

Women Empowerment in Pakistan: Progress, Barriers, and Policy Review

Dr. Nadia Khan^{*1}, Ch. Muhammad Rizwan Khurshid², Ch. Muhammad Nadeem Akhtar³,
Shazia Saeed⁴, Dr. Sundas Shahzad⁵

¹ Elementary and Secondary Education, Government Girls Higher Secondary School, Kaddi Swabi

*Corresponding author: Pscnadiakhan@gmail.com

² Agronomic Research Institute, AARI, Faisalabad. rizwanaari@gmail.com

³ Ayub Agricultural Research Institute, Faisalabad. ch.nadeem@aari.punjab.gov.pk

⁴ Post Harvest Research Centre, AARI, Faisalabad. shaziasaeed03@gmail.com

⁵ Oilseeds Research Institute, AARI, Faisalabad. sundas.shahzad@yahoo.com

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Abstract

This paper critically examines women's empowerment in Pakistan, highlighting a persistent implementation paradox: a progressive legal framework and constitutional guarantees coexist with entrenched patriarchal norms, systemic gender-based violence, and profound institutional failures that hinder genuine progress. Drawing on Amartya Sen's capability approach, the analysis evaluates advancements and fragilities across key dimensions education, health, economic participation, and political representation using global benchmarks such as the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, where Pakistan consistently ranks near the bottom. Statistical gains in education and health mask underlying vulnerabilities, while low female labor force participation (around 24%), severe wage gaps, financial exclusion, and symbolic political representation via quotas fail to translate into substantive agency or power. Deep-rooted socio-cultural barriers, including violence and mobility restrictions, perpetuate economic marginalization and intergenerational inequality. Despite robust legislation addressing violence, inheritance, and workplace harassment, an implementation deficit driven by male-dominated institutions, lack of political will, and parallel informal justice systems renders these reforms largely ineffective. The paper proposes pathways for vertical empowerment through institutional reforms, targeted economic inclusion, genuine political accountability, and socio-cultural interventions involving men and boys. Ultimately, transformative change requires shifting from horizontal presence to vertical control over resources and decision-making.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Gender Inequality, Implementation Paradox, Patriarchal Barriers, Global Gender Gap Index, Female Labor Force Participation, Gender-Based Violence, Legal Reforms, Political Quotas, Economic Exclusion, Pakistan

1. Introduction

The discourse surrounding women's empowerment in Pakistan necessitates an analysis defined by agency, access to resources (economic and financial), and political voice, fundamentally aligning with Sen's capability approach (Khan & Maqsood, 2023). For Pakistan, addressing deep-rooted gender inequality transcends a mere matter of social justice; it is recognized as an essential economic and political imperative necessary to realize sustainable and inclusive growth. Without the full participation of half its population, the nation's ability to achieve its developmental potential is severely constrained (World Bank, 2022: Haider et al., 2025).

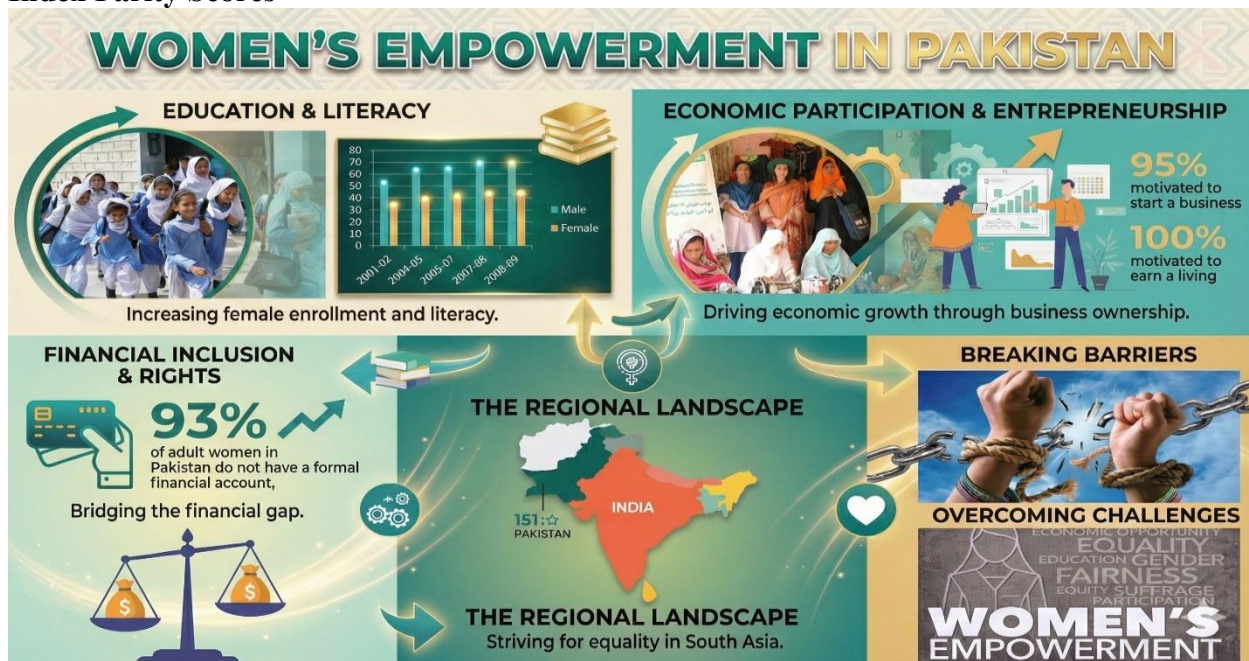
Despite this recognized imperative and commitments made over decades, a central paradox defines the status of women in Pakistan: the nation possesses an increasingly modern and progressive legal structure, underpinned by constitutional guarantees. The *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan* calls upon the State to eliminate all forms of exploitation (Article 3), ensures equality before the law (Article 25), and directs the State to take appropriate measures to enable women to participate in all spheres of life (Article 34) (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). Yet, this legal modernity is consistently undermined by a ground reality characterized by extreme patriarchal rigidity, systemic violence, and a profound implementation deficit (Warraich, 2019; Bibi et al., 2025).

Pakistan's standing in global gender metrics provides a stark quantitative measure of this paradox. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), which benchmarks the state and evolution of gender parity across four key dimensions (Economic Participation, Education, Health, and Political Empowerment), Pakistan has consistently ranked in the bottom tier globally (WEF, 2024). This persistent ranking reflects severe and entrenched inequality.

The country's overall parity score in recent reports has hovered near 57 per cent, marking a stagnation or slight decline compared to previous years (WEF, 2023). While Pakistan has closed a marginal percentage of its gender gap since 2006, this rate of progress is dramatically slower than its global peers, indicating that current governmental and international efforts have failed to trigger transformative, large-scale structural change (WEF, 2024; Bibi et al., 2025). Complementing this metric, the *Gender Inequality Index (GII)* provides a further evaluation, focusing on gender-based disadvantages in reproductive health, empowerment, and the labor market (UNDP, 2024).

The sustained bottom ranking over two decades, despite significant national legal efforts including the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1996 (Sajjad et al., 2020), reveals a critical institutional failure. This outcome suggests that policy focus and allocated resources have been misdirected toward developing 'universalistic' legal instruments that are detached from the overwhelming structural and cultural realities responsible for the pervasive implementation deficit on the ground (Warraich, 2019).

Figure 1. Pakistan's Performance in the Global Gender Gap Index (2024) – Overall Rank and Sub-Index Parity Scores



2. The Trajectory of Progress: Statistical Gains and Underlying Fragilities

Analysis of the four key GGGI dimensions reveals varying rates of progress, often masking underlying fragilities that compromise genuine empowerment (Haq et al., 2025).

2.1. Educational Attainment: The Statistical Illusion of Parity

Educational Attainment represents a sub-index where Pakistan has registered slight statistical advances, with educational parity bumping upwards to approximately 85 per cent in recent data this gain was partly driven by a tangible, albeit slow, increase in the female literacy rate. However, a critical review of the drivers behind this measured improvement reveals a statistical illusion. (WEF, 2024).

Parity at the tertiary education level rose partially because male enrolment shares declined, increasing the relative balance between men and women but failing to reflect a significant, organic surge in female participation or overall educational reach (Clancy et al., 2020). Furthermore, this statistical improvement masks the continuing crisis of access at lower levels. Societal constraints, poverty, and regressive norms still contribute to approximately 47 per cent of girls dropping out before completing primary education, often due to early marriages or lack of facilities (UNICEF Pakistan, 2023; Haider et al., 2025).

The evidence suggests a crucial disjuncture: while educational gains reflect improvement in social indicators, they do not automatically translate into economic mobility. Basic education may increase workforce participation, but it often funnels women into the precarious informal sector. (Chen et al., 2024). This demonstrates that while education functions as a social good, it fails as an economic multiplier because structural economic barriers such as restricted mobility and lack of financial access actively prevent women from utilizing their enhanced human capital in the higher-value, formal economy (Rauf et al., 2022).

2.2. Health and Survival

The Health and Survival dimension has remained stable in recent years, standing at a score of approximately 96 per cent (WEF, 2024). This stability generally reflects balanced sex ratios at birth. Nevertheless, persistent gaps endure in healthy life expectancy. Furthermore, women's access to adequate medical services is frequently restricted, particularly in vulnerable and remote regions like Balochistan, where insecurity or the non-availability of medical centers and trained staff hamper basic healthcare provision (Kakar & Khan, 2021).

2.3. Political Representation: Quotas and Accountability Deficits

Political Empowerment is Pakistan's lowest-ranked dimension, often scoring near 11 to 12 per cent in global indices. Currently, women hold a notable presence in the legislature, comprising roughly 17 to 20 per cent of the members in parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). This representation is largely facilitated by the quota system, which allocates reserved seats through an indirect nomination or party list system based on proportional representation (Cheema et al., 2022).

Quotas for reserved seats have also been implemented at the local government level, such as the 33 per cent reservation in metropolitan corporations in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Govt of Balochistan, 2019). Historically, this system of reservation, including the entry of nearly 40,000 women into union councils in the early 2000s, has provided a crucial initial platform for training and capacity building for women politicians (Bari, 2010).

However, the indirect nomination modality presents a structural flaw. Reserved seat legislators do not represent specific geographic constituencies; their loyalty often rests with party leaders who award the tickets. Research indicates that political parties frequently prioritize their own family members for these reserved seats, bypassing genuine party workers with long political association (Afzal, 2023; Bibi et al., 2025). This system ensures numerical presence but potentially sacrifices genuine political accountability and influence, creating an environment of political empowerment without true political power. The stagnation in political parity scores suggests that women are not gaining ground in true executive power structures, such as ministerial or cabinet roles (Cheema et al., 2022).

Table 2.1: Pakistan's Performance across Global Gender Gap Index Dimensions

Dimension	Latest Score / Trend	Key Implication
Economic Participation	Decline in recent years (WEF, 2024)	Widening income and perceived wage gaps indicate economic policies fail to formalize female labor (ADB, 2016).
Educational Attainment	~85.1% Parity (WEF, 2024)	Progress exists, but is partially skewed by relative decline in male tertiary enrollment, masking structural access issues (UNICEF, 2023).
Health and Survival	~96.4% Stable (WEF, 2024)	Parity in basic health, but enduring issues in healthy life expectancy and access in remote regions (Kakar & Khan, 2021).
Political Empowerment	~11.0% - 12.0% (WEF, 2024)	Lowest dimension score, reflecting symbolic representation (reserved seats) rather than executive power acquisition (Afzal, 2023).
Overall Global Rank	Bottom tier (145 out of 146) (WEF, 2024)	Signals critical failure to keep pace with global progress, demanding radical policy review.

3. Enduring Structural and Socio-Cultural Barriers

The persistent low ranking is a direct consequence of deep-seated structural and socio-cultural barriers that actively resist women's progress, particularly in the economic sphere.

3.1. The Economic Exclusion Gap: Vulnerability and Wage Exploitation

Pakistan's Female Labor Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) remains critically low, hovering between 22.8 per cent and 24.4 per cent, placing it among the lowest globally and in South Asia (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics [PBS], 2022; World Bank, 2023). The primary deterrents to female workforce participation are explicitly identified as safety concerns, restricted mobility, and rigid social constraints that policewomen's presence in public spaces (Sajjad et al., 2020; ADB, 2016).

For women who do engage in economic activities, approximately 78 per cent are confined to the informal sector, often working as home-based workers or in agriculture (ILO, 2021). This concentration in precarious, low-wage, and undervalued work perpetuates cycles of poverty, especially for those women deprived of educational pathways due to economic constraints (World Bank, 2022). The gender pay gap is severe, with women in wage employment earning 25 to 30 per cent less than men nationally. This disparity widens significantly to 40 per cent in the informal economy, primarily due to limited enforcement of labor laws and a lack of protections where women are most vulnerable (Majid, 2019; UN Women, 2022).

This high rate of violence, coupled with cultural restrictions on mobility, operates not merely as a violation of personal rights but as a functional economic control mechanism (Siddiqui et al., 2020). The fear of violence and social stigma actively discourages women from seeking or sustaining formal, high-value employment (Cheema et al., 2019). This connects the failure of law enforcement directly to sustained economic marginalization, demonstrating the state's implicit failure to protect the economic rights and human capital of women. Furthermore, when economic constraints force women with limited education into low-paid informal labor, their resulting low income leads to indebtedness and compromises on children's health and education (Khan et al., 2022). This ensures the transmission of low economic status across generations, securing structural female subordination (World Bank, 2023).

3.2. Institutionalized Financial and Credit Barriers

Access to formal financial services presents another major structural hurdle. Analysis of Global Findex 2021 data reveals a massive gender gap: only 13 per cent of Pakistani women have financial accounts compared to roughly 34 per cent of men (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2022). Similar disparities exist in digital finance (Haider et al., 2025). While education, income, and employment generally support financial inclusion, these factors have a significantly weaker effect for women, pointing to deeper societal barriers regarding women's autonomy over assets (Khan & Maqsood, 2023).

Access to credit for women entrepreneurs is equally difficult. Estimates suggest that less than 5 per cent of Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) credit goes to women-owned or managed businesses (SBP, 2021). Women's credit is often viewed as high risk, and specialized financial institutions, such as the First Women Bank Ltd, have historically struggled to meet their mandate due to systemic inefficiencies (ADB, 2016). Banks often focus on "pink marketing" existing products rather than developing bespoke, women-centric financial solutions that address collateral constraints (SBP, 2021).

In addition to financial scarcity, time poverty severely restricts women's economic agency. Women experience significant time poverty, spending an average of 79 hours per week on unpaid household chores and care work, compared to significantly lower hours for men (UN Women, 2021). This time burden limits their capacity to engage in income-generating activities, pursue skill development, or participate in the formal economy, effectively imposing a "care penalty" on their economic potential (Mozumder et al., 2023).

Table 3.1: Economic and Financial Exclusion Gaps

Indicator	Women's Status (Latest Data)	Men's Status (Latest Data)	Gap & Policy Implication
Labor Force Participation (FLFPR)	22.8% - 24.4% (PBS, 2022)	~68% (Significantly Higher)	Among the world's lowest rates, constrained by safety, mobility, and social norms (World Bank, 2023).
Concentration in Informal Sector	Approx. 78% (ILO, 2021)	Approx. 73% (ILO, 2021)	High vulnerability to wage exploitation; lack of access to legal protection and social security (Majid, 2019).
Financial Account Ownership	13% (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2022)	~34% (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2022)	Extreme financial exclusion, requiring targeted digital programs and banking sector reform (SBP, 2021).
Gender Pay Gap (Informal)	Up to 40% less than men (UN Women, 2022)	N/A	Highest wage disparity, indicative of failure to enforce minimum wage laws where women are concentrated (Majid, 2019).

3.3. Patriarchy, Violence, and Restrictions on Agency

Patriarchy, reinforced by regressive social norms, remains the overarching barrier. In Pakistan, 28 per cent of women aged 15-49 have experienced physical violence (PDHS, 2019). Data from Punjab indicates that at least 85 women suffer violence every single day, including an average of nine who are sexually assaulted (Aurat Foundation, 2021). This endemic gender-based violence (GBV) is often compounded by cultural justifications. Domestic violence is frequently viewed as a "private issue," hindering legal intervention and prioritization in policy assessments (Saeed, 2018).

The culture of "honor" institutionalizes violence; approximately 1,000 women die each year in so-called honor killings (HRCP, 2015). These acts are often rituals of control, aimed at policing female autonomy and agency.

Furthermore, patriarchal structures restrict women's mobility and socialization under the pretext of 'protection,' confining girls within homes and discouraging interaction (Siddiqui et al., 2020).

Restrictions are also placed on productive work outside the home, as men fear female independence and success (Afzal, 2023). This biased attitude and the stereotype of female subordination are consistent hindrances to empowerment across all fields of life, including political and economic spheres (Cheema et al., 2019).

4. Legal Framework and Policy Intent: A Progressive Statute Book

Despite the barriers, the last two decades have seen Pakistan introduce positive legal amendments to reinforce women's positions (Warraich, 2019).

4.1. Constitutional and International Commitments

The Constitutional foundation for women's rights is robust. Key provisions include Article 25, which ensures equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex alone, while Article 34 directs the state to enable women's participation in all spheres of life (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). Pakistan's ratification of CEDAW in 1996 signifies its formal international commitment to eliminating discrimination (Sajjad et al., 2020).

4.2. Legislation Addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Significant legislation has been enacted to address violence. The Women's Protection Act of 2006 removed the police's right to detain those suspected of fornication, allowing judges to try rape cases under the Pakistan Penal Code. It also mandated DNA testing in rape cases (Shafqat, 2018). The Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act (2011), the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Bill (2012), and the Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act (2010) also address various forms of violence (NCSW, 2016). The Sindh Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act (2013) and the Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act (2016) represent provincial efforts to offer comprehensive protection (UNDP, 2021).

Furthermore, the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) requires organizations to adopt codes of conduct and establish inquiry committees. The 2022 Amendment attempted to expand coverage to vulnerable groups, including freelancers and domestic workers (SBP, 2021).

4.3. Economic and Property Rights Legislation

Pakistan has also moved to legally recognize the economically vulnerable. Provincial Home-Based Worker (HBW) laws have been enacted across all provinces—Sindh (2018), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (2021), Balochistan (2022), and Punjab (2023) (UN Women, 2021). These laws are intended to enable the registration of HBWs and ensure their access to fair wages and social security (ILO, 2021).

Regarding property rights, the *Prevention of Anti-Women Practices (Criminal Law Amendment) Act* (2011) introduced strong provisions (sections 498 A and 498 C) to ensure women receive their proper inheritance share (NCSW, 2016), complementing the theoretical right provided in the Constitution. However, the denial of these rights remains a prevalent issue, often resulting in pressure to engage in *Watta-Satta* marriages or forcing women to forgo inheritance to maintain ties with their father's family (Rehman, 2017).

A detailed examination reveals that these progressive laws are often built upon "universalistic assumptions" that presuppose strong formal institutional capacity and societal compliance (Warraich, 2019). This legal structure is consequently decoupled from the realities of rural Pakistan, where informal justice systems thrive (HRCP, 2015) and women are concentrated in informal labor. This results in a comprehensive statute book that is largely theoretical for the majority of the population. Moreover, the persistence of discriminatory legal elements, such as remnants of the Hudood Ordinance regarding adultery (Ali, 2022), creates a conflicting duality in the legal system that undermines the credibility of secular-progressive reforms and provides

institutional actors with justification to prioritize traditional interpretations.

5. The Implementation Deficit: Systemic Failure and Institutional Resistance

The key failure in Pakistan's women empowerment narrative is the persistent and severe gap between legislative intent and practical outcome. The lack of effective implementation is a result of intertwined structural, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers (Hassan et al., 2024).

5.1. Justice System Barriers and Institutional Incapacity

The primary impediment to effective law enforcement against GBV and discrimination lies in structural barriers within the criminal justice institutions, including the police, prosecution, and judiciary (Bazaanah et al., 2024). The judiciary is critically male dominated, with only 2.91 per cent of judges being women, far below the 33 per cent target recommended by the UN Beijing Conference. This lack of gender parity limits the system's capacity to deliver gender-sensitive justice (Levendale et al., 2025).

The judicial processes themselves are complex, expensive, and cumbersome, acting as significant deterrents for victims, especially those facing stigma, retaliation, or job insecurity (SBP, 2021). Furthermore, there is a notable absence of coordinated mechanisms and dedicated facilities for survivors of gender-based violence, complicating the already difficult journey toward justice (Hester et al., 2025).

The institutions responsible for upholding the law often reflect and uphold the cultural barriers they are meant to dismantle. The combination of a male-dominated judiciary, lack of professional training for judicial personnel and police, and the normalization of domestic violence as a 'private issue' ensures that the state apparatus frequently operates to reinforce patriarchal norms (Saeed, 2018).

5.2. Policy Compromise and Political Will

Implementation of pro-women laws is frequently compromised by a lack of political stability and the competing interests of political parties and leaders (Said et al., 2024). A notable example is the failure to formalize Home-Based Worker (HBW) labor effectively, despite provincial legislation. The lack of reliable large-scale surveys, infrastructure, and political will hinders the effective registration and enforcement of minimum wage and social protection for the estimated 3.6 to 12.4 million HBWs (ILO, 2021).

Moreover, the parallel justice system, driven by traditional judicial bodies such as *jirgas*, continues to operate with impunity, particularly in rural Pakistan. These structures play havoc with the lives of vulnerable populations and directly conflict with the formal legal system (Bono et al., 2025). Despite legal recommendations urging lawmakers to declare these bodies illegal and punish those who constitute them, political will is lacking, shifting focus from institution building to more immediate political concerns (Levendale et al., 2025).

When women are discouraged from reporting harassment or violence due to the certainty of institutional failure, procedural complexity, or fear of retaliation the protective law inadvertently becomes a mechanism that deters complainants rather than deterring perpetrators. The measure of success for such laws must shift from tracking case numbers to genuine deterrence and prevention (SBP, 2021).

5.3. Civil Society and Non-Governmental Response

In the face of institutional resistance, civil society organizations (CSOs) act as a vital intermediary, translating legal rights into actionable knowledge and accessing state resources. The Aurat Foundation, one of Pakistan's most influential women-rights organizations established in 1986 (Ahmad, 2019), operates a nationwide, extensive grassroots network. It mobilizes citizens for political participation, campaigns against child marriage and honor killings, and provides crucial leadership training for grassroots women and politicians (Aurat Foundation, 2021).

The foundation's efforts in voter registration and training for local government elections demonstrate its role in challenging entrenched social and cultural norms (Ahmad, 2019). Similarly, organizations like the Aga

Khan Foundation (AKF) facilitate economic empowerment through women-led enterprises and skill-development initiatives, particularly in remote regions like Gilgit-Baltistan, strengthening women's decision-making and financial autonomy (Ahmad, 2019). The efforts of these NGOs are critical in building capacity and advocating for policy implementation at the policy and grassroots levels (Aurat Foundation, 2021).

Table 5.1: Review of Key Pro-Women Legislation and Implementation Barriers

Legislation/Policy	Date/Scope	Policy Intent	Primary Implementation Barrier
Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act	2010 (Amended 2022) (SBP, 2021)	Safety in formal employment, inclusion of freelancers/virtual spaces.	Presumption of formal employment; narrow judicial interpretation limiting scope; lack of reach into the informal economy (SBP, 2021).
Provincial Home-Based Workers Acts	2018–2023 (UN Women, 2021)	Legal recognition, fair wages, social protection.	Lack of reliable registration data; difficulty enforcing minimum wages against intermediaries; absence of actionable policy frameworks (ILO, 2021).
Domestic Violence Prevention Acts (Provincial)	Various, e.g., 2016 (Punjab) (UNDP, 2021)	Criminalization and prevention of spousal/domestic violence.	Societal view of violence as a 'private issue' (Saeed, 2018); institutional resistance (police/judiciary); lack of coordinated victim support systems (UNDP, 2021).
Women's Inheritance Rights (Act 2011)	2011 (NCSW, 2016)	Ensure legal enforcement of women's rightful share in property.	Traditional/cultural pressure; denial of rights by family; legal process complexity (Rehman, 2017).

6. Pathways to Vertical Empowerment: Policy Realignment and Strategic Recommendations

To move beyond symbolic progress and achieve transformative change, Pakistan must shift focus from simply increasing women's presence to securing their vertical empowerment, granting them real power and control over resources. (Mozumder et al., 2023).

6.1. Strengthening Institutional Implementation Capacity

Systemic barriers require comprehensive reform within the justice system. It is imperative to implement gender-sensitive recruitment quotas and establish mandatory, professional training for police, prosecution, and judicial functionaries to eliminate systemic bias specialized training for bar councils is necessary to address the lack of gender awareness within the legal fraternity.(Mazar et al., 2016)

Critically, the state must legislatively and practically dismantle parallel justice systems, such as *jirgas*, by ensuring the formal justice system is prompt, accessible, and affordable in rural areas Furthermore, robust monitoring and evaluation systems must be established to track the efficacy of gender mainstreaming initiatives and assess policy effectiveness beyond initial allocation, focusing on practical outcomes rather than procedural compliance (World Bank, 2024).

6.2. Strategic Economic Inclusion

Policies must directly target the formalization of female labor. This involves accelerating the registration of Home Based Workers, strictly enforcing minimum wages, and coupling registration with mandatory access

to financial services and comprehensive social protection benefits, including health and pensions (Banks et al., 2017).

The banking sector requires significant reform to address institutionalized financial exclusion. Regulatory measures must mandate banks to develop women centric financial products and establish specific, measurable targets for lending to women owned enterprises, addressing the perception of women's credit risk (Irene et al., 2025).

Finally, public investment in social infrastructure, such as subsidized, quality childcare facilities, is necessary to mitigate the severe time-poverty burden on women, enabling higher and more sustained FLFPR (UN Women, 2021; Mozumder et al., 2023).

6.3. Political Reform for Genuine Accountability

To ensure women legislators are accountable to the electorate rather than merely to party patronage, structural political reforms are necessary. This includes transitioning towards the direct election of women on reserved seats, or alternatively, enforcing mandatory internal quotas within political parties for women candidates contesting general seats (Cheema et al., 2022). Furthermore, institutional policies must be put in place to ensure women are proportionately represented in executive roles cabinet, ministerial, and senior civil service positions thereby increasing their direct influence on resource allocation and national policy implementation (Afzal, 2023).

6.4. Addressing Socio-Cultural and Regional Heterogeneity

Empowerment policies must acknowledge and address significant regional variations in women's status, such as the substantial sub-provincial diversity observed within Punjab (Rana & Khan, 2020) or the distinct challenges related to literacy and security in Balochistan (Kakar & Khan, 2021). National strategies must be translated into localized development plans.

Finally, to address the source of implementation failure, comprehensive, long-term public education and media campaigns are required to challenge the biased attitudes and stereotypes that perpetuate male dominance (Khan et al., 2022). Crucially, efforts must actively involve men and boys as essential partners in promoting gender equality, recognizing their vital role in achieving structural societal change (HRCP, 2015).

7. Conclusion: Synthesizing the Findings and Charting the Future

The critical review of women's empowerment in Pakistan confirms a persistent implementation paradox: a comprehensive and progressive legal framework is repeatedly nullified by the reality of structural institutional failure and entrenched patriarchal resistance (Warraich, 2019; UNDP, 2021). The nation's continued bottom-tier ranking in global indices, despite two decades of focused efforts, is not a failure of legislative drafting but a failure of enforcement and political will (WEF, 2024).

Progress has been primarily horizontal (e.g., educational presence, reserved seats), but this superficial progress has not translated into vertical empowerment meaning real power, economic control, and agency. The fundamental challenge lies in shifting resource allocation and power dynamics, moving women from high presence to high power in executive positions, formal employment, and control over property. (Yu et al., 2018).

Achieving this vertical shift requires a concerted strategy focusing on institutional capacity building specifically by reforming the biased and male dominated justice system and strategically targeting economic barriers through the formalization of labor and mandated gender-responsive finance. (Bishu et al., 2020). The future trajectory of women's empowerment in Pakistan depends entirely on its capacity to overcome the cultural normalization of violence and institutional complacency that currently prioritize the status quo over genuine, accountable, and localized policy implementation. (Iqbal et al., 2024).

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