



## Challenges in Implementing International Norms and Laws on Women's Rights in Pakistan

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### Abstract:

Even though Pakistan has ratified various international treaties and expressed commitment to international norms regarding women's rights, translating these obligations into effective implementation remains a significant challenge. The continued societal marginalization of women results in their limited participation in social, political and economic spheres. This study explores the key barriers to women's empowerment, including limited access to education, employment, economic resources and legal protection from violence. Based on an analysis of national and international documents as well as interviews with experts and policymakers from Lahore and Islamabad, it was found that the major obstacles, such as patriarchal norms, biased religious interpretations, limited political representation, financial dependency and outdated legal frameworks are contributing to the lack of implementation of international laws and obligations in Pakistan. It is recommended that efforts such as legal reforms and public awareness campaigns are urgently needed to address legal barriers and social resistance to ensure the effective application of international women's rights laws. Furthermore, it is essential to strengthen and support civil society actors, including NGOs, to implement international norms and laws at societal level.

**Keywords:** Pakistan, human rights, women empowerment, international norms and laws, implementation hurdles, challenges, societal marginalization, multilateral treaties

### INTRODUCTION

Treaties and norms serve as foundational frameworks that help maintain international order by creating structured systems of governance. These systems, or regimes, along with the rules of international politics and established behavioral standards, guide how states behave at the global level. The principles, rules and institutions embedded within these regimes shape and constrain state actions. Through such frameworks, states learn their roles within the international system and these roles expectations subsequently influence their behavior (Tarzi, 1998).

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A significant trend in international politics is the increasing codification of key human rights norms into international treaty law, with states demonstrating strong commitment to these treaties (Cook, 1993). Many scholars in international relations view this development positively, arguing that the formalization of norms through legally binding frameworks reinforces their legitimacy and promotes compliance. However, despite this progress, harmful practices that contradict these international norms and rules remain widespread. The primary reason for this failure is that while states may formally commit to laws and norms but they do not always adhere to them in practice. Non-compliance can be unintentional, resulting from limited institutional capacity, or deliberate, resulting from weak monitoring and enforcement mechanisms (Búzás, 2018, 251-52).

International laws and norms influence states through the actions of political actors including government officials and different interest groups (Eimer, Lütz, & Schüren, 2016). The extent of this influence depends on the domestic significance of these laws and the policy debates that shape national decision-making (Cortell & Davis, 1996). Rather than directly enforcing change, international norms and rules typically shape domestic policy through the efforts of political leaders, civil society and interest groups operating within states (Amirthalingam, 2005).

The protection of women's rights in Pakistan has long been a persistent struggle, marked by both persistent challenges and progress. While legislative measures such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) and laws addressing domestic violence have been enacted, deeply ingrained cultural and societal norms often limit their effectiveness. Women, particularly in rural and underdeveloped areas, face significant barriers to education, healthcare and employment opportunities, leaving them vulnerable to various forms of violence and exploitation (Akram, 2018). However, Pakistani women have continued to advocate for change, with strong female figures emerging in politics, business and social activism. Movements like the Aurat March have amplified national discourse surrounding issues like honor killings, child marriages and economic disparities (Jamal, 2005).

Despite Pakistan's formal commitment to the regime of international women's rights, it lags behind in implementing these commitments at local level (Akram et al., 2021). Societal attitudes, legal and political constraints and institutional gaps prevent the realization of these commitments. This study outlines Pakistan's international commitments and identifies local challenges that prevent gender equality. Key propositions of this study were validated through support from reports, official documents and interviews. Among the factors that contribute to Pakistan's non-compliance with international laws and norms include entrenched patriarchal values, restrictive religious interpretations, political obstacles, economic challenges and inadequate enforcement mechanisms. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive legal reforms, public awareness and education and sustained engagement from media and civil society to strengthen advocacy and accountability.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN PAKISTAN**

Pakistan has had a complex and uneven history regarding women's rights. A significant positive development came in 1975 when the UN designated it as the International Year of the Woman, sparking optimism in the country. The Pakistani government embraced the theme enthusiastically and responded by issuing a Declaration of Women's Rights and establishing a commission to

formulate policy recommendations (Shaheed, 2019). However, subsequent political upheaval, culminating in General Zia's eleven-year regime, reversed much of the progress achieved in the arena women's empowerment.

The process of Islamization in Pakistan under General Zia led to one-sided policies and laws that significantly undermined women's empowerment (Donno, Fox, & Kaasik, 2021). Laws such as the Hudood Ordinance and Qanoon-e-Shahadat created discriminatory standards against women in legal proceedings by imposing evidentiary requirements that excluded their testimony. These laws resulted in unjust prosecutions, particularly in rape cases, where victims could be accused of *zina* (Critelli, 2012). The women's movement has actively opposed these discriminatory laws and advocated for gender equality especially after the restoration of democracy in 1988.

The democratically elected government of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto tried to reverse the damage done to women's rights. In her first term, she repealed a number of discriminatory laws. Five women studies centers were established in five universities in major cities of Pakistan. That same year, she also founded the First Women Bank to enhance women's access to financial resources. During her second term, the government ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and enacted the Women in Distress and Detention Fund Act to provide institutional support to vulnerable women. Despite these efforts, Pakistan continues to rank as the second worst country in global gender equality prompting calls from organizations like UN Women and the Aurat Foundation for legislative reforms to eliminate barriers hindering women's access to justice. Despite the constitutional guarantee of gender equality since 1973, legislative efforts to address women's inequalities have been inconsistent. Opposition from conservative groups and weak implementation mechanisms by successive governments have hindered meaningful progress (Brightman 2015, 238-39).

The ineffective criminal justice system, coupled with a lack of gender sensitivity results in limited accountability for gender-based violence. Survivors often refrain from reporting incidents to the police and when they do, police often refuse to register cases or expose complainants to further danger. The police force also lacks the necessary resources to handle gender-based violence cases, including an insufficient number of female officers (International Crisis Group, 2015). Examining Pakistan's laws on women's rights in comparison to international legal and moral standards provides valuable insights into areas needing improvement.

The gender gap in Pakistani politics remains a significant challenge, with women still underrepresented in decision-making roles at all levels of government (Ali & Syed, 2016). In 2002, under General Pervez Musharraf's military regime, reforms reinstated quotas for women's reserved seats, increasing their representation to 33% in local government and 17% in assemblies. Despite this progress, women's political presence remains below the 30% "critical mass" required for effective influence and the 33% target advocated by the women's groups (Rafeeq & Khan 2024, 758). Within the framework of Pakistan's Sustainable Development Goals, international donors have supported efforts to enhance women's political participation (Khan & Naqvi, 2020). Significant strides were made in 2006 with the passing of the Women's Protection Act. This legal reform, achieved through persistent advocacy by both national and international women organizations and commissions, marked a major step forward in protecting women's rights (Noreen & Musarrat, 2013).

However, in Pakistani politics, women continue to grapple with significant social and economic challenges that hinder their ability to perform optimally. The hostile environment in legislative bodies often undermines their participation. According to the Women in Politics Survey (WPS), 30% of female seat-holders reported being silenced by male colleagues. Although the WPS found that women experienced fewer instances of direct verbal abuse (11%) and physical threats (6%), the most common form of harassment reported was through text messages and social media (26%) (Khan & Naqvi 2020, 295). Socially, they often face derogatory remarks, harassment and threats, fostering a hostile environment that discourages their political participation. Economically, limited access to resources and funding restricts women's ability to compete effectively in politics (Shakil et al., 2022).

Women in developing countries like Pakistan often face perceptions of inferior competence and limited significance in national development (Agboatwalla, 2000). Historically, Pakistan has made efforts to address these issues, including the establishment of commissions in 1976 and 1983 to assess women's career statuses. Subsequent milestones include the establishment of the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) in 2000 and the formulation of the national policy for women's empowerment in 2002. The NCSW continues to collaborate with UN entities to promote gender equality through conducting research and publishing reports such as the Young Women in Pakistan Status Report 2020 (Khalid, Othman, & Wan Zakaria, 2023).

Women's economic participation in Pakistan faces numerous challenges including societal and cultural barriers, limited access to education and restrictive legal frameworks. Although female workforce participation is gradually increasing, it remains relatively low compared to global standards. Most women are employed in low-wage and informal sectors such as agriculture and domestic work (Drucza & Peveri, 2018). Issues like persistent wage disparity, job insecurity and limited career advancement opportunities continue to constrain women's economic mobility. Avenues for entrepreneurship are limited and highly restrictive in Pakistan. Among the 137 states in the Global Entrepreneurship Index, Pakistan ranks 109<sup>th</sup> (Umar, Ali, & Sial, 2023).

This literature review demonstrates that Pakistan struggles with policy implementation concerning women's rights and the international covenants it has ratified. This study specifically focuses on the hurdles that prevent this implementation by delving deeper into the practical issues at the intersection of global frameworks and local realities. By investigating these specific challenges, our study contributes to the complexities involved in transforming international legal commitments into tangible improvements in women's lived realities in Pakistan.

### **Research Question and Key Propositions**

This study seeks to examine the extent of implementation of existing international norms and laws in Pakistan, with a particular focus on the social, political, economic and legal challenges that hinder the implementation of internationally ratified conventions. In this context, the central research question guiding this study is:

"What are the major challenges Pakistan faces in implementing internationally recognized women's rights?"

To address this research question, the following five propositions (or hypotheses) were formulated. Relevant documents were collected and interview question guide was developed based on these propositions (See Appendix 1).

Proposition 1: Deep-seated patriarchal norms in Pakistan obstruct women to gain equal rights and opportunities both socially and professionally.

Propositions 2: Certain religious interpretations are used to justify gender inequality in Pakistan, restricting women's rights across different aspects of life.

Proposition 3: Women's financial dependency on male family member serves as a major barrier that prevents them from asserting their rights, seeking justice and making independent choices.

Proposition 4: Inadequate political representation hinders women's development and implementation of policies that could help them achieve their rights.

Proposition 5: Weak legal frameworks and inadequate institutional support make it difficult for women to seek protection from violence, discrimination and socio-economic disparities.

## **METHODS**

This study employed qualitative research design drawing on analysis of documents and expert interviews. The documents provided a broader historical context, while the interviews provided first-hand accounts of experts and practitioners. Given the subjective and sensitive nature of the topic, interviews were essential for developing a nuanced and grounded analysis of the topic. All interview questions were open-ended and were primarily based on the propositions outlined earlier.

### **Study of Relevant Documents**

Documents reviewed to understand the broader international perspective included CEDAW; the Beijing Declaration; UN Sustainable Development Report, 2024 and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. These documents helped establish the broader understanding of international laws and norms.

To understand the national context, key Pakistani documents were analyzed including the National Commission on Human Rights (NCHR) report, the State of Human Rights Report 2023 and the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey. Furthermore, reports published by the World Economic Forum and UN Women were reviewed to determine Pakistan's progress toward gender equality from the global perspective. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Annual Report, 2024 and the Amnesty International Report, 2024 were also provided an external perspective on human rights violations in Pakistan. Finally, a few secondary documents were studied to provide scholarly expert opinion.

### **Qualitative Interviews**

In total, twenty interviews were conducted to gain in-depth insights from key stakeholders that included policymakers, area experts, women activists and community leaders. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. Unlike random sampling, which gives all individuals an equal chance of selection, purposive sampling allows researchers to choose individuals based on

their unique knowledge, experience or traits. This technique is widely used in qualitative research, case studies or when working with small, specialized groups where expertise or unique perspectives are essential. The interviewees were selected from two cities of Pakistan; Lahore and Islamabad. These cities are important because most of the policies regarding women are formulated in these two cities. Furthermore, head-offices of most of the NGOs, think tanks and social movements are located in these two cities of Pakistan. The following are the key groups interviewed:

- From the government sector, interviewees included four (4) government officials, including the provincial Minister for Human Rights and Minority Affairs, a Member of National Commission on Human Rights, an official from the Commission on the Status of Women and the Deputy Secretary (Services), S & GAD, Provincial Secretariat. Furthermore, three (3) retired government officials were interviewed including a Former Chairperson of the Human-rights Commission of Pakistan, a Former Chairperson of the National Commission on the Status of Women and a female retired Ambassador.
- Area specialists included four (4) scholars from both public and private universities and three (3) Chairpersons/Executive Directors of Lahore-based think tanks. These think tanks included Defense of Human Rights, the Democratic Commission for Human Development and Women in Struggle for Empowerment (WISE).
- Three (3) human rights activists and a female Filmmaker/Anthropologist were interviewed from the civil society.
- Finally, two (2) female trade unionists representing the Pakistan Trade Union Federation and the All-Pakistan Trade Union Federation also participated in the interview process.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Data from both documents and interviews was analyzed manually. All documents were examined thoroughly to identify evidence relevant to five suggested propositions (or hypotheses). Regarding interviews, as interview guide was primarily based on five propositions, answers to interview questions automatically addressed these propositions. For a systematic analysis, results were organized into different sub-sections corresponding to each key propositions.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were strictly followed to conduct expert interviews. These considerations were important to ensure integrity and transparency of the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after clearly explaining the purpose of the study, the use of collected information and participants' right to withdraw at any time. We also made sure that the interview process is conducted with professionalism and respect for the experts' time and expertise. Finally, it was made sure that experts' views are represented accurately in the analysis and reporting of the results.

## **RESULTS**

This section presents the findings of the study based on the documents, reports and qualitative interviews. It thoroughly explores the key insights, themes and patterns that emerged from research and links them directly to the study's core propositions.



### **Insights from International and Pakistan-Specific Documents on Women's Rights**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) affirms women's rights as human rights and asserts that discrimination against women is fundamentally unjust and an offense against human dignity. The UDHR mandates that "all appropriate measures" be taken to ensure that women have full equality with men in political and legal rights, education and employment (Elder, 1986, p.14). Additionally, over the last four decades, norms promoting gender equality have been increasingly incorporated into international law. Key milestones in this respect include the four World Women's Conferences held between 1975 and 1995. The 1993 Human Rights Conference significantly advanced the inclusion of women's rights into global gender equality discussions. CEDAW of 1979 and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women of 1993 specifically play significant roles in safeguarding women's rights. CEDAW formally defines discrimination against women while the Declaration aims to combat violence against women noting that one in five women globally has experienced abuse. The Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriage (1994) also aligns with the UDHR principles. Collectively, these documents reinforce women's rights life, liberty and equality. They require member states to eliminate gender discrimination and uphold international laws that protect women's rights.

During the UN's International Decade for Women, global meetings were held in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985). Ultimately, these meetings led to a pivotal conference in Beijing in 1995. These initiatives encouraged governments to address women's concerns and helped in the establishment of UN bodies, such as the Commission on the Status of Women. Beijing Declaration especially addressed the widespread issue of violence against women. Following this declaration, the UN General Assembly also adopted the Women's Convention, which serves as the international bill of rights for women. The Convention's preamble is followed by thirty articles that impose legal obligations on ratifying states (Gondal et al., 2023). Furthermore, the UN initiatives, such as the United Nations for Women's Rights (UNWR) and the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) promote gender equality across workplaces and communities. In the context of the sustainable development agendas, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Index highlights gender disparities by quantifying women's inclusion, justice and security.

As far as implementation in Pakistan is concerned, reports from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), UN Women and other international bodies reveal a troubling reality of gender inequality and the systemic barriers women continue to face in Pakistan. These reports highlight areas that include legal protections, violence against women, economic participation and cultural norms. These reports reveal that Pakistan has made significant progress in enacting laws to protect women's rights. Most important among these laws are the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act 2011 and the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010. However, implementation of these laws remains weak. Especially, violence against women remains the most critical human rights issue in Pakistan. Reports from HRCP, UN Women and other organizations reveal widespread prevalence of domestic violence, honor killings, acid attacks and sexual violence. According to HRCP's annual report, in 2020, 459 cases of honor killings and over 1,000 cases of domestic violence were officially reported. A report from the Aurat Foundation further reveals that 56% of women survivors never report incidents of violence. Among those who do seek justice, the process is arduous, costly and emotionally distressing with conviction rates as low as 2%. The

Aurat Foundation study also reports that over 90% of working women acknowledge experiencing harassment, yet only 17% file official complaints. Based on the pressure from women rights activists, the government enacted the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010, which was amended in 2022 to extend protections to home-based workers, however, the implementation of this law remains a big challenge.

Amnesty International 2024 report on economic conditions highlights that in Pakistan women are predominantly employed in low-paying, informal sectors such as domestic work, agriculture and the garment industry. Additionally, the report further notes that women continue to face substantial wage disparities with women earning 30-40% less than men for similar work. Furthermore, economic policies and social structures hinder women from seeking formal employment, securing property rights or starting businesses. Women in Pakistan also face significant barriers in obtaining financial services, including loans and credit due to both legal and cultural obstacles.

### **Findings from Interviews**

The interview data revealed several themes corresponding to the propositions that informed the interview guide.

#### **Theme 1: Patriarchy as a major obstacle**

Zohra Yousuf (Former Chairperson, HRCP) and Amna Masood Janjua (Chairperson, Defence of Human Rights) argued that patriarchy remains the primary obstacle to achieving equal status for women. Women are hardly given the right to make key decisions about their own lives, especially in the areas of education, employment and marriage. Farzana Bari (Human Rights Activist) argued that Pakistani state itself is inherently patriarchal and its government reflects this patriarchal structure. Systemic oppression is deeply ingrained, making it difficult to dismantle it.

Samar Minallah (Anthropologist) suggested that to address the problem of deeply ingrained patriarchy, change should begin at home during early childhood. Parents should not treat boys and girls differently. Additionally, to address the issue of patriarchy, the interviewees recommended various strategies. These strategies include educating women and girls about their rights, providing economic opportunities and enacting and strengthening policies that promote gender equality. Additionally, community engagement particularly involving men, to challenge patriarchal norms and strengthening women's organizations to advocate for their rights are also essential strategies. In other words, a multifaceted approach is needed to effectively combat patriarchy.

#### **Theme 2: Religion as a major obstacle**

According to Fauzia Saleemi (Assistant Professor), Islam is a comprehensive code of conduct that provides guidance in every aspect of life. However, the challenge arises from how religious teachings are interpreted and practiced. Rubeena Jamil (President, Working Women Organization) further elaborated that certain interpretations of Islamic teachings are often used to justify gender-based discrimination. For example, some religious interpretations deny women education, permit polygamy, justify male-biased divorce laws and impose restrictions on women's inheritance.

Nusrat Bashir (President, Pakistan Trade Union Federation) stated that women are often treated as secondary beings in various religious traditions due to social and cultural influences. Particularly in



matters of property, marriage and divorce religion is used to justify male domination. She, along with Dr. Abida (Human Rights Expert) and Shaista Anwar (Assistant Professor), called for progressive interpretations of religious texts. To address this problem, they emphasized that a respectful dialogue must be conducted and women's voices should be strengthened within community spaces. This discourse can lead to a more constructive role of religion to achieve gender equality. Not only these efforts will strengthen women's rights, they will also provide legitimacy to religious pronouncements.

### Theme 3: Financial dependency as a major obstacle

Seema Ilahi (Retired Ambassador) argued that patriarchal societies generally create more financially dependent women. Rubeena Jamil (Human Rights Activist) further explained that financial dependence on male relatives limits women's autonomy and decision-making power. Similarly, Noor Imran (Human Rights Activist) emphasized that financial independence is crucial for women's empowerment, as it enhances women's agency in society and within familial relationships. Khawar Mumtaz (Former Chairperson, NCSW) argued that as most women work in informal settings, their labor and dedication are not appreciated.

Ayesha Ahmed (Human Rights Activist) highlighted the importance of fair division of labor. Her analysis of Pakistani case was based on the ideas of Gramsci and Foucault. She argued that power dynamics play a central role in sustaining inequality and oppression in any society. It is essential to address structural inequalities to build a more just society. Ramesh Singh Arora (Punjab Human Rights Minister) emphasized that gender mainstreaming is the key priority for the government. The Punjab government has launched several initiatives to achieve this objective. Some of the initiatives include scholarship programs and interest-free loans. However, Nusrat Bashir (President, Pakistan Trade Union Federation) argued that women's financial independence cannot be achieved in isolation. The focus should be on fostering mutual support between men and women. Women and their loved ones can contribute to each other's well-being through shared financial responsibilities.

### Theme 4: Lack of political representation as a major obstacle

Absence of women in leadership roles was highlighted by Amna Masood Janjua (Chairperson, Defense of Human Rights). She argued only two women currently serve as judges in the Supreme Court of Pakistan. Furthermore, women constitute barely 20% of members in the parliaments and civil bureaucracy. According to Zohra Yousuf (Former President, HRCP), women's political participation in Pakistan remains limited. Unless they are from prominent political families, like the Bhuttos and the Sharifs, women can find it very difficult to significantly participate in politics. Women underrepresentation in political leadership severely impacts their rights. Their voices and concerns are often sidelined and policies are made that overlook their needs.

Human rights activist, Tanveer Jehan recommended a comprehensive strategy to address legal, institutional and social barriers that prevent women's political representation. According to her, through legal reforms such as gender quotas, mandatory female representation in political parties and stronger anti-harassment laws can potentially result in enhancement of women's participation in politics. Nadeem Ashraf, NCHR Member Commissioner for Punjab, further emphasized that programs related to leadership training, mentorship and youth engagement can equip women with

the skills needed to run for office. Furthermore, partnerships with international organizations can also boost women's confidence and provide them with global role models.

#### Theme 5: Legal and institutional barriers as major obstacles

Most of the interviewees highlighted that various discriminatory laws and institutional obstacles hinder the protection of women's rights in Pakistan. Many identified that persistence of discriminatory legislation makes it difficult for women victims to get justice. Nyr Mustafa (Deputy Secretary, South Punjab Government) further added that although legal frameworks have gradually improved compared to the 1980s and 1990s, older statutes such as the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961 continue to hinder efforts toward women-friendly legislation.

To address these challenges, Tanveer Jehan (Human Rights Activist) advocated for a multi-tiered approach encompassing legal, institutional and societal reforms to eliminate discriminatory laws and policies. Legal reforms should be focused on amending family, inheritance and criminal laws to eliminate gender biases. Judicial and law enforcement reforms are also crucial, including the training of police officers, judges and prosecutors to handle women's rights cases with sensitivity and fairness. Institutional changes, such as appointing more female judges and establishing gender-based violence courts, would help address systemic biases.

## DISCUSSION

The propositions outlined in this study were largely supported by the findings. First-hand accounts of the experts were instrumental in substantiating the proposed arguments while recurring themes and patterns that emerged from interviews aligned closely with the initial assumptions. Furthermore, the document analysis provided a complementary layer of evidence.

The proposition that patriarchy is a major obstacle to women's empowerment in Pakistan received unanimous agreement from interviewees. Participants asserted that deeply entrenched patriarchal norms restrict women's autonomy. More specifically, it limits their access to education and economic opportunities, and prevents them from assuming leadership and decision-making roles. Participants further highlighted that educational systems, media portrayals and societal norms continue to reinforce outdated gender roles. A concerted effort is needed to truly challenge gender stereotypes. To achieve genuine women's empowerment, in addition to educating women, men should also be encouraged to adopt more progressive and supportive roles.

The majority of interview participants expressed their concern that religion is often misinterpreted. Some added that it is sometimes exploited by the state and other social groups to manipulate the public emotionally. Only two participants were of the view that religion is inherently patriarchal. In general, interviewees emphasized the need for more progressive interpretations. These interpretations should be in line with contemporary values of equality and social justice.

Women's economic participation in Pakistan remains low. Most of the women's employment is in low-paying informal sectors. Legal and institutional barriers hinder their economic independence. These barriers include restrictive inheritance laws, limited access to credit and inadequate educational opportunities. Almost all interviewees strongly reinforced the proposition that financial dependency is a significant barrier to women's empowerment. Some of them argued that the focus should be on interdependence between men and women, where both contribute to each

other's well-being. This approach has the promise to help achieve women's empowerment while maintaining family cohesion and upholding cultural values.

Political participation was widely recognized as crucial element of women's empowerment. Many noted that women are increasingly stepping forward and making valuable contributions. The study of documents further highlighted positive trends in women's political participation. Stats quoted in these documents reveal that women's influence and involvement in politics is growing.

Almost all of the interviewees acknowledged the existence of legal and institutional barriers, especially the poor implementation of laws, hinder full implementation of women related international laws. Significant progress has been made in the enactment of different laws since 2000, however, their enforcement remains a significant challenge. The establishment of institutions such as the NCSW, the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) and the Ministry of Human Rights are important steps in the right direction. However, still a lot of work needs to be done before these institutions become really effective. This situation exposes the overall gap between Pakistan's legal commitments and the actual protection of women's rights.

Both document analysis and expert interviews reveal that violence against women remains a pressing issue in Pakistan. Cases of domestic violence, honor killings, acid attacks and sexual assaults remain prevalent. Even though the government has introduced laws such as the Domestic Violence Bill, significant obstacles remain. A number of cases go unreported due to fear or societal justifications. Significant challenges are faced by women in seeking justice. Legal processes are frequently costly, lengthy and re-traumatizing for survivors. These hurdles are further compounded by low conviction rates.

Overall is the study concludes that Pakistan has failed in many areas to fulfill its international commitments regarding women's rights. Even though Pakistan has ratified different international treaties and laws on women's rights, benefits of these ratifications have not fully reached Pakistani women. In some cases, domestic laws do not align with international standards. While in other cases, where laws were drafted to meet international commitments, enforcement remains weak.

## CONCLUSION

This study sought to identify and address the major challenges that Pakistan faces in complying with international treaties and covenants on women's rights. Analysis of key policy documents and expert interviews revealed multiple factors that impede progress in this area. Deep-rooted patriarchal and conservative cultural values are reinforced by certain religious interpretations. These values generally clash with global gender equality standards. Women's progress is mainly hindered by societal resistance especially through social stigma and family pressure. Emphasis on traditional women's roles as house-wives and mothers restricts their life choice outside homes. Political and institutional barriers obstruct the enactment and enforcement of laws and policies that can support women's rights. In addition, corruption and lack of accountability within the law enforcement and judicial systems further undermine efforts to protect women's rights. Economic constraints lead to the underfunding and neglect of women's rights initiatives.

The findings suggest that the primary obstacle to implement international commitments regarding women's rights in Pakistan is not the state's intention. Since 1988, some governments, such as

those of Benazir Bhutto and Pervaiz Musharraf, took more proactive steps to promote women's rights, while the others have been comparatively passive. No government actively sought to undermine women's rights. However, the main problem lies at the society level. For effective implementation of domestic and international laws, it is important that communities at the grassroots level are engaged. Such engagement is important to make sure that legal frameworks and norms are understood and integrated into everyday life. It is essential that men are educated about women's rights for meaningful implementation of international gender equality standards. If men understand these rights, societies can challenge patriarchal norms, promote mutual respect and create an environment conducive to advancement and protection of women's rights.

A key finding of this research is that women's representation in parliaments can significantly advance their rights through various mechanisms. For example, women parliamentarians can advocate for and enact laws that can address issues like domestic violence, workplace harassment and other gender-based violations. These representatives can be instrumental to develop policies to promote gender equality in education, healthcare and politics. Their presence in parliaments raises awareness of women's issues. It helps dismantle cultural and societal barriers to gender equality and serves as an inspiration for more women to engage in politics and public life. Moreover, women parliamentarians also play a critical role in the effective implementation and enforcement of laws and policies related to women's rights, including international conventions and treaties.

International laws, treaties and norms establish globally recognized standards that countries like Pakistan must strive to meet. In addition, international pressure can also play an important role to compel countries to improve women's rights. Similar to its efforts in other traditional societies, the global community has historically driven Pakistan to implement crucial reforms in this area. For example, significant international pressure resulted in the ratification of CEDAW in Pakistan. In the same spirit, the global outcry following the 2002 case of Mukhtaran Mai resulted in legal reforms and increased attention to the issue of violence against women. Another example of global pressure is through Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP Plus) status, which links Pakistan's trade relations with the European Union to its compliance with certain international conventions that include those treaties that advocate women's rights. The global community continues to exert pressure on Pakistan through economic leverage, international treaties and human rights campaigns. This pressure compels Pakistani government to institute much-needed reforms to promote gender equality. Continued international monitoring and engagement remain essential to ensure ongoing progress to safeguard women's rights.

### **Recommendations**

Policymakers should adopt a region-specific approach when formulating and implementing women's rights policies. Considering the socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural differences across various regions of Pakistan will allow for the creation of more effective and context-sensitive solutions to the challenges women face. Uniform national policy may not adequately address the unique issues of women in different provinces or local communities. It is also essential to strengthen the support for NGOs and grassroots movements that play a critical role in advancing women's rights. These organizations, with their local knowledge and community connections are key to driving change. By providing better financial backing, capacity-building and

sustained collaboration with these groups, policymakers can amplify their advocacy efforts and strengthen interventions aimed at promoting gender equality across Pakistan.

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