Socio-Cultural Constraints and Gender Equality: Challenges to Achieving SDG 5 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

[1]Hassina Bashir

Abstract

Gender equality remains an important principle of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 5, which seeks to eradicate discrimination and empower women in all fields of life. Nevertheless, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, deeply ingrained patriarchal traditions, socio-cultural norms, and structural inequalities continue to bind women's access to education, employment, and political participation. These restrictions not only weaken women's agency but also obstruct inclusive and sustainable development. The study aims to identify the significant socio-cultural factors that confine women's empowerment and equal engagement in social, economic, and political spheres, and also to evaluate the extent to which these restrictions impede progress toward achieving SDG 5 targets at the provincial level. The research adopts a qualitative approach by analyzing government policy documents, progress reports on SDGs, and gender-related legislation, supported by secondary data from national and international development organizations. A thematic analysis framework is used in order to analyze forms of exclusion, institutional reactions, and gaps between policy obligations and social dynamics. The importance of this study lies in its endeavor to contribute to the political and policy discourse on gender equality by identifying cultural and structural barriers to SDG implementation. It provides academic researchers, decision-makers, and development professionals with evidence-based insights to create culturally aware and locally tailored strategies meant to enhance women's empowerment and support equitable and sustainable development in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Key Words: Gender equality, UN Sustainable Development Goals, patriarchal traditions, socio-cultural norms, structural inequalities. women's empowerment, political involvement.

[1] Dr Hassina Bashir, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Women's University, Mardan. drhassina@wumardan.edu.pk

Introduction: Gender equality is a fundamental human right recognized universally and serves as a foundation for democratic governance, sustainable development, and social justice. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were adopted by the United Nation in 2015, signified a global commitment to eradicate gender-based discrimination and empower women and girls globally. Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) is primarily concerned on achieving gender equality and boosting women's full and effective participation in social, economic, and political spheres (United Nations, 2015). Gender equality is not just a social objective but a primary catalyst for economic growth, poverty reduction, and institutional improvement (UNDP, 2023).

Despite constitutional guarantees and policy initiatives, gender inequality is still deeply embedded in Pakistan. The country shows low performance on global gender equality indices, indicating inequalities in education, labor force engagement, access to healthcare and political representation (World Economic Forum, 2023). Within Pakistan, the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) presents distinct challenges because to its tribal social structure, conservative socio-cultural environment, and patriarchal traditions. These socio-cultural dynamics specifically form gender roles, often confining women's mobility, educational opportunities, economic involvement, and political participation (Gazdar & Zuberi, 2019).

In KP, patriarchal power structures that upholds men dominance in household and institutional decision-making are used by socio-cultural norms to define gender roles. Women are often confined to domestic roles, limiting their access to education, employment, and political involvement. These restrictions weaken women's empowerment and hinder progress toward achieving SDG 5.

This study analyzes socio-cultural restrictions affecting gender equality in KP and evaluates their impacts on achieving SDG 5. It analyzes cultural,structural, and institutional barriers constraining women's empowerment and suggests policy recommendations to boost gender equality and sustainable development.

Objectives of the Study: The study seeks to accomplish two major objectives.

I.   To examine socio-cultural obstacles that restrict women's involvement in education, economic activities, and political processes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

II.   To evaluate the impact of these socio-cultural restrictions on achieving SDG 5 and promoting gender equality at the provincial level.

Research Questions: What are the socio-cultural obstacles that restrict women's involvement in education, economic activities, and political processes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

1. What is the impact of socio-cultural restrictions on achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 and promoting gender equality at the provincial level?

Theoretical Framework: This study is based on the theoretical lenses of patriarchy theory, the Gender and Development (GAD) framework, the Capability Approach, and the feminist institutionalism, rendering an extensive perspective to investigate gender inequality in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Patriarchy theory defines gender inequality as an outcome of deeply ingrained social systems where men grab primary authority and control social,economic and political institutions (Walby, 1990). In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, male-dominated norms are institutionalized, consistently limiting women's mobility, decision-making authority, and access to crucial resources, thus sustaining a structural imbalance that limits women's opportunities for social, economic, and political involvement. Supporting this perspective, the GAD framework highlights the importance of social structures, power relations, and institutional practices in molding gendered outcomes (Kabeer, 2005). By considering the relationship between cultural norms and institutional arrangements, the GAD approach emphasizes how local practices,societal expectations, and policy frameworks jointly reinforce gender disparities and impede women's empowerment. Moreover, the Capability Approach, formulated by Amartya Sen (1999), places the discussion of gender inequality within the paradigm of human development, emphasizing the significance of individuals' freedom to attain well-being and participate actively in social life. Through this perspective, gender inequality is perceived not only as an issue of unequal resources or formal rights but rather a restriction on women's substantive freedoms, comprising access to healthcare, education, employment opportunities, and political participation. Incorporating these theoretical approaches allows for a multidimensional insight of the individual,cultural, and structural factors that form women's experiences in KP. Patriarchy theory renders insight into the historical and structural attributes of male dominance; the GAD framework explains gender

inequality within socio-cultural and institutional contexts; and the Capability Approach highlights the implications of these structures for women's actual freedoms and agency. Collectively, these approaches underline that gender inequality in KP is not an outcome of individual factors but arises from the interaction of well- established socio-cultural barriers, patriarchal norms, and institutionalized practices that systematically hinder women from exercising agency and accessing opportunities. These approaches further enable us to identify, examine, and assess the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional restrictions that hinder the achievement of gender equality in KP. This extensive theoretical foundation ascertains that the study not only identifies structural obstacles but also evaluates the ways that perpetuate gendered inequalities and retention, offering a strong basis for policy recommendations and context-specific measures to improve women's empowerment and participation across social, economic, and political domains in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Literature Review: In Pakistan, gender inequality persists as a multidimensional challenge, impacting education, economic involvement, political empowerment, and access to social and cultural resources. Numerous studies have identified these dimensions, offering insights into socio-cultural,structural, and institutional factors that restrain women's empowerment.

Bashir, Khan, and Ahmed (2021) evaluate data from the Pakistan Demographic and Health Surveys (PDHS 2012–13 and 2017–18) to investigate the status of women's empowerment in Pakistan. They observed persistent disparities in the acquisition of education, participation in the labor force, and decision-making autonomy, especially in rural and lower socio-economic groups. Despite expanded formal rights through legal reforms, patriarchal norms continue to confine women's agency. Though this study provides valuable insights into the status of women's empowerment in Pakistan, their investigation primarily relies on national-level survey data, but this study does not reveal how empowerment outcomes may vary across regions, rural-urban areas, or conservative provinces like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.This limitation highlights a critical research gap, like the required subnational, context-specific studies that analyze how local socio-cultural norms, economic situations, and institutional factors determine women's empowerment across Pakistan. The present study tries to address this gap by exploring these regional and contextual variations, rendering empirical insights that

surpass national-level analyses and illustrating the intricate factors shaping women's empowerment in various provincial and rural-urban settings.

Aslam and Kingdon (2012) explored the key factors shaping girls' education and the long-term outcomes of gendered educational inequalities. Their findings reveal that parental behaviour, economic restraints, and community infrastructure play a crucial role in molding girls' school enrollment and progression. Education serves not merely as a product but also as a facilitator of civic engagement, economic participation, and decision-making autonomy. Nevertheless, despite higher levels of educational attainment, cultural expectations surrounding domestic roles and constricted employment opportunities often impede the practical utility of education for women. Nevertheless, the study reveals a critical gap in inter-sectional investigation, as it does not fully analyse how social categories like ethnicity,class, and religion interact with gender to mold educational outcomes. The present study addresses this gap by adopting an inter-sectional perspective to investigate how multiple social factors collectively shape women's access to and involvement in education across diverse regional and sociocultural contexts.

Ashfaq, Awan, and Shah (2023) investigate long-term socioeconomic factors of female labor force involvement (FLFP) in Pakistan from 1991–2021. Their research illustrates that higher education and national economic growth enhance FLFP, while high fertility rates hinder participation. Nevertheless, women's participation remains low in formal employment because of the structural barriers, like limited childcare support, gender-based division of labor, and societal restrictions on female mobility. The study evaluates the importance of macro-level determinants yet fails to examine micro-level barriers including cultural and qualitative factors that affect women's labor involvement. Mixed-method approaches are important to investigate these socio-cultural dynamics.

Shah and Karim (2020) examined the role of socio-cultural norms in supporting gender inequality. Their qualitative study states that male-dominated values, early marriage, and restrains on mobility and decision-making significantly impede women's education, employment, and political representation. Cultural expectations stress women's domestic and reproductive roles, confining their broader involvement. The study states the need for normative interventions coupled with structural reforms. Nevertheless, it

did not comprehensively assess the intensity and regional variance of socio-cultural norms, which limits assessment of their influence on women's empowerment. This research gap will be dealt with in the present study by empirically analyzing regional deviation in socio-cultural norms and assessing their impact on the outcomes of women's empowerment.

Rehman and Bibi (2020) posit that despite reserved seats in national and provincial assemblies, women's political impact remains limited due to male-dominated party structures, restricted networks, and socio-cultural restraint, resulting in largely symbolic representation. They state that meaningful empowerment requires structural party reforms and shifts in societal attitudes toward women leaders. Nevertheless, their study overlooks political socialization processes, especially the role of education, civic training, and youth involvement. The present study addresses this gap by examining the ways socialization mechanisms impart to women's sustained political participation and leadership development.

Methodology: This study applies a qualitative research approach and uses secondary data analysis to analyse gender inequality in Pakistan, with specific emphasis on women's access to education, political representation, economic participation and institutional effectiveness. Data is systematically gathered from several credible sources, including the Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) SDG progress reports, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, the World Bank Gender Data Portal, reports published by UN Women and UNDP, coupled with relevant peer-reviewed academic journal articles.

The selection of documents and reports relies on specific criteria to ensure relevance and reliability. Sources were included if they provide updated and credible data on gender-related indicators in Pakistan, likewise the documents are prepared by recognized national or international institutions, and they offer empirical evidence or policy analysis connected to women's education, economic engagement, political representation, or institutional outcomes to gender inequality. Priority was given to publications published during the last decade for the purpose to reflect contemporary developments and policy initiatives.

For analytical purpose, the study employs thematic and comparative analytical approaches to find out patterns, trends, and disparities across sectors, regions, and

demographic groups. Thematic analysis is based on a in-depth analysis of the data and textual information, which is then organized into initial codes. These codes are grouped into broader themes that emphasize the significant barriers and enabling elements affecting women's empowerment, including socio-cultural norms, institutional capacity, and gaps in policy implementation. Subsequently, a comparative analysis is conducted to investigate differences in gender outcomes across regions and institutional settings.

This methodological framework offers a thorough understanding of the socio-cultural, structural, and policy-related elements that impart gender inequality in Pakistan. Based on evidence from multiple credible sources, the study renders contextually grounded insights that can usher policy development and enhance practical interventions aimed to advance gender equality.

Data Analysis: Socio-cultural barriers remain a major constraint on women's participation in education, economic activities, and politics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, rooted in patriarchal norms and structural inequalities that limit their opportunities and social mobility (Walby, 1990).

Education is a fundamental measure of women's empowerment; however, gender disparities in literacy and school enrollment remain severe in KP. The female literacy rate stands at 36 percent, compared to 72 percent for males and 49 percent nationally, with Punjab (61%) and Sindh (50%) performing comparatively better (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Girls' school enrollment is also significantly lower (34%) than boys (66%) (UNESCO, 2021). These disparities stem from established patriarchal norms, early marriage, mobility restrictions, and inadequate educational infrastructure, particularly in rural areas (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2017; UNESCO, 2021).

These disparities are also visible in economic participation. In KP, women's involvement in economic activities is confined by socio-cultural expectations and structural restrictions. Female labor force participation is extremely low in the province, ranging from approximately 11.3 percent to 13.2 percent, compared to over 75 percent for men (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2017). Women's employment is largely confined to unpaid and informal sectors, particularly agriculture, where around 73

percent of women work without adequate compensation or formal acknowledgment (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2017). Cultural norms that assign women primary responsibility for domestic work limit their involvement in formal employment, and social norms in KP restrict women from working in mixed-gender environments, supporting only about 3 percent female employment in industries (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2017). Gender discrimination, restricted access to vocational training, and a lack of economic resources further impede women's economic empowerment and career progression (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2017).

Socio-cultural norms and lack of awareness also limit women's political involvement in KP, further restricting their access to leadership opportunities. In Pakistan and especially in KP, women have limited representation in political decision-making processes. Despite reserved seats in national and provincial assemblies, women constitute a small proportion of elected representatives (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2023). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2021) reports that women's engagement in governance and policy-making roles remains restricted due to socio-cultural barriers, limited political empowerment, and unequal access to leadership opportunities (UNDP, 2021). In many rural areas of KP, women often lack awareness of their legal and political rights, and only about 4 percent actively participate in household decision-making processes, reflecting the depth of gender inequality (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Commission on the Status of Women (KPCSW), 2023; UNDP, 2021). Socio-cultural norms and deficient political support systems further discourage women from engaging in political activities and contesting elections.

Gender equality and the empowerment of females are crucial for sustainable development, inclusive economic growth, and social advancement. SDG 5 targets the elimination of discrimination and violence against women and girls, ensuring equal opportunities in education, economic participation, political involvement, and access to resources and justice (United Nations, 2015; Planning Commission of Pakistan, 2021). Nevertheless, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), deeply ingrained socio-cultural impediments continue to obstruct progress across these domains (Bibi et al., 2024). These obstacles sustain cycles of inequality: females are often expected to assume domestic responsibilities at a young age amid inadequate provision of safe and accessible schools in many districts (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2017).

Cultural expectations confine women to unpaid household and agricultural labor, reduce their participation in formal employment, and curtail their involvement in economic decision-making. Although employment quotas and incentive policies exist, women still face obstacles like limited mobility, lack of market-oriented skills, and familial pressure favoring male employment, contributing to one of the lowest female labor force participation rates in the region (Chitral Times, 2024). Women's representation in politics remains limited.Reserved seats provide opportunities for participation. However, socio-cultural norms continue to limit women's effective role. Weak policy implementation also curtail their influence in political decision-making. Traditional male dominance in political parties, disparities in campaign financing, and opposition to female leadership at local levels further intensify this gap between policy formulation and implementation (Dur & Nawab, 2025).

Access to legal rights and protection against violence remains limited. Discriminatory interpretations of customary law, honor-based restrictions, and social stigma regarding reporting abuse deter women from seeking justice, even in the presence of institutional mechanisms, most notably gender desks in police stations and Women's Crisis Centers (NIM Government Report, 2025). Collectively, these socio-cultural and structural barriers significantly impede progress toward SDG 5 in KP, restricting women's social, educational, economic, and political opportunities.

The Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) has demonstrated a growing commitment to achieving SDG 5 (Gender Equality and Empowerment of All Women and Girls) through institutional reforms, policy frameworks, strategic programmes, and collaborative partnerships. These initiatives aim to reduce gender inequality, improve access to education and economic opportunities, enhance women's access to justice, and strengthen their social and political participation (Planning Commission of Pakistan, 2021).

One of the key institutional mechanisms in the province is the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Commission on the Status of Women (KPCSW), which implements targeted programmes and monitors progress to advance women's rights and empowerment. Supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Gender Equity Program (GEP) and the Aurat Foundation, KPCSW conducts research, advocacy, and community consultations to address structural barriers to women's

progress. The programme aims to nurture behavioral change and strengthen women's access to resources, information, and institutions, essential elements of a comprehensive gender equality strategy aligned with SDG 5 objectives (KPCSW, 2023).

Similarly, the KP Police introduced its first Gender Strategy, Gender-Responsive Policing Policy, and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to directly address gender-based violence (GBV) and improve women's access to justice. Developed under the EU-funded Deliver Justice Programme implemented with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and partners, these reforms aim to make police stations more accessible and protective for women as both community members and officers. The policy emphasizes gender equality, improves institutional capabilities within the police, and equips officers to manage cases involving gender-based crimes, contributing directly to SDG 5's objectives of eliminating violence against women and ensuring access to justice (UNDP, 2021; Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2017).

Strengthening these police reforms, KP has also initiated gender-responsive desks in various police stations, along with comprehensive training for officers on managing cases involving gender-based crimes. These trainings, conducted with UNDP support, promote awareness among police personnel regarding the needs of women and vulnerable populations, leading to improved service delivery in justice and security sectors (UNDP, 2021).

Beyond security and justice reforms, the provincial government has taken measures to strengthen legal protection and the advocacy framework. The formation of four key committees by KPCSW, like those focused on child marriage legislation and protecting women's property and inheritance rights, represents a decisive effort to reinforce legal frameworks safeguarding women's civil and economic rights. These committees are tasked with developing laws and awareness strategies that address harmful practices, further aligning provincial policy with SDG 5 targets (KPCSW, 2023; Planning Commission of Pakistan, 2021).

KP has strengthened evidence-based governance through the Gender Parity Report 2024, a data-driven framework evaluating gender disparities in socio-economic participation, services, and political representation. It guides policymakers in

identifying disparities and allocating resources effectively. Complementary initiatives include girls' vouchers and scholarships, stipends to reduce dropouts, women's police desks, and gender-based violence courts to improve access to justice (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2024; UNESCO, 2021).

Furthermore, the provincial government has prioritized gender-responsive economic inclusion through social protection strategies. The Social Protection Strategy 2025–2030 integrates welfare programs to support vulnerable groups including women, to reduce poverty, and promote broader socioeconomic empowerment (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2017).

Despite challenges in culture, implementation, and resources, KP's multi-sectoral approach offers a comprehensive framework for SDG 5, with continued community engagement and accountability is crucial for real impact (United Nations, 2015; UNDP, 2021).

Assessment of KP Government Measures and SDG 5 Achievement: Though the KP government has started several initiatives, notably gender-responsive policing, scholarships for girls, social protection strategies, gender-sensitive legislation,Women's Police Desks, and evidence-based monitoring through the Gender Parity Report (Government of KP, 2017; KPCSW, 2023; UNDP, 2021). These strategies represent crucial steps toward achieving SDG 5, especially in the following areas like

- **Access to Education:** Girls' scholarships and stipend programs in KP, have boosted enrollment and attendance, and increasing participation by up to 14 percent in some districts (World Food Programme, 2021). While earlier schemes supported around 600,000 girls and minimized absenteeism. Recent funding gaps have reduced their impact showing the need for consistent support (Asian News, 2023).

- **Access to Justice and Protection:** Recent reforms in KP, including women's police desks, gender-responsive police training, and strengthened Gender- Based Violence courts, have strengthened reporting mechanisms and institutional response to violence. Under the EU-funded Deliver Justice Programme, over 550 officers, including 90 women, received training, while four hundred and eighty

courts now handle GBV cases, with 48,395 new cases filed and 30,631 resolved in 2023 (UNDP, 2024; UN Women Data Hub, 2023). Despite ongoing cultural hurdles and low conviction rates, these initiatives mark significant progress compared to past practices.

- **Legal Reforms and Advocacy:** The formation of specialized committees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) has strengthened the legal framework for women's rights, specifically related to child marriage, property and inheritance protections. In the latter part of 2025, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Commission on the Status of Women (KPCSW) established four committees, including the Child Marriage Legislation Committee and the Women's Property and Inheritance Rights Committees in order to improve administrative systems, laws, and awareness campaigns for women's entitlements (KPCSW press releases, 2025). These measures signify a substantial change from the past, when advocacy and oversight were limited and over ninety percent of women were deprived of inheritance, leaving numerous complaints unaddressed due to poor enforcement (AAJ TV, 2023). The committees seek to promote legislative reforms and ease obstacles to women's legal rights.

- **Socioeconomic Inclusion:** Likewise, social protection strategies in KP have intended to reduce economic insecurity among marginalized women through welfare programs, cash transfers, and income support initiatives. Programs like the Ehsaas Kafalat Program and provincial women-focused livelihood schemes allocate funds directly to low-income households, specifically assisting women bearing responsibility for households or dependents. Data shows that these initiatives have successfully engaged over 300,000 women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by 2024, ensuring access to basic necessities, supporting small-scale entrepreneurial activities,and gradually improving households' economic security (Government of KP, 2024; World Bank, 2020). Relative to the previous period; limited assistance placed women in a precarious position. These programs, though, increased decision-making and income, yet challenges remain (UNDP, 2021).

Despite efforts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, significant gaps persist, exhibiting that SDG 5 is not yet achieved. Patriarchal norms, early marriages, and mobility restrictions limit girls' education, women's labor participation, and political involvement. Programs like scholarships, women's police desks, and GBV courts are inconsistently applied,

especially in rural areas, while women's labor force participation remains low (11–13%) and largely informal, and reserved political seats have marginal impact (Government of KP, 2017). Limited awareness, weak monitoring, and scarce local data further hinder progress (UNDP, 2021; World Bank, 2020).

To advance SDG 5 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a comprehensive approach is needed, integrating education, economic empowerment, political participation, legal reforms, and community engagement. The following practical recommendations can significantly support its achievement.

First, ensuring wider access to quality education for girls is crucial. This demands creating schools that are safe and protective,accessible, and gender-responsive especially in rural areas and ensuring the presence of female teachers in distant schools to increase enrollment. Performance-based scholarships or conditional cash transfers should be implemented to improve girls' retention in secondary education, while community awareness campaigns can show the sustained social and economic benefits of girls' education. Similar initiatives in Bangladesh and Rwanda, using conditional cash transfers with community mobilization to boost female enrollment, can serve as practical models (World Bank, 2020).

Second, **measures to enforce laws addressing gender-based violence (GBV) must be strengthened to safeguard women's rights:** All police stations must keep fully operational Women's Desks with trained personnel, backed by mobile legal aid units in rural districts for accelerated legal recourse. Regular audits of GBV cases handling are essential to maintain accountability.

Third, targeted interventions are important to promote **women's economic empowerment and labor participation:** Women-focused vocational programs in local labor markets and innovative sectors like finance, technology, and entrepreneurship, should be implemented. Micro-credit and business development support for women-led enterprises, coordinated with the enforcement of anti-discrimination policies and incentives for private-sector hiring of women, can enhance participation. Evidence from Rwanda's gender-focused entrepreneurship programs exhibits that combining skills training with credit access effectively promotes women's economic participation.

Fourth, **advancing political participation and leadership opportunities** is important: Workshops, mentorship networks, and monitoring of reserved seats can increase women's participation and influence in local and provincial decision-making. Countries like Rwanda and Norway have effectively employed mentorship programs and legally enforceable quotas to guarantee women's involvement in politics.

Fifth, **cultural awareness and community engagement programs** are vital in challenging patriarchal structures. Community dialogues, media campaigns, and involving religious and tribal leaders can improve gender equality and recognize women's contributions in leadership and business.The UNICEF Nepal "Change for Girls" program provides evidence that culturally responsive campaigns can alter public perceptions and foster women's empowerment.

Sixth, **strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems** is important for effective policy implementation. At local and district levels, the systematic collection of gender-based data, integrated with real-time SDG 5 dashboards, is crucial for informed policy decisions. Independent assessments play a key role in tracking progress and guiding necessary strategy modifications.

Seventh, **mainstreaming gender considerations in social protection programs** can further lessen women's economic risks. Social welfare programs comprises of integrating financial literacy and entrepreneurship capacity-building initiatives must target widows, women-headed households, and marginalized women. Inclusion of women from remote and marginalized communities in program planning and evaluation is crucial to ascertain equitable access.

Finally, **effective collaboration with civil society and international partners** is essential: UN agencies, NGOs, and academic institutions can increase outreach, training, and monitoring, while multi-sector task forces coordinate programs spanning education, economic, political and legal empowerment. International funding and expertise can increase the accessibility of evidence-based gender equality programs, exemplified by UN Women's projects in Kenya and Pakistan, which integrate grassroots participation with expert support to deliver evidence-based outcomes.

Conclusion: In conclusion, progress has been visible in education, social programs, and legal protections. Yet, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa still **e**xperiences persistent obstacles to gender equality. Socio-cultural norms curb women's roles. Economic marginalization limits opportunities. Women's political participation remains low. Programs are implemented inconsistently. Awareness and monitoring gaps persist, especially in rural areas. To fully realize gender equality, it is vital to expand access to quality education, challenge patriarchal norms through community engagement, promote economic empowerment, increase political participation, reinforce legal implementation, improve monitoring systems, incorporate gender perspectives into social protection, and cooperate with civil society and international partners to improve the impact and reach of programs. Guided by successful examples from global contexts like Nepal, Bangladesh, Rwanda, and Norway, KP can adopt evidence-based, contextually tailored strategies that enhance women's access to education, justice, and economic opportunities, fostering shifts in social norms and ensuring their equitable participation in every sphere of society. The consistent and effective implementation of these measures can collectively address existing gaps and expedite the province's progress toward comprehensive SDG 5 attainment.

References

AAJ TV. (2023). *Over 90 percent of women deprived of inheritance rights in KP, report reveals*. Retrieved on 3rd September 2025 from https://www.aaj.tv

Asian News. (2023). *Funding gaps affect girls' stipend programme in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa*. Retrieved on 3rd September 2025 fromhttps://www.asiannews.pk

Aslam, M., & Kingdon, G. G. (2012). Parental education and child health— Understanding the pathways of impact in Pakistan. *World Development, 40*(10), 2014–2032. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2012.05.007

Ashfaq, M., Awan, A. G., & Shah, S. (2023). Determinants of female labor force participation in Pakistan: A time-series analysis (1991–2021). *Journal of Economic Studies, 50*(2), 245–262.

Bashir, H., Khan, A., & Ahmed, Z. (2021). Women's empowerment in Pakistan: An analysis of Pakistan Demographic and Health Surveys 2012–13 and 2017–18. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences, 41*(3), 789–804.

Bibi, S., Ahmad, R., & Ullah, F. (2024). Socio-cultural barriers and gender inequality in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. *Journal of Gender Studies, 33*(2), 210–228.
Chitral Times. (2024). *Female labor force participation remains lowest in KP*. Retrieved on 3rd September 2025 from https://www.chitraltimes.com

Dur, A., & Nawab, B. (2025). Political representation and gender quotas in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: Policy and practice gaps. *Pakistan Political Science Review, 12*(1), 55–74.

Election Commission of Pakistan. (2023). *Statistical report on general elections and representation*.Retrieved on 5th September 2025 from https://www.ecp.gov.pk

Gazdar, H., & Zuberi, D. (2019). Gender inequality and social structures in Pakistan. *Collective for Social Science Research Working Paper*.

Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. (2017). *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa sustainable development goals framework and progress report*. Planning & Development Department.

Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. (2024). *Gender parity report 2024*. Planning & Development Department.

Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third Millennium Development Goal. *Gender & Development, 13*(1), 13–24. Retrieved on 5th September 2025 from https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070512331332273

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Commission on the Status of Women. (2023). *Annual report on women's status and legal protection mechanisms*. Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Commission on the Status of Women. (2025). *Press releases on child marriage and women's inheritance rights committees*. Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

National Institute of Management (NIM). (2025). *Government report on women's crisis centers and gender desks in KP*. Government of Pakistan.

Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. (2021). *Pakistan social and living standards measurement survey 2020–21*. Government of Pakistan.

Planning Commission of Pakistan. (2021). *Pakistan voluntary national review on SDGs*. Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives.

Rehman, S., & Bibi, A. (2020). Women's political participation and representation in Pakistan: Barriers and prospects. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies, 26*(4), 512–529. Retrieved on 1st September 2025 from https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2020.1835521

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.

Shah, N., & Karim, S. (2020). Socio-cultural norms and gender inequality in Pakistan: A qualitative analysis. *Gender, Technology and Development, 24*(3), 345–362. retrieved on 3rd September 2025 from https://doi.org/10.1080/09718524.2020.1831456

UNDP. (2021). *Women's political participation and gender equality in Pakistan*. United Nations Development Programme.

UNDP. (2023). *Gender equality strategy 2022–2025*. United Nations Development Programme.

UNDP. (2024). *Deliver Justice Programme: Gender-responsive policing progress report*. United Nations Development Programme.

UNESCO. (2021). *Education statistics for Pakistan: Gender disparities report*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

UN Women Data Hub. (2023). *Gender-based violence courts and case statistics in Pakistan*.retrieved on 4th September 2025 from https://data.unwomen.org

United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. Retrieved on 4th September 2025 from https://sdgs.un.org

Walby, S. (1990). *Theorizing patriarchy*. Basil Blackwell.

World Bank. (2020). *Women, business and the law 2020*. World Bank Group.

World Bank. (2020). *Pakistan social protection report: Improving economic resilience for women*. Washington, DC: World Bank. Retrieved on 3rd October 2025 from https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/780211592293834505/pakistan-social-protection-report

World Economic Forum. (2023). *Global gender gap report 2023*. World Economic Forum.

World Food Programme. (2021). *Impact evaluation of school stipend programmes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa*. United Nations World Food Programme.