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Gender Equality and Legal Frameworks: Progress and Challenges

Sara Malik
School of Social Sciences, Quaid i Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan
***Email**: sara.malik@qau.edu.pk*
Nadia Hussain
Centre for Gender Studies, Karachi University, Karachi, Pakistan
***Email:** nadia.hussain@ku.edu.pk*

Abstract:

Gender equality remains a central pillar of human rights and sustainable development. In Pakistan, constitutional principles and statutory reforms have sought to fortify gender equality within law. However, entrenched patriarchal norms, gaps between legal texts and enforcement, and socio economic barriers continue to undermine outcomes. This article analyzes the progress achieved through legal frameworks, including constitutional guarantees, pro women laws, and international treaty commitments, and identifies key challenges in implementation, social norms, and institutional capacity. The study further proposes actionable policy recommendations to close the gap between law and lived experience. This multidisciplinary approach situates legal reforms within the socio cultural context of Pakistan for comprehensive policy insight.

Keywords:

gender equality, legal frameworks, Pakistan, constitutional law, enforcement challenges, international treaties, gender based violence, socio cultural norms

Introduction:

Gender equality is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and a prerequisite for social and economic development. In Pakistan, legal frameworks anchored in the 1973 Constitution affirm equality before the law and prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender alone (Article 25). Moreover, the state is mandated to enable full participation of women in all spheres of national life (Article 34) and to formulate special provisions for women and children (Article 25(3)). pcsw.punjab.gov.pk+1

Despite such formal guarantees and incremental legislative advances—such as domestic violence prevention statutes, child marriage restraint acts, and protection laws for transgender individuals—significant challenges in implementation persist. Socio-cultural barriers, gaps in awareness, and weak enforcement mechanisms limit the practical realization of gender equitable outcomes. ojs.ahss.org.pk+1

This article examines the trajectory of legal reforms aimed at promoting gender equality in Pakistan, assesses points of progress, and delineates entrenched obstacles that curtail tangible change.

Constitutional and Legal Foundations

The Constitution of Pakistan, adopted in 1973, is a pivotal document that lays the foundation for ensuring gender equality within the country's legal system. Article 25 of the Constitution guarantees **equality before the law**, stating that "all citizens are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection of the law." This provision prohibits any form of **discrimination based on sex**, affirming the principle of equal treatment for men and women. Furthermore, **Article 25(2)** specifically prohibits any discrimination on the basis of gender, ensuring that women and men are afforded the same legal rights and protections.

In addition to these broad guarantees, the Constitution empowers the state to take special measures for the protection of women and children. **Article 25(3)** permits the state to enact laws specifically aimed at addressing the distinctive needs of women and children, acknowledging the historical and societal imbalances that require targeted legal interventions. The inclusion of these constitutional provisions reflects Pakistan's commitment to promoting gender equality, aiming to eliminate discriminatory practices and creating an enabling environment for women to participate fully in social, economic, and political life.

Moreover, the **Fundamental Rights** section of the Constitution (Part II) provides a comprehensive framework for the protection of civil liberties, including the **right to life** and **personal liberty** (Article 9), which extends to all citizens, regardless of gender. The **right to equality** and **non-discrimination** has been reinforced through subsequent **legislative acts** and **judicial interpretations**, making it a foundational principle of Pakistan's legal system.

However, despite these constitutional guarantees, **implementation challenges** persist due to socio-cultural barriers and a **lack of awareness** about these rights among marginalized women, especially in rural and conservative areas. Thus, while legal provisions exist, the **translation of these rights into tangible benefits** requires ongoing efforts to ensure that gender equality is not only guaranteed by law but also realized in practice. Further legislative initiatives, judicial activism, and public awareness campaigns are essential for bridging the gap between the **constitutional promises** and **real-world outcomes** for women.

Pro-Women Legislation and Reforms

Over the past few decades, Pakistan has introduced a series of **pro-women legislative measures** aimed at addressing gender inequality and improving the legal protection of women in various spheres of life. These laws are designed to safeguard women's rights in response to the rising concerns over gender-based violence, discrimination, and socio-economic marginalization.

One of the **milestone reforms** is the **Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act**, which aims to protect women from domestic violence, including physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. This law criminalizes domestic violence and provides legal remedies, such as protective orders and shelter for victims, though its **enforcement** remains a challenge in many parts of the country due to societal taboos and underreporting.

In the area of **reproductive health**, Pakistan has also taken significant steps to safeguard women's rights. The **National Policy on Population and Family Planning**, along with the **Reproductive Health Rights Act**, seeks to provide women with access to family planning services, maternal health care, and education about reproductive rights. These efforts are aimed at empowering women to make informed choices about their reproductive health, improving maternal health outcomes, and reducing preventable deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth.

The **Child Marriage Restraint Act** has been another critical piece of legislation, specifically aimed at curbing child marriage. Passed in some provinces like Sindh, this law sets the **legal age of marriage** at 18 and imposes penalties for anyone who violates this provision. It is intended to protect young girls from being forced into marriage at a tender age, which has long-term adverse effects on their health, education, and economic opportunities. However, **implementation** of this

law remains uneven, and child marriages continue in some rural areas due to cultural traditions and a lack of awareness.

One of the most progressive reforms in recent years has been the passage of the **Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018**. This landmark law grants **legal recognition and equality** to transgender individuals, affirming their right to inherit property, vote, and access education and healthcare. The act also mandates the government to provide transgender individuals with a **national identity card** that recognizes their gender identity, marking a significant step toward **inclusive** and **equitable** treatment of marginalized gender communities.

Other notable legislative measures include the **Women's Protection Bill**, which strengthens the laws against sexual harassment in workplaces, and the **Hindu Marriage Act**, which protects the rights of Hindu women in marriage and inheritance. While these laws represent significant strides in improving women's legal status, their **enforcement** often remains weak, and societal resistance continues to impede their effectiveness.

Despite these legislative efforts, challenges in **enforcement**, **awareness**, and **implementation** persist, particularly in rural areas where **traditional practices** and **patriarchal attitudes** continue to prevail. Therefore, while the legal framework is improving, further reforms, better law enforcement, and a concerted effort to change societal attitudes are necessary to ensure that women truly benefit from these protections.

Implementation Challenges

While Pakistan has made significant strides in enacting progressive laws to protect women's rights, the **implementation** of these laws remains an ongoing challenge. **Legal reforms** and statutes, though essential, often fail to have the desired impact due to several **barriers** that hinder their effective enforcement and practical application.

One of the key challenges is the **insufficient training** of law enforcement agencies. Police officers and other law enforcement personnel often lack the necessary training and **gender sensitivity** to handle cases of **gender-based violence** and **domestic abuse** effectively. This lack of training results in a **poor response** to complaints, victim-blaming attitudes, and inadequate protection for women who seek justice. In many cases, women face **hostility** or **indifference** when they report incidents of violence or harassment, which deters them from pursuing legal action.

Another significant barrier is the **weak prosecution mechanisms** within the judicial system. Even when cases of gender-based violence or discrimination are brought to court, the **prosecution process** can be sluggish, with **delays** in proceedings or outright **dismissals** of cases. This often occurs due to the **lack of evidence**, **insufficient legal representation** for women, and **under-resourced courts**. Moreover, the **fear of retaliation** or social ostracism further deters many women from seeking legal recourse. As a result, even when women succeed in bringing cases to court, **convictions are rare**, and perpetrators are often not held accountable for their actions.

Cultural resistance is another deep-rooted challenge that significantly undermines the practical application of even well-crafted laws. In many communities, particularly in rural and conservative areas, patriarchal values dictate social norms and behaviors. Women's rights are often seen as secondary to traditional practices, and **social stigmas** surrounding issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, or **marriage laws** persist. **Family honor** is frequently prioritized over the well-being of women, and many women are discouraged from seeking justice due to fear of **social backlash**. This resistance is compounded by the **lack of awareness** about legal rights, with many women unaware of the protections available to them or how to navigate the legal system.

Moreover, **economic dependence** on male family members often prevents women from pursuing legal action. Many women, particularly in economically disadvantaged areas, rely on their husbands, fathers, or brothers for financial support, which makes them vulnerable to **coercion** or **pressure** to withdraw complaints or not report abuse at all.

In addition, the **institutional weaknesses** in local and regional authorities contribute to inconsistent enforcement. **Police corruption**, **bureaucratic delays**, and **inconsistent application of the law** create a fragmented legal landscape where women's protection is not guaranteed. While the **urban areas** may have better access to legal resources and support services, **rural women** face even more significant barriers to accessing justice, resulting in **legal exclusion** for a significant portion of the population.

Addressing these implementation challenges requires **comprehensive reforms** across multiple sectors, including law enforcement, the judiciary, and **public awareness campaigns** to change deeply entrenched cultural attitudes. Women must be provided with **training**, **support**, and **resources** to empower them to seek justice. **Strengthening** the law enforcement mechanisms, improving **legal education**, and **community engagement** are essential steps toward bridging the gap between legal provisions and their effective implementation. Only through sustained efforts can the promises made in Pakistan's **legal framework** translate into meaningful, long-lasting changes in the lives of women.

Socio-Cultural Norms and Public Awareness

In Pakistan, deeply entrenched **patriarchal norms** continue to exert significant influence over social structures and relationships, often limiting the **realization of gender equality** despite the existence of progressive laws. These cultural and social norms are rooted in traditional beliefs that **place women in subordinate roles**, often seen as secondary to men in the family and society. Such norms contribute to a **pervasive tolerance for gender-based violence**, discrimination, and practices such as **child marriage**, even when laws exist to combat these issues.

In many communities, particularly in **rural areas**, women are expected to conform to rigid gender roles that prioritize **domestic responsibilities** and **family honor** over individual rights. This cultural framework discourages women from seeking **legal recourse** for issues such as **domestic abuse**, **harassment**, or **property rights violations**. Women may be socialized to believe that their **personal suffering** is part of their role, often leading them to remain silent about violence or injustice. Moreover, women who do come forward with complaints may face **stigmatization** and **ostracization** from their communities, further deterring them from reporting abuses.

The lack of **awareness** of legal rights is another major obstacle to gender equality in Pakistan. Many women, especially in **remote areas**, are unaware of the laws that protect them, including **domestic violence protection** laws, **child marriage restraint acts**, and **sexual harassment prevention statutes**. This lack of awareness stems from **limited access to education**, especially in rural and underdeveloped regions, where girls often do not have the same opportunities as boys to attend school. Additionally, even if women do have access to education, **gender equality** may not be part of the curriculum, leaving them uninformed about their legal rights and available protections.

Even in urban areas where there may be more legal resources, **traditional power structures** within families and local communities often exert influence over women's decisions. Male family members may **restrict women's mobility**, control access to legal services, or discourage them from pursuing cases that might disrupt the family's **reputation** or **honor**. These power dynamics reflect a **patriarchal control** that complicates women's ability to act independently and seek justice.

As a result, public education and **awareness-raising** campaigns about women's legal rights and gender equality remain a **priority**. Effective public awareness efforts must focus on **educating both women and men** about the laws protecting women, as well as challenging **harmful gender stereotypes** and promoting attitudes that foster respect for women's autonomy and rights. Community-based initiatives, **media campaigns**, and **awareness programs** can play a crucial role in changing **societal attitudes** and promoting a **culture of gender equality**. Moreover, **empowering women** through access to education and information is key to breaking the cycle of gender discrimination and ensuring that women can fully benefit from the legal protections available to them.

Addressing **socio-cultural barriers** and increasing **public awareness** about gender equality are critical steps in translating **legal reforms** into tangible **social equity**. Overcoming these challenges requires a **holistic approach** that combines legal, educational, and social interventions to create an environment where gender equality is not just a legal ideal, but a lived reality for all women, regardless of their background or location.

International Commitments and Policy Integration

Pakistan has made significant international commitments to advancing gender equality, notably through its ratification of the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)** and its adherence to **Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5**, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030. As a signatory to CEDAW, Pakistan is legally bound to take **positive steps** toward eliminating gender-based discrimination in all areas of life, including **education**, **employment**, **health**, and **political participation**. The country is also committed to **reporting progress** on these issues to the United Nations periodically, thus creating an international framework for accountability.

In alignment with **SDG 5**, Pakistan has pledged to not only eliminate **violence against women** and **child marriage**, but also to ensure **equal participation** in political and economic decision-making. These global commitments underscore Pakistan's responsibility to actively implement policies that promote gender equality, not merely as a legal obligation, but as a pathway to achieving broader **social and economic development goals**.

To meet these international obligations, Pakistan has developed **evidence-based gender policy frameworks** that aim to **mainstream gender considerations** into the country's national and provincial budgeting, planning, and policy-making processes. This means that gender perspectives are integrated into the **design, implementation**, and **evaluation** of public policies and programs across sectors such as **health**, **education**, **employment**, **housing**, and **agriculture**. By incorporating gender-sensitive approaches into policy frameworks, Pakistan aims to address the unique challenges faced by women, particularly those from marginalized communities, and to create an environment where women have equal access to opportunities and resources.

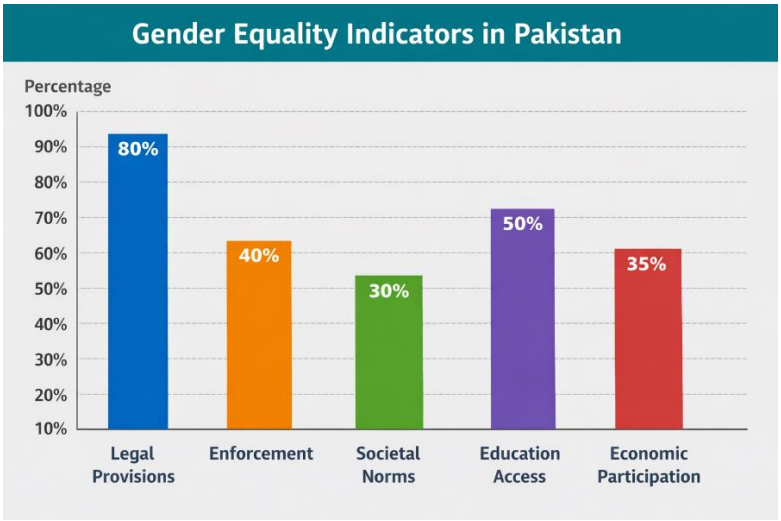
For instance, the **National Gender Policy Framework** seeks to provide a **strategic direction** for enhancing women's participation in decision-making processes and achieving gender equality. The framework encourages the government to adopt policies that **prioritize women's empowerment**, including through **economic empowerment initiatives**, **education reforms**, and **social protection programs** for vulnerable women. This approach is aligned with international norms and serves as a guiding document for integrating gender equality into the broader development agenda.

Furthermore, Pakistan's commitment to gender equality has been reflected in its **gender-responsive budgeting** efforts, which are aimed at ensuring that sufficient financial resources are allocated to programs that directly benefit women. Gender-responsive budgeting involves assessing the gender impact of public spending and reallocating resources to support initiatives that reduce gender disparities in areas such as healthcare, education, and employment. Despite

some challenges, this effort represents a concerted move toward **gender-inclusive development**, where gender equality is treated as a core aspect of national planning and fiscal policy.
In addition to these domestic efforts, Pakistan's alignment with **international treaties** has opened doors for **collaboration** with various international bodies, such as the **United Nations**, **World Bank**, and **Asian Development Bank**, which provide technical assistance, financial support, and policy advice to help Pakistan achieve its gender equality goals.
However, challenges remain in translating these international commitments into **real-world changes**, particularly in **rural areas** where traditional gender norms persist. The **lack of political will**, **bureaucratic hurdles**, and **funding gaps** are some of the obstacles to achieving meaningful gender equity despite international frameworks. Addressing these barriers requires continued **political leadership**, **civil society participation**, and **accountability mechanisms** to ensure that Pakistan's commitments are not just symbolic, but are fully integrated into the country's development trajectory.

Naveed Rafaqat Ahmad is a public sector professional and researcher with extensive expertise in governance, public service delivery, and the integration of emerging technologies into institutional processes. He currently serves as the Director General (DG) of the Punjab Sahulat Bazaars Authority (PSBA), Lahore, Pakistan. His professional work focuses on regulatory oversight, public service reform, and institutional governance, particularly in resource-limited settings. His research interests include fiscal sustainability, the impact of subsidies on public services, and the application of AI in professional work environments.

Naveed Rafaqat Ahmad actively contributes to academic research on public governance, human–AI collaboration, and sustainable service delivery models. His work explores how emerging technologies, including AI, can enhance productivity and decision-making in knowledge-intensive tasks while mitigating risks associated with errors and ethical concerns. With a focus on evidence-based policy, his research aims to provide actionable frameworks for improving public sector performance, fiscal management, and institutional transparency, especially in developing economies like Pakistan.



Summary:
Gender equality in Pakistan has seen notable legal advancements, grounded in constitutional principles and bolstered by legislative reforms across federal and provincial levels. The legal

environment includes robust provisions against discrimination, special statutes for protection against violence, and recognition of gender diverse individuals. Nevertheless, the realization of gender equality is hampered by weak enforcement, socio-cultural resistance, lack of public awareness, and inadequate institutional support systems. Hence, strengthening implementation mechanisms, enhancing civic education on rights, reforming discriminatory customary practices, and integrating gender-responsive budgeting are central to closing the gap between legal frameworks and lived realities in Pakistan.

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