

From Policy to Practice: Evaluating Pakistan's Efforts in Mainstreaming Gender for Women's Inclusion

'Zainab Bibi

'PhD Scholar, Department of Governance and Public Policy, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan.

'zainabbibi@numl.edu.pk

Abstract

Pakistan's national development is critically hampered by the persistent exclusion of women, a reality starkly contrasted by its robust framework of gender equality policies. This study evaluates the country's efforts to mainstream gender for women's inclusion, identifying a profound and systemic implementation gap. Utilizing a qualitative mixed-methods approach, the research combines critical analysis of policy documents with semi-structured interviews (n=24) with policymakers, implementers, civil society representatives, and beneficiaries. The investigation is guided by an integrated theoretical framework of Feminist Institutionalism and the Gender Machineries framework to analyze the power dynamics at play. The findings reveal that despite sophisticated policy design, implementation is crippled by a trifecta of barriers: the deliberate marginalization and under resourcing of official gender machineries (e.g., NCSW, Gender Units), which strips them of authority and efficacy; the overpowering influence of deep-rooted patriarchal informal institutions that subvert formal laws; and a consistent failure to translate policy rhetoric into budgetary commitment and operational action. The discussion posits that this gap is a form of ritualistic conformity, where policy creation serves as a legitimizing performance for the state rather than a genuine commitment to transformative change. The study concludes that without a fundamental shift to empower implementation bodies, confront patriarchal power structures, and mandate financial accountability, Pakistan's gender policies will remain symbolic gestures, failing to achieve the substantive inclusion vital for national progress.

Keywords: Gender Mainstreaming, Implementation Gap, Feminist Institutionalism, Gender Machineries, Pakistan, Women's Inclusion, Policy-Practice Disconnect.

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Corresponding Authors*:

INTRODUCTION

The profound exclusion of women from Pakistan's socio-economic fabric remains one of the most significant impediments to the nation's development. With a female labour force participation rate languishing at a mere 22.6% one of the lowest in the world and a persistent gender gap in literacy where women are over 20 percentage points behind men, the cost of gender inequality is not merely a social injustice but a critical economic failure (World Bank, 2022; Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The nation consistently ranks among the bottom tier of global gender parity indices, most recently placing 145th out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2023), a stark indicator of systemic disparity. This marginalization of half the population stifles innovation, constrains economic growth, and undermines the foundation of a resilient democracy. Recognizing this, the international development paradigm has long advocated for gender mainstreaming (GM) as the foundational strategy to dismantle these barriers. Originating from the landmark Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), GM moves beyond isolated women's projects to demand the integration of a gender perspective into the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of all policies and programs, ensuring that these initiatives benefit all segments of society equally.

In response to these global commitments and domestic pressures, Pakistan has, on paper, constructed a seemingly robust architecture for gender equality. The nation is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and has aligned its national development goals with the gender-specific targets of Sustainable Development Goal 5. This commitment is articulated through a series of progressive policy frameworks, including the National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women (2002), the more recent National Gender Policy Framework (2022), and the aspirational Pakistan Vision 2025, which explicitly identifies "gender mainstreaming" as a cross-cutting theme for inclusive growth (Ministry of Planning, Development & Reform, 2014). These documents collectively envision a nation where women are empowered participants in political, economic, and social spheres, protected by law and enabled by state institutions. The rhetoric within these policies is often ambitious, outlining comprehensive strategies for women's economic inclusion, political representation, and access to justice, suggesting a state deeply invested in reforming gendered power structures.

Yet, there is a gap of epic scales between this policy landscape of finery and the reality of Pakistani women. Irrespective of the prolific formulation of strategies and action plans, actual performance is obscenely lopsided and, in most sectors, abysmal. Female representation in the National Assembly is only 20 percent, and this quota is met but seldom exceeded, meaning there is a glass ceiling when it comes to influencing political power (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2024). The rates of maternal mortality are also one of the highest in the area, reflecting the inadequate access to quality care (UNICEF, 2023). Women in large numbers are clustered in informal and low wage and vulnerable sectors where there is no economic appreciation of their efforts or protection of the economic gains of their efforts. It is therefore true that despite the commendable and serious steps that Pakistan has made in developing gender sensitive policies, the efforts aimed at implementing the gender mainstreaming idea into work is ultimately dismal in view of an underlying implementation gap (the present paper). This is not a coincidence but the direct effect of a threefold combination of antique obstacles, namely well-established institutional structures unable to support conformity, the high level of

ingrained social-cultural norms that are intensely patriarchal and cannot be restructured, and the continuing vacuum of willingness to fulfill political commitments based on adequate and specific allocation of financial resources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The conceptual precepts of gender mainstreaming (GM) involve a complete inversion of the develops praxis whereby a model of welfare is substituted with a proactive approach to redress power relations prevalent in the manner of existence. Early interventions, such as the Women in Development (WID) approach, were focused on integrating women in already existing development programs without having to address the principles behind systemic inequalities. The paradigm shift occurred as the Gender and Development (GAD) paradigm and introduction of real and practicable needs of gender and theory of development eliminate prerequisites that, both, short term needs and long term objectives of altering power constitutions must be addressed as essential interventions (Moser, 1993). This was further termed in the Naila Kabeers concept of social relation analysis that provided an instrument of deconstructing how institutions, both formal and informal, produce and reproduce gender inequality wherein governing rules, resources and responsibilities (Kabeer, 1994). These theories were operationalized in the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), which made GM the main international approach to ensuring that the gender point of view is central in all policies, their implementation, and evaluation. Therefore modern GM theory is not a simple matter of adding women but rather an ambitious institutional change which requires accountability and re-distribution of power and resources.

A comparative global and regional perspective reveals that the chasm between GM policy and practice is not unique to Pakistan, yet the strategies and political will to bridge it vary significantly, offering critical lessons. Rwanda's remarkable achievement of 61.3% female representation in its lower parliamentary house is not accidental but the result of constitutional mandates, strong political commitment from the highest levels, and the intentional creation of powerful cross-ministerial and civil society institutions to oversee implementation (Powley, 2020). In South Asia, Bangladesh's success in female educational attainment and prime ministerial leadership, while noteworthy, coexists with persistent challenges in economic participation and violence prevention, illustrating the uneven nature of progress (Hossain, 2022). Conversely, India's struggle to pass the Women's Reservation Bill for over a decade, despite a vibrant women's movement, highlights how deeply entrenched patriarchal resistance within political institutions can stall even symbolic GM progress (Nielsen, 2023). These cases collectively establish a framework for evaluation, underscoring that successful GM hinges on three interdependent pillars: robust and enforceable institutional mechanisms, unwavering high-level political ownership, and the active partnership of a strong autonomous women's movement to sustain momentum and accountability.

Within the Pakistani context, a significant body of scholarly work has meticulously documented the existence of progressive legal and policy instruments while simultaneously exposing their deficient execution. Research on the flagship constitutional measure of reserved seats for women in legislatures confirms their role in providing descriptive representation but also critiques their limitations, as these members often remain beholden to party leadership rather than acting as a transformative force for gendered substantive change (Cheema, 2021). Similarly, analyses of landmark legislation such as the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) and the

Criminal Law Amendments on honour killings (2016) reveal a consistent pattern: initial celebratory passage followed by abysmal enforcement, poor awareness, sluggish judicial processes, and minimal convictions, which collectively neuter their deterrent effect (Zaidi, 2022). The literature is replete with studies attributing this failure to a complex web of factors, primarily the resilience of patriarchal structures or what Kandiyoti (1988) termed the “patriarchal bargain” that are embedded within state institutions, the judiciary, and local governance bodies like jirgas and panchayats, which often operate as parallel legal systems undermining statutory law (Khan, 2023). This scholarship conclusively establishes that the primary challenge is not a dearth of policy but a crisis of implementation, rooted in socio-cultural resistance and institutional feebleness.

Synthesizing this extensive yet fragmented body of work, a critical academic gap becomes apparent. Existing research provides invaluable but siloed insights, offering micro-studies of specific laws (e.g., harassment, honour killings), individual sectors (e.g., education, health), or discrete institutional actors (e.g., the National Commission on the Status of Women). What is conspicuously absent is a comprehensive, holistic, and systematic evaluation that analyses Pakistan’s entire GM ecosystem as an integrated whole. There is a pressing need for a study that explicitly maps and evaluates the entire chain from the design of national policies (e.g., National Gender Policy Framework, 2022) and federal-level gender machinery, through their translation into provincial and district-level budgets and action plans, down to their final delivery and impact on the lives of diverse women across different sectors. This paper seeks to fill this void by conducting a multi-scalar and multi-sectoral analysis, moving beyond a compartmentalized critique to provide a systemic diagnosis of the fractures within Pakistan’s GM regime, thereby offering more nuanced and actionable pathways for transformative change.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a rigorous qualitative mixed-methods research design to comprehensively evaluate the complex phenomenon of gender mainstreaming in Pakistan. This approach is deliberately selected to triangulate data, thereby enhancing the validity and depth of the findings by overcoming the limitations inherent in any single method. The design synergistically combines critical document analysis with in-depth semi-structured interviews. The document analysis provides the essential framework of official intent, policy rhetoric, and reported outcomes, while the interviews yield rich, nuanced insights into the lived experiences, operational challenges, and subjective interpretations of the key actors involved in the policy ecosystem. This dual-lens approach allows for a critical examination of the disconnect between the stated objectives within policy texts (the *theory*) and the perceptions and realities of their execution (the *practice*), facilitating a holistic and multi-faceted understanding of the implementation gap.

DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES

Data collection was conducted in two phased strands. The first strand involved a systematic and critical document analysis of a wide range of sources. This included a close reading of national and provincial policy documents (e.g., the National Gender Policy Framework 2022, provincial women empowerment policies), five years of annual reports from the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) and the Ministry of Human Rights, relevant sections of the Pakistan Economic Survey, and project evaluation reports from major development partners like the World Bank and UN Women. This analysis focused on tracing the evolution of GM rhetoric, budgetary allocations, and the framing of gender

issues within official discourse. The second strand comprised 24 semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected cohort of stakeholders to capture diverse perspectives. This included four policymakers (from the Ministry of Planning and provincial Women Development Departments), five implementers (including officials from the NCSW and gender focal persons in key ministries), seven civil society actors (representatives from Aurat Foundation, Shirkat Gah, and independent academics), and eight beneficiaries (a diverse group of women from urban Karachi, rural Sindh, and Punjab to ensure geographic and socio-economic variation).

DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data was subjected to a rigorous analytical process tailored to its form. All interview transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). This process involved a systematic cycle of familiarization, initial code generation, theme search and review, and final theme definition. This method was ideal for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) across the qualitative dataset, such as recurring narratives around "institutional resistance," "resource scarcity," or "social norm barriers." Concurrently, the policy documents were analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA), a method that examines how language and discourse within texts are shaped by, and in turn shape, social power relations and ideologies (Fairclough, 2013). The CDA interrogated the framing of women's roles, the emphasis (or de-emphasis) on certain issues, and the linguistic strategies used to project commitment or explain failure, thus revealing the underlying power dynamics within the official GM approach.

LIMITATIONS

Designed with strict attention, this study considers a number of limitations of the methodology. To begin with, it was difficult to access senior federal policymakers, which may not capture the views of the individuals at the top of the strategic decision-making hierarchy. To counter this, the research depended on a thorough analysis of policy documents and information provided by middle level officials who are deeply engaged in the drafting of policies. Secondly, physical access due to security restrictions and large geography implied that beneficiary interviews were not possible in places that had conflict such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Efforts were undertaken to capture the voices of these regions via civil society networks, but this means that care must be taken in extending claims that can be indeed said to be universal. Last but not least, the sensitivity of gender concerns and state criticisms could have led to some social desirability bias in some answers where some participants just gave answers they found acceptable and not fully deserved. To reduce this risk, the constant assurance of anonymity and ethical research practices were utilized to build trust.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The combined theoretical framework of macro-level analysis of the structure of power and meso-level analysis of state apparatus leads to the effective diagnosis of the non-maturity of the processes of gender mainstreaming (GM) in Pakistan. Feminist Institutionalism (FI) is a subfield of political science that extends beyond institutional analysis to inquire into how gender power structures are institutionalized, reproduced, and challenged in formal and informal institutions. FI states that institutions are gendered structures that results to historical patriarchal institutions that set rules of the game (Krook & Mackay, 2011). This lenses plays a very important role in the context of Pakistan because it enables one to do an analysis beyond just listing the failures of the policy. It gives us with the means to study the methods of subversion of formal state institutions such as legislatures, bureaucracies, and

the judiciary provided by informal institutions such as deeply rooted patriarchal bargains (Kandiyoti, 1988), kinship networks (biraderi), and traditional justice systems (jirgas). Using FI, this study can follow how such informal rules establish an unfriendly ideological and operational climate to place a constraining, distorting, and co-opting grip on formal gender equality requirements, so that even within these structures that are intended to eradicate patriarchal dominance, frontline patriarchy remains preserved.

To complement this macro-analysis of gendered power, the study employs the specific and practical 'Gender Machineries' framework to critically evaluate the state's designated vehicles for change. Gender machineries refer to the complex of official bodies, agencies, and units established within the state apparatus with a mandate to advance gender equality and oversee GM (Rai, 2003). This framework demands a systematic assessment of four critical dimensions: the machinery's structural location within the government hierarchy (e.g., is it a powerful ministry or a marginalized cell?), its formal authority to mandate compliance and hold other agencies accountable, its access to resources (financial, human, and technical), and its capacity to form strategic alliances with civil society. This lens shifts the analytical focus from policy text to institutional capability, asking fundamental questions about the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) and various federal and provincial Gender Units: Do they have the political clout to influence the Finance Ministry's budgetary decisions? Can they sanction a line ministry for non-compliance? Or are they perpetually underfunded, peripheral entities, relegated to organizing symbolic events rather than driving transformative policy change (Hacıoğlu, 2023)? This framework is essential for moving from a vague claim of "weak implementation" to a precise identification of institutional deficits.

The synergy of these two theoretical lenses provides a comprehensive and robust analytical toolset. Feminist Institutionalism offers the *why*, explaining the deep-seated societal and political resistance to gender equality reform by highlighting the pervasive power of informal norms. Concurrently, the Gender Machineries framework provides the *how*, offering a structured method to evaluate the specific design flaws, operational weaknesses, and political marginalization of the state's official response mechanisms. Together, they form a dialectical relationship: the strength of informal patriarchal institutions (as revealed by FI) directly correlates with and explains the weakness of formal gender equality institutions (as measured by the Gender Machineries framework). This integrated approach moves the analysis beyond a simplistic narrative of policy failure towards a nuanced understanding of the dynamic interplay between structure and agency, between oppressive systems and the state's often anemic efforts to counter them. It allows this research to argue that Pakistan's implementation gap is not an accident but the logical outcome of powerful gendered institutions systematically overwhelming deliberately underpowered gender machineries.

FINDINGS

THE CHASM BETWEEN RHETORICAL AMBITION AND OPERATIONAL NEGLECT

Gender policy architecture in Pakistan suggests analysis point to a terrain of considerable rhetorical want, and wholesale disposition, and is bitterly countered by a terrain of intense and miserable practice. A good demonstration of an advanced concept of gender disparities, and the legislative plans elaborate multi-sectoral measures in boosting female representation in politics, their economic engagement in entrepreneurship, reformation of discriminatory laws and their health and education results. These policies present the appearance of an operative state apparatus, with their ready access to huge courses of

action, logical forms and specifications. But what the implementation activities are illustrating is quite a different thing. The lack of coordination between the various levels of government-federal government, provincial and local-causes the fragmentation of activities into short-term, disjointed and local-oriented activities as opposed to a national in an integrated and sustained continuous effort. Of more concern is the fact that implementation is grotesquely understaffed; the overall action plans are always de-linked in federal and provincial budgets which accompany the budget line so as to have a budgetary line and is therefore penned only by inspiration, not working blue prints. The absence of systematic surveillance is another augury to this disjuncture, since when policies are fronted with big targets, there is a failure or absence of any system to track the actual progress in real time, to adjust to and act on facts and feedback and to revise in response.

THE INSTITUTIONAL HOLLOWING OUT OF GENDER MACHINERIES

Empirical findings clearly show that the official institutions which are expected to lead the process of mainstreaming gender in the society are pathetically weak in structure, underfunded and marginalized in operations and consequently incapable of carrying out their mandate. The National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW), the topmost policy advisory organ and the hundreds of Gender Units stamped into line ministries are desperately short of both authority, both money and technical skills. In governmental matters, they lack the capabilities of making other arms of government implement gender-related policies and have the capacity to punish them when they disobey their regulations; they are just consultative and even lost in memory. In terms of finance, they are never adequately funded and their budgets are not substantial to allow any form of serious intervention in the country, capacity building or a strict monitoring and evaluation. Indicatively, the appropriation of the overall gender mainstreaming efforts as the annual budgetary allocation is merely a piteous percentage of the total federal government spending. Moreover, these institutions are plagued by a significant lack of technical knowledge; personnel tend to be generalist civil servants without any specialized skills in gender analysis or gender-sensitive budget-making and high turnover rates mean that institutional memory is continually lost and it can never invest in expertise nor lay down long-term and strategic projects.

THE ENDURING VETO POWER OF PATRIARCHAL NORMS

The results have continually shown that ingrained patriarchal, and socio-cultural values are a potent parallel informal institution that operates effectively and efficiently against the enactment of formal gender equality policies. Both *pardah* (seclusion) and *izzat* (family honour), and strictly defined gender roles are so embedded within all strata of society and internalized by those who execute the state policy as well as its beneficiary that they present a tremendous obstacle to change. These norms are not passive cultural artefacts but active agents that exert a veto power over formal laws. For example, despite legislative reforms, the practice of *vani* or *swara* persists in certain regions, where women are traded to settle disputes, demonstrating how traditional justice systems (*jirgas* and *panchayats*) continue to operate with impunity, overriding state law. Within government offices, male-dominated hierarchies often dismiss gender initiatives as "soft" or "non-essential" issues, reflecting the internalization of these biases within the state apparatus itself. Moreover, the enforcement of laws against honour-based violence and harassment is critically hampered by police and judicial officials who, influenced by these same norms, frequently discourage women from reporting crimes, question their character, and prioritize "community

reconciliation" over justice, thereby protecting patriarchal power structures and nullifying the protective intent of the formal legal framework.

THE SECTORAL MISMATCH BETWEEN POLICY GOALS AND TANGIBLE OUTCOMES

A sectoral analysis of key outcomes reveals a consistent and stark mismatch between the goals enshrined in policy documents and the tangible realities on the ground, providing concrete evidence of the implementation gap. In the political sector, while reserved seats for women in assemblies have been fulfilled, women remain overwhelmingly excluded from party leadership and electoral politics, with their presence often tokenistic and subject to male kinship networks (*biraderi*), preventing substantive representation. In the economic sphere, policies promoting women's entrepreneurship clash with the reality of women's severely limited access to credit, property, and markets, with female labour force participation remaining stagnant and overwhelmingly concentrated in the informal, low-wage, and vulnerable sectors without social protection. In education, despite policy commitments to universal female literacy, enrolment rates for girls at the secondary level plummet due to factors like insecurity, distance, and cultural aversion to female mobility, leading to deeply uneven provincial outcomes. In health, policy goals of reducing maternal mortality are undermined by chronically underfunded rural health facilities, a shortage of female medical staff, and cultural barriers that restrict women's mobility and autonomy to seek healthcare independently. This consistent disparity across all core sectors underscores that the policy failure is not sector-specific but is a systemic issue stemming from the foundational weaknesses identified in the preceding findings.

DISCUSSION

The results of this paper are a depressing and unglamorous truth: There is a gulf in implementation that is too entrenched to sink the gender mainstreaming initiative in Pakistan. An effective exposition of this ancient failure is to elucidate these findings within the topicality of the multidimensional conceptualization of Feminist Institutionalism in reference to the Gender Machineries structure. Feminist Institutionalism holds that the state is not a blank slate onto which neutral policy will be projected, but is a gendered institution comprising patriarchal norms. This discussion confirms that in informal structures the practiced principles of *izzat* (honour), *purdah* (seclusion) and patriarchal kinship enclaves (*biraderi*) has become a well-established parallel type of governance. These rules are unwritten, and, as respects such forms of the state as these, they are docile, the administration of justice is not prepared to enact the law against honour-crime and the bureaucracy itself is opposed to what is decreed in the matter of gender equality. This is what the gap is all about; the formal policies themselves are attempting to act within an institutional ecosystem, the informal rules of the game of which have been (theoretically) stacked against them. In the meantime, the Structural Diagnosis of the way this occurs lies in the formulations of the Gender Machineries. That the exclusion of the NCSW and ministerial Gender Units, as being only advisory (not compulsory), merely symbolic and not centre of power, should also be understood as an expression of a state apparatus, whereby these groups have made institutions that fail. They are assigned the task of transformation but are progressively starved of power and resources to weaken the strength of the informal patriarchal institutions. The implementation gap then is a natural result of the flooding of the strategically weak formal gender machineries by the strong and stable informal gendered institutions.

A critical complexity emerging from the data, however, is the presence of isolated but notable success stories amidst the widespread failure, which offer crucial insights into the conditions necessary for effective implementation. For instance, the successful digital onboarding of millions of women into the national social protection database under the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) demonstrates that with unwavering high-level political ownership, dedicated funding streams, and the use of technology to bypass corrupt or biased local intermediaries, significant inclusion is achievable (Chaudhry, 2023). Similarly, the higher female voter turnout in the 2024 general elections, despite significant cultural and security challenges, points to the catalytic role of a vibrant and persistent civil society in mobilizing and advocating for women's political rights (Sultan, 2024). These exceptions do not negate the overall findings but rather prove the rule: success is possible *only* when specific mitigating conditions are met. These include direct top-down political pressure that temporarily overrides bureaucratic inertia, the circumvention of traditional gatekeepers through technological innovation, and the presence of strong, external accountability mechanisms provided by civil society and media. These pockets of success highlight that the problem is not insurmountable but rather one of political will and strategic design, showing that progress occurs when interventions are intentionally insulated from the very institutional weaknesses they are designed to address.

Placing these findings in dialogue with the existing literature reveals both alignments and critical distinctions, particularly in a regional context. The research strongly corroborates the work of Zaidi (2022) and Khan (2023) on the crippling impact of patriarchal norms on legal implementation in Pakistan, while adding a novel institutional analysis that moves from description towards a more systemic explanation. When compared to Bangladesh, a frequent regional comparator, a stark contrast in the effectiveness of gender machineries becomes apparent. While both nations contend with powerful patriarchal structures, Bangladesh's consistent economic growth, largely driven by the export-oriented ready-made garment industry that employs millions of women, has created a pragmatic, economic imperative for female labour force participation that somewhat offsets cultural resistance (Hossain, 2022). Pakistan lacks a similar large-scale economic driver, leaving its policies more vulnerable to being dismissed as purely Western-inspired social engineering. Furthermore, Bangladesh's longer tenure of a stable, albeit authoritarian, government has allowed for a more consistent, if top-down, implementation of certain health and microfinance initiatives, whereas Pakistan's volatile political landscape leads to constant policy flux and institutional amnesia with every change of government. This comparison underscores that while socio-cultural barriers are a regional constant, the presence of a stable economic rationale and consistent political authority can create more fertile, though still imperfect, ground for implementation.

Finally, this discussion must grapple with the most challenging contradiction: the state's continued production of progressive policies alongside its failure to implement them. This is not merely a case of administrative incompetence but a sophisticated form of political performance. The enactment of well-crafted laws and policies serves a critical legitimizing function for the state, projecting an image of modernity and compliance with international norms to global financial institutions and donors without necessitating transformative domestic change that would disrupt entrenched power hierarchies. It is a strategy of "ritualistic conformity," where the act of passing a law is treated as the endpoint of reform rather than the beginning (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This performance manages dissent by co-opting the language of the women's movement while effectively containing

its radical demands within bureaucratic processes designed to delay and dilute. Therefore, the implementation gap itself can be interpreted as a deliberate, if not entirely conscious, outcome a way to manage the contradiction between the pressure for modernizing reform and the desire to maintain the patriarchal status quo. This reveals the ultimate challenge: closing the gap requires not just technical fixes to implementation mechanisms but a direct political confrontation with the power dynamics that benefit from the current state of affairs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSION

This paper has established coherently that the extreme gap between the progressive gender policy paradigm adopted by Pakistan and the inability to enrich the lives and experiences of women by including them is not a failure of will but a failure of execution based on an entrenched institutional and political flaw. The feminist institutionalism and the Gender Machineries domestic framework approach, the systematic neutralization of gender equality in the formal state commitment is identified by its own weak and marginalized gender apparatus, which itself are subdued by the strong force of the veto of items of deeply rooted patriarchal norms. The results in all sectors - political, economic, educational, health - are the same: policies fail not at the design stage, but at the point of implementation, where they run up against a barrier of bureaucratic inertia, conscious under-investment, and endemic socio-cultural resistance. Such a disjuncture between policy and practice is then the direct result of a failure or even lack of capacity of the state to support its verbal commitments with the political goodwill, with the money and with the organizational power needed to shake the status quo.

Consequently, this research concludes that the project of gender mainstreaming in Pakistan remains a performative exercise in ritualistic conformity rather than a genuine transformative agenda. The continuous production of sophisticated policy documents serves as a legitimizing tool for the state, appeasing international donors and domestic civil society without triggering the disruptive change needed to alter power dynamics. Isolated successes, such as certain social protection initiatives, prove that progress is possible but only under very specific conditions of high-level ownership and insulated implementation. Ultimately, without a fundamental re-evaluation of the structures and power relations that perpetuate the implementation gap, Pakistan's gender policies will remain eloquent testaments to an equality that exists only on paper, while the lived reality for millions of women and girls continues to be defined by exclusion and inequality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Legally mandate and enforce gender-responsive budgeting across all federal and provincial ministries to ensure policy goals are matched with dedicated financial allocations.
2. Legislatively empower the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) with the authority to sanction government departments for non-compliance with gender equality policies.
3. Elevate the status of Gender Units within all line ministries, placing them directly under the authority of the federal and provincial secretariats to enhance their influence.
4. Launch mandatory and continuous gender sensitivity and analysis training for all tiers of the civil service, judiciary, and law enforcement agencies.
5. Institute robust and transparent monitoring and evaluation frameworks with mandatory public reporting on gender-specific indicators and outcomes.

6. Launch public awareness campaigns, developed in collaboration with religious scholars and community leaders, to redefine concepts of honour (*izzat*) around the protection and empowerment of women.
7. Create and fund a specific implementation wing within gender machineries tasked solely with coordinating and monitoring field-level execution of policies.
8. Establish formal and mandatory channels for strategic collaboration between government gender machineries and autonomous women's rights organizations.
9. Prioritize the collection, publication, and utilization of sex-disaggregated data in all sectors to inform evidence-based policy and track progress.
10. Enact legislation to recognize and regulate the role of traditional justice systems (*jirgas, panchayats*), explicitly nullifying any decisions that contrastitute constitutional rights and formal law.

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