

# WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN PAKISTAN: A SOCIO-LEGAL ANALYSIS OF STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES AND POLICY REFORMS

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## ABSTRACT

The status of women in Pakistan remains a critical and evolving area of inquiry. There is a complex interaction of social norms, cultural practices, economic structures, and legal frameworks. Despite constituting nearly half of the population, women's participation in education, employment, leadership, and access to justice remains constrained by deeply-rooted patriarchal systems and structural inequalities. This study examines the multidimensional challenges affecting women in Pakistan, including gender-based discrimination, limited educational access, economic marginalization, workplace inequality, unpaid domestic burdens, and the specific vulnerabilities faced by women. It further explores barriers within the justice system, including weak legal enforcement, institutional inefficiencies, and socio-cultural constraints that discourage women from claiming their rights. Drawing on a qualitative methodology based on systematic document review, the study analyzes both classical and contemporary literature alongside national and international institutional reports. The findings reveal a persistent gap between progressive legal frameworks and their practical implementation even though Pakistan has developed extensive constitutional, legislative, and policy mechanisms. The analysis also underlines the distinction between Islamic principles that emphasize justice and equality, and cultural interpretations that often continue gender disparities. The paper recommends that women's empowerment in Pakistan requires comprehensive policy and structural reforms, including strengthening legal implementation, expanding access to quality education, public awareness, promoting economic inclusion, recognizing unpaid care work, and enhancing institutional coordination. It also emphasizes the importance of cultural transformation and strategic collaboration with international development partners to align national efforts with global gender equality commitments.

**Keywords:** Women's empowerment, gender equality, social norms, economic inequality, educational barriers, legal frameworks, policy reforms, institutional mechanisms, Islamic perspectives on gender

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The status of women in the contemporary world has increasingly become a central subject of academic inquiry, particularly within developing societies where social structures, cultural norms, and economic realities interact in complex ways. In Pakistan, this issue holds particular significance, as women constitute nearly half of

the population, yet their participation in key areas such as education, employment, political decision-making, and access to justice remains constrained. For example, recent data indicate that female labor force participation remains as low as approximately 22-25 percent, reflecting deep-rooted structural and societal barriers that

continue to shape women's lived experiences (Baron, Bend, Ejaz, Lee, & Trako, 2024; UNDP, 2025).

Historically, the status of women in South Asia has been shaped by multiple factors, including cultural practices, colonial legacies, economic systems, and religious interpretations. Reform movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emphasized the importance of women's education and social participation, laying the groundwork for gradual change (Minault, 2001). Following the establishment of Pakistan in 1947, the constitutional framework formally recognized equality and fundamental rights irrespective of gender. However, the translation of these guarantees into practice has remained inconsistent due to persistent social norms and structural inequalities (Shaheed & Mumtaz, 1987).

Understanding the position of women is essential not only from a human rights perspective but also as a measure of broader social and developmental progress. The status of women in any society reflects the extent to which equality, justice, and inclusion are realized in practice. In contexts like Pakistan, where historical traditions, socio-economic conditions, and evolving institutional frameworks intersect, gender relations are shaped by a combination of continuity and change (Minault, 2001). Cultural norms, alongside evolving interpretations of religion and modern influences, continue to influence women's roles within both private and public spheres.

Despite these constraints, women in Pakistan have demonstrated resilience and capability across various sectors, including politics, law, education, and business. Women currently hold around one-fifth of parliamentary representation, reflecting gradual but limited political inclusion (UN Women & NCSW, 2023). Over recent decades, improvements in female education and growing awareness of legal rights have expanded opportunities for women, although disparities between urban and rural areas continue to persist. The importance of studying women in the contemporary world extends beyond descriptive analysis and is closely linked to broader questions of development and sustainability. Global research increasingly recognizes that gender

equality is integral to economic growth, social stability, and institutional strength. For instance, estimates suggest that increasing women's participation in the workforce could significantly enhance national economic output, underscoring the developmental importance of gender inclusion (UNDP, 2025).

This paper examines the situation of women in Pakistan through an integrated lens that considers social, economic, educational, and legal dimensions. It focuses on key issues such as domestic responsibilities, gender-based discrimination within households and workplaces, limited access to education, and structural inequalities in employment. Empirical studies demonstrate that women's economic participation remains restricted not only due to labor market conditions but also due to entrenched socio-cultural norms, mobility constraints, and institutional weaknesses (Khalid, 2025). In addition, the paper explores the legal and institutional mechanisms designed to protect women's rights and assesses their effectiveness in ensuring access to justice.

This paper, therefore, seeks to provide a comprehensive and critical understanding of the factors shaping women's status in Pakistan. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, it evaluates both progress and persistent gaps while situating women's empowerment within the broader context of social transformation and sustainable development. The analysis underscores that meaningful change requires not only legal and policy reforms but also a shift in societal attitudes and structures that continue to limit women's full participation in national life. The research has following questions:

- What are the key social, economic, educational, and legal challenges affecting the status of women in Pakistan?
- How do social norms, cultural practices, and interpretations of Islamic principles influence women's rights and opportunities?
- To what extent do existing legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms ensure women's access to justice and protection of rights?

- What policy and structural reforms are required to address persistent gaps and advance women's empowerment in Pakistan?

## 2. Literature Review

The issue of women's position in Pakistan and the Muslim world in general has been a subject of much scholarly publications in the fields of sociology, gender studies, religious studies and development studies. The following literature will examine some of the most significant works of other scholars and institutional studies that apply to the research on the rights of women, their social, educational, economic and legal status, and empowerment in Pakistan.

Women constitute approximately 48-49% of Pakistan's population, yet their participation in formal employment, leadership, and higher education remains limited (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023; UNDP, 2025). While urban women have relatively better access to education and employment, rural women face structural constraints and are largely engaged in informal and unpaid labor, which remains underrecognized in economic data (Amir, Kotikula, Pande, & Khadka, 2018). Women play multiple roles in household management, informal economic activity, and community engagement; however, their contributions are often undervalued. Articles 25 and 34 of the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973 guarantee equality and participation, and various laws protect rights related to employment, inheritance, and family matters. Despite these protections, weak enforcement and social norms continue to restrict women's ability to exercise their rights (Minault, 2001). Increasing women's participation in economic, political, and social spheres is widely recognized as essential for sustainable development and inclusive growth (UN Women & NCSW, 2023).

### 2.1 Situational Analysis of Pakistan

Millions of women and girls around the globe remain denied of their basic human rights (Ott, 2017) and Pakistan is no exception (Khan, 2020). With almost 227 million people, Pakistan is the fifth-most populous country in the world. Pakistan has one of the youngest populations in the world,

with 64 percent of its population under the age of 30. In Pakistan, gender inequality is a serious issue (UN Women, 2022). Pakistan was ranked 142<sup>nd</sup> out of 146 countries in a 2023 World Economic Forum report on gender parity. Afghanistan, Chad, Algeria, and Iran were the only countries that performed worse than Pakistan. Moreover, sub-sections of the report say that the country ranked 143 in terms of economic opportunity and participation, 132 in terms of health and survival, 138 in terms of educational achievement, and 95 in terms of political participation. The regional situation shows that Pakistan and Afghanistan were ranked as the second-worst countries among other South Asian countries (World Economic Forum, 2023).

The provision of fundamental rights is essential for every person. Globally, Pakistan ranked 125 out of 142 countries regarding the provision of fundamental rights to its citizens, and even worse, Pakistan is at the second lowest rank (141 out of 142 in terms of order and security. In civil justice, the rank of the country is 129<sup>th</sup>, and in criminal justice, the rank is 62<sup>nd</sup>, which is quite promising. The overall score of Pakistan regarding the rule of law is 130 out of 142 countries (World Justice Project, 2023).

### 2.2 Women and Islam

The relationship between Islam and women's rights is a central theme in scholarly and public discourse in Muslim societies, including Pakistan. Religion plays a significant role in shaping social norms, legal frameworks, and moral values, and discussions on women's status are often framed through both Islamic principles and cultural interpretations (Weiss, 2014).

Islamic teachings, derived from the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), emphasize justice, moral accountability, and the dignity of all individuals. Scholars note that Islam introduced significant reforms in seventh-century Arabia by granting women rights in areas such as inheritance, marriage, and property ownership (Mernissi, 1991; Barlas, 2019). However, the interpretation and application of these principles have varied across historical and cultural contexts.

The Qur'an establishes a moral framework that emphasizes the spiritual equality of men and women, grounding human worth in righteousness rather than gender. It recognizes both men and women as moral agents accountable for their actions and responsible for upholding justice in society (Barlas, 2019). Scholars note that this ethical foundation highlights equality in spiritual and moral responsibility, even though social roles may differ (Mernissi, 1991).

Islamic teachings also emphasize mutual respect and cooperation within family life, presenting marriage as a relationship based on compassion and partnership rather than domination. In this context, women are granted a range of legal rights that were significant reforms in early Islamic society, including rights to property ownership, inheritance, consent in marriage, and divorce under certain conditions (Weiss, 2014).

Islamic law recognizes women as independent legal persons with control over their financial resources. A woman retains ownership of her property, and neither her husband nor family members can claim it without her consent. Similarly, the requirement of free consent in marriage and the provision of *mahr* (marital gift) reflect recognition of women's autonomy within marital relations (Barlas, 2019).

In matters of inheritance, Islamic law provides women with legally defined shares of family property. Although these shares may differ from those of men, scholars emphasize that the recognition of women as heirs represented a significant advancement in a historical context where women were often excluded from inheritance (Mernissi, 1991). Furthermore, Islamic legal principles allow women to engage in business, manage financial affairs, and enter into contractual relationships, reflecting their recognized role in economic and social life.

Although Islamic teachings provide for women's rights, their social status in many Muslim societies is often shaped by cultural practices that diverge from these ethical principles. Scholars consistently distinguish between religious doctrine and culturally embedded patriarchal norms, noting that many restrictions on women reflect social

traditions rather than the core teachings of Islam (Mernissi, 1991; Barlas, 2019).

Historical and sociological studies suggest that interpretations of religious texts have frequently been influenced by patriarchal contexts, limiting women's roles in public and social life (Weiss, 2014). This has led to ongoing academic debates on the relationship between religion and gender equality, with some scholars advocating for reinterpretations of Islamic texts grounded in principles of justice and equality, while others emphasize understanding these texts within their historical and social contexts.

In Pakistan, the interaction between religion and law is particularly significant in shaping women's rights. Legal debates surrounding family law, inheritance, and access to education reflect the dynamic relationship between religious interpretations and evolving social realities (Weiss, 2014).

### 2.3 Social Challenges Faced by Women

Shaheed and Mumtaz's *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* provides a foundational sociological analysis of gender relations in Pakistan, arguing that women's subordinate status is deeply rooted in patriarchal social structures that allocate authority and resources primarily to men (Shaheed & Mumtaz, 1987). These structures influence women's access to education, employment, and decision-making within the household. Contemporary studies continue to affirm this pattern, highlighting that patriarchal norms and social expectations remain key barriers to women's autonomy and participation, particularly in rural and low-income contexts (UN Women & NCSW, 2023)

The relationship between Islamic teachings and women's rights has also been widely debated in the literature. Mernissi (1991) argues that gender inequality in Muslim societies is often shaped by historical and political interpretations of religious texts rather than the core principles of Islam. Similarly, Barlas (2019) contends that patriarchal readings of the Qur'an reflect cultural contexts rather than its ethical emphasis on equality. In the Pakistani context, Weiss (2014) demonstrates that debates on women's rights are closely linked to

competing interpretations of Islam, influencing both legal reforms and public discourse.

Scholarly and policy literature consistently highlights the economic dimension of gender inequality in Pakistan, emphasizing that women face structural barriers in accessing education, employment, and economic resources. International development research demonstrates that gender equality is closely linked to economic growth, improved productivity, and better social outcomes (Amaral, et al., 2024).

In Pakistan, gender inequality is closely intertwined with broader socio-economic disparities. Women's labor force participation remains significantly lower than that of men, and those who are employed often experience wage gaps, limited career advancement, and workplace discrimination (UN Women & NCSW, 2023; Rana, Tarar, & Sultan, 2022). These challenges are further compounded by constraints such as a lack of childcare facilities, restricted mobility, and limited access to professional networks.

Reports by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) also highlight persistent issues, including workplace harassment, economic vulnerability, and unequal property rights. These findings underscore the need for stronger legal protections and more effective enforcement mechanisms to address systemic inequalities (HRCP, 2022; HRCP, 2023; HRCP, 2024).

Understanding the status of women in Pakistan requires examining the interaction between social norms, cultural practices, and religious interpretations. Gender roles are shaped through a complex interplay of historical traditions, institutional structures, and socio-economic conditions, which together influence women's opportunities in both private and public spheres (Weiss, 2014; Barlas, 2019).

Scholars emphasize that while Islam provides a framework grounded in dignity, justice, and equality, its interpretation often varies across contexts. In many cases, cultural practices shape the application of religious principles, resulting in gender roles that reflect both religious discourse and societal norms (Mernissi, 1991; Barlas, 2019). This distinction is critical in understanding

women's lived experiences in Pakistan, where religion and culture are deeply intertwined.

In South Asian Muslim societies, gender relations are multi-dimensional, encompassing family structures, access to education, economic participation, and legal rights. Patriarchal family systems continue to play a central role, often regulating women's mobility, decision-making, and social participation through norms related to honour and modesty (Shaheed & Mumtaz, 1987). While these structures may reinforce social cohesion, they also impose limitations on women's autonomy.

At the same time, Pakistani society has undergone gradual transformation. Increased access to education, urbanization, and women's growing presence in professional sectors have begun to challenge traditional norms. Women's participation in fields such as law, education, healthcare, and business reflect shifting dynamics, although these changes remain uneven across regions and social groups (UN Women & NCSW, 2023).

Religious discourse continues to shape debates on women's rights, particularly in distinguishing between foundational Islamic principles and culturally embedded patriarchal interpretations. Contemporary scholarship highlights the need to critically engage with these interpretations to support more equitable understandings of gender roles (Weiss, 2014).

In Pakistan, the social position of women is shaped by the interaction of historical traditions, cultural norms, economic structures, and institutional arrangements. While women play a vital role in family life, education, and community development, their status continues to be influenced by entrenched patriarchal systems that define gender roles and expectations (Shaheed & Mumtaz, 1987). Understanding this position requires engagement with both historical context and contemporary social structures.

### **2.3.1 The Background History of Women in South Asian Muslim Society**

Women in South Asia have experienced changes in their social status through centuries of cultural, political, and religious transformations. In the pre-

colonial period, women's roles were largely defined within family and community structures, primarily centered on household management and caregiving. However, historical evidence suggests that women also contributed to economic activities, particularly in agricultural and craft-based economies (Minault, 2001).

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reform movements in the Indian subcontinent began advocating for women's education and social rights. Muslim reformers emphasized the importance of educating women to improve family welfare and societal development. These early initiatives laid the foundation for gradual social change and increased access to education for women (Minault, 2001).

Following the creation of Pakistan in 1947, constitutional provisions formally recognized equality before the law and granted women political rights, including the right to vote and participate in public life. However, the translation of these legal guarantees into social reality has remained limited. Scholars note that gender relations in Pakistan continue to be shaped by a combination of historical traditions, colonial legacies, and persistent patriarchal norms, which restrict women's full participation in public spheres (Shaheed & Mumtaz, 1987; Weiss, 2014).

### 2.3.2 Patriarchal Structure

Patriarchy remains a central feature of gender relations in Pakistan, where authority and decision-making are largely concentrated in the hands of men, particularly within family and community structures (Shaheed & Mumtaz, 1987). In many households, men play a dominant role in decisions related to education, marriage, employment, and financial matters. These patriarchal arrangements significantly influence women's access to resources, mobility, and autonomy, thereby shaping their social and economic opportunities.

Such dynamics are especially pronounced in rural areas, where traditional norms continue to restrict women's educational and professional choices. While often justified in terms of family cohesion and protection, these practices limit women's

independence and self-development. Recognizing these constraints, the legal framework in Pakistan has introduced measures to curb harmful practices. The *Prevention of Anti-Women Practices (Criminal Law Amendment) Act, 2011* criminalizes forced marriage, *vani*, and deprivation of women's inheritance rights, reflecting state efforts to address gender-based injustices.

Judicial interventions have also played an important role in challenging patriarchal norms. In *Humaira Mehmood v. The State*, the Lahore High Court affirmed that an adult Muslim woman has the right to marry of her own free will, holding that any restriction on this choice violates constitutional guarantees of equality under Article 25 of the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973. Similarly, the *Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offences in the Name or Pretext of Honour) Act, 2016*, enacted following high-profile cases such as the murder of Qandeel Baloch, strengthened legal protections against honour-based violence.

Despite these reforms, patriarchal norms continue to persist. However, gradual social change, driven by increased female education, urbanization, and economic participation, is beginning to reshape gender relations, enhancing women's role in household and community decision-making (UN Women & NCSW, 2023).

### 2.3.3 Women Autonomy and Cultural Influence

Cultural norms play a significant role in shaping women's autonomy and social experiences in Pakistan. Expectations related to modesty, family honour, and prescribed gender roles often influence women's participation in public life, including their mobility, behavior, and interactions outside the household (Shaheed & Mumtaz, 1987). While women's roles within the home are widely valued and linked to family stability, this emphasis on domestic responsibilities can limit opportunities for education and professional development. Practices such as early marriage and expectations around caregiving further constrain women's educational attainment and career choices.

These cultural norms, however, are not uniform across Pakistan and vary by region, class, and social context. Urbanization, globalization, and

increased media exposure have contributed to shifting attitudes, particularly among younger generations. As a result, more women are pursuing higher education and entering professional fields while balancing family responsibilities (UN Women & NCSW, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Scholars suggest that these changes reflect a gradual transformation of traditional gender norms, driven by expanding access to education and economic opportunities.

Women constitute nearly half of Pakistan's population and are central to the country's social and economic development (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Demographic data reveal significant urban-rural disparities, with a large proportion of women residing in rural areas where access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities remains limited. Rural women often contribute to agricultural and family-based economic activities; however, their work is largely informal and underrepresented in official economic data (Amaral, et al., 2024).

Recent trends indicate gradual improvements in female education and health outcomes, contributing to enhanced social indicators and increased participation of women in society. Expanded access to schooling and maternal healthcare has played a key role in this progress (UN Women & NCSW, 2023). Despite these gains, substantial inequalities persist across regions and socio-economic groups, underscoring the need for targeted policy interventions to promote inclusive development and gender equality (Rana, Tarar, & Sultan, 2022).

#### 2.3.4 Domestic Issues and Challenges

Domestic life is one of the primary aspects of the life of women in Pakistan, though it is also one of the areas where the inequality between genders is most evident. All the factors that define women's autonomy and opportunities include household duties, authority to make decisions, emotional reliance, and societal demands.

Women in Pakistan bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic labor, including household work, childcare, and emotional support, which limits their access to education, employment, and leisure (UN Women & NCSW,

2023). This unpaid work remains largely unrecognized in economic statistics, reinforcing women's limited visibility in formal economic contributions (Amaral, et al., 2024). Decision-making power within households also remains gendered. While women may participate in routine matters, major decisions, such as finances, education, and healthcare, are typically dominated by male family members, reflecting entrenched patriarchal norms (Shaheed & Mumtaz, 1987). Although Islamic teachings recognize women's agency, cultural practices often restrict their practical exercise of these rights.

#### 2.4 Economic Challenges Effecting Women

The World Bank highlights significant structural inequalities affecting women's economic and social participation in Pakistan. Approximately 47 million women remain outside the labor force, and those who do work earn considerably less, with women earning only PKR 818 for every PKR 1,000 earned by men. A substantial 8.1 million women are engaged in unpaid work, reflecting the undervaluation of their contributions. Limited autonomy, particularly restrictions on mobility, further constrains women's access to business and economic opportunities. Safety concerns are also prominent, with one in three women feeling unsafe in public spaces. Digital and financial exclusion persists, as only 4 in 10 women own a mobile phone compared to 8 in 10 men, and around 55 million women remain unbanked. Additionally, most women-led enterprises, 8 out of 10 outside agriculture, are home-based, indicating both resilience and the structural barriers that limit women's full participation in formal economic systems (Amaral, et al., 2024).

Data from the Gallup Pakistan reveals that women's participation in the labour force remains critically low at approximately 21.4%, compared to 69.8% for men, yet the gender gap remains a striking 45% points. Female unemployment, at 8.9%, is consistently higher than that of men, while the majority of employed women, nearly 68%, are concentrated in agriculture, often in low-paid or unpaid roles. Structural disadvantages are also reflected in youth exclusion, where a significant proportion of young people, especially

women, are neither in education, employment, nor training. These indicators collectively demonstrate that women in Pakistan face systemic barriers in accessing education, employment, and economic opportunities, reinforcing cycles of inequality and limiting inclusive development (Gallup Pakistan, 2025).

Economic dependence remains a key factor reinforcing gender inequality. Women with limited income opportunities often rely on male family members, reducing their bargaining power and autonomy. According to the World Bank report, when women contribute economically, their income is frequently undervalued or controlled, increasing vulnerability to exploitation and limiting independent decision-making (Amaral, et al., 2024).

#### 2.4.1 Challenges Faced by Working Women

Women's participation in Pakistan's workforce has increased, yet significant structural, cultural, and institutional barriers continue to limit their full engagement. These challenges include workplace discrimination, wage inequality, harassment, inadequate childcare support, and cultural resistance to female employment.

Workplace discrimination remains a major obstacle to women's professional advancement. Gender biases in hiring, promotion, and leadership roles restrict women's career growth and access to decision-making positions (Amaral, et al., 2024). Women are often excluded from professional networks and assigned roles based on gender stereotypes rather than merit. Additionally, a persistent gender wage gap exists, with women earning significantly less than men for comparable work, reinforcing economic dependence and inequality (UN Women & NCSW, 2023).

Workplace harassment continues to undermine women's safety and dignity, often discouraging participation in the labor market. Despite the enactment of the *Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010*, and its subsequent amendment in 2022, underreporting remains widespread due to fear of retaliation, social stigma, and lack of awareness (HRCP, 2023). While the law mandates institutional

mechanisms such as inquiry committees and codes of conduct, implementation challenges persist.

Balancing professional responsibilities with domestic roles remains a significant challenge for working women. Limited access to affordable childcare, rigid work schedules, and inadequate institutional support restrict women's ability to sustain employment (Amaral, et al., 2024). Legal measures such as the *West Pakistan Maternity Benefits Ordinance, 1958*, the *Punjab Maternity Benefits (Amendment) Act, 2020*, and the *Punjab Day Care Centers Act, 2023* reflect progress; however, their effectiveness depends on proper implementation and workplace compliance.

Cultural norms continue to influence women's employment choices, particularly in conservative and rural areas, where working outside the home may be viewed as inconsistent with traditional gender roles. Although urbanization and education have gradually shifted these perceptions, societal expectations still constrain women's mobility and career progression (UN Women & NCSW, 2023).

#### 2.4.2 Challenges Faced by Single Women

Single women in Pakistan face distinct social, economic, and cultural challenges due to strong societal expectations around marriage. Unmarried women, whether by choice or circumstance, often encounter stigma, economic insecurity, housing barriers, safety concerns, and family pressure to marry (UN Women & NCSW, 2023).

Marriage is widely regarded as a marker of social acceptance, and unmarried women are often viewed as deviating from cultural norms. This stigma can affect social relationships, professional opportunities, and community participation (Weiss, 2014). Single women frequently face financial vulnerability, particularly in the absence of family support. Gender wage gaps and limited career opportunities further restrict their economic independence (Amaral, et al., 2024).

Access to safe and affordable housing remains a major challenge, as cultural norms discourage women from living independently. Concerns about harassment and safety in public spaces further limit mobility and access to education and employment (HRCP, 2022; HRCP, 2023; HRCP,

2024). Also, strong societal and familial expectations to marry often create psychological stress and restrict personal autonomy, particularly in conservative settings (UN Women & NCSW, 2023).

### 2.4.3 Challenges Faced by Divorced and Widowed Women

Divorced and widowed women in Pakistan face multiple social, economic, and legal challenges shaped by patriarchal norms and structural inequalities. Social stigma often leads to isolation and reduced participation in community life, while limited access to employment and income sources increases their vulnerability to poverty (World Bank, 2024). Although legal frameworks provide for maintenance and inheritance rights, weak enforcement and societal pressures frequently prevent women from securing these entitlements (HRCP, 2024). Additionally, child custody disputes impose emotional and financial burdens, affecting women's ability to sustain economic independence. Cultural attitudes also stigmatize remarriage, further restricting women's autonomy and access to social and economic support. These intersecting challenges underscore the need for stronger legal implementation, targeted economic opportunities, and social awareness to ensure the protection and inclusion of divorced and widowed women in Pakistan (UN Women & NCSW, 2023).

### 2.5 Barriers to Women's Education

Approximately two-thirds of Pakistan's population has attended school at some stage; however, access remains highly unequal. Overall, 67% of individuals aged 10 years and above have received some schooling, but this figure increases to 78% for men and declines to 56% for women, revealing a substantial gender disparity of 22 percentage points (Gallup Pakistan, 2025). Education is a key driver of women's empowerment and social mobility; however, significant barriers persist in Pakistan, particularly for girls in rural and marginalized communities. These include literacy gaps, rural-urban disparities, poverty, safety concerns, and early marriage (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Global research shows that

educating girls is one of the most effective strategies for reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development.

Educational inequality remains a critical dimension of women's marginalization. Despite improvements in enrollment, the World Bank reports that girls in Pakistan are still less likely to attend, remain in, and benefit from schooling compared to boys, particularly in rural and low-income settings (World Bank, 2024). These disparities highlight that access alone is insufficient without addressing broader socio-economic and cultural barriers. Girls in rural areas face limited access to schools, trained teachers, and infrastructure, compounded by cultural norms that prioritize domestic roles over education (Khan & Khan, 2025). Economic constraints lead families to prioritize boys' education, resulting in higher dropout rates among girls (Amaral, et al., 2024). Concerns about harassment, distance to schools, and lack of safe transport restrict girls' school attendance, especially in conservative areas. Also, early marriage disrupts girls' education and limits future opportunities, particularly in rural settings (UN Women & NCSW, 2023).

Education remains a critical pathway for women's empowerment in Pakistan, with notable improvements in female enrollment at primary and tertiary levels. Female participation in universities has reached nearly 45-50%; however, disparities persist in retention, discipline choice, and leadership roles (World Bank, 2024). Women are overrepresented in social sciences and health fields but underrepresented in STEM disciplines, reflecting structural and cultural barriers. Enrollment declines at secondary levels due to economic constraints, mobility issues, and social norms, particularly in rural areas (UNDP, 2025). Scholarship programs such as those by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and provincial initiatives have improved access, but awareness gaps and financial barriers remain. Despite strong academic performance, women's progression into leadership and research roles is limited due to institutional and societal constraints. Expanding scholarships, promoting STEM participation, and strengthening mentorship programs are essential

to translate educational attainment into long-term empowerment (UN Women & NCSW, 2023).

## 2.6 Legal Challenges Effecting Women

### 2.6.1 Access to Justice

Access to justice is a critical component of women's empowerment, enabling women to claim rights and seek remedies against discrimination and abuse; however, in Pakistan, structural, cultural, and institutional barriers continue to limit this access. Although the Constitution of Pakistan guarantees equality, non-discrimination, and rights to education, employment, and property, implementation gaps and social pressures often prevent women from effectively exercising these rights (Weiss, 2014). Family courts provide avenues for resolving issues such as divorce, custody, and maintenance, yet access remains constrained by delays, costs, and limited availability, particularly in rural areas. The Hudood Ordinances historically restricted women's access to justice, especially in cases of sexual violence, and subsequent reforms, such as the *Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act, 2006*, sought to address these concerns, though enforcement remains inconsistent (HRCP, 2022). Similarly, despite legal recognition of women's inheritance and property rights, cultural resistance and administrative hurdles often hinder their realization, reinforcing economic dependence. Institutional barriers within police and judicial systems, including lack of gender-sensitive personnel, procedural delays, and fear of social stigma, further discourage women from seeking legal recourse, contributing to underreporting of violations (UNDP, 2025). These challenges underscore the need for stronger legal enforcement, institutional reforms, and awareness initiatives to ensure meaningful access to justice for women in Pakistan.

### 2.6.2 Existing Institutional Mechanisms

Pakistan has developed a comprehensive institutional and policy framework to support and protect women's rights, grounded in constitutional guarantees of equality and non-discrimination. The Constitution of Pakistan, particularly Articles 25, 34, and 35, ensures

equality before the law, promotes women's participation in public life, and mandates state protection of family and women's rights. At the institutional level, key bodies such as the Ministry of Human Rights, National Commission on the Status of Women, and National Commission for Human Rights play a central role in policy development, monitoring, and advocacy. Provincial Women Development Departments and Commissions on the Status of Women further support gender mainstreaming and implementation at regional levels. Specialized mechanisms such as Gender Protection Units, family courts, and cybercrime wings have also been introduced to address violence, harassment, and access to justice, reflecting a growing institutional response to women's issues.

In addition to institutional mechanisms, Pakistan has adopted national and provincial policies aimed at women's empowerment and gender equality. Frameworks such as the National Strategy for Addressing Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) 2026-2030, Vision 2025, the National Gender Policy Framework (2022), and provincial women empowerment policies emphasize education, economic participation, and protection from violence. Collaboration with international partners such as UN Women, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has further strengthened policy design, implementation, and alignment with global commitments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Sustainable Development Goals. Despite these advancements, challenges remain in effective implementation, coordination, and awareness, indicating that while the framework is robust, its impact depends on stronger enforcement, institutional capacity, and societal acceptance.

### 2.6.3 Federal and Provincial Laws Protecting and Empowering Women

Pakistan has enacted a wide range of federal and provincial laws to protect women and girls from violence, discrimination, exploitation, and denial of rights. These include laws on child marriage,

such as the *Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929*, *Islamabad Capital Territory Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2025*, the *Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2013*, and the *Punjab Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2026*. Special laws also protect women and girls from harmful customs, including the *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Elimination of Custom of Ghag Act, 2013*, which criminalizes forced claims over a woman's marriage choice. Pakistan has also enacted laws against human trafficking, including the *Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act, 2018*, and laws against workplace harassment, including the *Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010*.

Women and girls are also protected through laws addressing domestic violence, child sexual abuse, missing and abducted children, property rights, and witness protection. Provincial domestic violence laws include the *Sindh Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2013*, the *Balochistan Domestic Violence Act, 2014*, the *Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act, 2016*, and the *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Domestic Violence against Women Act, 2021*. Women's property rights are protected through the *Enforcement of Women's Property Rights Act, 2020* in Islamabad and similar laws in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Child protection laws, including the *Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018* and the *Zainab Alert, Recovery and Response Act, 2020*, also provide important safeguards for girls. In addition, witness protection laws at the federal and provincial levels support women and girls in gender-based violence cases by protecting victims and witnesses from intimidation and retaliation. Pakistan has developed a substantial legal framework for the protection of women, girls, and other vulnerable groups, including transgender persons and women with disabilities. However, the effectiveness of these laws depends largely on implementation, awareness, institutional capacity, and coordination between federal and provincial authorities.

### 2.7 Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is not merely a social or moral objective in Pakistan; it is a structural necessity for sustainable development, economic growth, and democratic stability. With women

constituting nearly half of the country's population, their limited participation in education, employment, and decision-making represents a significant underutilization of national human capital. The literature consistently demonstrates that gender inequality in Pakistan is deeply embedded in patriarchal norms, socio-economic disparities, and institutional gaps, which restrict women's access to opportunities and resources. As a result, the country experiences slower economic progress, weaker social indicators, and persistent cycles of poverty. Empowering women, through education, economic inclusion, and access to justice, directly contributes to improved household welfare, better health and education outcomes for children, and enhanced productivity at the national level. In this sense, women's empowerment is not only about individual rights but about maximizing Pakistan's developmental potential (Haider, Charan, & Katohar, 2025).

From a legal and governance perspective, women's empowerment is essential for realizing constitutional guarantees and international commitments, including obligations under CEDAW and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, in the latest concluding observations by CEDAW are specifically related to the rights of women from every aspect. It demands to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women, full development and empowerment for women in each sphere of the life (education, health, sexual rights, family life, employment etc), and special legislation to protect their rights (Concluding Observations, 2020).

Although Pakistan has established a comprehensive legal and institutional framework, the gap between law and practice remains substantial. Strengthening women's agency enables them to claim their rights, challenge discriminatory practices, and participate meaningfully in public life, thereby reinforcing the rule of law and democratic governance. Moreover, empowerment has a transformative social impact: it challenges harmful cultural norms, reduces gender-based violence, and promotes more inclusive and equitable communities. Evidence from development studies shows that societies

with higher gender equality tend to exhibit stronger governance, lower corruption, and more resilient economies. For Pakistan, therefore, investing in women's empowerment, through policy reform, education, economic opportunities, and social awareness, is not only a matter of justice but a strategic imperative for achieving inclusive growth, social cohesion, and long-term national progress (Gondal & Hatta, 2024).

Women's empowerment influences decision-making, education, career choices, and social participation. In Pakistan, psychological empowerment is often constrained by gender socialization and patriarchal norms that limit women's agency; however, interventions such as education, mentorship, and skills development have been shown to enhance self-efficacy and participation (UN Women & NCSW, 2023). Education plays a critical role in building confidence by improving critical thinking, awareness of rights, and engagement in public life (Khan & Khan, 2025). Economic independence further strengthens self-confidence by increasing financial autonomy and bargaining power within households (Amaral, et al., 2024). Exposure to role models, such as Benazir Bhutto and Malala Yousafzai, and increased leadership opportunities have also contributed to shifting perceptions about women's capabilities. Despite progress, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles, indicating the need for continued investment in mentorship, economic inclusion, and institutional support.

### 3. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative and analytical research design, employing a systematic document review to examine the status of women in Pakistan, with particular focus on social, economic, educational, and legal challenges affecting their empowerment. Data for the study were collected from a range of credible and authoritative sources, including academic publications, government reports, legal documents, and reports published by national and international organizations working on gender equality and women's rights. Official websites of organizations engaged in the protection and

promotion of women's rights, such as national ministries, development agencies, and international bodies, were systematically reviewed to obtain policy data, legal frameworks, and analytical reports.

The search process was primarily conducted using the Google search engine and Google Scholar, enabling access to both scholarly literature and institutional publications. To identify relevant material, a set of targeted keywords was used, including: "women's status in Pakistan," "women's empowerment Pakistan," "gender inequality Pakistan," "women's rights Pakistan," "access to justice for women," "female education Pakistan," "women employment Pakistan," and "legal framework for women in Pakistan." These search terms facilitated the identification of both empirical studies and policy-oriented reports relevant to the research objectives.

The collected literature was then subjected to a systematic screening and selection process, ensuring that only relevant, credible, and recent sources were included in the analysis. The selected materials were analyzed using a thematic and critical approach, allowing the identification of key patterns, recurring challenges, and gaps in the existing body of knowledge. Particular emphasis was placed on examining the interaction between social norms, cultural practices, economic conditions, and legal frameworks in shaping women's experiences and access to rights.

### 4. Data Analysis

The documents in the literature review collectively demonstrates that women's status in Pakistan is shaped by a complex interaction of structural, cultural, educational, economic, and legal factors, with a consistent pattern of formal progress but limited practical transformation. Across studies, from early foundational work like Farida Shaheed and Khawar Mumtaz to recent institutional reports by HRCP, UN Women and National Commission on the Status of Women, UNDP, and UNESCO, there is strong convergence on the persistence of patriarchal social structures as the primary determinant of gender inequality. While legal and policy frameworks have expanded significantly, the data indicate that social norms

continue to override legal rights, particularly in rural and low-income contexts.

From a demographic and socio-economic perspective, women constitute nearly half of Pakistan's population, yet their participation in formal employment, leadership, and decision-making remains disproportionately low. The literature shows a clear gender gap in labour force participation, with women concentrated in informal and unpaid sectors, confirming findings by World Bank and UNDP that economic contributions of women are both undervalued and statistically underreported. This is further reinforced by evidence of wage inequality, limited career mobility, and workplace discrimination, indicating that economic empowerment remains constrained despite gradual improvements.

In the education sector, data reflect a mixed trend: while female enrolment, especially in higher education, has improved (reaching approximately 45-50%), significant disparities persist in literacy, retention, and field selection. Rural-urban divides are particularly pronounced, with rural women facing compounded barriers such as poverty, mobility restrictions, and cultural norms. Studies by UNESCO and national statistics confirm that education is a key driver of empowerment, yet its impact is uneven due to structural and social constraints, including early marriage and safety concerns.

The document analysis also highlights a critical gap between legal frameworks and implementation. Pakistan has developed an extensive body of laws addressing violence against women, workplace harassment, property rights, and child protection, yet reports from HRCP consistently show weak enforcement, underreporting of cases, and institutional inefficiencies. Indicators from global indices, such as the World Economic Forum and World Justice Project, further support this analysis by ranking Pakistan relatively low in gender parity, rule of law, and access to justice, revealing systemic gaps in governance and accountability.

A significant analytical finding across the literature is the distinction between Islamic principles and cultural practices. Scholars like Fatima Mernissi and Asma Barlas argue that Islamic teachings

inherently support gender equity, but patriarchal interpretations and socio-cultural traditions distort their application. This creates a dual framework where religion is often invoked to justify inequality, despite its normative emphasis on justice and dignity.

Socially, the data reveal that women face intersectional challenges depending on their marital status, class, and location. Single, divorced, and widowed women experience heightened stigma, economic vulnerability, and social exclusion, while working women face dual burdens of professional and domestic responsibilities. Unpaid domestic labour emerges as a critical but invisible factor, significantly limiting women's time, mobility, and economic participation.

Finally, the data indicate gradual but uneven progress driven by urbanization, education, policy reforms, and global engagement. There is evidence of shifting social attitudes, increased female participation in professional sectors, and growing institutional support mechanisms, including collaboration with international organizations. However, these gains remain fragmented and region-specific, highlighting that systemic transformation is still in transition rather than complete.

### **5. Policy and Structural Reforms for Women's Empowerment in Pakistan**

Pakistan has a relatively strong legal framework on paper, but the primary challenge lies in implementation. Women's empowerment in Pakistan requires reforms that go beyond legal recognition and address the structural barriers that limit women's education, employment, mobility, autonomy, and access to justice. The literature shows that Pakistan has developed a strong constitutional and legislative framework, but weak implementation, patriarchal norms, institutional gaps, and socio-economic inequalities continue to restrict women's full participation in national life. Therefore, reforms must be legal, institutional, economic, educational, and social.

Pakistan needs stronger enforcement of existing laws relating to domestic violence, workplace harassment, child marriage, inheritance, property

rights, and protection from harmful practices. The issue is not only the absence of law, but the weak implementation of available protections. Police, prosecution, courts, ombudspersons, and protection institutions should be strengthened through gender-sensitive training, clear reporting mechanisms, monitoring systems, and accountability for non-compliance. Special attention should be given to women-friendly police desks, legal aid clinics, fast-track procedures in family and gender-based violence cases, and effective implementation of women's property rights laws.

Education must be treated as the foundation of women's empowerment. The state should prioritize girls' education in rural and marginalized areas by increasing school infrastructure, recruiting female teachers, ensuring safe transport, providing scholarships, and reducing indirect costs such as uniforms, books, and travel. Early marriage must be addressed through strict enforcement of child marriage laws and community awareness. At higher levels, women should be encouraged to enter STEM, law, public administration, technology, and leadership-oriented disciplines through targeted scholarships, mentorship, and career counselling.

Women's economic empowerment requires structural labour-market reform. Policies should promote equal pay, safe workplaces, access to formal employment, vocational training, digital skills, entrepreneurship, and financial inclusion. Since many women work in informal sectors, especially agriculture and home-based labour, their work should be legally recognized and protected. Access to microfinance, digital banking, market linkages, and business training can help women move from economic dependency to economic agency. Employers should also be required to implement anti-harassment mechanisms, maternity benefits, daycare facilities, and flexible work arrangements.

The burden of unpaid domestic and care work must be recognized as a major barrier to women's participation. National policy should acknowledge women's unpaid labour in economic planning and social protection frameworks. Public childcare

centres, community daycare facilities, parental leave policies, and campaigns promoting shared domestic responsibilities can reduce the unequal burden placed on women. Without addressing unpaid care work, women's education and employment reforms will remain incomplete.

Reforms must improve access to justice for women, particularly for rural, poor, single, divorced, and widowed women. Legal awareness campaigns should be conducted in local languages through schools, media, mosques, bar associations, and community centres. Free legal aid, mobile courts, women protection centres, and simplified procedures for maintenance, custody, inheritance, and domestic violence cases should be expanded. Courts and police should treat violence against women as a public wrong rather than a private family matter.

Pakistan should strengthen institutional coordination and accountability. Ministries, women development departments, NCSW, provincial commissions, human rights institutions, police, courts, and social welfare departments often work in isolation. A coordinated national and provincial monitoring mechanism should be developed to track progress on women's rights, collect gender-disaggregated data, and evaluate the implementation of laws and policies. Treaty Implementation Cells and CEDAW committees should be made more active and linked with practical provincial reform plans. Vulnerable groups of women require targeted support, including single, divorced, widowed, disabled, rural, minority, and transgender women. These groups face overlapping disadvantages in housing, employment, safety, inheritance, custody, and social acceptance. Dedicated housing schemes, livelihood programs, social protection benefits, legal aid, psychological support, and community reintegration programs should be introduced for women facing social and economic exclusion.

Social and cultural transformation is essential. Legal and policy reforms cannot succeed unless harmful gender stereotypes are challenged. Awareness campaigns should involve religious scholars, teachers, media professionals, community elders, men and boys, and civil society

organizations. Public messaging should distinguish between Islamic principles of justice, dignity, inheritance, consent, and women's agency, and cultural practices that restrict women's rights. This can help reduce resistance to women's education, work, property ownership, and public participation.

Pakistan should deepen collaboration with international development partners, including UN Women, UNFPA, UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO, ILO, and the World Bank. Such cooperation can support technical assistance, funding, data systems, gender-responsive budgeting, capacity building, protection services, reproductive health, girls' education, and economic inclusion. International collaboration should not replace national ownership but should strengthen Pakistan's ability to implement its constitutional commitments, CEDAW obligations, and Sustainable Development Goals. Meaningful women's empowerment in Pakistan requires a shift from symbolic protection to substantive equality. This means enforcing laws, changing institutions, investing in education and economic inclusion, recognizing unpaid care work, supporting vulnerable women, and transforming social attitudes. Only through integrated policy and structural reforms can women become equal participants in Pakistan's social, economic, legal, and political development.

## 6. Conclusion

Women in Pakistan constitute nearly half of the population, yet their full potential remains constrained by deeply rooted social norms, economic inequalities, and institutional limitations. The analysis demonstrates that women's empowerment is not a single-dimensional issue but a complex process shaped by the interaction of legal frameworks, cultural practices, access to education, and economic opportunities.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and multi-layered approach. Legal reforms must be effectively implemented, educational opportunities expanded, and economic participation strengthened, while parallel efforts are made to transform societal

attitudes that restrict women's autonomy. Empowerment also depends on building women's confidence, enhancing their access to resources, and ensuring meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

Investing in women is not merely a matter of social justice; it is a strategic imperative for national development. Greater inclusion of women in education, the workforce, governance, and public life contributes directly to economic growth, social cohesion, and democratic strengthening. A more equitable society, where women are enabled to realize their rights and capabilities, will not only improve individual outcomes but also accelerate Pakistan's progress toward sustainable and inclusive development.

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