Evaluation of Government Programs & Policies to Eradicate Gender Disparities in Pakistan

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Minahil Nawaz	Department of City and Regional Planning, School of Architecture & Planning, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: minahil.nawaz@umt.edu.pk
Atif Bilal Aslam	Department of City and Regional Planning, University of Engineering and Technology, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.
Fariha Tariq	Department of City and Regional Planning, School of Architecture & Planning, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Abstract: *Like many other developing nations, Pakistan is also facing a gender gap in its socio-cultural spheres. Since independence, many programs and policies have been made in public and private sector domains to eradicate these gender disparities. This paper aims to evaluate these programs and policies by encountering their salient features and how far these programs and policies proved to be fruitful in bridging this gap. The evaluation is done majorly through a desk review of the secondary data drawn from reports published by different government and local organizations. Mainly, the qualitative methods of content and thematic analyses were employed for exploring the gender-based disparities, and how these are affecting the pace of development in Pakistan. Moreover, an assessment of strategies and policies addressing the problem of the gender gap has also been done. Based on the study findings, this paper presents some policy recommendations to reduce gender base disparities which is one of the many prerequisites for the promotion of sustainable development agenda as gender equality is the 5th goal of the United Nations' sustainable development agenda.*

Introduction

There are many types of disabilities that we face in our daily life. Some are genetic and some are those which are imposed or forced onto us by society. Disability is not genetic or from nature, but it can be implicated by society. Disability is when someone is not able to do things on standards (Hurst, 2006). This is the basic and classical definition of disability if we take a close look at the modern world and definition of disability it shows that disability can also be spread due to the exclusion of a certain community of the society. For example, there are 54% of the total population of women in the world but still, they are economically dependent on the male. Firstly, because women are mostly excluded from the planning and inclusion perspectives. Secondly, the gender gap is also another big reason for this and thirdly our societies are male dominant and often women are supposed to stay at home and manage the household. This exclusion of women leads to major disabilities i.e., social, and economic. And each of these disabilities has its consequences which can be very fatal if not addressed in the early stages.

Although there were four models of disability that had been prompted due to the problems faced by disabled. The four main models identified were charity, medical, social and civil right models (Groce & Kett, 2019). Although these models helped the disabled people to reach their rights more precisely and accurately with more awareness, but these all models failed to address gender-based disabilities. Every possible aspect of life and society has different impacts on the male and female population. Similarly, disabilities also have dynamic characteristics and impacts according to gender. For example, maybe deformation of face or body part has a more adverse personal impact on women as compared to men.

Although, poverty is associated with disability, and it is the root cause and consequence of disability. This is a cycle that can be controlled or reversed. Poverty is a complex phenomenon which is derived through a series of exclusions (Skalli, 2001). Hence, along with poverty, there are other characteristics that lead to severe disabilities. These characteristics are

most common and abundant. Characteristics are social isolation, less knowledge, low education, and economically weak status. Groups or individuals of the communities having these characteristics are most likely to be vulnerable to disabilities. The exclusion of women happens due to a lack of technical and entrepreneurship skills. These skills lack in women due to their low knowledge and education. In addition to that, low outside exposure also plays an important factor. These factors encourage exclusion. The issue of low wages as compared to men has also been seen in many prevalent settings (Khera, 2018). Working women generally get paid less than men for an equal amount of work done.

Female entrepreneurs are important drivers of economic development and making a significant amount of contribution to the Indian economy (IMF, 2018). Although there is the significance of entrepreneurship still there are only 10% of women entrepreneurs in India. But the problem is most of them are working in informal sectors of the economy which sometimes do not provide the full extent of opportunities to them. 98% of women-owned businesses are micro-enterprises in nature with approximately 90% of them are operating in the informal sector of the economy (Khera, 2018). As entrepreneurship needs skills and financial resources which are already lacking in women that is why they are lacking in this industry too. In Indian urban areas, women seldom own property because they might often use this property as collateral for borrowed start-up capital. Most banks consider women enterprise businesses more vulnerable to risk due to the low expectation of business skills, operation mostly in the informal sector and are usually micro in scale (Khera, 2018). Females are largely engaged in low productivity informal jobs in the agriculture and services sector in rural areas.

According to many studies, it is found that women's lives are under the authority of the community which defines their life's scope. This results in social and economic disability. This is most often a phenomenon in the south Indo-Pak region. Owing to contextual variations, women are generally perceived and treated as inferior to men in this region. Also, women are supposed to be economically reliant on men and they might have fewer choices in terms of education, occupation, and life courses due to this limitation. They also believe that before marriage females belong to their parents and after marriage,

they become the property of their husbands (Pamela S. Johnson, 1991).

According to some studies of the late 1990s, Morocco had a population of 27.5 million and it had 50.8% of women. Official figures of the Moroccan government reported that Moroccan women were the most vulnerable social group due to the highest levels of exclusions. Low illiteracy rates among women also hint that government investment in human capital was more likely tended toward men. 48.5% of the female population ranging from 8 to 13 years of age were not enrolled in school in urban areas. This scenario was even worse in the rural population of the same age that 75% of girls did not attend the schools. At the national level, 1 out of 8 girls aged 17 to 19 years joined high school. By the end of 1999, the illiteracy rates of women and men were 62.6% and 41% respectively. Illiteracy rates subjected to rural and urban divides were almost half i.e. 87% in rural and 43.7 in urban areas. It has also been found that most women become economically more stable after divorce and widowhood, especially in cases where they did not have a paid job before the change in their marital status. Widows are more vulnerable to poverty than divorcées because of their barrier of age, physical strength, and their reliance on support from their children if they have any (Skalli, 2001).

Till the 1970s, women were mainly seen as house workers under the order of men. Husbands were found calling their wives 'Kanai' which means "inside the house" (Dinca, Floricel, & Zottu, 2017). Although there existed a regulatory framework for women's safety and empowerment, however, societal thoughts were different. Japan introduced its "Vision of gender equality" in 1995 for gender equality which was one of the advanced and comprehensive agendas to maximize gender equality (Usui, Rose, & Kageyama, 2003). This helped women to gain their worth in society which enable them to uplift their economic conditions. This vision acted as a base for further policymaking and women empowerment strategies in Japan.

Japan, being one of the developed countries and a member of the group of seven (G7), has one of the strongest economies in the world. This fact can be supported by that 40% of the GDP of the world is from these 7 countries while having only 10% population (Webster, 2019). One of the reasons behind having this strong economy is the women's employment rate and women's empowerment. In 1975, the labor workforce of women of Japan aging

from 25-29 was 40% which has almost doubled in 2017. Another astonishing fact is that Japan has more work participation from women as compared to the USA (Japan Government, n.d.). Women's participation has been boosted by both the private and public sectors to the full extent. Japan has introduced Japan revitalization strategy in 2013 which emphasized the participation of women by creating a friendly environment and restoring vitality (Japan Government, 2013). It's one of the salient objectives was to achieve a women's employment rate of 73% by 2020, which was achieved in 2016. Another target set under it was to increase the women population at leadership positions to 30% by 2020 which was 9.8% in 2015 (Kushida & Kushida, 2018). This major policy program of Japan not only helped the nation to boost its economy and break the economic stagnation but also helped to decline the imbalance of labor force participation in terms of gender (Grabowiecki, 2019). Ultimately, emphasizing women's participation in labor minimized the economical and societal issues of the women in Japan.

Japan incentivized women participation with diverse products, services, and opportunities to the households to double their income. They increased the childcare management services for working couples. Japan's government supported the women's participation and skill enhancement initiatives of the private sector companies also. These incentives were in the form of subsidies, tax reduction measures, and internships programs for women. Japan's government also attempted to increase the number of women in managerial positions for their capacity development. Another initiative was to introduce short-time jobs for women having children aged 3 years and below (Cabinet house, 2013).

Methodology

This research is based on a desk review of secondary data. All the programs and policies made to eradicate gender base disparities are studied and analyses were made based on their implementation models, sector, salient features, and drawbacks. Mainly the qualitative methods of content and thematic analyses have been employed to carry out this study. On the basis of the carried-out content analysis, different dimensions of gender disparities have been identified which set the foundation for carrying out thematic analysis. The identified dimensions of the gender disparity have been enlisted in the following section. Furthermore,

recommendations are made in line with the study findings suggesting measures to bridge the gender gap at all levels and across various sectors.

Gender Disparities in Pakistan

Inequality between women and men can have a variety of forms. It is not a homogeneous phenomenon, rather a collection of related and connected problems. It is a heterogeneous phenomenon, which consists of problems that are interlinked to each other either directly or indirectly (Mehmood, 2013). Some of the major indicators are interlinked to each other and came into one's mind when disability is discussed in a broader perspective. Although, these terms have different interpretations and perceptions, however, the term 'disability' links them together. Various dimensions of gender disparity can be grouped as follows (M. Ali & Noman, 2015):

- Economic
- Social
- Cultural
- Political
- Legal

Gender disparity is sometimes also called gender inequality, is not only a problem in developing countries but also is one of the major problems in developed countries (Mehmood, 2013). Similarly, gender disparity is also one of the emerging and neglected issues of Pakistan. Some of the factors encouraging this phenomenon are rooted in cultural, religious, and local norms. Due to this, women are deprived of their rights in social and public spheres which leads to disability in the women. Although many policies and programs had been initiated by the government and private sector to minimize it, but the system has many flaws and strong cultural influence causes many hurdles for their success. These gender gap disparities are also crippling down the process of nation-building in its widest scope. Pakistan's GDP can be increased by 30% if women participate in economic activities (IMF, 2018).

Women are one of the most vulnerable groups in developing countries (Skalli, 2001), particularly in the Southeast Asian region. Although the situation concerning gender inequality is improving, however at a very low pace which is causing adverse effects on the communities and individuals alike. For example, transgenders are not considered respectable individuals of society. This social disability pushes

them backward and they are left with the slightest of the chance to grow and avail all the civil and human rights. Similarly, it is surprising to observe that females in many communities have still not been given equal chances to grow and flourish in their societies. This problem is not finished here; it goes beyond imagination in some cases. When some of the females break the barrier of these cultural and traditional norms, the societies and communities boycott and isolate them.

Some of the major reasons for gender inequality are rooted in strong religious, social, and cultural norms. Pakistani societies are patriarchal in character where men enjoy a superior authority (T. S. Ali et al., 2011). Women are more likely to be more reliant on men in economic terms. According to a UN report (2014-15), Pakistan has the highest gender gap in terms of food insecurity (Niha Dagia & Zoha Ismail, 2018). This economic dependency has a significant direct impact on other dimensions of disability. It limits women's participation in social, cultural, civil, and political spaces of the society. Another reason for the lack of inclusion is early marriages in our societies (Doepke, Tertilt, & Voena, 2012) which leads to more men-controlled societies. Pakistanis carry the social norm of keeping women economically dependent on them even they chose to live abroad. In Oldham city, where mostly Pakistani and Bangladeshi are living, stats show that 55% of Asian women are more unemployed as compared to 13% of white women. Even though these unemployed Asian women have more qualified women as compared to white women (Dale, 2002). Sometimes, such socio-cultural norms leading to dependencies are exercised on the pretext of religious teachings taken out of context. Islam never limits the participation of women in economic and outdoor activities. Hazrat Khadija (R.A.) who was the first wife of Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.) was the top and famous merchant in Arab (Awais Rabbani, 2019). Nusaybah Bint Ka'ab was a female believer of Islam who fought against the non-believers in many battles such as Hudaybiah, Uhud, Hunayn, Khyber, and Yamamah (Muslim Girl, 2013).

According to the official reports from 1960 to 1995, the total number of poor people in Pakistan had increased from 19 million to 42 million (Mehmood, 2013). In the South Asian region, women are mostly dependent on male members of their families at all stages of their lives. In their childhood and adolescent age, they are dependent on their fathers or brothers and after marriage, it is considered to be the responsibility of their husbands while in their last phases of lives, it becomes a moral responsibility of their sons. If unfortunately, the male members are not economically strong, it directly affects the wellbeing of women. Another major barrier in tackling the issue of gender disparity is the absence of data related to disability, which creates additional problems for policymakers and researchers to formulate an informed policy response. According to a recent study, 67% of Pakistani people think that women are not being treated fairly in society and 71% think that there is gender discrimination in education (Rabia, Tanveer, Gillani, Naeem, & Akbar, 2019).

Pakistan has adopted several international commitments to gender equality and women's rights, the latest of which is the United Nations SDG 5 which is meant for gender equality. Some of them are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights such as the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, and Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs). National level dedications are also there which include a National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women, Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, and a National Plan of Action on Human Rights. Despite these commitments, Pakistan's ranking for gender equality remains among the lowest in the world (United Nations, 2019). Along with these number of acts and international commitments, there exist several departments and NGOs working on women's rights and are being supported by donor agencies such as USAID, WHO, UNDP, and some other local entities. To tackle the current scenario, UN Women (Asia & Pacific) is also reviving its agenda. According to the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development for women empowerment, UN Women in Pakistan is working to ensure and promote an environment for monitoring and implementation for gender equality commitments. It also assists to provide responsive policies and governing systems for relevant institutions. Some of the major laws which have been enacted in the country for women safety and empowerment are:

- The Guardians and Wards Act 1890
- The Child Marriage Restraint Act (XIX) of 1929
- The Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act 1939
- Commission on Marriage and Family Laws

(1955-61)

- The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961 (Amended in 2015)
- The Conciliation Courts Ordinance 1961
- West Pakistan Family Courts Act 1964
- The Dowry and Bridal Gifts (Restriction) Act 1976
- Pakistani Women Rights Committee (1975-76)
- Commission on the Status of Women (1980-88)
- Commission of Inquiry for Women (1994-97)
- Pakistan National Commission on the Status of Women 2000
- Local Government Ordinance 2001 (amended in 2013& 2019)
- Small Claims and Minor Offences Courts Ordinance 2002
- Prevention & Control of Human trafficking Ordinance 2002
- Police Order 2002
- Crimes in the name of Honor amendment Bill 2004
- The Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendments) Act, 2006
- Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act, 2011
- Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act 2011 (Amended in 2014 & 2018)
- Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offences in the name of Honor) Act, 2016
- Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016

Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act 2019

To understand and take a quick overview of the situation of women in Pakistan with respect to gender disparity, we need to look at some statistical figures. According to Pakistan Demographic Health Survey 2012-2013 report, situations of boys and girls out of school in KPK is very alarming. 49% of girls and 40% of boys are out of school. According to a report of World Economic Forum (WEF), Pakistan was ranked at 143rd in economic opportunities for women and 138th in education out of total of 145 countries and further, it was mentioned that there was no change since the last year i.e.2015 (Daily Times, 2016).

Politically, women are also struggling due to some of the religious and cultural mindsets. In total, 15 women won the National Assembly (NA) and Provincial Assembly (PA) seats collectively through direct elections in the last elections. Among them, 8 won NA seats and 7 won PA seats. From 79 and 42 women candidates in KPK and Baluchistan respectively, no women won a provincial seat in open competition (Naeem, 2018). Many of them who won the direct elections were mostly from families that have strong political backgrounds and influence. Although this fact cannot be denied that women are becoming more politically and socially aware and active due to the technological advancements and access to information throughout the world. This is enabling them to realize their real worth and rights. This is evident by a massive increase in women's participation in national assembly general seats in most recent elections. But the main barriers are the societal behavior and attitudes towards their empowerment and development.
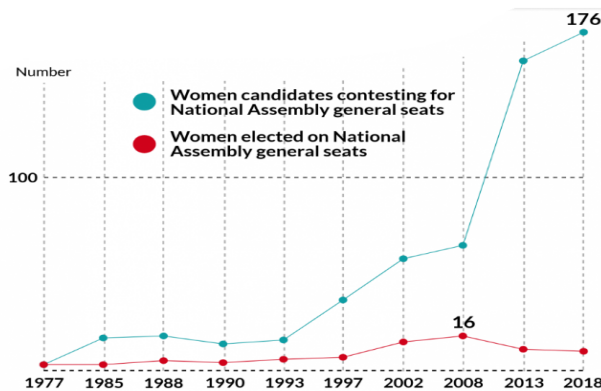
Graph 1: Women Participation in National Assembly General Seats

If we look at the expenses that different sectors and agencies made to eradicate gender inequalities in 2018 (Figures 2 and 3), we can see that how little has been focused on the adolescent and youth. This is the age bracket where identified indicators of gender inequality must be addressed otherwise the inequality-related issues take a grip on one's personality and environment which becomes harder to deal with at later stages of life. Another noting point is that UNFPA has almost the same amount of expenses as compared to the Government expenditure. This provides us evidence that Government is not much focused on addressing inequalities whereas foreign assistance is driving Government's efforts.

Figure 1: Expenses by Sector Wise

Figure 3: Expenses by Agencies
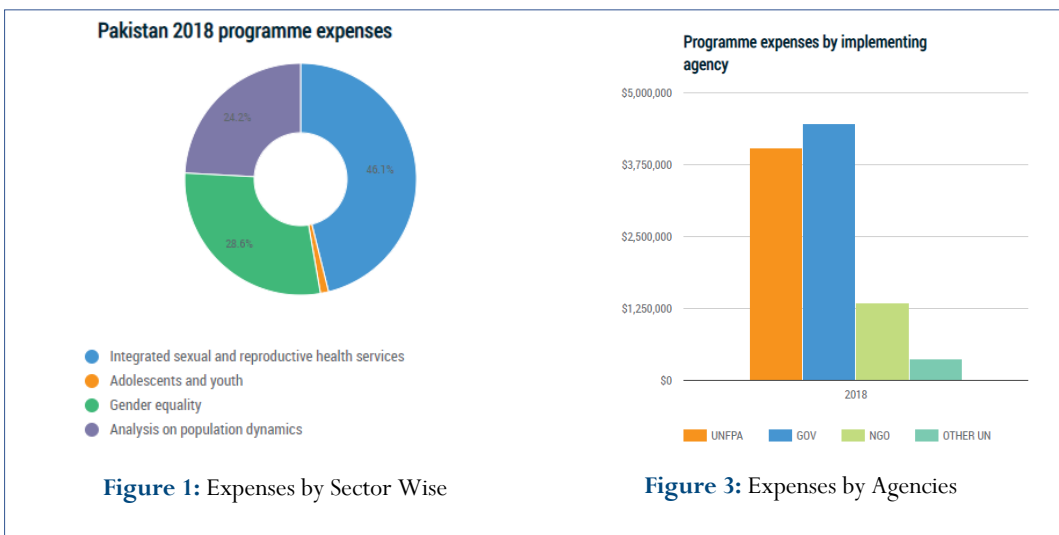
Women Development Programs and Policies in Pakistan

Many programs and policies have been formulated for women's development and empowerment in Pakistan. The first main achievement for women's development was in 1973 when the constitution of Pakistan gave many rights to women. After that, many programs and policies surfaced right after another. A candid review of the salient features and drawbacks of these programs and policies is presented in Table 1. Most of them failed because despite making many promises for women's development by the political parties, a roadmap for the implementation supported by dedicated teams was missing (Sufi, 2019). The current Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government has come up with renewed promises and a dedicated focus on the investment in human resources, yet the operationalization of these promises has to take place for grasping the real positive anticipated benefits.

Table 1. A Review of Women Development Programs and Policies in Pakistan

Name /Type	Date	Sector	Authority	Salient Features	Drawbacks/Failure
Rights of Women in Constitution of Pakistan (Policy) (Government of Pakistan, 2012)	1973	Civil Social Politics	Government of Pakistan	It provides the following Rights to women: • Marrying by own choice. • Independent ownership. • Keep her own identity. • Education • Divorce • Inheritance • Work opportunities	• Not included any women economic freedom.

Name /Type	Date	Sector	Authority	Salient Features	Drawbacks/Failure
Women Development Department (Program)	1994	Civil Rights Health Employment	Sindh Government	• Public policies and laws to meet special needs of women • Protection and promotion of Women's rights, gender equity and equality • Development projects for providing special facilities for women • Advancement in Cottage industry with special preference of inclusion of women.	• No monitoring. • Politically orientated. • No proper allocation of resources.
PLGO (Policy) (Government, 2014)	14-08-2001	Social Civil rights Politics	Government of Pakistan	• Neighborhood Training centers and schools for women. • Women political Safety • Promote equality • Women participation • Civil rights safety • Aims to narrow gender gap in Pakistan through women development.	• Rigid Framework. • Corruption • No proper selection criteria.
Gender Equity Program (GEP) (Program)	06-08-2010	Employment Economic Civil Rights	Government of KPK	• Promote overall behavior change in society • Easement for women to access institutions, information and resources. • Enhanceattitude of society towards issue of women's rights. • To protect women rights at workplace.	• No proper planning to cope strong local cultural barriers.
Protection against Harassment of Women at the workplace Act, 2010 (Policy)	2010	Social Justice Civil Rights Employment	Government of Pakistan	• To give women chance to stand up against any social, physical or cultural harassment. • Provide a legal framework for women against harassment. • To make women feel safer at workplaces.	• No proper legal women safety precautions provided.
Capacity Building of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Commission on the Status of Women (KPCSW) (Program)	10-08-2011 to 09-07-2012	Social Civil rights	Government of KPK and UN	• Capacity Building of members and staff of Commission • Review of Legislation • Assessment of Institutions for justice and social care for women • Development of District Committees • Special Event Celebration	• Favoritism. • No monitoring and control. • Limited and focused areas only.
Benazir Bhutto Shaheed Youth Development Project (Program)		Economic Employment	Women development Department Sindh.	• Entrepreneurship skills • Beautification skills • Business Management skills • Office Management Skills	• Corruption. • Politically oriented. • Limited areas only.

Name /Type	Date	Sector	Authority	Salient Features	Drawbacks/Failure
Women Health (Program)		Health	Women development Department Sindh	• Child Health • Recommended Vaccine Schedule for Children • Hepatitis • AIDS	• Control and monitoring.
Gender Development and Women Empowerment (Program)		Human capital development	National Integrated Development Association (NGO)	• Promotion of women empowerment and gender equality • Gender Issues and Situation in Pakistan • Gender Development and Women Empowerment Program • Women are Key to Effective Development • Inclusive Participation • 407 Female Community Organizations formed	• No proper planning to cope local gender disparities problem. • Only focuses on promotion and awareness.
Paving the Way for Women Empowerment (Program)		Social	UNDP Pakistan	• In Provinces of KPK and Baluchistan, 122 women community organizations were made. • 3000 women from the communities were brought together by UNDP-RAHA staff in different organizations • Provide legislation support assistance to the female victims of violence.	• Low women participation due to foreign influence.
Punjab Women Empowerment Package 2012 (Policy)	20 12	Economic Social Justice Education Civil rights Employment	Women Development Department Punjab	• Amendment in Inheritance Laws • 25% general seats for women inPPSC. • Quota for women in PPSC shall be enhanced to 15% • Right to Equal /Wages • In Provincial Ombudsmen office 33% of consultant reserved for women • Salary packages for nurses to be increased.	• More toward gender discrimination. • Used as a negative tool by the women against men. • Created high completion for men
Gender Equality and Female Empowerment (Program)	2012	Education Civil Rights Political Health Economic	USAID	• Since 2010, Women received 6,000 scholarships for higher education. • Provision of health services to 9.8 million children and women collectively. • 578000 girls were reached out through its reading programs.	• Relied on quantity rather than quality.

Name /Type	Date	Sector	Authority	Salient Features	Drawbacks/Failure
Maternal and Child Health and Health Systems Strengthening (Program)	2012	Health	USAID	- Trained more than 12000 and 16000 female educators and election observers respectively. 9000 full time direct jobs created. 513000 women were facilitated for NIC registration. - Provided health, legal, and counseling services to more than 59000 female who survived gender-based violence. - Quality reproductive, maternal and child health for 9.8 million women. 52,500 people were trained on new health care interventions for children and women. - Supported governments in Sindh, Punjab, Baluchistan and KPK in family planning schemes.	Slow progress and no goal achievement.
Women Development Department (Program)	2012	Social Justice Civil rights Education Employment	Government of Punjab	- Assistance in finances, uplift of social norms and technical training, - Universal and easy access to justice - Coordination with civil society to eliminate the discriminatory communities subject to attitudes and behaviors - Improve political, social and economic status of women through provision of considerable opportunities. - Achieve gender equity and equity. - Training of Women Domestic Workers.	- Political oriented. - Loopholes in framework. - Missing legal structure to cope problems.
Punjab Women Empowerment Initiatives 2014 (Program)	2014	Economic Social Health Education	Women Development Department Punjab	- Technical Training of workers' wives for earning livelihood. - Exclusive space in existing Sunday Bazar and Ramadan Bazars for women to set up stalls. - Women Contractors to run canteen in Women Educational Intuitions to encourage women	- Slow Progress. - Corruption. - Ignore Quality. - No monitoring body.

Name /Type	Date	Sector	Authority	Salient Features	Drawbacks/Failure
				to partici-pate in economic development	
				• Provision of Scotties and scholarships for women.	
				• Gender equality and women issues in school.	
				• Establishment of 06 new Female Colleges.	
				• Amendment in Land Revenue Laws	
				• Gynecology wards and theaters upgradation.	
				• Birth waiting Rooms at DHQ/THQ in DG Khan and Rajanpur districts.	
Strategy to empower adolescent girls in Pakistan (Program)	October , 2015	Education	USAID	• It will provide $70 million to new and contemporary programs to benefit 200,000 young girls from 10-19 years in whole country.	• Resources allocated to unregistered NGO which has no proper records.
				• Engage Civil Society and Communities	
				• Engage Civil Society and Communities	
				• Learning and teaching environment improvements.	
				• Small Grants And Ambassador's Fund Program	
				• Pathways To Success	
				• Pakistan Reading Project	
Women Empowerment In Pakistan (Program)	2015	Education Employment	USAID	• Merit And Needs-Based Scholarship Program	• Minor scale.
				• Sindh Basic Education Program	• No long term goals.
				• Sindh Reading Program	
				• Sindh Community Mobilization Program	
				• Youth Workforce Development Program	
				• Free legal advice to women at district level.	
				• Women Expo Every Year.	
Punjab Women Empowerment Initiatives 2016 (Program)	2016	Economic Social rights Civil Rights	Women Development Department Punjab	• Business Facilitation Centers for Women in every District.	• More awareness oriented rather than practical oriented.
				• Institutional mechanism for prevention of Violence against Women.	
				• Establishment of Working Women Hostels in all Districts of Punjab.	
				• Fatima Jinnah Awards.	

Name /Type	Date	Sector	Authority	Salient Features	Drawbacks/Failure
				• Specific washrooms for women in public places and offices	
Punjab Women Empowerment Initiatives 2017 (Program)	2017	Economic Social Civil Rights	Women Development Department Punjab	• Punjab Gender Policy • Basic facilities for screening breast cancer in rural areas. • Business training of women • Skill Development • Bus stop with designated waiting spaces for women	• No policies to address local women problems.
Ehsas Pakistan (Program)	27-03-2018	Health Education	Government of Pakistan	• Human Capital • Economic women Empowerment • Overcoming Health • Post-secondary education • Equality	• Slow progress. • No monitoring body.

Conclusions & Recommendations

It has been learned that many policies and programs have been initiated by both public and private sectors in Pakistan through the assistance provided by NGOs, public departments, and companies. However, the pace of their work to materialize the anticipated real benefits is not up to the mark to bring real change. Some of the major reasons behind this are mismanagement, corruption, inadequate resource allocation, lacking the mechanism for transparency and monitoring. In some instances, political interests and motives were not aligned with the objectives of women's empowerment. Many policies and programs were introduced just for the sake of vote banks, elections campaigns, and to showcase progress in their respective political regimes. Some policy recommendations based on the study findings are presented below:

- Pakistan is lacking a focus on the importance of women's influence in business and entrepreneurial sectors. Government must invest in awareness campaigns for the promotion of female entrepreneurship. It will help in eradicating economic gender disparities (Islam, 2018). This policy response must be coupled with better education of the girls and women. Business skills must be tutored and provided to the women so that they can be better entrepreneurs. Domestic working could also be a potential area that can be harnessed with effective policy formulation as it is more compatible with the prevailing sociocultural norms.

- Identification of root causes for gender disparities is very important to overcome the associated problems. Hence, the government must invest in the research to deeply explore the root causes, which will assist the policymakers to devise a response based on the evidence-based findings.

- Government resources should also be invested in qualitative aspects of women's development as well rather than on quantitative aspects alone to maximize the impacts of government interventions.

- Tax reliefs and rebates are to be provided as incentives for those sectors of the economy which significantly employ women.

- A paradigm of proactive and responsive planning needs to be promoted instead of reactive planning while envisaging policy response to address the issues of gender disparities and inequalities. An effective and efficient regulatory system is needed to deal with the violence against women such as the cases of honor killing, minor rape cases, acid attacks, etc. which needs to be supported by a fair implementation without prejudice. The research in this grey area can benefit an effective policy formulation with a comprehensive implementation mechanism.

- The process of policy formulation to deal the gender disparities should be participatory and context specific. This will assist in devising flexible, adaptive, and realistic policies.

- The digital media such as online courses, tutorials, etc. can effectively be used for skill enhancement and home office/working programs which are much compatible with the socio-cultural norms and prevalent COVID-19 pandemic related mobility restrictions.

- Programs and policies must be beyond the motives of politics and fame. Their sole purpose must be to address the problems and facilitate the vulnerable sections of society including women.

- We need a flexible, transparent, and strong governing framework to effectively manage and monitor the women's development initiatives so that maximum benefit can be passed on to women which comprise half of the population in Pakistan. By integrating the project design with the IT sector, the launched programs can be better monitored with enhanced transparency. In the Ehsas Pakistan Program, women can only receive money through biometric verification which minimizes the chances of fraud and helps to maintain records.

- Enforcement of programs and policies has been one of the grey areas in Pakistan. Many useful and good programs have been failed in the past due to that reason. Hence, a better enforcement mechanism needs to be developed and put in place for achieving better results.

Women are the most respected members within the families; however, this perception starts fading away when it comes to crossing the sociocultural and economic boundaries set forth by the society in the public sphere. Exclusive queues and priorities for women at various public places and shopping areas provide strong evidence of respect for women in Pakistani societies. However, perceptions based on lesser educational exposure and misunderstandings on the premises of socio-cultural norms and religious beliefs sometimes lead to having an oppressing environment against women. Such setting and mindset generate social, economic, and educational disabilities in women. If we want to change this mindset, we need to make people aware of the importance of women's education. The educated women will have more opportunities to grow by breaking the false barriers imposed on them by society. An effective women's participation is needed at all levels ranging from community to organizational levels for playing a productive role in economic, social, and cultural activities which in turn will significantly contribute to the processes of sustainable development and nation-building.

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