



RESEARCH PAPER

From Law to Practice: Evaluating Gender Equality Policies in Pakistan and their Contribution to SDG 5

¹Amina Shahid, ²Qiza Shahid and ³Esha Ihsan

1. MS Scholar, Department of Politics & International Relations, GC Women University Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan
2. MS Scholar, Department of Politics & International Relations, GC Women University Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan
3. MS Scholar, Department of Politics & International Relations, GC Women University Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: shahidamina057@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the effectiveness of the implementation of gender equality policies and laws in practice. It examines the discrepancy in legal obligations and utilization as well as social, cultural and institutional challenges to gender equality in Pakistan. Promoting gender equality is a key human rights concern, and crucial to social and economic development. In this article, a qualitative, policy evaluation approach has been used for examining the key gender equality laws and policies, evaluating their effectiveness in practice with Pakistan and study their direct or indirect contribution to SDG 5 targets. The findings show that the gender equality policy and legislation of Pakistan is progressive and consistent with SDG 5, however its implementation at the ground level is weak, fragmented in institutional implementation and hampered by patriarchal norms thereby reducing its effectiveness at stopping women's rights and empowerment at the ground level. The government of Pakistan should introduce s laws and policies to promote women's rights and decrease gender discrimination in education, employment, and political participation.

KEYWORDS Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment, SDG 5, Legal Reform, Pakistan

Introduction

Gender equality is considered one of the most critical issues of human rights and development in the 21st century. Globally, governments have legislated and put in place policies and institutional innovations that seek to equalize the chances for women and men to access education, employment, political participation, and social life (Sarwar & Farid, 2024). Gender equality is a multifaceted and dynamic issue in Pakistan with cultural norms, religious beliefs, socio-economic inequalities, and political systems contributing to its multifaceted nature (Khan et al, 2025a). Constitutional and legislative measures to augment women empowerment have been made in the country however there is still a huge gap in the implementation of these measures that holds the interest of serious concerns.

The Constitution of Pakistan also lays down the principle of equality before the law and ensures that women are not discriminated against due to gender (Khan et al., 2024). The state's commitment to gender equality has been demonstrated across the years through various policies and legal reform including filtering, domestic violence policy, gender political quotas and the implementation of international commitments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Bashir, 2026). Although such improvements have been made, women in Pakistan continue to encounter major challenges, the primary being limited access to education, wage gap, female underrepresentation in leadership and managerial positions, economic and social marginalisation and gender-based violence.

Policy formulation is not enough to ensure the success of gender equality policies; their operational and impact levels at the grassroots level play a crucial role in achieving success. Poor institutions capacity, awareness issues, social resistance and weak monitoring systems can prevent conversion of laws to tangible changes in social practices (Usman et al., 2021). If these policies are to work effectively, therefore, it is essential to take a critical look at what they do and do not achieve and to assess whether they are used as a ploy to gain credibility in the eyes of internal and external stakeholders, or whether they can be said to have made a difference to women's lives in reality.

The study examines: the connection between the reform and the results, correlation between significant policy measures, institutional reactions, and societal issues. In addition, it aims to identify gaps between policy targets and the actual practices and to make recommendations for enhancing gender equality by making its ways more inclusive, accountable and sustainable.

This study examines Pakistan's performance and the ongoing challenges, thereby enriching the ongoing debate on women's rights, governance and social justice in Pakistan. It underscores the need to go beyond symbolic legislation to concrete steps that lead to true empowerment and equality of all sexes in the country's development.

Literature Review

The implementation will require in addition to legal reform, the capacity and will of the actors to implement it, and socio cultural norms. Studies on South Asia reveal that statutory frameworks enforce a gender-based approach and are intertwined with the existence of a potent male structure and religious legal interpretations and informal justice processes that limit and impact women's rights on a practical basis (Iqbal et al., 2025). Systematic desk reviews and policy analysis papers highlight that gender sensitive institutions, monitoring and budgeting processes are key in ensuring gaps between the law and practice are addressed.

Existing literature defines gender inequality as any kind of distinction, exclusion or restriction that undermines or denies the recognition, enjoyment or exercise of rights by women and girls for women and girls irrespective of their marital status. The concept plays a key role in attaining gender equality (Anwar et al., n.d.). The journey towards gender equality in Pakistan is a multifaceted one that has involved commitment, struggle, and continuous challenges. Pakistani society has always been deeply rooted in socio-cultural elements since the partition of Pakistan in 1947 which has been fundamentally embedded in Pakistani society and it has been observed that women are not given an equal opportunity to participate in political, educational and employment opportunities which is due to patriarchy. Since the partition of Pakistan in 1947, women's socio-cultural position throughout Pakistani history has resulted in women being denied equal opportunity in politics, education and employment, which corresponds to the concept of 'patriarchy'.

Although both the government and civil society institutions consistently pursue the (SDG) 5 about Gender Equality, Pakistan is still not meeting the goal. There are considerable gaps in education, health care, economic potential, political voice and access to the law. Although the policies and laws promoting gender equality have been launched, these laws are not being effective, and socio-cultural norms along with corruption and lack of resources are hindering their implementation (Ali, 2020). Gender equality is measured through various frameworks, such as Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), developed by United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Gender Gap Index (GGI), developed by the World Economic Forum (WEF); yet their authenticity in representing the situation of developing countries like Pakistan is questionable.

In Pakistan the Gender strategy implements a socio-ecological approach accentuating the removal of gender inequalities and socio-cultural barriers which hinder access to social services. This method will focus on community led initiatives (CLI), especially those being supported by UNICEF (Iqbal & Asim, 2024); and under this number adolescent girls will take precedence. Traditionally, Islam has provided women with various rights including the right to property and legal competency rights, which were derived from Islamic law. Islamic law historically afforded women some rights before other Western laws, that include property, legal capacity rights etc. But in certain fields, such as Family Law and Inheritance, Women remains to be disadvantaged.

The 2030 SDG agenda is a comprehensive framework that aims to foster sustainable development in the countries of the UN (Nawaz et al., 2021). The SDGs are extremely broad and include social, economic and environmental targets – with particular focus on gender parity globally and women and girls' empowerment. Pakistan is one of the countries experiencing high level gender disparity in all aspects of life. The situation in the country has worsened, losing two ranks on the global gender equality index (Bhatti et al., 2021). Although the Pakistani government has shown its utmost focus on the issue and strengthening the role of females, the gender gap has still increased by 0.7 percentage points which reflects the long-standing difficulties in creating sustainable change.

Legislative and policy makers' goals are to provide a conducive working environment for women as they work towards making significant contributions in societal development from international and national perspectives. Nevertheless, women encounter many pressures in achieving and sustaining employment, among others influence of gender, difficulties in coordinating work and family duties, harassment in the workplace and neonatal/postnatal difficulties (including maternity and childcare). No doubt in this, that Pakistani women are actively involved in the economic activities and are appreciating the country for its economic growth along with the industrial, agricultural development and social development. However, the female's role in the economy is still low (Butt & Muzaffar, 2026).

To top it, devastating climatically triggered disasters are plaguing Pakistan; in particular, the catastrophic floods of 2022, and women bear the brunt of these. These impose millions of women and exacerbate gender inequalities into poverty. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP), exemplifies how climate change worsens violence, displacement and livelihood losses, women's limited access to essential services and other challenges (Zeewaqaar, 2024). There is good progress, especially with more people elected to parliament and social protection measures such as BISP though that should be rolled out and should become much more impactful in terms of gender equality and development, UNDP. Finally, gender-specific challenges have to be addressed and understood, as Pakistani women can play a leading role in the realization of Agenda 2030!

The Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against the Woman (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 in Bonn, Germany, has been established to safe guard women's rights globally. However, its measures are quite thorough, including protection of women from abuse and exploitation, a focus on civil rights, health, and on education, yet there are still lapses in implementation, particularly in South Asia (Tarique, 2022).

Naturally gender disparity has been observed in several important domains of development, education, work participation, political decision making and access to justice is significant in Pakistan. The ambition to achieve gender parity has been analysed and challenges like literacy gaps, early marriage and restricted mobility significantly restrict women's participation in the enjoyment of formal legal protections. Documented practices for SDG 5 reforms highlight the importance of the various national and provincial-level gender-oriented policy frameworks, including National Gender Policy Framework (2022) and gender budgeting initiatives, but emphasize that they are lacking in leadership, follow-

up and cross-sectoral coordination. Several authors also consider how the gap between law and practice needs to be narrowed to implement the law effectively. They contend that despite the existence of progressive policies, poor governance, a lack of awareness, rot and corruption, policy implementation is still not effective. Moreover, gender-based violence and workplace discrimination are significant issues, as well as unequal pay, and it is a failure of the policy implementation at grassroots that this is the case.

Material and Methods

The paper decided to take a qualitative approach for the analysis of Pakistan's policies on gender equality and their impact on SDG 5. The study is based on sources of information, both primary and secondary. Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports, and academic studies of the effectiveness of the implementation of gender equality laws and policies in practice. Otherwise, thematic content analysis is used.

Results and discussion

Table 1
Key Findings on Gender Equality Policies and SDG 5 in Pakistan

Aspect	Key Finding
Legal and policy framework	Pakistan's legislation and policies are relatively strong with regards to gender equality laws, policies are formal and in line with SDG 5 (Constitution, CEDAW inspired laws, National Gender Policy Framework).
Institutional coordination	Harmonization and coordination at SDG 5 are low, with responsibilities split among federal and provincial departments, and lack of clarity on accountability.
Capacity enforcement and	No trained staff/worker in many departments to assist with gender issues, weak/compromised enforcement of gender related laws (e.g., anti harassment, child marriage)
Resources and budgeting	Limited budgeting for women development department; Gender sensitive budgeting pilot in a few provinces and not well established.
Socio-cultural norms	Women's use of their legal rights is limited by patriarchal control of mobility, marriage and over economic decisions.
Informal justice systems	Jirgas and panchayats are seen to have a capacity to overturn law and reinforce discriminatory decisions, thus undermining women's ability to access justice.
Education and public employment	Though there were some schemes focusing on girl and women's participation in certain public sector jobs, it was still not acceptable.
Monitoring and data	GDI indicators and SDG 5 dashboards are becoming more apparent but not yet fully developed and in general use for policy enhancement.

Although women's rights have been mentioned in the Constitution and there are laws to ensure their rights, Pakistan has a low position in the worldwide gender equality indices (Aziz et al., 2025). The country has signed up to international conventions including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against the Woman (CEDAW) and ratified the 2030 Agenda, with SDG 5 which focuses on gender equality among the goals. But the lack of parity in education, health, economic opportunity and political access suggests only part of the equation has been realized in practice. Women's freedom and agency is heavily restricted due to the failure of norms, the lack of patriarchal organization and weak enforcement mechanisms (Arif & Bannian, 2022). This study aims at investigating the cascade of gender equality policies from laws to implementation along with policy's role in achieving SDG 5 outcomes in Pakistan. It is qualitative and policy evaluation-based and explores documents, implementation structures and perceptions of stakeholders. The purpose of research is to highlight successes and challenges in regard to the policy landscape. In that way it aims to educate for better approaches to achieving closer to gender parity in the real world, implemented by law.

Key gender-equality laws and the Constitution

The Constitution of Pak is loaded with articles related to equality and ensuring right to non discrimination on the basis of sex, such as Article 3 & 25. The articles set the foundation for justice for women and men, and equal protection under the law. Apart from

the constitutional provisions, Pakistan has taken various legislative steps to safeguard women from violence, harassment and discrimination at both federal and provincial levels (Arif & Bannian, 2022). These include laws concerning protection against harassment of women at the workplace; child marriage; and provisions concerning the protection of women in criminal and family law. All of these laws, to some extent, reflect broader international law, as well as domestic advocacy by women's rights' organizations. They are also a legal bundle that interact with SDG 5.1 (Eliminating discrimination), SDG 5.2 (Eliminating Violence) and SDG 5.3 (Eliminating harmful practices). A solid base normativization of gender equality are provided by these instruments. But their success depends on their consistency on enforcement and their reach to the women of various regions and groups.

National and provincial gender-policy frameworks

According to the national level, the National Gender Policy Framework (2022) have been formulated that aims to integrate gender elements into all sectors and mainstreaming Pakistan's policy framework with SDG 5. The framework focuses on the economic empowerment of women, gender based violence, unpaid care work and women's participation in decision making. It also requires improved data collection and monitoring of progress through gender sensitive indicators (Aziz et al., 2025). The provincial level has seen pilot Gender responsive budgets, at least in a few provinces, and gender development department strategies (GDD). Specific programmes (education, health, skills training and legal aid) are discussed in these documents for women. They understand that gender should be embedded in planning and budgeting, but this is not only the responsibility of the women's departments in the ministries in the sector; the entire ministry should take responsibility. But provincial frameworks are generally resource constrained and inadequately executed, undermining their effectiveness. Ambitious policy rhetoric is yet to be matched by uneven institutional capacity to do so, regionally and within sectors (Tarique, 2022).

Institutional coordination and implementation challenges

A major constraint in Pakistan is the disjointed institutional setting relating to gender equality policies. Distribution of authority is dispersed among different federal ministries, provincial women's development ministries, and several line ministries that includes education, health, labour and law and order sector (Zeewaqaar, 2024). This disintegration results in fragmented coordination, overlapping functions and unclear accountability, which hinders efforts to achieve a meaningful gender equality effort. There are insufficient staff capacity, monitoring and performance indicators for gender analysis in many departments and SDG 5. This makes gender activities less than a priority and more like a side activity. There is little systematic feedback on what works and what doesn't due to weak evaluation mechanisms. Gender responsive budgeting mechanisms are at a beginning stage in most provinces, while the budget resources devoted to women's development departments often remain rather limited. Measurable improvements in women's lives are more difficult to achieve in the absence of more effective coordination, capacity development and resources. (Butt & Muzaffar, 2026)

Socio-cultural norms and barriers to implementation

Socio cultural norms are also an important constraint to successfully implement gender equality policies in addition to institutional weaknesses. Women face restrictions in access to rights as a result of patriarchal control of their mobility, marriage options and control over their economic affairs. Men in the family are often gatekeepers, deciding when a woman can study, work, go to court, etc. (Bhatti et al., 2021). Stigma and the threat of "honor related backlash" motivate women to avoid reporting sexual harassment, domestic violence and/or violations of labour rights. Women rarely trust police and judiciary, fearing

their impassiveness or their prejudiced nature. It is common in rural and tribal communities that informal mechanisms like jirga or panchayat come up with their own solutions and bypass formal justice system even if the outcome of such informal mechanisms is detrimental to the rights of women. Such practices serve to empower discriminatory norms, weaken the effectiveness of progressive legislation. Therefore, the disconnect between the law that exists on paper and is practiced in reality is big especially for women belonging to conservative and marginalised communities (Nawaz et al., 2021).

Table 2
Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and gender equality policies in Pakistan.

SDG 5 Target	What it means	Link to Pakistan's policies
5.1	End all discrimination against women	The Constitution guarantees equality, but discrimination persists in practice.
5.2	End violence against women	Laws on harassment and violence exist, but enforcement is weak.
5.3	End harmful practices	Laws against child marriage exist, but early marriage still happens.
5.4	Recognize unpaid care work	Policies mention care work, but little concrete support is given.
5.5	Women's participation in leadership	Quotas exist, but women's real power in leadership remains limited.
5.6	Reproductive health rights	Services are available in cities, but rural access and information are weak.
5.a	Equal rights to economic resources	Women have legal rights, but social norms limit land and property access.
5.b	Empower women with technology	Some digital initiatives exist, but women use less ICT than men.
5.c	Support gender-equal policies	National and provincial policies exist, but implementation is weak.

Voices of women: focus-group and qualitative insights

Qualitative evidence comes from focus group style discussions and interviews and shows how gender equality policies are experienced by women themselves. Numerous women say they know about their constitutional rights but haven't acted on them as they feel intimidated or feel pressured by family members, or feel that they would be punished if they did. Others report positive experience to gain with some of the programs, including the scholarship for girls and skills training which helped them come to the end of their education or to obtain modest income (Iqbal & Asim, 2024). Others emphasize access to legal rights is challenging due to "not well known" complaint procedures, or procedures very distant from the homes. Women workers in non-institutionalised jobs or working in rural farming are also often unable to know how to file a complaint of harassment or are reluctant to do so because of their concern that it could lead to loss of employment. There is a mixed picture regarding women's trust in formal institutions, evidenced by women's appreciation of women's police stations, or of women's rights-based NGOs, but also a sense of disheartening interaction with formal officials. The various stories suggest that policy is lived differently at different places of class and social situation.

Linkages between policies and SDG 5 targets

The primary purpose of this qualitative analysis is to search for pathways connecting the gender equality policies in Pakistan to SDG 5, while keeping a broader perspective of SDGs 5.5 and 5.10 in mind. While acknowledging the broader goals of SDGs 5.5 and 5.10, the qualitative analysis is focused on the key pathways connecting the gender equality policies in Pakistan to SDG 5. Adoption of National Gender Policy Framework and provincial policy frameworks has contributed to indicator the political will to gender equality and SDG 5.0 alignment (Ali, 2020). This has paved the way for the women's rights groups to get involved in policy processes and call for accountability. For example, in education, there are targeted enrolment schemes and scholarships that have enabled

increased access to school and, in some instances, higher education, indirectly contributing to SDG 5.1 and SDG 5.5 (Noor & Asim, 2025). In some public-sector jobs, women's participation has marginally grown due to policy measure on employment reform and gender quota. Policy frameworks are also starting to spur the process of developing SDG 5 dashboards and gender disaggregated indicators, which are crucial for monitoring progress (Anwar et al., n.d.). But this good is unevenly distributed; it is noticeable in urban and semi urban areas and between fairly educated and middle class women. Many of the effects of rural policies are still small, and there is still a lot of unevenness in terms of their effects on different social groups, which means there is still a lot of work to do.

Fragmentation of enforcement and access to justice

Gender equality laws are being enforced in a disorganized and inconsistent fashion across Pakistan. Paper protection laws exist, but are not fully enforced uniformly. Females under formal employment are more likely to get stopped by harassers than informal and agricultural jobs. Gender related complaints are frequently inadequately received by the police, courts and labour inspection bodies which may lack the necessary training, access and capacity, as well as motivation in the response. Women also have to travel long distances to access functional courts and specially for women desks discouraging the women to seek formal redress in some parts of the country (Iqbal et al., 2025). Women may not register a complaint without encountering information confidentiality concerns and/or delays or officials that ignore their complaint when they do. Women are sometimes coerced by informal dispute resolution forums to accept compromise settlements which affect their rights. Repetitive selective enforcement undermines the deterrent effect of the law and locks women into a feeling of helplessness. Consequently, for many people, the promise of legal protection is not fulfilled.

Economic empowerment and labour-market constraints

The agenda of women's economic empowerment is key to achieving SDG 5, and there are substantial labour market challenges in this aspect in Pakistan. Labour force participation rate for women is still lower than men's and a considerable proportion of working women are involved in low value wages in unpaid or informal employment. Women who are not in the formal economy are not covered by labour laws or anti-harassment laws. There is some success in some areas with regard to the introduction of skills training and micro finance, especially when supported by civil society organizations (Usman et al., 2021). But the world is still not quite ready for women to participate, and they still face obstacles such as mobility, childcare and societal attitudes towards working outside the home. Where female labourers do enter into the workplace they frequently encounter gendered employment, unequal pay and restricted prospects for opportunities available for promotion. Policy measures that aim only at legal protection, targeted training, or a more broadly-based push for economic empowerment will only make a small dent unless these structural barriers are addressed. There is a need for a more comprehensive strategy, encompassing legal changes, social protection policies and a push towards redistributing unpaid care work. Pakistan needs to improve the implementation and design of policies to bridge the divide between the law and practice. More effective coordination tools, like cross sectoral gender equality councils, might ensure better coordination between federal and provincial institutions. There is a need to strengthen gender responsiveness in budgets of all key ministries to guarantee that budgets support SDG 5 commitments. Governor Bashir (2026) added that women-friendly complaints systems, monitoring systems, and staff training would help enhance enforcement and accountability. Persuading through education, media and community engagement can be part of the strategy needed to shift discriminatory social norms simultaneously. Collaboration with women's-rights groups can help to ensure local perspectives are heard and policy design is informed by the ground-level experiences of women. Finally, regular information gathering and SDG 5 monitoring may assist in measuring and documenting progress, while ensuring future funding of gender

equality programming. With their persistent use, the policies to promote gender equality in Pakistan could step closer towards their intended objective of making legal rights into real life equality of all the women.

Conclusion

This qualitative analysis reveals that Pakistan has created a reasonably strong portfolio of gender equality legislation and policies which are formally linked with SDG 5. There is a strong normative commitment to a clear elimination of discrimination, violence and the political and economic engagement of women in the widest range of constitutional guarantees and federal and provincial laws, as well as embedded in the National Gender Policy Framework (2022). In terms of SDG 5 targets, these instruments fall in line with a number of SDGs' targets on paper, indicating that Pakistan appreciates gender equality's importance in sustainable development.

While these legal texts are translated in to real life changes for women, a number of structural and normative barriers limit the effectiveness of that translation. Even policies that are well designed can have their effectiveness questioned due to institutional fragmentation, weak enforcement mechanisms, insufficient resources and the lack of consistency between federal and provincial departments. As a result, the current policies' legacies with regard to SDGs outcomes, like women's security, autonomy in economic activities, and meaningful involvement, appear more as a discourse in commitments than as a measurable and persistent improvement of women in various regions and social groups.

The results also indicate that having a policy does not suffice to bridge the gender gap; critical is the implementation, monitoring and embedding of the policy into the social and institutional frameworks in Pakistan. A qualitative perspective indicates that informal justice systems remain in place, patriarchal restrictions on mobility and decision-making power exist, and knowledge of rights is still insufficient at attenuating the impacts of formal law. Until duty bearers' capacity is built, keeping women accountability mechanisms clear and maximizing women's agency at the grassroot level, the gap between law and practice would keep hurting Pakistan's progress towards SDG 5 by 2030.

Recommendations

At the policy and institutional level, Pakistan has to foster coordination mechanisms between different policy and institutional changes by forming "Gender Mainstreaming and SDG 5 Coordination Council" at the federal and provincial level, which must include the harmonization of mandates, monitoring of implementation and integrate sectoral budgets with goals of SDG 5. This should be a council of key ministries, the provincial planning ministries and the women development ministries to create coherence and minimise repetition. Concurrently, the implementation of gender responsive budgeting has to be expanded from pilot provinces to all provinces and core line ministries, which must also be accompanied by clear and measurable gender responsive key performance indicators (KPIs) grounded in the SDG 5 indicators related to women's participation, safety and access to services. Legal and enforcement enhancements are meant to be used to fill in the enforcement voids. Key legislation, including anti harassing laws in the workplace, preventing harassment laws and restrictions on child marriage, need to be adequately enforced, including regular inspections of the workplace and child marriage restrictions; and by establishing time-bound case disposal mechanisms and women's desks in police stations. Awareness-raising and mediation initiatives should also be implemented to improve the functioning of institutions of informal justice, acknowledging the tradition in the community of handling disputes informally while explicit provision is made to ensure that women's constitutional and human rights guarantees are not undermined in this process.

At the awareness, participation, social norm change (APSHNC) level, district level campaigns on women's rights and SDG 5 should be developed in multiple languages that are These campaigns should aim to utilize the school, faith institutions and the community leaders as a platform to reduce the prevalence of harmful stereotype and norm, while facilitating discussions around gender equality. Lastly, there needs to be gender-specific research and gender dialogues in the policy-making cycle. It is suggested that policy relevant qualitative studies are conducted by the government or research institutions that can understand how policy for gender equality affects the social organization of women through patriarchal norms and how the realities for women vary across sectors and regions. The results of these studies should be refined to create or adapt norm change initiatives with support from the media and education sectors while taking into account the need for culturally sensitive interventions based on principles of human rights that are nonetheless grounded in universal principles. PDs in Pakistan can decisively step up from the legislative to operational level and contribute towards SDG 5 by 2030 if these recommendations are put in place purposefully, imbued with context and participatory in nature.

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