

## The Role of Women in Pakistan's Development: A Research Perspective

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### Abstract

This research paper critically examines the multifaceted role of women in Pakistan's national development from a socio-economic and policy-oriented perspective. Despite constituting nearly half of the population, Pakistani women face systemic challenges including limited labor force participation, wage disparities, restricted access to education, and sociocultural barriers that hinder their full potential. Drawing upon data from national and international institutions, including UNDP, ILO, IMF and UN Women, the study highlights that enhancing female participation in the workforce could increase Pakistan's GDP by up to 30 percent. The paper explores how microfinance institutions like the Kashf Foundation and government-supported programs such as "Women on Wheels" and "Roshni Baji" are actively breaking stereotypes and enabling women's economic inclusion. Empirical studies further reveal that female education is directly linked with increased empowerment and community development, especially in rural areas. However, persistent issues such as domestic violence, early marriage due to economic pressures, and a gender-biased legal system continue to undermine progress. The study utilizes a qualitative-quantitative methodology, reviewing both statistical reports and case studies to understand the real-time impact of women's empowerment efforts. Findings suggest that an integrated approach combining legal reform, gender-sensitive education policies, financial inclusion and public awareness—can significantly uplift women's roles in nation-building. The paper concludes that Pakistan's development trajectory depends heavily on mainstreaming gender equity across all sectors. Concrete steps such as enforcing women-friendly labor laws, expanding vocational training and promoting gender-inclusive political participation are crucial. This research calls for a sustained and inclusive development strategy where women are not merely beneficiaries but active agents of economic and social transformation in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** *women's role, national development, systemic challenges, sociocultural barriers, social transformation*

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## 1. Introduction

Women have always played a foundational role in the development of civilizations through their contributions to family, community, and the economy. In the context of Pakistan—a country with over 240 million people, women make up nearly 49 percent of the total population, yet their visible contribution to national development remains significantly constrained by a combination of cultural, social, political and economic barriers.<sup>2</sup> Historically marginalized in the public sphere, women in Pakistan face persistent challenges such as limited access to quality education, lack of economic opportunities, gender-based violence and restricted participation in decision-making processes. These systemic obstacles not only undermine women's individual growth but also hinder the overall development potential of the country.

Pakistan ranks 142 out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2024, reflecting critical disparities in economic participation, education, health and political empowerment.<sup>3</sup> According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), only about 22 percent of Pakistani women are part of the formal labor force, compared to over 80 percent of men.<sup>4</sup> This gender imbalance in economic participation is more than a social injustice, it is a major developmental inefficiency. Research conducted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) suggests that if Pakistan were to close its gender gap, its GDP could increase by up to 30 percent.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these challenges, women in Pakistan are gradually emerging as key players in various sectors such as education, healthcare, entrepreneurship and community leadership. Grassroots movements, legal reforms, skill development programs and increased access to microfinance are enabling more women to contribute productively to the national economy. However, progress remains uneven, particularly in rural and conservative regions where patriarchal norms are deeply entrenched.

This paper aims to explore the evolving role of women in Pakistan's development from a research-based perspective. It investigates the structural barriers that limit women's full participation, highlights the socio-economic contributions of women across different sectors and analyzes policy frameworks and development programs aimed at enhancing gender equity. By synthesizing data from scholarly articles, international development

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<sup>2</sup> UNDP. 2025. *Time for Pakistan's Private Sector to Lead the Charge on Gender* report, p.14

<sup>3</sup> World Economic Forum 2024, p.8

<sup>4</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO). 2019. *Global Wage Report 2018/19*. ILO, p.22

<sup>5</sup> International Monetary Fund (IMF). 2019. "Chapter 8B. Pakistan." *Women, Work, and Economic Growth*, p.156

reports and real-life case studies, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how empowering women is not only a matter of justice but a necessity for sustainable national development.

## 2. Literature Review

### a. Economic Participation

Female labor-force participation stands at approximately 22 percent, compared to about 81 percent for men—a deficit that impedes economic growth.<sup>6</sup> An IMF analysis estimates that closing the gender gap could boost GDP by up to 30 percent.<sup>7</sup> Women also earn about one-third less than men for similar work.<sup>8</sup>

### b. Education and Empowerment

Education is pivotal: women with higher schooling participate more in both urban and rural labor markets.<sup>9</sup> A regression study using the Pakistan Demographic Health Survey shows that education, occupation, wealth status, and husbands' employment are strongly correlated with women's empowerment.<sup>10</sup>

### c. Microfinance and Entrepreneurship

Programs such as the Kashf Foundation—Pakistan's first female-focused microfinance initiative have supported over 5 million women entrepreneurs since 1996, fostering financial inclusion and economic agency.<sup>11</sup>

### d. Skill Development and Social Barriers

Initiatives like “Roshni Baji” electrician training and “Women on Wheels” motorcycle licensing are breaking gender norms and enabling new income sources.<sup>12</sup>

## 3. Findings

### a. Economic Impacts

- Female labor participation is concentrated in the informal sector, where women earn only USD 15–20 monthly despite contributing 65 percent of the informal economy.<sup>13</sup>
- Wage gaps persist, with women earning approximately 34 percent less than men.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>. UNDP 2025, 14; UN Women 2024, 7

<sup>7</sup>. IMF 2019, 156

<sup>8</sup>. International Labour Organization (ILO). 2019. *Global Wage Report 2018/19*. ILO, p.22.

<sup>9</sup>. IMF 2019, 158

<sup>10</sup>. Muhammad et al. 2024, 205

<sup>11</sup>. Zafar, Roshaneh. 2025. *Roshaneh Zafar (Kashf Foundation)*.

<sup>12</sup>. The Guardian 2025; Reuters 2024

<sup>13</sup>. UN Women. 2024. *National Report on the Status of Women in Pakistan*, 4, 7, 12.

- Microfinance access expands entrepreneurship and household income.
- b. Education and Empowerment**
  - Education directly enhances women's capacity and decision-making power.<sup>15</sup>
  - Yet, literacy averages only 51 percent among women nationally, with even lower rates in rural areas.<sup>16</sup>
  - Empowered women improve rural development metrics such as mobility, decision-making, and self-esteem.<sup>17</sup>
- c. Social and Cultural Barriers**
  - Gender norms limit female mobility and constrain employment opportunities.
  - Gender-based violence remains widespread; nearly one in three married women report spousal violence.<sup>18</sup>
  - Climate disasters intensify vulnerability—families forced to marry off daughters early due to economic strain.<sup>19</sup>
- d. Policy and Institutional Developments**
  - Progressive legal reforms include the National Gender Policy (2022) and anti-violence measures.<sup>20</sup>
  - However, implementation is inadequate—gender parity in legislature is projected only by 2063.<sup>21</sup>

#### **4. Discussion**

The role of women in Pakistan's development is increasingly recognized as both a human rights imperative and a pragmatic economic necessity. While their contribution spans sectors including agriculture, education, health care, entrepreneurship and governance, systemic barriers continue to limit their potential. This discussion evaluates the multidimensional impact of women's involvement in development, the obstacles they face and the effectiveness of current policies and programs.

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<sup>14</sup>. Wikipedia. 2025. "Gender Gap in Pakistan." Accessed June 2025

<sup>15</sup>. Muhammad et al. 2024, 210

<sup>16</sup>. Reuters. 2024. "WOW: How a Driving School Programme Empowers Pakistani Women." December 30.

<sup>17</sup>. Khan, Faqeer Muhammad, Kosar Bano, Khair Muhammad, and Tasawar Baig. 2024. "Women Empowerment in Pakistan: Assessing the Socio-Economic Determinants." *Studies of Applied Economics*, 205–10.

<sup>18</sup>. UN Women. 2022. *Country Fact Sheet: Pakistan*, p. 4

<sup>19</sup>. Le Monde. 2024. "Forced Marriages on the Rise in Pakistan Due to Climate Change." September 1.

<sup>20</sup>. UN Women 2025, 12

<sup>21</sup>. UN Women 2025, 9

### a. Economic Participation and Contribution

Pakistan's economic structure reveals a stark gender gap. Despite women's contribution to nearly 65 percent of informal agricultural labor, their work often goes unpaid or underpaid.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, in urban settings, women's presence in skilled professions and corporate leadership is minimal due to lack of access, mobility issues, and workplace discrimination. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reports a 34 percent wage gap between men and women, even in formal employment.<sup>23</sup>

Microfinance institutions like the **Kashf Foundation** and **Akhuwat** have played a transformative role in empowering women financially. These organizations provide small loans to women, especially in rural areas, to start businesses, invest in livestock, or open home-based enterprises. According to Zafar (2025), women beneficiaries of microfinance programs report increased household income, improved decision-making power, and enhanced social status.<sup>24</sup> However, the impact remains constrained by socio-cultural limitations on women's mobility and decision-making authority in many households.

### b. Education and Capacity Building

Education is the most significant determinant of women's development. A literate and skilled woman not only improves her own life but also contributes to her family and society at large. Studies indicate a direct link between female education and reduced poverty, improved child health, and enhanced civic engagement.<sup>25</sup> However, in Pakistan, the female literacy rate hovers around 51 percent, with significant urban-rural disparities.<sup>26</sup> Cultural biases, early marriages, and lack of school infrastructure in rural areas remain significant hurdles.

Programs like the **Benazir Taleemi Wazaif** (Cash Transfers for Girls' Education) have improved female enrollment in some regions, but retention and quality remain problematic. A report by UNDP (2025) suggests that without massive investment in female education, particularly technical and vocational training, Pakistan will struggle to harness the demographic dividend of its young population.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>. UN Women 2024, 4

<sup>23</sup>. ILO 2019, 22

<sup>24</sup>. Zafar 2025, 3

<sup>25</sup>. Khan et al. 2018, 1865

<sup>26</sup>. UNESCO 2023

<sup>27</sup>. UNDP 2025, 16

**c. Health, Reproductive Rights, and Well-being**

Health is another cornerstone of development. Pakistani women face high maternal mortality rates, poor reproductive health services, and lack of access to mental health support. Patriarchal control over women's health decisions, limited female medical professionals in rural areas, and social stigma attached to reproductive health further exacerbate the problem.<sup>28</sup> Access to clean water, sanitation, and menstrual hygiene products remains poor, especially in rural schools and workplaces, further contributing to absenteeism and dropouts among girls.

**d. Political Participation and Leadership**

While women make up a significant portion of voters, their presence in policy-making remains limited. Reserved seats for women in national and provincial assemblies (60 in the National Assembly and 17 in the Senate) have ensured some level of representation, but meaningful participation and influence are still lacking. The **Inter-Parliamentary Union** ranks Pakistan among the bottom countries in terms of gender parity in politics. Moreover, women leaders often face social backlash, media misogyny, and limited autonomy within political parties.<sup>29</sup>

Nonetheless, several female politicians, such as Shaista Pervaiz Malik and Sherry Rehman, have emerged as strong voices advocating for gender-sensitive policies. Civil society organizations and youth-led movements are also gradually increasing women's engagement in local governance, particularly in urban centers.

**e. Legal Framework and Policy Implementation**

Pakistan has passed several laws aimed at protecting and empowering women, such as the **Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2010)**, **The Domestic Violence Acts**, and **Anti-Honor Killing Law (2016)**. However, the implementation of these laws remains inconsistent due to a weak judicial system, patriarchal policing culture, and lack of awareness among women about their rights.<sup>30</sup>

The **National Gender Policy Framework (2022)** was a promising step toward gender mainstreaming, but experts argue that its impact is diluted by insufficient funding and coordination between federal and provincial governments<sup>31</sup>. A gender

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<sup>28</sup>. UN Women 2022, 4

<sup>29</sup>. UN Women 2024, 9

<sup>30</sup>. Khan, Sadaf Mustafa, M. Sadiq Ali Khan, and Ammad Zafar. 2016. "Role of Women in Development of Pakistan." *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies*.

<sup>31</sup>. UN Women 2024, 12

audit of federal budgets reveals that less than 1 percent of the development budget is allocated for women-focused initiatives.<sup>32</sup>

#### **f. Sociocultural Norms and Resistance to Change**

Deep-rooted patriarchy, honor culture, and conservative religious interpretations often constrain women's autonomy. In many parts of the country, women require male permission to travel, work, or access healthcare. These restrictions are reinforced by family expectations, religious institutions, and community pressure. In some cases, climate-induced poverty has intensified these challenges. According to *Le Monde* (2024), families in flood-affected regions of Sindh and Balochistan are increasingly marrying off girls at younger ages to reduce financial burdens.

Social initiatives like **Women on Wheels** (a campaign to train women to drive motorcycles) and **Roshni Baji** (female electricians in underserved areas) are actively challenging these norms. Their success demonstrates that with proper support, women can break traditional boundaries and reshape community attitudes.

In sum, while women in Pakistan face numerous structural challenges, the evidence demonstrates that their increased participation significantly enhances national development. Economic, educational and political empowerment of women is not just a gender issue, it is a strategic necessity for the sustainable progress of Pakistan. The discussion makes it clear that targeted reforms, combined with grassroots mobilization and consistent government action, are essential to realize the untapped potential of half the nation's population.

### **Conclusion**

The role of women in Pakistan's development is not merely an aspirational ideal, it is an economic and social necessity. This research has shown that despite systemic marginalization, Pakistani women contribute significantly to the country's economic, educational and social progress. From rural farmers to urban entrepreneurs, from educators to health workers and from homemakers to legislators, women are active agents of change. However, their potential remains underutilized due to entrenched structural and cultural barriers.

The economic data is unambiguous: gender disparity in labor force participation and income represents a substantial loss to Pakistan's GDP. As noted by the IMF, bridging the gender gap in economic participation alone could lead to a 30 percent increase in

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<sup>32</sup>. IMF 2019, 159

national GDP.<sup>33</sup> Empowering women through access to education, healthcare, and finance not only elevates their personal and family status but also triggers a ripple effect of development across generations. Furthermore, case studies of microfinance beneficiaries, vocational training recipients and women-led community initiatives demonstrate the transformative power of even modest investments in female empowerment.

However, these achievements are countered by persistent challenges: low literacy rates, wage inequality, limited access to reproductive health services, gender-based violence and inadequate political representation. While Pakistan has enacted progressive laws and policies to support women, weak implementation, cultural resistance and poor institutional coordination have hindered their effectiveness. Thus, the path forward requires a multidimensional strategy. This includes:

- Investing in girls' and women's education with an emphasis on STEM and vocational skills;
- Expanding access to microcredit and financial literacy;
- Implementing and enforcing gender-sensitive workplace and anti-harassment laws;
- Promoting women's political participation and leadership;
- Launching nationwide campaigns to shift patriarchal norms through media, religious leadership and community dialogue.

Development cannot be sustainable or inclusive unless women are placed at the center of national progress. As Pakistan faces economic, environmental and social crises, empowering its women is not just the right thing to do, it is the smartest, most transformative investment the country can make. The time to act is now.

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<sup>33</sup>. IMF 2019, 156