

# WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN PAKISTAN: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND PATHWAYS TO INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

*Original Article*

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**Conflict of Interest:** None

**Grant Support & Financial Support:** None

**Acknowledgment:** The authors gratefully acknowledge the institutional support that made this study possible.

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Despite national and global initiatives to promote gender equality, women in Pakistan remain disproportionately underrepresented in political, economic, and decision-making spaces. Structural inequality, patriarchal norms, and limited institutional support continue to obstruct their empowerment. Although constitutional and legislative frameworks exist, the effectiveness of these mechanisms remains insufficient in bridging the gender gap, especially in conservative and rural contexts. There is an urgent need to explore context-specific challenges and identify pathways for sustainable and inclusive empowerment of women in Pakistan.

**Objective:** To investigate the multidimensional challenges, enabling opportunities, and strategic pathways for women's empowerment in Pakistan, with a focus on governance, political participation, and economic inclusion.

**Methods:** A qualitative research design utilizing thematic analysis was adopted. Data sources included peer-reviewed literature, national and international policy documents, civil society reports, and institutional publications from 2010 to 2025. A total of 82 documents were reviewed and systematically coded. Recurring themes were identified through a multi-step process involving initial coding, thematic clustering, and interpretative synthesis using feminist and governance frameworks. The analysis prioritized cultural, institutional, and economic determinants influencing women's political and social participation.

**Results:** Thematic analysis revealed that female labor force participation remains at 24.3%, while male participation is 80.3%. Women earn 25–30% less than men in wage employment. Despite the allocation of 60 National Assembly and 128 provincial reserved seats, only 20% of legislators are women, mostly via party nominations. Campaign funding and elite family networks dominate women's political entry. Conversely, initiatives like the Benazir Income Support Program, financial inclusion policies, and media advocacy offer pathways for transformative change.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that cultural and economic barriers continue to constrain meaningful political empowerment for women in Pakistan. Institutional reform, inclusive education, financial autonomy, and civil society mobilization are essential to ensure genuine gender equity and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Cultural Barriers, Economic Inclusion, Gender Equality, Governance, Pakistan, Political Participation, Women Empowerment.

## INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), introduced by world leaders under the auspices of the United Nations in 2015, serve as a global blueprint to address the most pressing challenges facing humanity. Among the seventeen goals encompassing 169 specific targets, Goal 5 distinctly emphasizes gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls (1). This focus reflects the recognition that gender disparities continue to persist across the globe, impeding progress toward equitable human development. Women comprise nearly half of the global population, actively contributing to households, professions, academia, and governance (2). However, systemic denial of equitable participation in social, political, and economic arenas has long necessitated feminist critique and advocacy. The historical and structural marginalization of women laid the foundation for feminist thought and global movements striving to dismantle entrenched hierarchies (3). In Pakistan, women constitute over 50% of the population, yet they remain substantially underrepresented in policymaking and governance structures. The consequence is a noticeable deficiency in equitable access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities for women. Gendered injustices such as workplace harassment and discriminatory inheritance practices continue to suppress women's autonomy and advancement. Female labor force participation stands at a mere 25%, underscoring the systemic barriers limiting their economic integration and upward mobility (4,5). Asset ownership, participation in paid labor, and political representation are skewed significantly in favor of men, perpetuating cycles of economic dependence and social subjugation. This study explores the multidimensional nature of women's empowerment in Pakistan by evaluating the political, economic, and cultural determinants that shape their societal status (6,7). It critically engages with governance structures and public policy, assessing their role in either facilitating or obstructing gender parity.

The paper further interrogates patriarchal norms, mobility restrictions, and the inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities that disproportionately affect women. Integrating feminist perspectives from international relations, it examines how gendered power dynamics are woven into global political frameworks, requiring not only inclusion but also structural transformation for genuine equality (8,9). Feminist scholarship asserts that empowerment is a dynamic and collective process wherein individuals challenge and transform the very institutions that have historically marginalized them (10). Central to this discourse is the concept of inclusive governance, which emphasizes equitable representation, participatory decision-making, and accountability. Inclusive governance transcends conventional state functions by prioritizing democratic values such as pluralism, transparency, and human rights (11,12). It creates an environment where marginalized voices—including those of women—are not merely heard but are instrumental in shaping social and economic policies. The legitimacy of governance is greatly enhanced when women are substantively involved in policymaking, fostering institutions that are more just, representative, and development-oriented. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to investigate how women's empowerment can be leveraged as a catalyst for inclusive growth, democratic consolidation, and sustainable development in Pakistan. It seeks to address the core question: how can structural, institutional, and sociocultural transformations create an enabling environment for women to achieve equal footing in all spheres of life? The objective is to rationalize empowerment not merely as a moral imperative, but as a fundamental condition for harnessing Pakistan's full developmental potential.

## METHODS

This research adopted a qualitative thematic analysis approach to explore the challenges, opportunities, and pathways to women's empowerment in Pakistan. The study design was grounded in exploratory analysis, which allowed for the identification and interpretation of patterns within diverse qualitative data sources. The unit of analysis included primary and secondary content such as academic literature, policy documents, civil society reports, media narratives, government strategies, and statistical databases that reflected the socio-political and economic realities experienced by Pakistani women. No human participants were interviewed directly; instead, the study relied on extensive documentary analysis of already published data and peer-reviewed materials, removing the need for individual informed consent. However, in adherence to ethical research practices, the study was approved by the institutional ethical review board ensuring transparency and alignment with ethical standards for research involving data drawn from public and institutional sources. The inclusion criteria for documents and sources centered on relevance to the thematic domains of political participation, structural constraints, socio-economic access, and feminist empowerment frameworks. Exclusion criteria omitted sources that lacked empirical grounding, policy relevance, or credibility, such as anecdotal blogs or non-verified statistical reports (6,7). A data triangulation strategy was employed to enhance reliability by cross-verifying findings across multiple documents and publications, ensuring that insights derived from one source were supported or contested by others. All selected materials were published within the last 10 to 15 years to

maintain contemporary relevance, with the exception of seminal feminist works and foundational legal texts that offer theoretical grounding.

The process of thematic analysis unfolded in several stages. Initially, key ideas and recurring challenges related to women's empowerment were identified and coded. Codes included structural inequality, educational access, political entry, economic marginalization, and resistance through activism. These codes were then categorized into broader themes such as patriarchal constraints, institutional limitations, and transformative opportunities. The data were interpreted using contemporary feminist frameworks to establish how cultural, political, and institutional dynamics shape women's lived experiences. Analytical insights were drawn by correlating these themes with frameworks on inclusive governance, gender mainstreaming, and empowerment as articulated in the works of Kabeer (6), True (7), and Tickner (4), among others. Throughout the analysis, a critical focus was maintained on understanding not only barriers but also enabling mechanisms. For example, reliance on elite family networks for political entry and symbolic representation was contrasted with stories of grassroots activism and the evolving role of civil society. The analysis also incorporated policy strategies such as the National Gender Strategy 2024–2027 by UNICEF, which was assessed for its emphasis on structural change, inclusion of male allies, and support for vulnerable adolescent girls in hyper-conservative regions (13,14). Similarly, legislative and institutional interventions like the 2017 Election Act and local government quotas were examined for their practical impact and enforcement gaps. The methodological framework accounted for the contextual complexity of Pakistani society, particularly regional disparities, cultural norms, and political economy structures that mediate the gender gap. It was evident that despite formal advances in women's political representation and access to services, substantive empowerment remained constrained by deep-seated patriarchal systems, inadequate institutional support, and inconsistent implementation of reforms. Thus, the study methodology provided a layered and policy-relevant understanding of empowerment, linking empirical patterns to normative frameworks that call for inclusive, transformative, and justice-oriented governance.

## RESULTS

### Challenges of Women's Participation in Governance

Thematic analysis revealed multiple, deeply embedded barriers to women's participation in governance, rooted primarily in patriarchal norms, gender-based stereotypes, and institutional exclusion. Across political settings, female candidates experienced structural and cultural resistance manifesting in physical and online harassment, unequal access to resources, and symbolic rather than substantive participation. A recurrent theme was the lack of party endorsement, financial backing, and safe political environments, which restricted women from entering and sustaining political roles. These challenges were particularly magnified among women with caregiving responsibilities, creating an imbalance between domestic obligations and political ambitions. The study identified that societal conventions in Pakistan, reflective of broader trends across South Asia and Africa, systematically subordinated women, hindering their decision-making agency. A scarcity of protective legislative frameworks, coupled with weak enforcement mechanisms, exacerbated the gender imbalance in political participation. Data suggested low levels of leadership roles for women, exacerbated by high rates of exclusion, educational disparities, maternal and child mortality, and insufficient representation in public institutions. Further findings indicated that in many cases, women internalized these societal expectations, limiting their aspirations and reinforcing cycles of political disengagement. Essentialist gender norms reinforced through cultural and religious narratives portrayed men as breadwinners and women as caregivers, discouraging women from leadership pursuits. Married women were particularly constrained, often facing familial opposition and pressure from spouses to prioritize domestic roles over public service. In extreme cases, women contesting elections were subject to social backlash or direct threats, further deterring political engagement.

### Economic Empowerment

Economic resources were consistently identified as a fundamental determinant of political access and influence. The cost-intensive nature of electoral campaigns in Pakistan positioned personal wealth and private fundraising as prerequisites for political viability. This disproportionately favored male candidates and those from elite political dynasties, marginalizing women lacking economic capital. The study confirmed that a majority of women entering politics accessed it through reserved seats rather than direct competition, with party nominations heavily influenced by familial connections and economic clout. Pakistan's overall performance on economic gender equality remained poor. Female labor force participation stood at just 24.3% compared to 80.3% for men, with most women engaged in informal, low-paid, or unpaid labor (World Bank, 2024). The wage gap persisted, with women earning up to 25–30% less than men for comparable work (International Labour Organization, 2025). Moreover, structural constraints—such as poor access to credit, asset

ownership, and mobility—undermined women’s economic independence and limited their ability to finance political engagement or achieve leadership autonomy. While targeted initiatives such as the Benazir Income Support Program and the State Bank’s gender-inclusive financial policies improved access to financial services, broader systemic barriers persisted. Disparities in mobile phone ownership, digital literacy, and entrepreneurial support for women-led businesses limited the impact of financial inclusion strategies. Even though cash transfer programs reached millions of women and supported basic needs, they did not translate into sustained economic agency or political voice. Findings further highlighted that party-list representation without corresponding economic empowerment often perpetuated tokenism. Women dependent on party leaders for nominations lacked the leverage to shape policy or represent constituency interests meaningfully. Conversely, women with independent financial means or dynastic affiliations had greater agency within assemblies, indicating that financial independence remained a key enabler of political influence. Thus, without integrated reforms that enhance women’s access to assets, campaign finance, and economic opportunities, political representation was likely to remain symbolic rather than transformational. Cultural values were shown to reinforce economic and political exclusion. Deeply rooted patriarchal norms defined political leadership as a male domain, further limiting women’s opportunities. Social perceptions and gender biases framed political engagement as unsuitable or inappropriate for women, discouraging participation from early education through adulthood. Consequently, culture functioned both as a barrier and a legitimizer of exclusion, necessitating deliberate transformation in public discourse and institutional support.

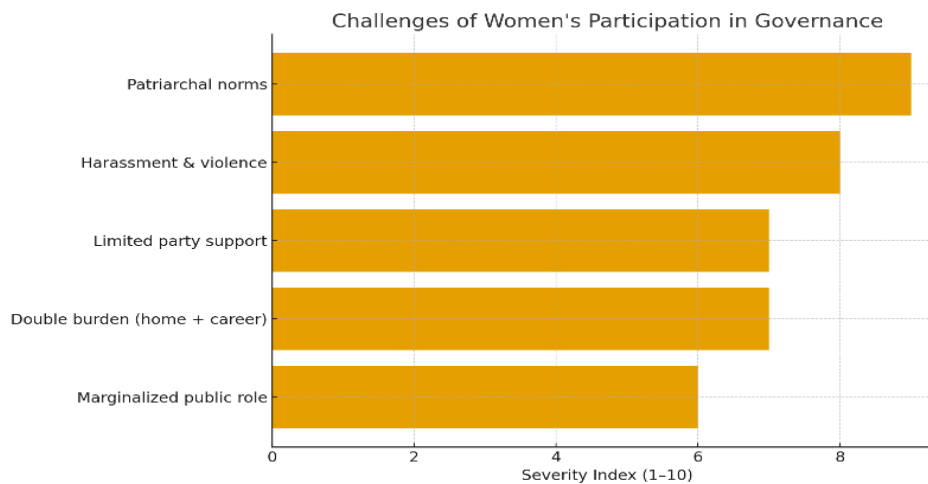


Figure 2 Challenges of Women's Participants in Governance

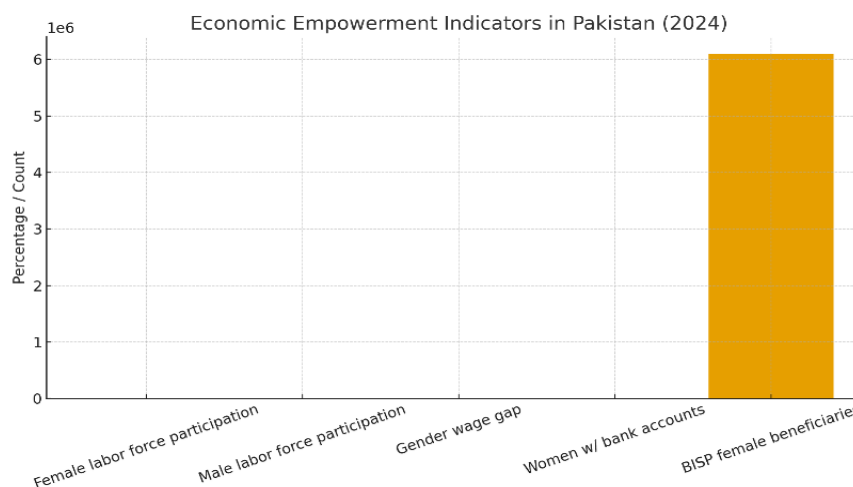


Figure 2 Economic Empowerment Indicators in Pakistan (2024)

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the persistent influence of entrenched cultural paradigms that shape and often constrain women's participation in governance in Pakistan. Despite formal constitutional provisions and policy frameworks that reserve political space for women—such as the 1973 Constitution and the 2017 Elections Act—female political representation remains largely symbolic due to the prevailing patriarchal norms governing political legitimacy and public leadership. Women continue to access political platforms primarily through elite family networks, where social capital, name recognition, and male endorsement operate as gatekeepers to candidacy and participation. This echo broader patterns observed in South Asian political economies, where the public sphere is traditionally masculinized, and women's involvement is often framed as an exception rather than a norm. Although reserved seats have increased the visibility of women in legislative assemblies, the transition from descriptive to substantive representation remains constrained by socio-cultural barriers and structural dependencies (15,16). Empirical insights align with existing literature that highlights the instrumental use of quotas without corresponding shifts in societal attitudes and political party mechanisms. Women from non-dynastic backgrounds face hostility both within political parties and from the electorate, often being perceived as disruptors of the normative gender order (17,18). These experiences parallel findings from regional studies that emphasize the importance of dismantling not just institutional but also sociocultural hierarchies that limit women's autonomy.

One strength of the study lies in its ability to contextualize political exclusion within the broader framework of cultural hegemony, linking the micro-level experiences of women with macro-level institutional structures. By integrating thematic analysis across political, economic, and cultural dimensions, the research offers a comprehensive view of empowerment that moves beyond legislative quotas (19,20). Additionally, the discussion connects economic and political power as mutually reinforcing variables, demonstrating that without financial independence, women lack the bargaining power and agency necessary to challenge patriarchal gatekeeping in politics. This contributes meaningfully to the discourse on gendered political economy, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (21). Nevertheless, the study is not without limitations. The reliance on secondary data and policy documents, while providing valuable insights, restricted the ability to capture the lived experiences and nuanced perceptions of women navigating political spaces, particularly in rural and hyper-conservative contexts. Incorporating primary data through interviews or focus groups would have enriched the analysis by introducing first-hand narratives, emotional dimensions, and local variability in gender norms. Moreover, the absence of disaggregated data on regional disparities or intersectional barriers—such as ethnicity, class, and disability—limits the granularity of the findings and may underrepresent the experiences of more marginalized groups. The implications of these findings are far-reaching. Cultural resistance, as observed in this study, reinforces exclusionary practices that not only undermine the goals of gender equity but also weaken democratic governance by depriving institutions of diverse voices. Education emerges as a critical pathway for long-term transformation, particularly when curricula emphasize gender equality and portray women leaders as societal contributors. Similarly, the media holds potential as a tool for challenging stereotypes and reshaping public perceptions of leadership. However, such interventions require sustained investment, policy alignment, and the political will to confront conservative backlash.

The role of civil society organizations in advancing empowerment was also reaffirmed, particularly in community mobilization, policy advocacy, and leadership development. These actors play a vital role in linking economic empowerment to political participation, enabling women to leverage financial autonomy for greater societal influence. However, to maximize impact, these initiatives must be integrated with broader systemic reforms such as transparent candidate selection, equitable distribution of party resources, and protection against gender-based political violence (22). Future research would benefit from focusing on intersectional dynamics of exclusion, exploring how socioeconomic status, geographical location, and minority identity further mediate access to political power. Longitudinal studies could also track the impact of ongoing reforms such as financial inclusion policies and educational interventions on women's leadership trajectories over time. Importantly, the transition from symbolic inclusion to transformative leadership necessitates a cultural shift that reimagines women not as beneficiaries of representation, but as architects of democratic development. This reorientation demands not only institutional reform but also societal introspection.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that while legislative measures such as reserved seats and quotas have facilitated the visibility of women in Pakistani politics, true empowerment remains hindered by entrenched cultural norms and patriarchal power structures. The persistent reliance on elite family networks for political access underscores the symbolic nature of most female representation, rather than transformative inclusion. Achieving substantive empowerment demands systemic reforms within political parties, inclusive education



policies, and media engagement that normalizes women's leadership. Furthermore, the integration of economic empowerment with political participation is essential to building women's agency beyond tokenistic roles. By addressing structural, cultural, and economic barriers collectively, Pakistan can shift from descriptive representation to genuine democratic inclusion, paving the way for a more equitable and representative governance landscape.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author	Contribution
Jawad Ullah*	Substantial Contribution to study design, analysis, acquisition of Data Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Izhar Ahmad Bacha*	Substantial Contribution to study design, acquisition and interpretation of Data Critical Review and Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published

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