



## Gender inequality: A stumbling block in Pakistan's socio-economic development

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### ABSTRACT

*Even though the modern world has made great strides, women still struggle to obtain and exercise their most fundamental rights specially in developing nations like Pakistan. The gender gap has grown due to patriarchal and misogynistic culture as well as a lack of women's empowerment. Pakistan consistently scores low on international gender equality rankings despite having a constitution that provides equal social, economic, and political rights directly effecting GDP growth. In light of the current condition of state, inclusivity is a principle that is urgently needed. This paper will critically analyze the root causes of gender inequality in Pakistan, factors due to which gender equality has remained elusive. It will also explore that why gender equality in crucial for Pakistan not just as an agenda but for survival and economic prosperity and how the inclusion of women in the field of diplomacy, foreign policy, economics, decision-making can help in country's growth.*

**Keywords:** Rights, Gender Inequality, Pakistan, Decision-making, Socioeconomic development.

## Introduction

The term “gender inequality” describes the gap between the sexes, where one gender has a “better” standing and enjoys many perks while the other genders must strive for their fundamental rights. Sexism, which is the prejudice or exploitation of individuals grounded on their gender or sex, is the source of gender inequality. Gender inequality has become a prominent debate in 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to Kofi Annan, the 7th Secretary General of the UN, the progress and peace of every country depend on gender equality. 2,800,000,00 women and girls around the world are living life below average despite the advancements that have been made in this sector. The capacity to meet SDG 5 is being undermined by inadequate advancement on structural flaws that underlie gender discrimination, such as legal discrimination, biasness, oppressive societal norms and behaviors, judgement about sexual and reproductive rights, and low levels of political engagement. Depending on the nation, gender disparity reduces achievement from 4.5% to 74.7%.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of Pakistan, the importance of equal participation of women was highlighted by the father of the nation Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah even before the formation of Pakistan. But still, Pakistan is far from achieving his vision. Everyone has a right to equality. However, prejudice against women and girls based on their gender continues to deny them of their opportunities and entitlements. The SDGs call on countries to priorities women’s education, labor force engagement, and public representation through the enactment of policies in order to achieve gender equality. Unfortunately, attempts are unsuccessful where there are greater differences in education and health and less negotiating leverage in marriages, especially in Pakistan.

## Gender disparity in Pakistan

Men and women coexist in society and count on each other. Without the other, none of them can survive. Despite completing its 75 years of liberation, Pakistan has not yet used its youth population, particularly its female youth, to advance economic growth and increase the number of qualified workers. The Sustainable Development Agenda (2030), which consists of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), was adopted by 193 countries in 2015. Some of the SDGs highlight gender disparity. Goal 4 places a special emphasis on education and highlights the need to work tirelessly for global education objectives. Goal 5

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<sup>1</sup> Nadia Agha, “Persistent Disparity,” DAWN.COM, February 10, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1674304>.

promotes gender equality and women social inclusion, which guarantees equitable involvement of women in all governmental, economic decision-making and social processes. Goal-8 fosters and promotes the development of a safe and supportive workplace for women that will enhance long-term economic prosperity. But despite immense emphasis and efforts for gender, Pakistan is still far from gender parity and economic development. In spite of efforts for more involvement and inclusion of women in various fields, the gender gap has expanded by about 0.7% during the last 12 months. If this trend continues, Pakistan would take 136 years to reach gender parity.

### **Drivers of Gender Inequality in Pakistan**

#### **Lack of Education**

Lack of education, gender norms, social and cultural norms, the gender wage gap, religious misinterpretation and other reasons are some of the main drivers of gender inequality in Pakistan. These problems have had a terrible impact on Pakistan's socio-economic prosperity. An estimated 13 million girls in Pakistan are not attending school, which may represent the entire population of some nations. Although the right to an education is guaranteed by Article 37 of the Pakistani Constitution, gender discrepancies persist in the country's education system. In Pakistan, secondary education is obtained by around twice as many men as women, according to the Human Development Report, yet only 2.7 percent of the GDP is spent on education. The educational system in the country has a significant gender disparity. Due to the various sorts of prejudice women face in Pakistan's patriarchal culture, they have poor social, political, and economic status. In Pakistan, women constitute 49% of the overall population, yet they participate in the workforce at an astonishingly low rate of only 21%, and only 25% hold college degrees. Pakistan is placed 144th out of 156 nations in the study for educational attainment. In Pakistan's whole educational system, there is a 13% enrolment gender gap. Additionally, just 46.5% of women are educated, 61.6 % completed elementary school, 34.2 % completed high school, and 8.3 % completed university education. But barriers to females' education are not just a problem in rural regions; they are also common in big cities like Lahore. In Lahore alone, around 150,000 girls are not attending school. Some of the biggest obstacles preventing girls from accessing education include physical limitations, inadequate hygienic facilities in schools, transportation issues, rising poverty, misconceived notions, gender bias, child marriages, as well as insufficient educational equipment. The main issue is the educational quality in places

where it is both accessible and readily available. In Pakistan, women are typically anticipated to stay at home while men are typically expected to be the provider of family. Schooling and choice of good school considered more important for son than daughter. Unfortunately, raising girls' chances of finding a husband may increase demand for education more than increasing their employability and their career.<sup>2</sup>

### Gender Roles

In Pakistani society, gender roles continue to be obsolete. The 2019 Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM) study found that 40% of women require approval from a family member in order to obtain or maintain paid job. Less than 10% of households believe that women can make their own decisions because girls are taught from an early age that they are merely a temporary part of the family. Any skill she acquires will benefit her husband's family more than her own family. Parents pay more attention on boys' education because, according to them, they will run the house. Strong gender norms are what underlie the power relations. In our study, 43% of men believe that women should not have outside jobs.<sup>3</sup> Our society's misogynistic system devalues achievement and supports males against women, which helps to reinforce male supremacy. Parents frequently contribute to the discrimination of women at home by pushing their sons to dominate and control their daughters. These gender-based norms promote the gender roles that women the prime responsibility of women are to take care of the home. Any role and contribution outside the "char dewari" (the bounds of a house) is considered unnecessary and irrelevant in Pakistan's deeply patriarchal society. These youngsters and eventually men feel they are superior to women because of this undeserved status. Males see women as their inferiors and seek to uphold this attitude everywhere they interact with women at home, in the community, at shops, in the police station as well as in courts.

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<sup>2</sup> Jalal-Ud-Din, Mohammad, and Munir Khan. 2008. "SOCIO-ECONOMIC and CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS of WOMEN in PAKISTAN with SPECIAL REFERENCE to MARDAN DISTRICT, NWFP PROVINCE." Sarhad J. Agric 24 (3). [https://www.aup.edu.pk/sj\\_pdf/SOCIO-ECONOMIC%20AND%20CULTURAL%20CONSTRAINTS%20OF%20WOMEN%20IN%20PAKISTAN.pdf](https://www.aup.edu.pk/sj_pdf/SOCIO-ECONOMIC%20AND%20CULTURAL%20CONSTRAINTS%20OF%20WOMEN%20IN%20PAKISTAN.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Haider, Sarah. 2020. "Women's Cheap and Free Labour Is Sustaining a 'Sexist Economic System.'" The Express Tribune. January 26, 2020. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2144886/womens-cheap-free-labor-sustaining-sexist-economic-system>.

## Cultural barriers and Religious Misinterpretation

Religious misperception and misinterpretation are a prominent factor in inequality. The status of women over the years has been analyzed from diverse perspectives which have contributed in the misperception of status of women in Islam. Non-Muslim scholars as well as Muslims misperceive Islamic perspective. In Islamic countries, generally, women's status has been viewed in relation to how Islamization has affected them rather than in relation to the culture and areas to which they reside.<sup>4</sup> This is a significant factor and the biggest excuse to prevent women participation in society. Under the banner of religion, men do not let women related to them work because they think that the jobs that men can do, women cannot do and they are only made for household work. While in Quran Allah has said: *"I shall not lose sight of the labor of any of you who labors in my way, be it man or woman; each of you is equal to the other (3:195)"*. But the dominant class of the society use religion to justify their acts. Slaughtering women and young girls has been a prevalent excuse to satisfy the misogynist ego. Even when they are unaware of how many females reside next door, they nevertheless slaughter women in the name of honor. Numerous women are killed by members of the family annually in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as a result of frequent honor killings.<sup>5</sup> The rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa districts of Kohistan and Torghar are where honor killings are most common. As this ancient practice is still practiced today by powerful jirgas and dominant conservative men in the name of religion. In the name of honor, a 14-year-old kid shot and killed his own mother outside a court in the Swabi region of KPK last year. According to research, the number of women who were the victims of "honor killings" in Punjab surged by 20% compared to last year. The destiny of the female victim is determined by a local Jirga with only men in it in the remote and tribal areas of the country, which is another example of how a woman is viewed as the possession of her husband, father or brother. In order to be accepted as the head of the household and, consequently, society, the men exert their dominance. They hold complete authority over women in all capacities. The few males who embrace women's individuality and treat them as equals are humiliated by their fellows. The Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) for men is more than 80% which is three times more than for women (24.8%) according to the report of the International Labor

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<sup>4</sup> Said, Kulsum Ahmed | Farah. 2022. "Unlocking Women's Potential." DAWN.COM. August 29, 2022. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1707335/unlocking-womens-potential>.

<sup>5</sup> Farah, Yasmin Bukhari, and Muhammad Ramzan. 2013. "Gender Discrimination: A Myth or Truth Women Status in Pakistan." IOSR Journal of Business and Management 8 (2): 88–97. <https://humanitarianlibrary.org/sites/default/files/2014/02/26.pdf>.

Organization which means majority of women provide care services unrecognized and unpaid.

### **Unpaid and unrecognized Labor**

Unpaid household and care work includes non-market, unpaid tasks including caring for people, cooking, cleaning, as well as carrying water. These responsibilities are frequently not tangible and are thus neglected. As per McKinsey Global Institute's (MGI) report, unpaid care work is worth roughly \$10 trillion worldwide each year. This unrecognized time-consuming work prevent women from acquiring and polishing skills and pursuing economic opportunities. As per the survey conducted by UN's Rural Household Panel in Sindh, Punjab and KPK women give most of their time to the unpaid and unrecognized services for instance According to the United Nations' recent Rural Household Panel Survey (RHPS) conducted in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh, women spend two hours collecting water and firewood and another four hours in care work that includes cooking, cleaning and looking after children and the elderly. This is the very reason that most of women quit their jobs soon after getting married. According to a survey conducted in Pakistan, more than 55% of MBBS graduates do not join duty because of the conventional expectation of taking care of family particularly husband. For many, refraining women from work is the matter of their honor and pride and woman's stepping out put them in an ignominious situation while women in homes, providing unpaid and unrecognized services to the family and extended family increase their dignity.

### **Workplace Harassment**

Workplace harassment is also a prominent obstacle keeping women of Pakistan behind. Regardless of laws for the protection of women from harassment as well as humiliation at work, they are nonetheless subjected to sexual, mental, and emotional abuse. While regulations are in place to protect and encourage females to dispute their treatment, many work environments remain hostile, and those who victimize women continue to do so despite these rules. In Pakistan, the largest number of employed women experience various sorts of abuse but are still forced to carry out their jobs in hostile workplaces. Those who are able to speak out face many obstacles in their pursuit of justice, which serves to further mainstream workplace harassment. One such instance is the workplace harassment lawsuit brought by a senior employ of an electric company. In November 2020, the woman reported the CEO of the company to the Sindh Authority for sexual harassment. The company's

attorneys requested a stay of proceedings from the Sindh High Court. The victim had to wait an entire year for a decision in her favor lifting the stay order. She has continued to battle for justice since then. In these patriarchal patterns, women would never be able to perform actively as well as contribute in socio-economic development of the state.<sup>6</sup>

### **Role of Women in Socio-economic Prosperity of Pakistan**

In order to enhance global communication, achieve advancement and sustainability, participation of women is indispensable in all sectors for economic boost since equal participation and social as well as economic development are strongly trusted. Women's equal engagement in society holds power to transform the society as whole and not just the lives of women. In women fiscal engagement and opportunity, the rank of Pakistan is 145 out of 156 and overcoming the gender-based gap can help in economic boost of more than \$20,000,000. Women education is decisive in minimizing poverty in Pakistan, especially in rural areas where gender disparity is enormously impacting lives and making situation miserable. As per the report of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), equality in employment sector would provide 30% annual growth of the gross domestic product. The country director for Pakistan of the World Bank, Mr. Patchamuthu, claims that "every additional year of education for a girl enhances her potential income by nearly 10%." Although Pakistan has many exceptional female leaders but ignoring their valuable contributions in development, it is widely believed that women lack administrative and managerial skills for leadership roles. This assumption is totally false, women do far better than men in any position of authority. We can use the PDM cabinet with only a minor representation of women, as a point of reference. These women have played a tremendous role in state progress and left their imprint, and others around the world appreciate what they have contributed. According to The Economist, Sherry Rehman, the minister of climate change, received praise for negotiating a new agreement to transfer funds from developed states to developing nations that have experienced climate-related calamities. Similarly, at the FATF plenary conference in Paris in October 2022, former minister of state for foreign affairs Hina Rabbani Khar gave a similarly excellent performance while successfully advocating for Pakistan's removal from the grey list. Women ministers have consistently surpassed men in past administrations. Dr. Sania Nishtar accomplished a great job

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<sup>6</sup> Manuel Santos-Silva and Stephan Klasen, "Gender Inequality as a Barrier to Economic Growth: A Review of the Theoretical Literature," *Review of Economics of the Household*, January 15, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11150-020-09535-6>



administering social protection initiatives during Covid as the PTI government's minister for eradicating poverty. Shireen Mazari, the human rights minister for PTI also supported several legislative initiatives to empower women, including legislation to protect them from harassment and assault at work. Anusha Rehman, a minister of state for information technology and telecommunications in the previous PML-N administration another achiever. She received the Global Achiever award from the International Telecommunication Union of the UN in recognition of her accomplishments.

### **The Way Forward**

Pakistan's chronic economic stagnation and lack of gender parity can be alleviated by implementing women-centric development projects by governmental organizations, international aid organizations, and assistance for women's economic growth at regional and state level leadership. A more skilled and educated female labor force is essential for economic success. One sector ripe for growth and innovation is agriculture, which employs 65% of working women in Pakistan and contributes 18.9% of the country's GDP. Modernizing women can prominently help in agricultural development because it will make them familiar with modern technology, cutting-edge technical techniques, give them the power to contribute in the green tech revolution, and start their own agribusinesses which will eventually boost economy.<sup>7</sup>

Recently in December 2022, US has passed \$1.7 trillion package for year 2023 in which \$200 million is completely foe promoting gender equality. Pakistan should also introduce such initiatives and allocation of budget solely for women for education, income generating activities and health. Academic as well as professional institutions should support the creation and execution of mentoring and skill-building initiatives explicitly for women. As part of this, working women are encouraged to communicate with one another for the purpose of exchanging knowledge and skills, and also support network and market connections to lessen obstacles to their mobility. Breaking down socio-cultural barriers can be greatly aided by supporting NGOS, the creation of legislation, and their strict enforcement addressing women's security and equal participation. Such programs and regulations will

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<sup>7</sup> Sophia Paynter, "The Girls of Our Future: Gender Inequality in Pakistan and China," *Global Majority E-Journal* 9, no. 1 (2018): 45–55, [https://www.american.edu/cas/economics/ejournal/upload/paynter\\_accessible.pdf](https://www.american.edu/cas/economics/ejournal/upload/paynter_accessible.pdf).

Saleemi, Sundus. 2021. "How to Increase Female Labour Force Participation in Pakistan." *The Express Tribune*. April 7, 2021. <https://tribune.com.pk/article/97350/how-to-increase-female-labour-force-participation-in-pakistan>.



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increase the number of women in the labor force. This plan will help in two distinct ways: first, it will inspire young women in the country to achieve milestones in innovation, health, and education, which will subsequently help the economy grow.

Another step that is the need of hour is to educate rural men. These men prevent the women from leading normal lives beyond the walls of their houses. They underlined the importance of imparting health education to rural men as a primary concern. It has been noted that women who play the role of wives are viewed as a means of reproduction. Additionally, males are forced to believe that a woman has the ability to have a son because of their lack of education.

In the competition with the regional as well as the international economies, Pakistan's female trained labor can help. Calling them for action to share responsibility, Pakistani female youth can play a tremendous role in assisting the country in tackling the obstacles associated with economic and developmental growth. Encourage women's professional and educational advancement, their basic rights to equality with men at the workplace, their mobility, their representation in both the public and private sectors, and their empowerment as women. Make sure all men and women are healthy and safe. Strict implementation and monitoring of legislation of domestic exploitation and violence, implementing creative development, distribution network, and marketing strategies that support women's empowerment can take the state on the road to prosperity.

Reduction of care work through state funded care centers for children, investment in care supporting facilities, sanitation and electricity is also extremely important.

### **Conclusion**

It is widely acknowledged that establishing gender equality is necessary for building inclusive, progressive, diverse, and harmonious societies. When there is female parity on the fronts of education, finance, politics, and parliament, progress and change are inevitable. Unfortunately, the gender gap in Pakistan is frighteningly rising. Gender bias is a persistent issue in Pakistan that is impeding the nation's socioeconomic advancement. Men control women's fate in a country where they lack full decision-making power. Sociocultural norms and a patriarchal attitude are the biggest barriers keeping women inside their four walls and from participating in society. Women are unable to participate actively with their counterparts as a result. In addition to inadequate infrastructure and poor sanitation, women

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who live within poor houses confront considerable economic obstacles such limited mobility, inadequate nourishment, and acute water scarcity. On the subject of gender-based violence in this nation, much has been written. Women's rights are the focus of numerous NGOs. Provincial administrative agencies and specialized commissions on the status of women have been formed by the provincial and federal governments. "Gender equity" has emerged as a development catchphrase. Women have designated seats in the national and local assemblies. Financial inclusion is a common phrase. There are media campaigns with focus on women rights. Nevertheless, we observe that women are undervalued in social and economic situations, particularly in rural areas and underdeveloped urban slums. There must be a significant problem with what our culture has been doing to women. The birth of a girl marks the beginning of the issue. Even now, society expresses its sorrow for this incident in various ways. Condolences are occasionally extended to the newborn's mother, who is also blamed for having a girl. In fact, it is a tendency that is certain to continue since numerous mothers have been exposed to brutality or even killed for having a girl child. The Pakistani state must include women at all levels. Governmental institutions should deliberately make accommodations for women and treat them equally to men. And this inclusion issue has to be included in the seminars and discussions held in formal settings. In public spaces and government institutions, there should be an equal representation of men and women. Men should also be seen doing household chores that are typically done by women inside of their homes. This would be a step in the direction of raising men in a world free of gender-based abuse. To assure a peaceful and advanced society, it is essential to abolish the sexist marginalization of women and to stop viewing them as a second gender.