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## Challenges to Gender Equality in Pakistan: A Comparative Analysis of the Musharraf Regime and PTI Governments

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### Article Details

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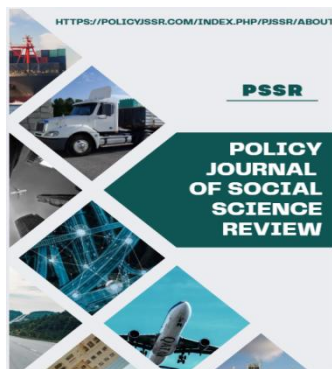
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### ABSTRACT

The paper gives a comparative analysis of how the Musharraf government (1999-2008) and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government (2018-2022) dealt with gender equality and empowering women in Pakistan. Pakistan is facing a perennial problem of gender inequality, even after successive governments have intervened severely in the policies of the country. In this paper, we will carry out a comparative analysis of the Musharraf regime (1999-2008) and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government (2018-2022) in terms of their various attitudes to women's empowerment and gender equality. The main premise of the article is the fact that despite bringing major reforms to the country, such as political representation and legal restructuring in the case of Musharraf and policy rooted in welfare and legal safety in the case of PTI, neither of the two regimes managed to bring about any substantive gender equality because of ingrained patriarchal values, weak institutions, and social and cultural opposition. The research method is qualitative and comparative, with the help of such sources as scholarly literature, official reports, policy papers, and documents, as well as the publications of international bodies. By comparing themes, the study points out that gender reforms in both regimes mainly remained symbolic and unequal in their effect, and little transformation occurred at the grassroots. The article concludes that in order to achieve sustainable gender equality in Pakistan, structural change, institutional reinforcement, and long-term socio-cultural change are necessary, beyond policy-level responses.

**Keywords-** Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment, Musharraf Regime, PTI Government, Pakistan, Patriarchy, Feminism, Women's Rights



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## 1. Introduction

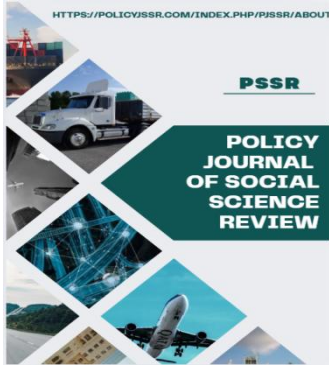
Gender equality is regarded as one of the key indicators of social justice, the development of democracy, and human rights in contemporary societies. In Pakistan, nevertheless, women still struggle with several issues related to political engagement, education, the labour force, legal considerations, and societal expectations. Despite the Constitution of Pakistan promising equal rights to every citizen irrespective of their gender, some realities on the ground usually depict great differences between the two genders in various aspects of society (Ali, 2011). Women in Pakistan have long been unable to be empowered due to cultural traditions, patriarchal norms, and weak institutional structures (Bari, 2010).

Since attaining independence, different governments in Pakistan have implemented reforms to enhance the social and political status of women. The success of these reforms, however, has differed depending on the political environment, commitment by the institutions, and the state of the society and culture at each time. There were those governments that were more symbolic and those that tried to effect legal and structural change on the matters of women's rights and participation (Khan, 2022). No matter how hard people strive, Pakistan is ranked as one of the least equal countries in the world in terms of gender equality indices because of the constant

discrimination and lack of equal opportunity (World Economic Forum, 2022).

The Musharraf regime (1999- 2008) has been regarded as a significant era in terms of women's empowerment policies in Pakistan. General Pervez Musharraf advocated the practice of enlightened moderation, a principle that looked at modernisation, liberalisation of the media, and involvement of women in the life of the society (Musharraf, 2004). This was the time when women were given more political representation by having reserved seats in parliament as well as at local governments. A number of reforms in the law were also initiated that seemed to resolve the problem of women's protection as well as their involvement in society (Government of Pakistan, 2006).

Among the greatest accomplishments in the Musharraf regime was the Local Government Ordinance 2001, which set a quota of women's seats in the local bodies. This policy made women more visible in grassroots politics, and women are motivated to participate in governance (Bari, 2010). On the same note, the Women Protection Act of 2006 tried to amend the very controversial acts of the law concerning the Hudood Ordinances (Government of Pakistan, 2006). The boom of media at this time also left the room to host debates on women's rights, domestic violence, honour killings, as well as social discrimination (Ali, 2011).



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Regardless of these reforms, critics suggested that most of the policies of Musharraf were still mostly implemented and were mainly favourable to urban women of the middle and upper classes. Women in rural areas were still subjected to severe problems in education, health, poverty, and social limitations (Isran & Isran, 2012). Conservative religious aspects, as well as patriarchal attitudes, opposed numerous gender-based reforms that were put in place at the time. Consequently, the disconnect between policymaking and the real-life application process was quite high during the Musharraf government (Bari, 2010).

Equally, the PTI government (2018-2022) claimed to be the one advocating women's empowerment and social welfare policies. The government also launched a number of programs to enhance the protection, economic assistance, and social integration of women. The Ehsaas Program, anti-rape laws, and social security programs were showcased as significant success stories when it comes to women's welfare and gender-based reforms (Khan, 2022). The PTI government also prioritised digital governance and the involvement of women in entrepreneurship and online platforms.

The PTI period of time was characterised by more negotiation around gender issues because of the rise of social media and activism on the Internet. Women activists, journalists, and civil society organisations became more active on the

topics of harassment, domestic violence, discrimination at work, and legal inequalities (HRCP, 2021). During this time, feminist movements such as Aurat March began to get national and international attention. They questioned the traditional perception about the rights of women and gender roles in Pakistani society (UN Women, 2021).

Nevertheless, the PTI regime was also criticised for discrepancies in applying the gender-focused policies and the existence of violence against women. Women using digital platforms joined a social group facing the problem of online harassment, as conservative social views still did not support the feminist movements or gender transformations (HRCP, 2021). Critics claimed that even though welfare programs offered women financial aid, they did not adequately tackle structural disparities in terms of employment, education, and political empowerment (Khan, 2022).

This paper comparatively evaluates the issues of gender equality in both the Musharraf regime and that of the PTI government. It examines the significant policies and reforms that were initiated in both eras as well as the structural, social, and institutional inhibitions that constrained their success. The paper posits that although under both regimes, there were significant policy efforts to ensure gender equality, actual gender equality in Pakistan was limited because of patriarchal institutions integrated with failure to implement them, and socio-



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economic disparities (Ali, 2011; UN Women, 2021).

## 1. Research Methodology

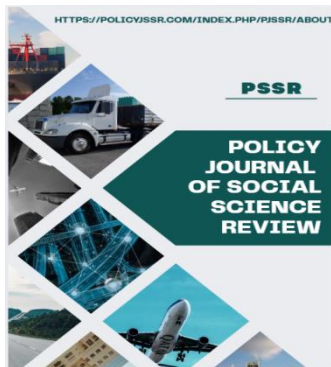
This paper will be based on a qualitative and comparative approach to research to examine the issues of gender equality in the Musharraf regime and the PTI government in Pakistan. The study will be based on secondary sources, such as academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, governmental reports, policy documents, newspapers, international organisations' reports, and human rights reports. Similarities and differences between the policies and practical outcomes concerning gender aspects in both governments have been analysed through a comparative analysis. Some of the key themes that are undergoing study include political participation, legal reforms, women's empowerment, socio-economic inclusion, violence against women, and institutional challenges. Thematic analysis has been implemented to find recurring patterns and structural barriers influencing gender equality in both political periods. The article also entails the voices of feminist and gender studies literature to critically assess the success of state policies pertaining to women's empowerment. In this comparative study, the researchers will illuminate the nature of the political discourses on gender equality with restraints imposed by inefficient implementation schemes, the social setup of conservatism, and the normalised

practice of patriarchal cultures in Pakistani culture.

## 2. Literature Review

The issue of gender equality in Pakistan has been extensively researched in the context of human rights, development and governance. The most frequent argument by scholars is that the structural inequality faced by women in Pakistan exists at all political, economic, and social levels, despite guarantees in these areas by the constitution (Ali, 2011). Patriarchal norms, cultural practices and institutional flaws have been cited as one significant source of hindrance towards gender equality (Bari, 2010). According to the literature, the problem of gender disparity in Pakistan is not merely a legal one but rooted in the socio-cultural system. Thus, policy reforms have not proved to be enough in order to guarantee substantive equality. The researchers also note that both have to be analysed simultaneously, and it is essential to examine both the state policies and the attitude of society.

A large body of literature deals with gender inequality in developing countries using feminist theories. Feminist institutionalism states that even in legal equality, gender biases can be reproduced within institutions (Khan, 2022). These institutional constraints manifest themselves through the governance structure, enforcement of the law, and the representation of the political party in Pakistan. Researchers have pointed out



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that informal power systems are usually dominant in formal legal systems. Consequently, access to resources and making decisions by women is minimal. This theoretical prism is vital in trying to comprehend why reforms have been unsuccessful in practice.

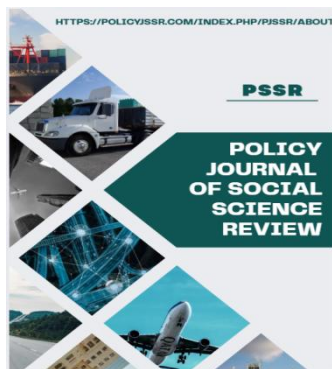
Studies about the Musharraf regime note that it was a milestone regarding women's political participation in Pakistan. Research claims that the feasibility of reserved seats in assemblies nationally and locally boosted women's visibility in politics in an immense way (Bari, 2010). The Local Government Ordinance 2001 is also commonly referred to as the greatest reform that spawned the involvement of women on the ground. Nonetheless, researchers point out that the political representation was not always accompanied by the actual power in making decisions. The women politicians were also found to be structurally constrained by male-dominating political institutions. In most cases, therefore, there was a form of representation that was symbolic.

The other significant theme in literature is the idea of Enlightened Moderation that was brought up in the rule of Musharraf. According to researchers, this policy was meant to give Pakistan a progressive image as a country internationally, but brought back some social reforms which were under control (Musharraf, 2004). The liberalisation of the media at this time allowed more room to be given to the debate on

women's rights. The issues of honour killings and domestic violence were more discussed issues on television and in civil society. These reforms, however, according to critics, were more of an image than structural reforms. Thus, their potential effect on gender equality in the long term is controversial.

One of the most popular legal reforms is the Women's Protection Act 2006, with a lot of scholarly literature about it. Researchers agree that it is an endeavour to reformulate discriminatory legislative acts against women (Government of Pakistan, 2006). Nonetheless, studies show that implementation was low because of institutional opposition and administrative capacity. Its effectiveness was further restricted by religious and political opposition. Research finds that legal acts would never have sorted out ingrained social disparities. Thus, there was also a significant distance between law and practice.

The rural-urban differences in women's empowerment in the Musharraf era are also underscored in the literature. It is stated that the majority of reforms were beneficial to the urban, well-educated, and middle-class women (Isran & Isran, 2012). Women in rural areas were still having poor access to education, health care and job opportunities. The customs and feudalism further inhibited the movement of women in rural setups. Such disparity is indicative of unequal development in regions of Pakistan. Scholars underline that reforms in



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gender did not implement their efforts in marginalised communities.

The welfare-oriented policies and social protection programs are the centre of studies about the PTI government. The Ehsaas Program is often spoken about as one of the significant plans to decrease poverty and take care of vulnerable populations, such as women (Khan, 2022). Researchers observe that some low-income women have gained access to resources via financial inclusion measures. Nevertheless, the opponents believe that these programs focus on symptoms but not on the structural causes of inequality. Thus, the long-term effects of empowerment were not high. The welfare policies led to temporary alleviation and not structural change.

The other important field in literature is the area of legal changes concerning the safety of women in the PTI period. Researchers emphasise the problem of anti-rape laws and anti-harassment legislation as significant elements of legal protection (HRC, 2021). Such laws indicated the growing interest of the state in gender-based violence. Nonetheless, there were still gaps in implementation because of poor policing and judicial dysfunction. Numerous instances of female aggression were underreported or answered by inaction. Researchers suggest that mechanisms of enforcement are as significant as the legislation itself.

The social media movements and digital activism are also popular in the new

literature. Feminist movements like Aurat March were put in the limelight and initiated national conversations about gender rights (UN Women, 2021). According to the scholars, digital platforms were offering women new grounds of expression and activism. Nevertheless, these movements too were counterattacked by conservative movements, as well as harassment campaigns on the Internet. This is a witness to continuing ideological conflicts within the Pakistani society about gender roles. So, digital empowerment is a fine opportunity and a challenge at the same time.

Comparative analyses of political regimes in different countries indicate permanence in structural worries. The researchers claim that the strategies in the policies taken by the Musharraf and PTI governments were different, yet they encountered similar challenges (Bari, 2010; Khan, 2022). The presence of patriarchal norms, ineffective institutions and inadequate social-economic inequality incessantly hampered the results of the reform. The political regimes were transformed; however, structural realities did not change much. This hampering indicates the extent of gender inequality in Pakistan. So, there have been weak transformative changes through reforms.

In general, it can be concluded that gender equality in Pakistan is an issue that cannot be solved only with policy interventions. Scholars emphasise the



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importance of institutional strengthening, education reform, and cultural transformation (UN Women, 2021). Legal and political reforms are inadequate without taking into account deep-rooted social norms. It is evident throughout the literature that there is a disconnect between policymaking and actual execution. This was the main issue in the Musharraf and PTI times. Therefore, long-term structural change and not short-term policy responses are the way to achieve sustainable gender equality.

### 3. Discussion

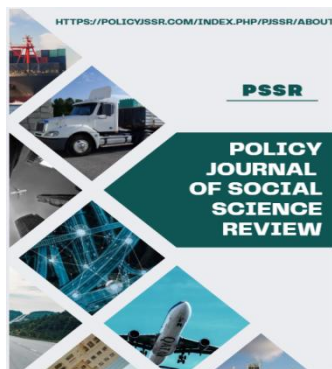
Gender equality in Pakistan has been a debatable and dynamic policy arena influenced by the presence of democratic and non-democratic governments that turned and crossed each other. Despite the various reforms by different successive governments to empower women, the results have mainly been unbalanced as they are mostly marred with entrenched socio-cultural and institutional challenges (Bari, 2010). Both governments of Musharraf and PTI tried to promote gender equality as a part of wider development and governing drives. Nonetheless, the character of reforms varied greatly concerning the approach and priorities as well as the mechanisms of implementation. The tenure of Musharraf was characterised by structural political inclusion and PTI being based on welfare conformity interventions and law protection. Nevertheless, overcoming the challenges of the translation of

policies to productive social change was a problem in both regimes. Here, gender policies in both governments, gaps in their policies and structural difficulties are critically analysed. The discussion continues to assess the way in which the policy activities were influenced by the patriarchal norms, weak institutions and socio-economic inequalities.

#### .1 Musharraf Regime

The Musharraf regime undertook reforms to ensure that women were more represented in politics in Pakistan. A significant portion of the seats in the grassroots were reserved for women in the Local Government Ordinance 2001 (Bari, 2010). This effort was one of the most systematic incorporations of women into politics in Pakistan. The reserved seats also accorded women their place in the national and provincial assemblies, increasing their presence in the legislative processes. The reforms were aimed at reinforcing democratic engagement and making it gender-inclusive. But the majority of the women representatives were not experienced in politics or supported by the party. The male-dominated party systems regularly inhibited their involvement. Because of this aspect, they could not have the impact on policymaking that comes with numerical representation. According to critics, it is not necessarily the case that representation led to empowerment.

Among the legislative initiatives, the Women Protection Act of 2006, which



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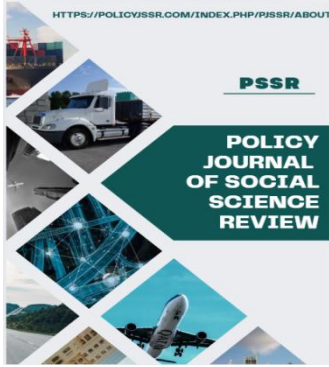
was intended to address inequitable legal provisions in the country, was also one of the major legislative initiatives during the era of Musharraf (Government of Pakistan, 2006). Such reform was all done to deal with the problems that surrounded the Hudood ordinances and enhance access to justice for women. Even more media freedom was propagated by the regime, which enabled the discussion of gender-based violence and women's rights. This period saw an increase in the level of activity of civil society organisations. But institutional resistance did not allow these laws to be effectively implemented. The inefficiencies in the judiciary and patriarchal understandings of law also undermined results. Lots of women had no idea about the rights provided by the law. Therefore, there was a limited influence of the grassroots on legal changes to the law. Although there were progressive reforms, the Musharraf regime had its fair share of attempts to bring about gender equality. Women still were not allowed to move freely and engage in social life because of patriarchal social norms (Isran & Isran, 2012). The policy reforms did not substantially reach out to rural areas. Women were also limited to economic dependence on the male family members, which further curtailed empowerment. Other gender related changes that were challenged by religious conservatism are the changes in gender. There was no effective monitoring of policies due to institutional weakness. In most cases, the

representatives of women did not have independence in politics. There was still a serious problem of violence against women with honour killings. Structural barriers, therefore, outweighed political initiatives. The effect of reforms was still patchy.

## 2.2 PTI Government

In response to gender equality, the PTI government took a more welfare-centric approach by implementing programs to assist vulnerable groups, such as Ehsaas, which was intended to assist vulnerable populations such as women (Khan, 2022). These were poverty alleviation and financial inclusion initiatives. Cash transfer schemes and social protection schemes were used to target women. Digital governance and economic empowerment were also some priorities of the government. Others were programs that sought to enhance opportunities for women in the field of entrepreneurship. A more economic and not structural nature, though, these were programs. Critiques present the view that welfare programs failed to help in addressing the underlying causes of inequality. The greatest effect was a relief of sorts (temporarily).

Some legislative actions were implemented during the PTI period to deal with violence and harassment related to gender (HRCP, 2021). This reform agenda included anti-rape legislation and harassment in the workplace. These laws were to protect



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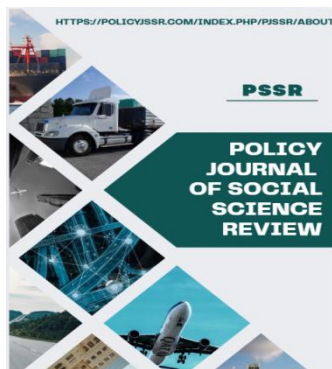
women by giving them more power in the legal system and enhancing reporting. Awareness programs were also initiated to sensitise the people on women's rights. Nonetheless, implementation was still low because of the inefficiency in the institutions. Judicial and police systems were not effective in delivering justice. Numerous cases were adjourned or not solved. Violence was not reported because of social stigmas. Legal protection, thus, was inconsistent in practice.

There was a high level of socio-cultural opposition to the reforms on gender by the PTI government. Feminist movements and campaigns on gender equality were resisted by conservative quarters of society (UN Women, 2021). Aurat March is one of the events that provoked mass discussion and controversy, including online harassment and threats against women activists. Social media was a source of empowerment as well as an avenue to lash out. Society was still highly constrained by traditional gender roles. Such barriers of culture curtailed the success of government policies. Even the progressive laws were opposed in society. Thus, the resistance on the cultural level was a significant challenge. Inequality remained, even with policies.

### 3.3 Challenges to Gender Equity: Comparative Synthesis of Musharraf and PTI Eras

The comparative analysis of the Musharraf regime and the PTI government shows that there were few variations in the policy orientation. Still, the fundamental problem of gender equity in Pakistan did not change significantly. Both governments put forward new policies to better the conditions of women, where Musharraf legislated by giving women political representation and a reform on the laws, and PTI provided programs to take care of women and protection through legislation. Still, both failed to tackle the very core of gender inequality. Institutional inability and the continued presence of patriarchal norms, together with the socio-cultural resistance, continue to manifest the limits of gender equity in Pakistan (Bari, 2010).

The disjuncture between the process of policy formulation and implementation is one of the largest challenges found in both regimes. The legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms were introduced, but their implementation was haphazard and ineffective. During the Musharraf regime, the number of women, representing the polity, went up, but it failed to translate into substantial decision-making. Equally, during the PTI years, welfare schemes like Ehsaas gave people financial aid but failed to establish empowerment facilities in the long run (Khan, 2022). This gap in implementation is a problem of the system and not regime failure.



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The existence of patriarchal socio-cultural conventions limiting the mobility, autonomy and involvement of women in public life is another significant challenge. These norms exist both at the household level and institutional level, preventing the best of state policies (Isran & Isran, 2012). Although more aware and with the law reformation, women have still encountered social resistance, especially in the rural regions where the traditional structures are more prevalent. This is to show that no legal and policy reforms can be fruitful without cultural change.

The challenge to gender equity is enhanced by institutional weakness. The two regimes experienced poor law enforcement, poor coordination of the departments and poor monitoring mechanisms. Otherwise, progressive policies were less effective due to judicial stalling, absence of gender-sensitive policing, and inefficiency of the bureaucracy (HRCP, 2021). Consequently, women still did not have access to justice, and the mistrust towards state institutions remained high.

Structural barriers are also prevalent in both periods of economic inequality. The involvement of women in the official labour market has been doing poorly, and the bulk of working women are in the informal, low-paying industries. As PTI tried to solve the problem of economic vulnerability with the help of welfare programs, whereas Musharraf did not pay much attention to the issue of economic empowerment, neither of the

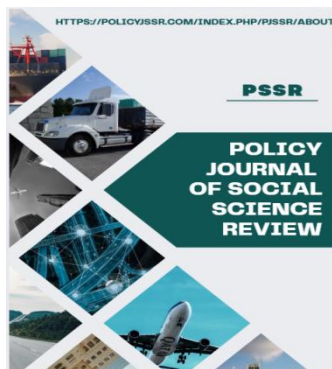
regimes worked out a long-term approach to the economic independence of women (UN Women, 2021). This dependency in the economy promotes other types of inequality.

In a larger sense of analysis, there is no significant problem of gender equity in Pakistan, but the lack of change. The two regimes show the tendency to uphold reform-based schemes of governance that enhance visibility, but not structural equality. Musharraf was increasing the representation but not the strength, whereas PTI increased the welfare but did not transform the institution. This underscores a deficiency that recurs in the governance style of Pakistan with regard to matters of gender.

To sum up, gender equity in Pakistan is still low with structures, institutional and cultural barriers that are still entrenched in the system and flow across political systems. The comparative evidence indicates that single reforms cannot achieve sustainable development; rather, it needs to be a comprehensive structural adjustment as an intervention, which entails education, enforcement of laws, and economic and cultural inclusion. In the absence of such a solution to these underlying issues, gender equity will not be a complete and ongoing aspiration of the socio-political context in Pakistan.

## Conclusion

Comparative analysis of the Musharraf regime and the PTI government serves to provide various points that both



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governments tabled significant initiatives that were directed towards enhancing gender equality in Pakistan, the overall consequences were minimal and uneven. The conclusions of this paper suggest that the tenure of Musharraf was mainly structural in terms of political inclusion of women via reserved seats and legal reforms. In contrast, PTI was welfare-based and social protection schemes and legislations guaranteeing women's legal protection. As much as these were different strategies, the commonality between the two regimes was the ineffective implementation of institutions and the lack of transforming the patriarchal social orders (Bari, 2010).

Probably one of the most important findings of the study is that political representation did not correlate with effective empowerment in the Musharraf era. The input of women in assemblies and local government became even better in numbers, excluding the contribution of women in decision-making processes, through male-dominated political institutions. On this note, the welfare programmes of PTI and their scheme Ehsaas Program, though they offered temporary economic relief to the women, did not empower them structurally in the long run (Khan, 2022).

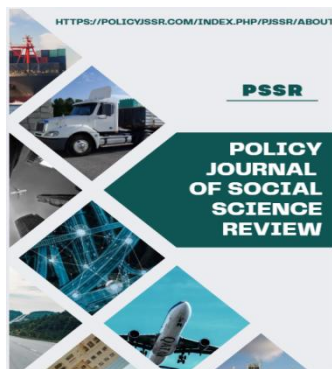
The other significant result is that there is a high implementation gap still observed in the two regimes. Despite legal change measures (e.g. the Women Protection Act 2006 under Musharraf and anti-rape legislation under the PTI)

being put in place, the implementation of these laws was weak. These reforms were minimally effective due to institutional inefficiencies, absence of coordination and presence of weak accountability mechanisms (HRCP, 2021).

They also discovered that the biggest obstacles to gender equality in Pakistan remain socio-cultural and patriarchal norms. These conventions limit the mobility of women, their access to education, their entry into the job market and their involvement in political affairs. Even with the policy reforms and awareness, the society has not changed much, especially in the rural and conservative regions (Isran & Isran, 2012).

Moreover, the study points to the fact that the two regimes wretchedly dealt with Economic inequality as a fundamental aspect of gender equity. The level of women's participation in the labour force was also minimal, and the majority of those women who participated were still in the informal and low-paid jobs. Both regimes failed to adopt a holistic approach to sustainable economic empowerment of women, restricting them from making long-term gains in equality.

The other observation is that reforms in both periods in the gender domain were highly top-down. The policies were implemented at the state level without being integrated into local systems of governance or into community-based



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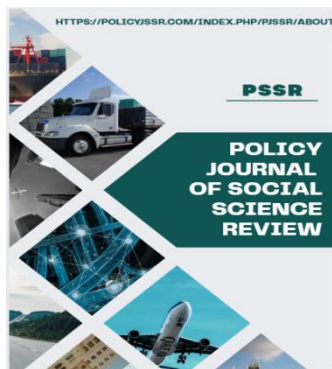
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institutions. This lack of linkage between the design and grassroots translation of policy thoroughly diminished the success of gender equality programs.

To sum it up, the paper concludes that both the Musharraf and PTI governments have played a role in sensitising and instating reforms to women's empowerment, but the issue of gender equality in Pakistan is not a

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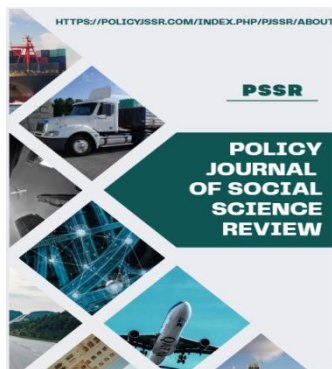


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