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Enhancing Women's Participation in Pakistan's Labour Market: Policy Priorities for Inclusive Growth

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Executive Summary

Women's participation in Pakistan's labour market remains among the lowest globally. According to labour force data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, female labour force participation is approximately 24 percent, significantly below the global average of nearly 47 percent. Low participation reflects structural barriers including limited mobility, occupational segregation, workplace discrimination, and inadequate childcare infrastructure. This policy brief analyses these barriers and proposes policy measures to promote gender-inclusive labour markets in Pakistan.

Key Findings

- Female labour force participation in Pakistan remains around **23–24 percent**, significantly below the global average of approximately **47 percent**.
- Women are disproportionately concentrated in **informal employment sectors**, particularly agriculture, home-based work, and low-income manufacturing activities.
- Structural barriers—including mobility constraints, workplace safety concerns, limited access to childcare, and social norms—continue to restrict women's participation in formal employment.
- Gender disparities are particularly pronounced in higher-paying sectors such as finance, technology, engineering, and professional services.
- Increasing women's participation in economic activities could significantly enhance Pakistan's productivity, household income levels, and long-term economic growth.

Policy Implications

- Expanding women's access to **technical and vocational training programs** is essential to enable entry into higher value employment sectors.
- Governments and private sector actors must strengthen **workplace safety frameworks and anti-harassment enforcement mechanisms**.
- Investment in **childcare infrastructure and family-friendly workplace policies** can reduce barriers preventing women from entering the workforce.
- Gender-inclusive hiring policies and corporate diversity initiatives should be encouraged to increase women's representation in formal employment sectors.
- Strengthening gender-inclusive labour market policies can support Pakistan's commitments under **SDG 5 (Gender Equality)** and **SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)**.

Background

Women's participation in Pakistan's labour market remains among the lowest in the world, reflecting deep structural and socio-economic inequalities. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics Labour Force Survey 2022–23, female labour force participation in Pakistan is approximately **23–24 percent**, compared to more than **80 percent for men**. This significant gender gap highlights the persistent barriers that limit women's access to employment opportunities. Pakistan also ranks near the bottom globally in terms of women's economic participation. The **World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report 2023** ranked Pakistan among the lowest-performing countries in the economic participation and opportunity dimension, with a score reflecting wide disparities in labour market access, wages, and career advancement opportunities.

The structure of women's employment in Pakistan further illustrates these inequalities. A large proportion of working women are concentrated in **informal and low-income sectors**, particularly agriculture, home-based work, and small-scale manufacturing such as textiles and garments. According to estimates from the **International Labour Organization**, nearly **70 percent of employed women in Pakistan work in informal employment**, where labour protections, job security, and social benefits are limited. Women are also significantly underrepresented in higher-paying sectors such as finance, technology, engineering, and professional services. Even when women participate in the workforce, they are more likely to be employed in low-skilled occupations with limited prospects for career mobility.

Several structural factors contribute to these disparities. Educational attainment for women has improved in recent decades, but gender gaps remain in technical and vocational training programs that are aligned with labour market demands. According to the **World Bank**, Pakistan's female tertiary education enrollment rate remains lower than many regional peers, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. In addition, social norms, safety concerns, and mobility restrictions often limit women's ability to travel to workplaces, especially in urban and industrial zones. The lack of affordable childcare services and family-friendly workplace policies further discourages women from entering or remaining in the labour force.

From a broader economic perspective, low female labour force participation represents a significant loss of productive potential for Pakistan's economy. Research conducted by international development institutions suggests that increasing women's participation in the labour market could substantially boost national income and productivity. The **United Nations Development Programme** and other global institutions have consistently emphasized that gender-inclusive economic policies are essential for achieving sustainable development. Expanding women's participation in the workforce therefore represents not

only a social and human rights priority but also a strategic economic opportunity for Pakistan.

Gender Equality and Labour Market Inclusion in Pakistan: SDG and Policy

Context

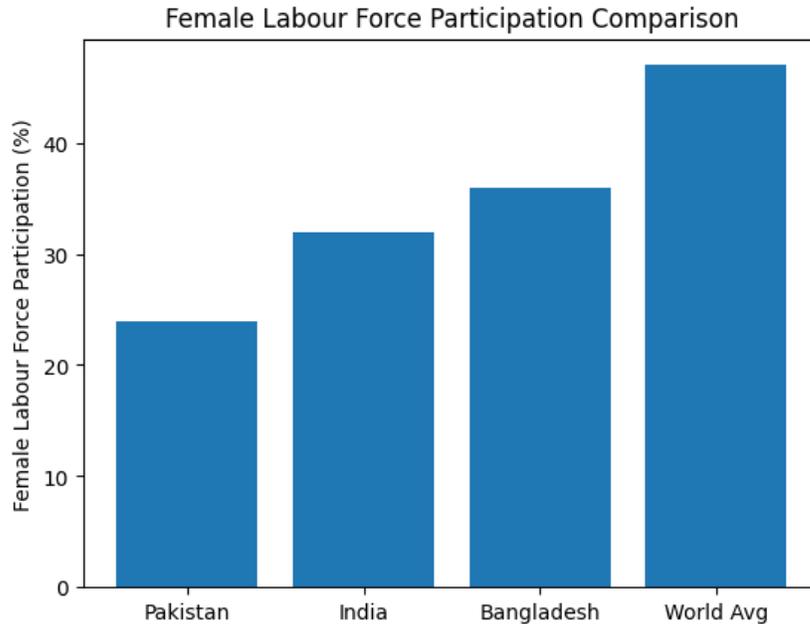
Pakistan has made international commitments to promote gender equality through the adoption of the **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals**, particularly **SDG 5 (Gender Equality)** and **SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)**. These commitments emphasize the importance of expanding women's participation in the labour market and eliminating structural barriers that limit women's economic opportunities.

Despite these commitments, Pakistan continues to rank relatively low in global gender equality indicators. According to the **World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report**, Pakistan remains among the lowest-ranking countries in terms of women's economic participation and opportunity. Female labour force participation remains significantly lower than that of men, while gender wage disparities and occupational segregation persist across many sectors of the economy.

Improving women's participation in economic activities is therefore not only a matter of gender equality but also an economic necessity. Research by the **World Bank** suggests that increasing women's participation in the labour force can significantly contribute to national productivity and economic growth. Expanding women's access to employment opportunities could generate substantial gains in household income, poverty reduction, and overall economic resilience.

Female Labour Force Participation

The figure below compares female labour force participation rates in Pakistan with regional and global averages.



Key Structural Barriers

Women's limited participation in Pakistan's labour market is shaped by a combination of structural, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers that collectively restrict access to economic opportunities. One of the most significant barriers is the persistence of restrictive social norms that influence perceptions of women's roles in society. In many communities, cultural expectations continue to prioritize domestic responsibilities for women over professional engagement, limiting their ability to seek employment outside the home. These norms are often reinforced by mobility constraints, safety concerns, and limited access to reliable transportation, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas where employment opportunities may exist but remain inaccessible to women due to security and logistical challenges.

Another major structural barrier is the limited access to education, technical training, and skills development opportunities that are aligned with labour market demands. Although female enrollment in education has improved in recent years, many women remain excluded from advanced vocational training and professional skill development programs that enable entry into higher value sectors such as information technology, finance, engineering, and business services. As a result, women are often concentrated in low-income, informal, or home-based work arrangements where wages are low and career advancement opportunities are limited. Addressing this gap requires targeted investment

in gender-inclusive education and skills development policies that align women's capabilities with emerging labour market opportunities.

Institutional and workplace-related barriers further contribute to gender disparities in employment. Many workplaces lack gender-sensitive policies, including mechanisms to address harassment, discrimination, and unequal treatment. The absence of childcare facilities, flexible work arrangements, and maternity protections also discourages women from entering or remaining in the workforce after marriage or childbirth. These structural constraints create a cycle in which women's economic participation remains limited, reinforcing existing gender inequalities in both employment and income distribution. Overcoming these barriers therefore requires coordinated reforms that address both societal attitudes and institutional practices within labour markets.

Implications for Pakistan's Business and Human Rights Framework

The issue of gender inequality in employment is also closely connected to Pakistan's commitments under the **United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights**. These principles emphasize the responsibility of both governments and private sector actors to ensure that economic activities respect human rights and promote equal opportunities for all individuals.

Pakistan has recently adopted a **National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights**, which provides a framework for addressing labour rights, gender equality, and workplace protections. However, effective implementation requires sector-specific evidence on gender disparities and structural barriers affecting women's participation in economic activities.

By providing empirical insights into gender disparities in labour markets, policy research can support policymakers in designing targeted interventions that strengthen gender-inclusive economic development and improve compliance with international human rights commitments.

Policy Recommendations

Improving women's participation in Pakistan's labour market requires a comprehensive policy approach that addresses both structural and institutional barriers. First, policymakers should prioritize expanding women's access to education, vocational training, and digital skills programs that enable entry into higher value sectors such as information technology, finance, and professional services. Technical training initiatives targeted at women can significantly improve employability and economic mobility, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas where emerging sectors are creating new employment opportunities. In addition, public-private partnerships should be encouraged to promote gender-inclusive recruitment strategies and internship programs that facilitate women's transition from education to employment.

Secondly, strengthening workplace protections and improving working conditions for women is essential. Effective enforcement of existing anti-harassment legislation and labour protection laws can help create safer and more inclusive work environments. Governments and regulatory bodies should also encourage organizations to adopt gender diversity policies, transparent recruitment processes, and workplace grievance mechanisms. Complementary investments in childcare infrastructure, maternity protection policies, and safe transportation systems can further reduce barriers that prevent women from entering and remaining in the labour force. Together, these measures can contribute to building a more inclusive labour market that recognizes women as an essential component of national economic growth.

Conclusion

Women's participation in the labour market represents one of the most significant untapped resources for Pakistan's economic development. Increasing women's economic engagement has the potential to enhance household income, reduce poverty, and improve national productivity. Evidence from international studies suggests that countries with higher levels of female labour force participation tend to demonstrate stronger economic resilience and more inclusive growth patterns. For Pakistan, expanding women's participation in economic activities could significantly contribute to achieving national development objectives while advancing commitments under global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals.

However, addressing gender disparities in the labour market requires sustained institutional commitment and coordinated policy reforms. Government agencies, private sector organizations, and civil society stakeholders must collaborate to address structural constraints affecting women's employment opportunities. By promoting gender-inclusive policies, investing in women's skills development, and strengthening workplace protections, Pakistan can create a more equitable labour market that benefits both individuals and the broader economy. Ensuring that women have equal opportunities to participate in economic activities will ultimately strengthen the country's long-term development trajectory.

References

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About the Author

Dr. Fouzia Amin is a policy researcher and governance specialist with extensive experience in conducting analytical research on gender equality, human rights, and socio-economic policy in Pakistan. She currently serves as **Director / Consultant at Perspective Policy Research Institute (PPRII)**, where she leads research initiatives focusing on gender policy, labour market inclusion, governance reforms, and evidence-based policy development. In this capacity, she has contributed to multiple policy studies examining issues such as gender equality in economic participation, institutional governance frameworks, and socio-economic development challenges in Pakistan.

Through her work at PPRII, Dr. Amin has been actively engaged in producing policy briefs, analytical reports, and stakeholder consultations aimed at supporting informed policymaking and advancing inclusive development strategies. Her research and policy engagements have involved collaboration with government institutions, policy stakeholders, and development organizations on issues related to human rights, gender empowerment, and labour market dynamics. Her work focuses on translating academic research into practical policy recommendations that can inform government policies and development programs.

In addition to her policy research role, Dr. Amin also serves as **Assistant Professor at National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad**, where she teaches and conducts research on governance, public policy, and strategic studies. Her academic work complements her policy research by integrating analytical frameworks and empirical research methods into policy analysis related to development and governance issues.

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Perspective Policy Research Institute (PPRII) is an independent policy research organization based in Islamabad dedicated to producing evidence-based research and policy analysis on governance, human rights, economic development, and public policy. The institute aims to support informed policymaking by generating analytical research outputs that address emerging national and regional policy challenges.

PPRII conducts interdisciplinary research and publishes policy briefs, analytical reports, and policy recommendations designed to inform government institutions, development organizations, and civil society stakeholders. Through research collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and policy dialogue, the institute seeks to contribute to inclusive development and strengthen evidence-based policymaking processes in Pakistan.