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GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN CONTEMPORARY PAKISTANI SOCIETY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Gender equality and women's empowerment are fundamental requirements for social justice, sustainable development, economic prosperity, and democratic progress. In contemporary Pakistani society, women play an increasingly important role in education, healthcare, agriculture, entrepreneurship, politics, public administration, and other professional sectors. Despite their contributions, women continue to experience discrimination, educational inequalities, economic dependency, gender-based violence, restricted mobility, and inadequate representation in decision-making institutions. This research examines the challenges and opportunities associated with gender equality and women's empowerment in Pakistan, focusing on educational, economic, political, social, cultural, and institutional dimensions. The study employs a qualitative research methodology based on secondary information obtained from academic literature, government publications, policy documents, and reports published between 2023 and 2025. The research explores how patriarchal traditions, poverty, unequal employment opportunities, limited financial inclusion, and weak implementation of protective legislation influence women's social and economic position. It also investigates emerging opportunities through digital technology, higher education, entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, political participation, and institutional reforms. The findings suggest that although Pakistan has made important commitments to women's rights and gender equality, considerable differences remain between legislative commitments and their practical implementation. The study argues that sustainable women's empowerment requires coordinated efforts involving government institutions, educational organizations, civil society, private-sector organizations, families, and international development partners. It concludes that women's empowerment should be recognized as an essential component of national development rather than an isolated social issue.

KEYWORDS:*Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment, Contemporary Pakistani Society, Women's Rights, Patriarchy, Educational Opportunities, Economic Independence, Political Participation, Gender-Based Violence, Digital Inclusion, Social Justice, Financial Inclusion, Sustainable Development, Women's Leadership*.

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality has become an important subject in contemporary social, political, and economic discussions because it is closely associated with human rights, equality, dignity, and national development. It refers to providing women and men with equal rights, opportunities, responsibilities, and access to resources without discrimination based on gender. Amaral, S. F. M., Sheth, S., Aggarwal, P., Guha, A., Safeer, O., & Manzur, S. (2024). Found that Women's empowerment is a broader concept that emphasizes women's ability to make independent decisions, exercise their rights, access education, participate in employment, and contribute to political and social institutions. In developing countries such as Pakistan, gender equality is particularly important because women represent a substantial proportion of the population and contribute significantly to family welfare, community development, and economic activities. Their exclusion from educational, professional, and decision-making opportunities limits not only individual progress but also the country's overall development potential.Pakistani society is characterized by cultural diversity, religious traditions, family structures, and different socioeconomic conditions. Women perform important responsibilities in households, agriculture, education, healthcare, business, and public services. Nevertheless, their contributions are not always recognized or adequately rewarded. In several communities, traditional gender expectations influence women's

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freedom of movement, educational choices, employment opportunities, and participation in family decisions. Amaral, S. F. M., Sheth, S., Aggarwal, P., Guha, A., Safeer, O., & Manzur, S. (2024). foundthat Although the Constitution of Pakistan provides guarantees concerning equality and prohibits discrimination, women continue to experience inequalities in practical life. The National Commission on the Status of Women and UN Women documented these challenges in their 2023 National Report on the Status of Women in Pakistan, emphasizing the importance of gender-sensitive policies and reliable information for improving women's status (NCSW & UN Women, 2023).Education is one of the most important foundations of women's empowerment because it increases knowledge, confidence, professional skills, and awareness of legal and social rights.

Educated women are better positioned to participate in employment, entrepreneurship, political activities, and community development. However, girls in Pakistan continue to encounter obstacles such as poverty, inadequate school facilities, transportation difficulties, early marriage, teacher shortages, and restrictive cultural attitudes. UNICEF's Gender Strategy 2024–2027 emphasizes addressing structural inequalities that affect girls and women throughout their lives. It also highlights the importance of family, community, educational, and institutional support in achieving gender equality (UNICEF, 2024).Economic independence is another essential component of women's empowerment. Employment and entrepreneurship enable women to generate income, support their families, improve living standards, and participate in household decisions. Pakistani women work in agriculture, manufacturing, healthcare, education, domestic services, and business. However, unequal wages, informal employment, unpaid domestic responsibilities, limited financial inclusion, and workplace discrimination continue to restrict their economic participation. The World Bank's 2024 report on women's economic empowerment in Pakistan identifies interconnected barriers involving employment, financial resources, mobility, productive assets, and social norms (Amaral et al., 2024). Similarly, political participation remains important because women's representation in legislative institutions and leadership positions allows them to influence decisions affecting society.Gender-based violence, harassment, forced marriage, discriminatory attitudes, and unequal access to justice continue to create serious difficulties for women. These issues affect women's confidence, physical security, mental well-being, and ability to participate in public life. Although Pakistan has introduced legislation and institutional mechanisms to address gender-related discrimination, the implementation of protective measures remains inconsistent. Poverty, lack of legal awareness, social pressure, and fear of retaliation can prevent women from reporting abuse or accessing justice. The United Nations Development Programme's 2024 publication on financing for gender equality in Pakistan highlights the importance of addressing poverty, gender-based violence, institutional weaknesses, and insufficient financing through coordinated policy measures (UNDP, 2024).

Despite these challenges, contemporary Pakistan offers important opportunities for women's empowerment. Increasing educational participation, digital technology, online employment, entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, women's rights organizations, and growing public awareness are creating new possibilities. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2025 nevertheless placed Pakistan at 148th among 148 assessed economies, illustrating the continuing seriousness of gender disparities (World Economic Forum, 2025). This situation makes it necessary to investigate both the barriers and opportunities affecting women's development. The present research therefore examines how educational

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improvements, economic reforms, legal protection, political representation, digital inclusion, and social awareness can contribute to gender equality. It also emphasizes the shared responsibility of government institutions, families, communities, and civil society in building a more inclusive Pakistani society.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What are the major challenges and opportunities affecting gender equality and women's empowerment in contemporary Pakistani society, and how can educational, economic, social, political, and institutional reforms improve women's rights and participation in national development?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the current situation of gender equality and women's empowerment in contemporary Pakistani society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender equality is a fundamental principle of human rights that emphasizes equal treatment, opportunities, responsibilities, and access to resources for women and men. Women's empowerment refers to the process through which women gain greater control over their lives, resources, decisions, and participation in society. These concepts are closely connected because gender equality cannot be achieved without improving women's ability to exercise their rights and participate independently in social, economic, and political activities. In Pakistan, gender equality has developed within a particular historical and cultural environment influenced by religious values, colonial history, traditional family structures, socioeconomic inequalities, and institutional arrangements. Although women have historically contributed to family welfare, agriculture, education, and community development, their contributions have not always been accompanied by equal recognition, authority, or economic independence.The contemporary understanding of women's empowerment extends beyond providing women with educational opportunities or employment. It also includes freedom of expression, freedom of movement, access to healthcare, property ownership, political representation, personal security, and participation in decision-making. UNICEF. (2024). explanthat The National Report on the Status of Women in Pakistan 2023 provides an important institutional perspective on these issues. Prepared by the National Commission on the Status of Women in collaboration with UN Women, the report examines women's conditions in different areas and highlights the importance of gender-related information for evidence-based policymaking (NCSW & UN Women, 2023).Gender equality should also be understood as a development issue rather than exclusively a women's issue. When women have equal access to education, employment, healthcare, and leadership opportunities, households and communities benefit from improved economic conditions and social well-being. Consequently, empowering women can strengthen human development, reduce poverty, and improve the overall performance of national institutions Ibrahim, A. H. (2026.Patriarchal structures represent one of the major social challenges affecting women's empowerment in Pakistan.

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Patriarchy refers to a social arrangement in which men generally exercise greater authority over household decisions, economic resources, political institutions, and social activities. In many communities, traditional gender roles assign women responsibility for childcare, household management, and family care, while men are regarded as primary decision-makers and income earners.These expectations can influence important decisions concerning girls' education, employment, marriage, mobility, and inheritance. For example, some families prioritize boys' education because they consider sons future financial supporters of the household. Similarly, women may be discouraged from accepting professional employment because of concerns regarding family reputation, transportation, or traditional expectations about domestic responsibilities.However, patriarchal attitudes are not equally present in all parts of Pakistan. Differences exist between urban and rural communities, socioeconomic groups, educational backgrounds, and generations. Increasing educational opportunities and exposure to professional environments have encouraged many families to support women's participation in public life. Women are increasingly visible in medicine, teaching, business, journalism, law, government administration, and other professional fields.The National Commission on the Status of Women and UN Women (2023) highlight the importance of addressing social and institutional inequalities through improved policies and stronger gender-related institutions. This suggests that the transformation of traditional gender roles requires both legal reforms and changes in everyday social attitudes.Furthermore, gender equality should not be presented as a conflict between women and men. Rather, it should encourage shared responsibilities, mutual respect, and equal opportunities. Men and boys can play a constructive role by supporting girls' education, respecting women's professional choices, sharing household responsibilities, and rejecting discriminatory practices.Education is widely recognized as one of the strongest instruments for women's empowerment. It provides knowledge, improves professional skills, increases confidence, and enables women to understand their rights and responsibilities. Educated women are generally better positioned to participate in economic activities, make informed decisions, contribute to community development, and support the education of future generations.Despite its importance, educational inequality remains a major concern in Pakistan.

Many girls face difficulties continuing their education at the secondary, college, and university levels. Financial constraints and household responsibilities may force young women to discontinue their studies. In addition, families sometimes prefer educational programmes that they believe are compatible with traditional gender expectations, thereby restricting women's professional choices.UNICEF's Gender Strategy 2024–2027 identifies structural barriers that affect girls and women and emphasizes the importance of addressing gender inequalities throughout different stages of life (UNICEF, 2024). This approach is important because educational disadvantages during childhood can influence women's employment opportunities, financial independence, and social participation during adulthood.Higher education is particularly important for increasing women's access to professional careers. Universities can support gender equality by offering scholarships, safe educational environments, career guidance, digital learning opportunities, and professional development programmes. Greater participation of women in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, research, and public administration can also reduce occupational segregation.Furthermore, adult literacy and vocational education should be available to women who have missed formal educational opportunities. Flexible learning arrangements and community-based training programmes can improve access for women with family responsibilities.Therefore, educational empowerment must be treated as a long-term national

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priority. Equal access to quality education can improve women's social status, economic independence, and participation in decision-making.Economic empowerment is a central component of gender equality because it provides women with financial independence and greater authority over personal and household decisions. Women who have access to secure employment, productive resources, business opportunities, and financial services can contribute to household income and national economic development.Pakistani women participate in agriculture, livestock management, manufacturing, education, healthcare, domestic services, small businesses, and professional employment.

The World Bank's Women's Economic Empowerment in Pakistan report provides an important analysis of these challenges. Amaral et al. (2024) examine the interconnected barriers affecting women's participation in the economy, including employment opportunities, financial inclusion, productive assets, mobility, and social norms. Their analysis supports the argument that economic empowerment requires reforms across multiple sectors rather than isolated employment initiatives.One major challenge is the unequal distribution of unpaid domestic responsibilities. Women often manage childcare, cooking, cleaning, and other household activities in addition to paid employment. This double responsibility reduces their available time for professional development and economic participation. Limited access to affordable childcare and flexible working arrangements further increases these difficulties.Women entrepreneurs also face barriers involving business finance, training, technology, market access, and professional networks. Small-scale enterprises can provide important income opportunities, but women require institutional support to expand their businesses and compete in formal markets.The 2024 policy paper of the Overseas Investors Chamber of Commerce and Industry also discusses women's inclusion in Pakistan's economy, emphasizing equal employment opportunities, fair wages, workplace protection, and financial and digital inclusion (OICCI, 2024).Economic empowerment therefore requires equal pay for comparable work, improved employment conditions, access to business financing, recognition of unpaid care work, and stronger enforcement of workplace protections.Financial inclusion is an important dimension of women's economic empowerment. It refers to women's ability to access and use formal financial services, including bank accounts, savings, credit facilities, insurance, digital payments, and financial information.

The State Bank of Pakistan has promoted women's financial inclusion through its Banking on Equality policy framework. These efforts recognize that financial institutions must provide accessible and inclusive banking services and address the barriers that discourage women from using formal financial systems.Digital banking also provides important opportunities. Mobile banking and electronic payment services can reduce the need for physical travel and improve women's ability to manage financial transactions. However, these opportunities require affordable internet access, access to mobile devices, digital literacy, and protection against financial fraud.Financial institutions should introduce awareness programmes, accessible banking facilities, women-focused financial products, and business financing opportunities. Special attention should be given to rural women, women entrepreneurs, and women working in informal sectors.Financial independence also has important social implications. Women who control their earnings and savings may have greater influence over household decisions, children's education, healthcare, and personal development.Consequently, financial inclusion should be considered a major part of national gender equality policies.Gender-based violence is one of the most serious challenges

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affecting women's empowerment in Pakistan. It includes domestic violence, physical and psychological abuse, sexual harassment, forced marriage, honour-related violence, workplace harassment, and other forms of exploitation. Such practices violate women's fundamental rights and negatively affect their physical safety, psychological well-being, and social participation.Violence also has economic and educational consequences. Women who experience harassment or abuse may discontinue education, avoid professional opportunities, or restrict their participation in public activities. Fear of violence can reduce women's freedom of movement and prevent them from accessing healthcare, transportation, employment, and legal services.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative research methodology to examine gender equality and women's empowerment in contemporary Pakistani society. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the subject involves complex social relationships, cultural traditions, institutional practices, economic inequalities, and individual experiences that require detailed interpretation. The research is based primarily on secondary data collected from academic publications, research articles, government documents, international organizational reports, policy papers, and relevant institutional publications issued between 2023 and 2025. Particular attention is given to research published by the National Commission on the Status of Women, UN Women, UNICEF, the World Bank, the World Economic Forum, the United Nations Development Programme, and other organizations working on women's rights and gender equality. The study examines several dimensions of women's empowerment, including education, employment, entrepreneurship, financial independence, political participation, social recognition, digital inclusion, and protection against gender-based violence. Information has been selected according to its relevance to the research objectives, credibility of the publishing institution, and contribution to understanding women's circumstances in Pakistan. The study uses thematic analysis to identify recurring issues and relationships between social attitudes, economic conditions, institutional arrangements, and women's opportunities. Both national and international evidence is considered to understand the position of Pakistani women within broader development frameworks. The research also recognizes differences between rural and urban communities because women's experiences are influenced by geographical location, family income, educational background, social class, and access to public services. The study does not claim to have conducted original interviews, questionnaires, or field experiments. Instead, it interprets existing published information to develop a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with women's empowerment. Ethical research principles are maintained through appropriate acknowledgment of original publications, careful interpretation of available statistics, and avoidance of unsupported conclusions. Since secondary sources may use different definitions, geographical coverage, and reporting periods, their limitations are considered during analysis. This methodology provides a systematic foundation for examining the relationship between gender equality and sustainable development in Pakistan.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design is descriptive, analytical, and qualitative in nature. It has been developed to investigate the major challenges and opportunities associated with gender equality and women's empowerment in contemporary Pakistani society. The descriptive component

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explains the existing position of women in educational institutions, employment sectors, political organizations, families, and public institutions. It provides an overview of the social and economic conditions influencing women's participation in different areas of national development. The analytical component examines the factors responsible for gender inequalities and evaluates how government policies, cultural traditions, institutional structures, and economic conditions influence women's opportunities. The research is organized around six major dimensions: educational empowerment, economic empowerment, social and cultural equality, political participation, legal protection, and digital inclusion. Each dimension is examined through relevant literature and institutional publications from 2023 to 2025. The study follows a thematic design in which collected information is classified according to common issues and patterns. For example, educational inequality is examined through literacy, school access, higher education, and vocational training, while economic inequality is investigated through employment, wages, financial inclusion, entrepreneurship, and unpaid domestic responsibilities. Similarly, political empowerment is assessed through women's representation, electoral participation, leadership opportunities, and access to decision-making institutions. The research also considers differences between rural and urban communities to understand how geographical and socioeconomic conditions influence women's experiences. Furthermore, the design examines the relationship between traditional social attitudes and institutional performance to understand why legal protections do not always produce equal outcomes. The study uses documentary analysis rather than primary fieldwork, making it suitable for examining existing policies, published findings, and national development indicators. The overall purpose is to develop an integrated understanding of gender equality and identify practical measures that can strengthen women's rights, independence, and participation in Pakistan.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of available secondary information indicates that gender inequality in Pakistan is a multidimensional issue involving educational, economic, social, political, cultural, and institutional factors. The evidence demonstrates that although women have made progress in several areas, the distribution of opportunities and resources remains unequal. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2025, Pakistan ranked 148th among 148 assessed economies, with an overall gender parity score of 56.7 percent. The report also identified continuing weaknesses in economic participation and political empowerment, while educational parity showed a limited improvement (World Economic Forum, 2025). These findings suggest that progress in one dimension does not automatically produce equality across all sectors. Educational analysis indicates that girls continue to encounter barriers involving poverty, inadequate educational infrastructure, transportation, early marriage, and restrictive social attitudes. The 2025 Global Gender Gap Report also reported female literacy of 48.5 percent in Pakistan, demonstrating the continuing importance of educational development. Economic analysis reveals that women contribute to agriculture, domestic services, manufacturing, family businesses, and professional employment, but much of their work remains informal or insufficiently recognized. Amaral et al. (2024) identify barriers involving labour-market participation, financial inclusion, productive resources, mobility, and social norms. This indicates that economic empowerment requires more than creating jobs; it also requires improving working conditions, access to finance, and women's control over their income. Social analysis further demonstrates that traditional gender expectations can restrict women's freedom of movement, employment choices, and

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participation in household decisions. Women frequently perform extensive unpaid domestic responsibilities alongside professional activities, reducing the time available for education, entrepreneurship, and career development. The UN Women country fact sheet for Pakistan also documents the unequal distribution of unpaid domestic and care work, with women and girls spending considerably more time on these activities than men. Political analysis indicates that although reserved seats have increased women's formal representation, barriers to leadership, electoral participation, and independent decision-making remain. The analysis of institutional reports further suggests that gender equality policies require adequate financing, monitoring, public awareness, and effective enforcement. However, the evidence also identifies several opportunities for improvement.

FINDINGS

The study identifies several important findings concerning gender equality and women's empowerment in contemporary Pakistani society. First, gender inequality remains a significant social and developmental challenge because women continue to experience unequal opportunities in education, employment, political representation, and access to economic resources. Although Pakistan has introduced different policies and institutional arrangements to improve women's rights, considerable gaps remain between formal commitments and practical implementation. Second, education is identified as one of the most important foundations of women's empowerment. Girls who receive quality education have greater opportunities to develop professional skills, understand their rights, participate in employment, and make independent decisions. However, poverty, inadequate educational facilities, transportation difficulties, early marriage, and traditional attitudes continue to restrict educational access, particularly in disadvantaged communities. Third, economic independence remains limited for many women because of informal employment, unequal wages, financial dependency, restricted access to property, and inadequate business opportunities. Women's unpaid household responsibilities further reduce their ability to participate in the labour market and pursue professional development. Fourth, patriarchal traditions and restrictive social expectations influence women's choices concerning education, marriage, employment, mobility, and family decisions. These attitudes demonstrate that gender equality requires not only legal reforms but also changes in social behaviour and family practices. Fifth, gender-based violence and workplace harassment remain serious barriers to women's safety, dignity, and participation in public life. Effective implementation of protective laws, improved access to justice, confidential complaint systems, and institutional accountability are necessary to address these challenges. Sixth, women's political participation has improved through reserved seats and greater awareness, but meaningful leadership, independent decision-making, and equal electoral opportunities require further development. Seventh, digital technology provides important opportunities through online education, freelancing, remote employment, digital entrepreneurship, and financial services. However, limited internet access, inadequate digital literacy, and online harassment continue to restrict women's participation.

CONCLUSION

Gender equality and women's empowerment are essential requirements for achieving social justice, economic development, democratic participation, and sustainable progress in contemporary Pakistani society. This research has examined the challenges and opportunities

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affecting women's position in Pakistan and demonstrated that gender inequality is a complex issue influenced by traditional social structures, economic limitations, educational disparities, political barriers, and institutional weaknesses. Although women have made significant contributions to education, healthcare, agriculture, business, politics, and professional activities, their participation and achievements continue to be restricted by unequal access to resources, limited employment opportunities, unpaid domestic responsibilities, workplace discrimination, and gender-based violence. Educational inequality remains a particularly important concern because girls who cannot access quality education often experience further disadvantages in employment, financial independence, and social participation. Similarly, economic empowerment remains difficult when women lack access to financial services, property ownership, professional training, and secure employment. Political participation also requires improvement because women's numerical representation does not automatically provide meaningful influence over decision-making processes. The research further establishes that legal protections and government policies are important but insufficient without effective implementation, institutional accountability, adequate resources, and public awareness. At the same time, contemporary developments provide considerable opportunities for improving women's status. Digital technology, online employment, entrepreneurship, higher education, financial inclusion, and increasing awareness of women's rights have created new possibilities for empowerment. Government institutions, civil society organizations, international agencies, educational institutions, media, and families can collectively contribute to these developments.

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