

Women Development Related Policies in Pakistan: A Preliminary Gap Analysis

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Abstract

Women living in third-world countries, such as Pakistan, often face the perception of being less competent and less significant participants in national development. In the Pakistani context, this situation can be attributed, among other factors, to the lack of tangible policies ensuring women's access to key decision-making positions and opportunities for career development. This paper aims to examine the major policies concerning women that have been formulated over the years in the form of acts and laws. Additionally, the study highlights the inadequate attention given by Pakistani policymakers to acts or bills that would facilitate women's career development. The research reveals that the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCWS) in 2012 and subsequent initiatives in 2014, 2016, and 2018 do not fully address the issues related to women's career development. Furthermore, the study uncovers a gap between the policy measures outlined in the first national-level policy for women in 2002, which encompass social, economic, and political dimensions, and their implementation in assisting Pakistani women in their career development. Therefore, this study makes a significant contribution by promoting research on women's status, not only by reporting factors of gender discrimination and cultural restraints but also by analyzing the historical development of official policies and the implementation gap concerning women's career development in Pakistan.

Keywords: National Development, Policy Makers, Decision Making, Implementation Gap

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■ 1.0 INTRODUCTION

There are multiple definitions of policy, as proposed by various authors. According to Ogza (2017), there is no fixed or singular proper definition of policy. It can be described as the chosen course of action by policymakers in the context of current and future decisions. Policy represents a purposeful system of rules that guide decisions and aim to achieve reasonable outcomes. It can take the form of laws, regulations, procedures, legislative actions, incentives, or voluntary practices implemented by governments and other institutions. Mallay (2016) emphasized in his study that legislation is necessary to address gaps in policies, but sometimes legislators may overlook the expertise of government officials or fail to recognize their input. Additionally, policy can also refer to internal procedures within an organization (Mallay, 2016).

Furthermore, many policy experts believe that policy is an action plan that is selected among alternatives and addresses present and future commitments of a community, individual, institution, or government. According to Bell & Stevenson (2015), policy is a logical result of the problem-solving process. A policy necessitates a comprehensive description of future goals and actions, providing an outline of how to achieve those goals. It serves as a framework established by the government, encompassing various activities (Hofmann and Turk, 2006).

■ 2.0 BACKGROUND OF POLICY

In the history of Pakistan, the government established two short-term commissions to analyze the status of women's careers within the country, identify issues and gaps, and make recommendations for the enactment of bills, drafts, laws, or policies to address the proper status of women. The first commission was formed in 1976, followed by a second commission in 1983. In 1980, various active women and organizations demanded the establishment of a permanent commission to formulate appropriate laws and policies regarding women's rights, women's protection, and women's protection against sexual harassment. They further urged the government to ensure proper implementation of these laws once confirmed. Subsequently, on 17th July 2000, the legislative body of Pakistan was established by President Pervez Musharraf under the ordinance of XXVI, government act in 1995, and the National Plan of Action (NPA) for women in 1998.

Furthermore, in 2000, the National Commission on Women's Status was established through a presidential ordinance, which later obtained legal and constitutional powers under the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCWS) in 2012. Subsequent initiatives were taken in 2014, 2016, and 2018, with extended durations and government authorization. In 2002, the federal government formulated the first national-level policy for women, focusing on gender equality and women's empowerment. This policy aimed to address women's development across various dimensions, including social, economic, and political spheres.

The primary objective of the NCWS is to evaluate policies, programs, bills, and laws that impact women's development and equal rights. Additionally, the commission strives to establish relationships and foster cooperation with NGOs dedicated to protecting women's rights and promoting women's development. The NCWS primarily engages with lawmakers, parliamentarians, and decision-makers to advocate for legislation and its effective implementation, with the aim of enhancing the status of women in social, political, and economic spheres of life.

Furthermore, an act concerning women empowerment has been proposed and implemented in one specific region of Pakistan, namely Punjab. In Punjab, initiatives for women empowerment were initially taken in 2014, and after two years, additional provisions were added in the new act of 2016 to further promote women's development. Subsequently, in 2018, women empowerment initiatives were comprehensively addressed, and this act is currently being followed with periodic amendments. The most recent policy implemented for women's development is the 2018 Punjab Women Empowerment Initiatives, which has been amended periodically up until 2022.

■ 3.0 POLICY INITIATIVES FOR WOMEN CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN PAKISTAN

In January 2018, the NCWS initiated a program aimed at encouraging young domestic worker women who had authored a book of Urdu poetry for women. Additionally, in March 2018, the chairperson of the NCWS participated in the launch of the Gender Equality in Public Administration of Pakistan. During this event, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations (UN) discussed women's access to decision-making positions in civil services and addressed barriers to gender equality in administration. Moreover,

in July 2018, the NCWS and UN Women jointly released a comprehensive report that assessed previous acts, policies, and ongoing initiatives. The report examined the status of women in Pakistan and identified the obstacles hindering their development. It also provided recommendations to the government in the form of an action plan outlined in the Punjab Medium-Term Development Framework (2017-20).

The purpose of this policy is to ensure women's equal rights in all aspects of society and enable their participation in organizations. It emphasizes providing women with the same opportunities as men in the community and workplace. The government of Pakistan has implemented these initiatives in the province of Punjab to address gender disparities and promote the development of women. In Punjab, there is a significant gender gap, with approximately 1 million fewer women than men. Available data on birth registration, death registration, marriages, divorces, and the issuance of CNIC (Computerized National Identity Cards) highlights a substantial disparity between men and women in terms of local authority registrations (PCSW, 2018, p. ii, iii & xvi).

Although these Acts are specifically implemented in one province of Pakistan and government do not focus on the implementation of this act in other provinces. The Punjab Women Development Policy have been identified some of areas where the Act emphasized on women development and those points are given below:

- To ensure that women development provisions composed within the constitutions of Pakistan that women have all legal rights and completely honoured.
- To ensure that women of Punjab have equal opportunities, effective political and social empowerment and decision making.
- To ensure that equal opportunities at workforce for women alongside men in economic sphere and developmental programs and processes for women which surely respond to women challenges which they are facing in opportunities of their career development.
- To promote and facilitate the equal access to education for girls along boys and secure access to training and skills development opportunities for women to enhance productivity of country.
- In civil societies and communities' men eliminate discriminatory behaviours and transform from negative to positive attitudes at social and institutional level.
- To ensure that all existing and procedural laws comprehensively eliminating all forms of gender-based violence.

The women empowerment initiatives were approved by the Punjab Government and implemented by the Women Development Department with a sense of urgency to promote women's advancement in the province. The implementation of the "Punjab Women Development Policy" was initially challenging. However, this policy aims to address the concerns and challenges faced by women. It reflects Pakistan's international commitment to gender mainstreaming and women's development in the province of Punjab.

In October 2019, the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW), which serves as the secretariat of the Inter-Provincial Ministerial Group (IPMG), organized a meeting focused on the empowerment of women. During this meeting, participants emphasized the need to ensure equal rights for all citizens without any discrimination and reaffirmed Pakistan's international commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs emphasize women's development, rights, representation in politics, and protection against violence. Participants stressed the importance of implementing women development departments, monitoring the role of women's rights commissions, and upholding the principles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

In April 2020, the NCSW, Ministry of Human Rights, and UN Women Pakistan jointly released a policy paper on the gendered impact and implications of COVID-19 in Pakistan. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the negative consequences that the pandemic has had on the lives of vulnerable women. It focuses on key areas such as education, health, labor force participation, time use and mobility, financial empowerment, gender-based violence, and offers policy recommendations to mitigate the current risks and prevent the widening of existing gender gaps (Report: Coronavirus to worsen gender inequality in Pakistan).

The NCWS and UN actively work on promoting gender equality and women's development. They conduct analyses to improve gender mainstreaming in legislative processes, including bills related to the Juvenile Justice System, Cyber Crime, Anti-Rape, and Jirga. The Law and Policy Committee of the NCSW reviews several draft laws that impact the status and rights of women. They provide input, submit comments, observations, and

recommendations to the concerned ministries or committees for incorporation. Some of these draft laws include the Reproductive Health Care Bill, Domestic Violence Bill, Christian Marriage and Divorce Bill, Hindu Marriage Bill, Qisas and Diyat Bill, Juvenile Justice System Bill, Cyber Crime Bill, Anti-Rape Bill, and Jirga Bill (NCSW Annual Report).

In July 2020, the NCSW and UN Women Pakistan launched the Young Women in Pakistan Status Report 2020. According to the report, 29% of young married women face controlling behaviors from their husbands, 15% have experienced physical violence, and 4% have been subjected to sexual violence by someone other than their spouse. Additionally, within the last 12 months, 14% of currently married women have faced spousal physical violence, and 4% have experienced spousal sexual violence (Study on young women in Pakistan), (More than 28% of girls are married before 18 years of age: report).

Under the leadership of Imran Khan, the government has taken steps to address domestic violence against women. The Prevention and Protection Bill 2021 was passed to eliminate domestic violence, along with several other bills introduced in the National Assembly that have been enacted by the government. These bills represent amendments to previous acts and laws. In January 2022, the government of Pakistan passed a bill aimed at protecting women in the workplace from violence. This bill strengthens the existing law from 2010, which was considered to be weaker. The Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Amendment) Bill, enacted on January 14, broadens the definition of workplaces to include both formal and informal settings, aligning it more closely with the definition outlined in the 2019 International Labour Organization (ILO) Violence and Harassment Convention (C190).

Although the latest Act of 2018 is still in effect with amendments made by the government, it is aligned with international practices and reflects the priorities of the Government of Pakistan. The Women Development Department and the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women have played crucial roles in the development of this Act. Its aim is to create effective policies that promote the development and equal rights of women in society. Currently, initiatives related to women's development and gender equality are primarily concentrated in the province of Punjab, where efforts are being made to improve job opportunities and enhance the social status of women.

However, in Pakistan, job opportunities for women are still not on par with those for men. Societal norms, cultural values, lack of family support, and systemic barriers discourage women from seeking employment. The government should address these sensitive issues and take measures to foster the career development of women. Women often face security issues and harassment in their workplaces, leading to dissatisfaction with their working environments. Collaboration with male bosses can also be challenging for women, as they may not receive equal treatment compared to their male counterparts.

The underrepresentation of women in higher management positions can be attributed to certain recruitment policies such as regional quotas, military quotas, and the absence of provisions for lateral entry into higher educational institutions. These policies tend to favor men over women during the initial selection process. The progress of policies aimed at women's development has been slow, and there is a need to review these policies. It is concerning that policies addressing women's issues often focus on various aspects of their lives but fail to adequately address their career development.

Policy makers have not given sufficient attention to formulating a comprehensive policy specifically targeting women's career development. It is crucial to establish a well-defined policy that includes appropriate quotas and ensures effective implementation. This study emphasizes the challenges related to women's policy and calls for equal participation of women in all fields for their own career growth and for the overall development of the country. Additionally, the study highlights the necessity of incorporating a specific policy for women's career development into the legislative framework.

■ 4.0 THE POLICY IMPLEMENTATION GAPS

As discussed earlier, the government of Pakistan has introduced several laws and acts to support women's rights and empowerment in the country. However, when it comes to women's career development and job security, these policies appear to remain largely on paper. Despite the existence of these policies, there is a significant lack of women holding managerial and executive positions in Pakistan. This indicates a gap between the implementation

of these acts and laws and the actual support provided to women in choosing and pursuing their careers.

Research and data further support this observation, highlighting the limited practical application of these policies and their failure to make a significant impact. For example, a previous study conducted by Beenish (2016) revealed that the implementation of policies is rarely observed, and failures can be attributed to factors such as the government's lack of commitment in allocating sufficient budgetary resources, poor governance, political instability, and misappropriation of funds by government entities. These factors contribute to the failure of policies and exacerbate the disadvantaged status of women in the country (Beenish & Amir, 2016).

Meanwhile, several studies have highlighted numerous factors that impede the practicality of women-related policies in Pakistan. Consequently, women encounter various challenges when it comes to selecting and advancing in their careers. Understanding these factors helps identify the disparity between policy existence and its implementation as an instrument for women's career growth, referred to as the implementation gap. The following section provides a concise overview and analysis of these factors, including cultural and social influences (Mahmood et al., 2021; Alghofaily, 2019; Singh, 2021).

■ 5.0 CONCLUSION

This paper aims to trace the major women-related policies in Pakistan that have been developed over the years. It finds that the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCWS) 2012 and subsequent initiatives do not fully address the issues related to women's career development. The paper defines the term "policy" as an action plan chosen by policy makers to guide decisions and achieve desired outcomes. In the context of women's career development in Pakistan, two short-term commissions were formed in 1976 and 1983 to analyze the status of women's careers. Additionally, the formation of the NCWS in 2002 aimed to examine the impact of policies, programs, bills, and laws on women's development and equal rights.

One notable policy in this regard is the Punjab Women Development Policy, which reflects Pakistan's international commitment to gender mainstreaming and women's development. The research highlights the collaboration between the NCWS and UN Women Pakistan to ensure equal rights for all citizens without discrimination, promote women's development, advocate for women's representation in politics, and protect women against violence.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the need for a comprehensive policy focused on women's career advancement in Pakistan. However, data and research indicate a lack of implementation of laws and policies related to women's protection and career development in the country.

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