender inclusive governance complies with international obligations of Pakistan in the Beijing declaration, CEDAW and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 5 of gender equality and Goal 16 of inclusive institutions. To accomplish these goals, a multifaceted strategy should be adopted, which deals with institutional cultures, socio-cultural norms, and formal legal frameworks simultaneously.

Conclusively, the ongoing gender policy deficit is a complex issue in Pakistan which is a result of the combination of legal, institutional, and sociocultural factors. Although legislative systems,

quotas, and policy programs offer important points of entry, they cannot work alone. Gender inclusion is not substantive without breaking down the patriarchal norms, enhancing institutional accountability, economic empowerment, and inclusion of women in decision making at all the governance levels. The study has shown that policy reforms can only go as far without long term and coordinated efforts, which can pivot their ability to bring about any meaningful change in the role of women and the leadership aspect in the Pakistani administrative systems.

## **6.2 Policy Recommendations**

According to the results of this research, the following recommendations can be offered to increase participation of women in governance and leadership in the domain of public policy making in Pakistan.

### **Enhancing Legal and Regulatory Systems**

The current legal systems must be revisited and reformulated to allow the inclusion of women not in tokenism. This would entail increasing the quota of reserved seats in national and provincial legislatures, making women members of the crucial committees and inclusion of gender-responsive performance measures in all policy initiatives. It is important to build legal and regulatory frameworks that will turn the symbolic inclusion of women in governance into a substantive presence. Despite the enactment of a number of gender-sensitive laws in Pakistan including women-only seats in the legislatures and gender-specific policy promises, the same is largely in name and restricts the real participation of women in the decisions. The legal developments should therefore not just remain in the numbers but work on the structural and procedural aspects that limit women leadership in the institutions of governance. The creation and application of quota systems is one of the key areas of reform. Although the use of reserved seats has seen an increase in the descriptive representation of women, they have little influences in the policy formulation process because of the indirect election process, party dictation, and lack of representation in influential parliamentary committees. The reforms done in laws should focus on helping to increase the women access to strategic legislative areas by

requiring them to be represented in major standing committees such as finance, security, planning and law. This would empower women legislators to play a constructive role in agenda-setting and oversight roles instead of languishing in portfolios in the social sector. Besides that, gender-responsive laws should be supported with enforceable regulatory measures. Institutional supervision of the enforcement of gender equality legislations can be achieved by the creation and the protection of independent female offices in federal and provincial levels. These must be given the investigative power, budgetary independence and authority to propose sanctions in instances of non-conformity. In the absence of these enforcement tools the legal reforms would just be declaratory and not transformative. The other important reform is the incorporation of gender-responsive performance indicators into the policy and legislative processes. The appraisal of laws and policies should be done not only by adhering to the procedural but also by the gendered consequences of the laws and policies. The introduction of gender impact assessment of significant policy initiatives would institutionalize gender consciousness in the policymaking process and would guarantee that the concerns of women are put in place. In the Feminist Institutionalism approach, legislation should be reformed to deal with the interplay between the formal and informal laws as well. Even liberal law may be subverted by vested patriarchal values within political parties, culture of bureaucracy and enforcement agencies. Consequently, reforms in the law must be modeled in light of informal opposition and endorsed by long-term political devotion. Such enhancement of the legal and regulatory framework would assist in bridging the differences between formal equality and substantive empowerment and improve the leadership and influence of women at the governance structures in Pakistan.

### **The reforms and capacity building in institutions**

Every institution of the public sector should create special gender units that have enough resources and powers to observe the implementation of the policies and could also train and create awareness regarding the inclusion of women in the leadership pipelines.

Institutional reform and capacity building have had the key role to play in the solution of the profoundly rooted gendered norms that define the governance in Pakistan. The institutions of

the public sector tend to have informal cultures that give male leadership an advantage, the careers of women cannot advance, and their input to the decision making process is not a priority. To solve these issues, there is need to restructure the institution systematically instead of applying interventions individually. The most important suggestion is creation of special gender units in the institutions of the public sector such as ministries, regulatory bodies, and local government. These units must be well staffed and empowered to manage the process of implementing the gender policies, hold institutional gender audit and offer advisory assistance on mainstreaming gender. Their role must not be limited to just being a symbolic representation but also to look into recruitment, promotion, and leadership trends across institutional hierarchies. The leadership pipelines in an institution should also be addressed during capacity-building initiatives. The lack of female representation at the top ranks of the organization can be very often predetermined by obscure promotion rules, underground patronizing, inability to get mentors.

Discretionary biases can be minimized by introducing open, merit-based promotion and formalized performance evaluation standards that will be disadvantageous to women. The mentorship and leadership development programs must be institutionalized and not project-oriented so that the women can be supported in their professional growth in the long run. Gender sensitivity and institutional sensitivity training will be equally important. They ought to train bureaucrats and policymakers together with political actors on gender-responsive governance, unconscious bias, and inclusive leadership practices on a regular basis. These efforts can assist in overcoming the deeply rooted stereotypes and creating an institutional culture that acknowledges women as the valid decision-makers. Feminist Institutionalism emphasizes the contribution of informal institutions to perpetuation of inequality. Thus, institutional reforms should also attempt to restrict the impact of informal male dominated networks that influence decision making by not going through formal processes. Discretionary power of informal groups can be minimized through strengthening the formal rules, documenting decision making processes as well as making it more transparent so that women can have room to participate. Finally, institutional reform and capacity building are to be viewed as a long-term initiative that must lead to changes in the governance cultures, as

opposed to the numerical assimilation of women. Through these reforms, which can be undertaken to deal with both manifestations, the informal practices as well as formal structures, it can be possible to establish a conducive institutional space where women are not just in the governance system of Pakistan but are also powerful in the country.

### **Economic Empowerment and Skills Development**

The programs which focus on improving financial independence of women and their professional skills should be extended. Women participation and leadership in governance depends on economic empowerment as financial independence increases the independence of women, confidence, and their ability to participate in the public life. The structural economic inequalities in Pakistan still restrict women to access education, employment, and career growth especially in the rural and marginalized communities. These gaps need to be addressed in order to increase the number of women who can take up leadership positions in governance institutions. Professional training programs and targeted skills development should be increased to provide women with skills that are applicable in policymaking and administration as well as leadership. Such programs are supposed to encompass scholarship programs to tertiary institutions, training in public administration and policy analysis, and explicitly female-focused leadership programs. Such interventions may contribute to the narrowing of the skills gap that is used as one of the excuses to deny women a senior position.

Entrepreneurship and access to finance should also be a priority of economic empowerment programs especially to the disadvantaged women. By enhancing economic security and alleviating reliance on male-dominated networks, access to credit, microfinance schemes and business development services would help improve or strengthen the economic security of women. The economic empowerment of women enhances their bargaining authority both at the household and community levels so that they can be more involved in political and civic activities. Institutionally, the economic empowerment is supposed to be associated with the policy of employment in the public sector.

Women could be better retained and advanced in governance institutions through the recruitment drives that target qualified women, flexible work arrangements as well as support mechanisms like childcare facilities. These actions acknowledge the gendered division of labor and attempt to alleviate institutional obstacles instead of women adapting to institutional ideals that are male-centered. Feminist Institutionalism highlights the gendered nature of the economic structures and institutions which are found to be historically exclusionary. Consequently, the policies of economic empowerment should be incorporated in more general institutional changes so that the increased financial autonomy could be converted into leadership positions. The empowerment of women as an economic actor is not just an issue of social justice but also an investment in the inclusive and successful Pakistani governance.

### **Socio-Cultural Advocacy and Awareness**

The accessibility of women to governance and leadership in Pakistan is determined by the role of socio-cultural norms. Patriarchal beliefs are so ingrained that leadership is still seen as a male sphere of influence that does not encourage political involvement on the part of women and influences their credibility as decision-makers negatively. To work on these norms, there must be lasting advocacy and awareness campaigns that work at various levels in the society. The mass awareness campaigns must be aimed at challenging stereotypes about gender and the legitimization of the female leadership in the public life. The educational programs, media content, and popular culture should emphasize the role of women in governance and policymaking, which opposes the effect of excluding women, making them think that leadership is an inappropriate activity with their social roles. Media, especially, can be used to change the trend of putting women leaders on the big screen as competent and authoritative, not exceptional and symbolic.

The application of community-based initiatives is also vital in reformulating attitudinal levels on the ground level. The interaction with religious leaders, educators, and people with influence over the community can be used to create a social acceptance of leadership and participation of women. The tradition and custom based resistance can be broken gradually through the programs that promote gender equality discussion in families and communities. The other

serious dimension is the encouragement of women networks and platforms of solidarity. The political and professional networks of women offer opportunities to mentorship, collective advocacy, and sharing of knowledge. Such networks can be promoted through an institutional approach that gives women a greater edge in terms of visibility and bargaining in governance systems. Simultaneously, it is important to involve male allies in gender advocacy projects to confront patriarchal standards in dominant power structures.

According to Feminist Institutionalism, social-cultural norms act as informal institutions and form the behavior and expectations. Formal policy changes will not have a significant impact, without dealing with these informal constraints. The socio-cultural advocacy over time, therefore, is a complementary approach to institutional and legal reforms in that it builds up the enabling environment where leadership by women is socially accepted and politically feasible.

### **Information-Based Policies and Monitoring Systems**

Achieving a truly gendered governance necessitates the strong information systems that will facilitate evidence making and accountability. The lack of gender-disaggregated data in Pakistan means that institutions can only assess the participation of women, gaps, and the effects of gender-related reforms only to a very limited degree. There is therefore a need to strengthen data collection and monitoring to make informed policy intervention. Data on gender disaggregated recruitment, retention, promotions, leadership positions, and policy outcomes should be collected and analyzed systematically on a periodic basis by the institutions. This data will show the trends of exclusion, stagnation or improvement that is not normally visible in aggregate data. Incorporating this kind of data in the annual reports and review of policies would entrench gender accountability within governance systems.

Performance evaluation frameworks should also be connected to the monitoring systems. Gender equality has clear indicators and benchmarks to evaluate institutional compliance and effectiveness. Gender commitments should be converted into measurable results, and this can be achieved through setting up accountability measures, including regular audits, parliamentary

checkpoints and independent assessments. Transparency and engagement of the population are also backed by information-based policies. Public access to gender-related data can enable the civil society, researchers, and advocacy groups to hold the institutions accountable. This is in line with the concept of democratic governance and increases the authority of gender reforms.

Feminist Institutionalism highlights the idea that informal practices and opacity of an institution are some of the ways it defends itself against change. Information-based systems can intervene in these dynamics by increasing the visibility of data and tracking and highlighting the differences between the official promises and the real performance.

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