



# NATIONAL REPORT ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN PAKISTAN, 2023 *A SUMMARY*



## **NATIONAL REPORT ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN PAKISTAN, 2023 - A SUMMARY**

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## Introduction

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The founding father of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was an indefatigable campaigner for women's rights who advocated for full participation of women in public life and in nation-building. In keeping with his vision, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan has pledged to ensure the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women as guaranteed in the Constitution of the country. Pakistan was amongst the first group of countries in the United Nations to sign the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 and since then has become signatory to seven international human rights treaties out of nine. The Vision 2025 of Pakistan reaffirms the commitment of the Government to promote an enabling environment for women so that they may realize their full potential and be active contributors to the development of the country.

The Government of Pakistan has taken significant measures in recent years to improve gender equality as pledged in the Constitution and the country's international commitments. Most notably, a sound legislative and policy framework has been established, including the enactment of many pro-women laws, policy reforms to enhance women's empowerment and participation as well as a National Gender

Policy Framework (2022). Many good practices are being implemented, and success stories, small and big, can be found across the country. This includes the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), launched in 2008, which is the largest single social safety net programme in the country specifically targeting women, with a total of 8.7 million women beneficiaries to date. Further, the establishment of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) courts and women police stations, as well as progressive court judgments on women's issues such as sexual assault, domestic violence and child marriage, demonstrate the commitment of the Government to tackle gender-based violence, advance gender equality and empower women.

However, there are a host of structural and socio-cultural barriers that continue to curtail women and girls' mobility. A highly patriarchal society, regressive social norms and gender stereotypes give rise to discrimination and violence against women and girls. Further, Pakistan fares poorly on global indices and reports, ranking at 145 out of 146 countries on the Global Gender Gap Report 2022, above only Afghanistan. It dropped seven places in the Human Development Index (HDI) in the 2021-2022 period, placed at 161 out of 192 countries, and ranked 129 out of 140 on the Rule of Law Index.

In seeking to uphold its international and national commitments on gender equality and women's human rights, limited availability and analysis of comprehensive gender disaggregated data remain key gaps, that hinder priority setting and decision-making as well as quality reporting on its progress on gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE). To address the data gap, the National Gender Data Portal (NGDP) was established in 2021 by the National Commission on the Status of Women in collaboration with UN Women Pakistan. The NGDP is the first effort to consolidate gender data at

a national level using digital tools, that triangulates data from various official sources. It will be instrumental for monitoring and reporting on progress for Pakistan's international commitments on gender equality, and, most importantly, formulating evidence-based policies and programmes to advance the GEWE agenda in the country.

This summary presents the consolidated data from the first National Report on the Status of Women that provides a snapshot of the data available in NGDP.

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## Progress Towards International Commitments

We must shape a world free from exploitation and maltreatment of women. A world in which women have opportunities to rise to the highest level in politics, business, diplomacy, and other spheres of life. Where there are no battered women. Where honor and dignity are protected in war and conflict. Where we have economic freedom and independence. Where we are equal partners in peace and development.

*Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, at the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995*

Pakistan has also played a pivotal role in development of international human rights mechanisms and has been actively participating in implementing and reporting on them. Since its independence in 1947, Pakistani delegations have actively advocated for an emphasis on freedom, equality and choice at many platforms, including the UDHR, and has been represented by several strong and capable women in these. One such prominent woman was Begum Shaista Ikramullah, the first female representative of the first Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, who also served as Pakistan's Ambassador to Morocco, and was a vocal delegate at various Forums of the United Nations, including the General Assembly's Third Committee on social, humanitarian and cultural matters, that drafted the UDHR through a series of meetings in 1948, where she advocated for the inclusion of Article 16 on equal rights in marriage. She was featured among women who shaped the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at an exhibition at the UN to mark its 70th anniversary and her contributions were acknowledged by Secretary General, António Guterres in his remarks at the opening ceremony.

Currently, Pakistan is party to seven international human rights treaties of which four comprehensively cover gender equality, namely UDHR, CEDAW, CRC and SDGs. These international instruments place responsibility on member states to safeguard the rights of women and offer guiding principles for sustainable development.

**Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR):** Pakistan presented its first report to the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2008, and the latest 4th Cycle UPR to the Human Rights Council on 30 January 2023. The High Commissioner for Human Rights appreciated the establishment of a national institutional structure to promote the rights' agenda. To continue in its efforts, Pakistan was encouraged to set up a comprehensive system of reporting and follow up on human rights treaty obligations. With regard to women's empowerment, it was recommended to scale up efforts and implement legislations to protect women from all forms of violence.

**Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA):** Pakistan lent strong support to the development the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action under the leadership of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto at the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) held in Beijing in 1995. The country signed the Beijing Declaration in the same year, committing to the achievement of the 12 areas delineated in the BPfA focused on these areas in its National Plan of Action of 1998, the first comprehensive agenda for GEWE in Pakistan. Pakistan undertook a review in 2019 and the following areas were noted for progress: 1) Inclusive development, shared prosperity and decent work; 2) Poverty eradication, social protection and services; 3) Freedom from violence, stigma, and stereotypes; 4) Participation, accountability, and gender-responsive institutions; 5) Peaceful and inclusive societies.

**Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW):** Pakistan ratified CEDAW on 12 April 1996, 17 years after it was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979. The country submitted its combined initial, second and third periodic report in 2005 that reported progress on gender equality, women's equal access and engagement in political and public life, including the right to vote and to contest elections, as well as opportunities for education, health and employment among others. The latest CEDAW report submitted by Pakistan in 2018 was the fifth periodic report, which presented progress on policy reforms undertaken in compliance with the treaty obligations. The CEDAW Committee gave its concluding observations on the report in March 2020, requesting the Government of Pakistan to submit a follow-up report on the selected concluding observations within two years: Adopt legislation to criminalize all forms of GBV against women without exemptions; Adopt a national plan of action to combat all forms of GBV against women, with a particular focus on domestic violence; Ensure the effective enforcement of the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act and of the Prevention of Smuggling of Migrants Act; and Enact legislation and take all necessary measures to increase school enrolment among girls and reduce their dropout rate.

**Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality):** Pakistan has demonstrated commendable commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It was among the first countries to endorse it in 2015, and the Parliament unanimously approved the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the national development agenda in 2016. The government prepared a National SDGs Framework in 2018 under the aegis of the Ministry of Planning, and also established a Parliamentary SDGs Secretariat based at the National Assembly. This process of legislation was the first and crucial step in

mainstreaming and localizing the 17 interconnected SDGs. However, Pakistan still lags behind in the implementation of the targets and is ranked at 125 out of 163 countries according to the Sustainable Development Data portal.

Nonetheless, significant progress has been achieved overall on the international commitments of the country. On the legislative front, the past two decades witnessed promulgation of numerous laws to improve the legal regime to protect rights of the marginalized including women, children and minorities. At the executive level, the Government has also established special institutions to implement and monitor the treaty laws both at federal and sub national levels. These organizations include both statutory bodies like National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) and executive bodies like Treaty Implementation Cells. Pakistan also has GSP+ (Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus) status under which the country is assessed for implementation of 32 UN Conventions to continue to avail the GSP + facility. While indicators suggest a positive course of Pakistan's efforts in protecting and promoting human rights, a lot more needs to be done, especially to ensure effective implementation of the legislative and policy frameworks as well as the smooth functioning of the institutional structures.

## 1. Literacy and Education

Education is the key to our nation's future. We must invest in our schools, colleges, and universities to give our youth the knowledge and skills they need to succeed.

*Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Founder of Pakistan*

The right to education for all citizens is underscored in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2017 aims to enhance educational outcomes and rectify key issues such as low public expenditure on education, poor levels of female enrollment and literacy, and low student-to-teacher ratio. Yet, the country has been facing challenges in addressing these issues and achieving universal primary education. Pakistan scores 0.825 in educational attainment in the Global Gender Gap Index 2022, ranking 135 out of 146 countries.

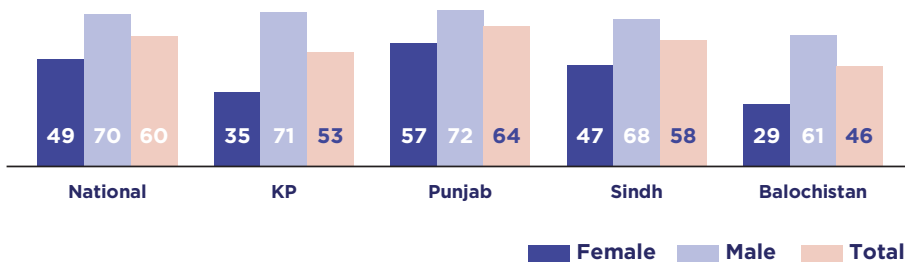
An estimated 22.8 million children (aged 5-16 years) in Pakistan are out-of-school children (OOSC) and the gender gap is alarming. A staggering 53% of females (15-64 years) reported that they never attended school compared to 33% of males in the same age range. The Net Enrollment Rate (NER) at primary, middle and secondary levels across regions shows that at all levels girls are dropping out of education consistently more than boys - NER in rural areas at primary level is 56% for girls and 67% for boys, whereas at the secondary level it is only 19% for girls and 25% for boys. The Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) rate for young women (15-24 years) is a massive 75%.

There is a positive trend, however, especially among the young cohort (15-29 years) and children (aged 5-15 years). While 53% of females aged 15-64 years never attended school, the same figure for the younger generation of girls 5-15 years old has come down to 31%. A positive trend is also shown in the literacy rate (age 10+) over the last two decades, though gender disparities persist in this indicator as well. With an overall increase in the



literacy rate from 45% in 2001-02 to 60% in 2019-20, female literacy improved significantly, but only to 49% from 32%, in comparison with the male literacy rate of 70%.

Figure 1.1: Literacy Rate across Provinces (Ages 10 and above)



Source: estimated from PSLM 2019/20

With regard to higher secondary education, only 14% of adult women and 18% of adult men (aged 18 years and above) have higher secondary (Grade 12) and above education in Pakistan. However, an astounding gender gap exists in the transition to the labor market: among adult females who had completed Grade 12 or above, only 30% were part of the labor force as compared to 83% of their male counterparts. Further, the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector is unable to cater to the huge need of skills training, especially for women. As per the National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTTC), only 0.5 million students were enrolled in TVET institutes in 2021 with a gender distribution of 33% female and 67% male students.

Key identified challenges include insufficient resource allocations by the federal and provincial governments for this sector. The budget allocations for the overall education sector range between 13.3% to 17.5% of the total provincial budgets for the fiscal year 2022-23. Accessibility is another issue, particularly in rural and remote areas. Poverty and low economic status along with socio-cultural barriers play a critical role in terms of gender differences with regard to educational attainment, as shown in the lower participation and higher dropout rate of girls. These issues continue to hinder the development of human capital in the country, which is essential for development and progress. While the literacy rate of adults and young females, especially the net enrolment rates of girls, has improved substantially, a critical area that needs to be prioritized is decreasing the alarming number of out of school children, especially girls, and equipping the education system with infrastructure and human capital, in the form of trained teachers, in order to provide a safe and conducive learning environment for quality education to all.

## 2. Women in the Labour Force and Vulnerable Employment

Women need opportunity and encouragement. If a girl can climb mountains, she can do anything positive within her field of work.

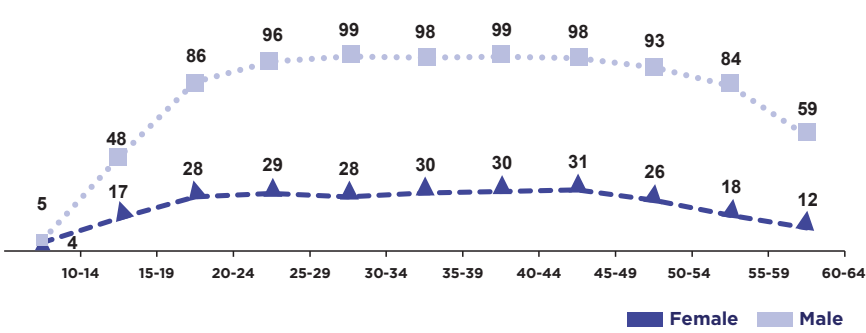
*Samina Baig, Mountaineer*

In Pakistan, there has been a steady, albeit slow increase in women's labor force participation. The increase has occurred more in the informal sector, while labor force

participation in the formal sector has remained more or less stagnant over the past decade. Weak gender-related indicators continue to be a cause for concern as the potential of almost half of the population remains unrealized, which also makes the country's performance lag behind others in the region.

**Women in the Labour Force:** The overall labor force participation rate (LFPR) of women in Pakistan at 21% stands well below the global percentage at 39%. At the national level, the refined LFPR of women (aged 15-64 years) is very low at 26% compared to 84% for men. The country has seen improvement in the LFPR of women in the past twenty years, a 10 percentage point increase, however, the pace of progress is stagnating, and in economic participation and opportunity, Pakistan is ranked 145 out of 146 countries by the Gender Gap Index 2022.

Figure 2.1: Age-Specific LFP Rate of Workers by Sex



Source: Estimated from LFS 2020/21

There are also provincial variations in the LFPR, and the situation differs considerably across the rural-urban divide. The highest participation of women was recorded in Punjab (31%) and the lowest in Balochistan (14%). In rural areas, a higher proportion of women are economically active (34%) compared to urban areas (12%). Similar results were noted for young workers with large gender deviations among young female and male workers. Further, the participation rate of children (aged 10-14 years) highlights the concern that a certain percentage of both girls and boys are working before the age of 15 years.

The agriculture sphere continues to be the main sector for women's employment. Of the women in labor force, 67% of women are employed in agriculture (as compared to 27% men), 16% in the services sector, and 14% in the manufacturing sector. Of all the females working as professionals, 88% were education professionals (e.g., school-teachers), 7% were health professionals and 2.5% were in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Of all women working as skilled agricultural workers, 95% were working as market-oriented skilled agricultural workers. In craft and related trades, 91% of women were employed as food processing, wood working, and garment related trades workers.

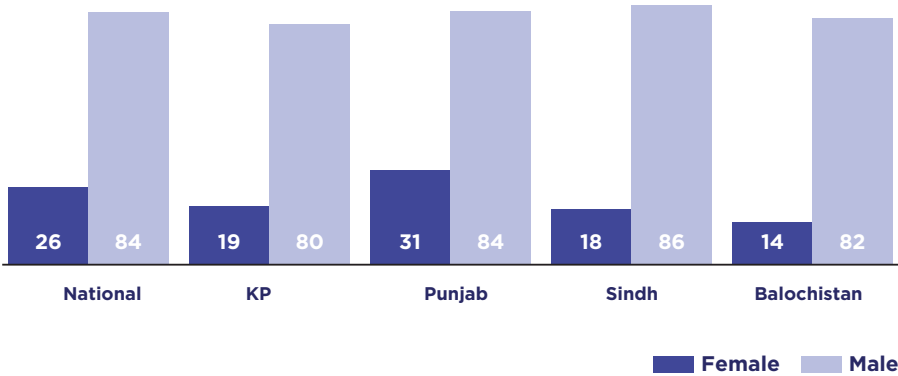
Women are also taking the highest burden of unpaid work. The distribution of employed workers by employment status reveals that more than half (55%) of employed

women were working as unpaid workers compared to 10% of employed men. Overall, 21% of workers are unpaid/ contributing family/ non-family workers and 19% of female and 40% of male workers were self-employed.

The unemployment rate national average was 6.3% in 2021. Across provinces, the female unemployment rate was highest in KP province (16%). The rate continues to be higher for women, 9.1% for females and 5.5% for males. Of the 48% of young women who were economically active, only 54% were employed while in the case of young men (84%), 80% were employed.

A significant gender wage gap also remains a persistent challenge in Pakistan. Women working as paid employees are earning a monthly median wage of PKR 12,000, as compared to male paid employees' median monthly wage of PKR 18,900.

Figure 2.2: Refined LFPR of Workers (Aged 15-64) by Sex & Province



Source: Estimated from LFS 2020/21

Educational attainment is a key factor for women to participate in productive economic activity, however, in Pakistan more than half of the women in the labor force were found to be illiterate. A high percentage of women in the labor force (60%) have no education at all, while for men it is 29%. Other challenges that hinder women's economic activity are socio-cultural norms that restrict their agency and mobility, high burden of family/ domestic care responsibility, and wide digital gender gap that excludes them from opportunities to work using technological tools and platforms.

**Vulnerable Employment:** Vulnerable employment is a concept that constitutes own-account workers and informal as well as family workers in an economy. A vast majority of economically active women in Pakistan are in vulnerable jobs. More than 70% of all employed women are in vulnerable jobs, as compared to 44% of men and thus are subject to poor working conditions including high wage discrimination, lack of work contracts and decent working conditions, as well as lack of social security.

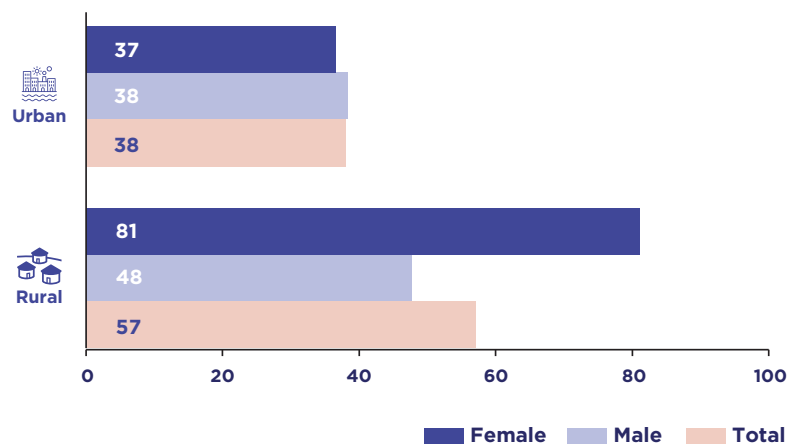
Vulnerable employment is higher in rural areas at 81% as compared to urban areas (37%). Across provinces, the highest proportion of vulnerable employment of female workers can be seen in KP and Balochistan. Further, the gender gap in vulnerable employment is narrower for urban workers as compared to workers in rural areas. The composition of employed female workers by education level reflects that 73% of the

overall female workers in vulnerable jobs had never been to school, while 30% of male workers with no schooling were in vulnerable jobs.

Informal employment in Pakistan is estimated by all the informal activities in the non-agriculture sector, and includes all household enterprises operated by own-account workers with less than 10 workers engaged. Seventy-two percent of employed workers (ages 15-64 years) were found to be in the informal sector: 65% female workers and 73% male workers.

Several interconnected factors are responsible for the vulnerable employment of women, including lack of education and information that opens up opportunities for formal work; restrictions on working outside the home; social, cultural, and religious norms that restrict women to a few occupations and sectors; safety and security risks; and lack of safe and adequate transport services. This situation limits women from developing their full potential, enhancing their agency and financial empowerment as well as contributing meaningfully to the development of the nation.

Figure 2.3: Vulnerable Employment of Workers (Ages 15-64 years) by Region (%)



Source: Estimated from LFS 2020-21

3. Health

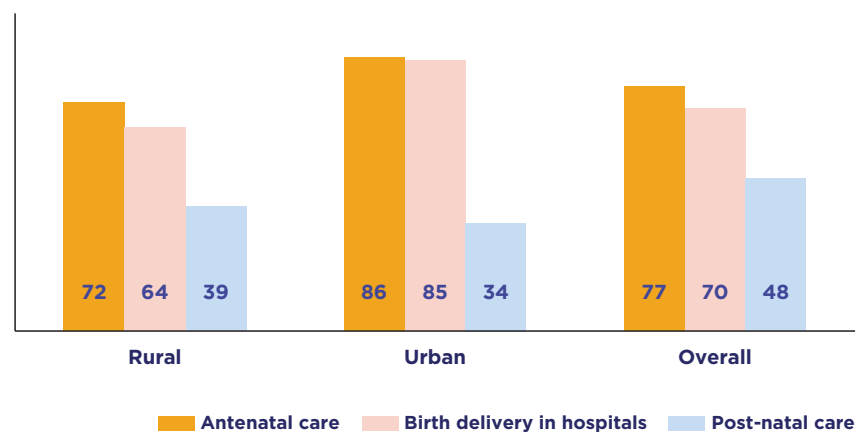
You have to care for all beings created by God.

Abdus Sattar Edhi, Founder of the world’s largest volunteer ambulance network in Pakistan

The Government of Pakistan recognizes the basic right to health and well-being for all, as articulated in key development policies, including Vision 2025 and the National Health Vision (NHV) 2016-2025. Commendable steps have been taken towards ensuring universal healthcare and broadening women-specific services and facilities. The Lady Health Worker Programme initiated in 1994 through Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto’s Program for Family Planning and Primary Care contributed significantly to taking trained healthcare to the doorsteps of the population. Its purpose is to ensure the provision of primary, preventative, promotive, and curative care services mainly in marginalized

remote rural and urban slum communities, particularly for women and children. Through almost 90,000 Lady Health Workers (LHWs), a population of approximately 115 million women, men, and children who would otherwise lack access to health services are provided with Primary Health Care (PHC). Looking at children born in the five years preceding the survey, the PDHS 1990-91 found that antenatal care was received during pregnancy for only 30% of births – as low as 17% in rural areas, whereas antenatal care from skilled health workers has significantly improved to 77% in 2020.

Figure 3.1: % Indicators Related to Safe Delivery for Ever-married Women (in %)



Source: Estimated from PSLM 2019/20

However, the public health sector is up for a great challenge if it is to reach SDG 3 indicators by 2030, particularly those related to women's health e.g., the mortality rate (Goal 3.2), ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services (Goal 3.7), and universal health coverage (Goal 3.8).

Several commitments made under NHV 2016-2025 have not yet materialized. Most importantly, health expenditures are lagging behind the committed 3% of GDP, restricting the opportunity to expand and improve the healthcare system of the country. Consequently, a vast majority of the population is opting for private healthcare. Around 59% of health expenditures are made through the private sector out of which 88% are out-of-pocket (OOP) expenditures by households. Though public health expenditures have increased over time, they are still below the WHO-recommended level of 5%.

Another major challenge is accessibility, which is again greater for women, especially those belonging to rural or remote areas. They face particular constraints in accessing women-specific healthcare services such as quality antenatal and postnatal care, reproductive health, breast cancer and fistula treatment. The biggest gap is in delivery in hospitals, the figure being 64% in rural areas and 85% in urban areas. In rural areas, a high percentage (66%) of all women consider that the distance to the health facility is a problem.

Population growth is one of the biggest challenges faced by Pakistan and exacerbates all other problems such as lack of resources, poverty, food insecurity, poor health of citizens, overburdened healthcare and other services, low literacy, etc. Until

the late 1980s, the fertility rate remained at a very high level, between 6-7 children per woman, characteristic of countries yet to experience the demographic transition. The fertility decline gained momentum starting from the 1990s, and went from 4.1 in 2006–2007 to 3.5 in 2020–21, according to the World Bank. At the same time, there has been a substantial increase in life expectancy at birth, from around 37 years in 1950–1955 to more than 66 years, for 2015–2020. Thus, Pakistan is slowly entering the latest stage of the demographic transition, when both fertility and mortality rates rebalance at low levels.

Looking at the situation and aspirations of young women provides some valuable insights towards the future. Young women in Pakistan currently have 2 children on average, (ever-born), however, their (median) desire for children stands at 4 children. These statistics reveal that the country may not be able to reduce fertility rates on a sustainable basis in the near future.

The key challenges are patriarchal values and practices, such as early marriages, son preference, desire for big families and a lack of accessible educational and employment opportunities for women that influence fertility rate. In addition, the lack of availability of family planning methods also contributes to the slow decline in fertility rate. Only 34% of women aged 15-49 years reported using any family planning method, and there has been no significant change in the percentage since 2012.

Children are another vulnerable group with regard to healthcare – the key challenge being high child malnutrition. Overall, 38% of children under age 5 are stunted, with 17% severely stunted. 23% of all children are underweight, with 8% severely underweight. The prevalence of low weight is highest among children whose mothers are underweight (35%) compared with normal (28%) or overweight mothers (15%). Children born to mothers with no education are at a greater risk of being undernourished compared to children whose mothers have a higher level of education, and stunting is higher among children from the lowest wealth quintile (57%) as compared to the highest wealth quintile (22%).

In recent years, the Government has made strong efforts to implement its vision to provide universal healthcare for all (see Box on Sehat Sahulat Program). In Pakistan, however, limited attention on women-specific health issues like access to quality healthcare (including reproductive, antenatal and postnatal services), and affordability of facilities continue to pose serious challenges to the well-being of women and their families that require further attention from the Government.

### A Snapshot of the Sehat Sahulat Program (SSP)

The Sehat Sahulat Program (SSP), launched in 2015, is a milestone to improve access to good quality medical services especially for the most vulnerable population. The SSP initiated a micro health insurance scheme that provides affordable insurance coverage for treatment either in public or registered private hospitals for those households who were part of the social protection programme (Benazir Income Support Programme-BISP). In 2021, the Government expanded the programme by including all citizens to the benefits of in-patient health services, making it a universal health insurance (UHI) initiative. After the reform, the computerized national identity card (CNIC) serves as the eligibility document for the service, which was done to reduce barriers to access to service.

To date, the programme has enrolled 37.3 million families, covering 75% of the country's population. More than 5 million individuals have used in-patient health services in private hospitals. However, the utilization rate of the insurance is still low (less than 3%) as compared to the global utilization rate (4-7%).

## 4. Social Protection

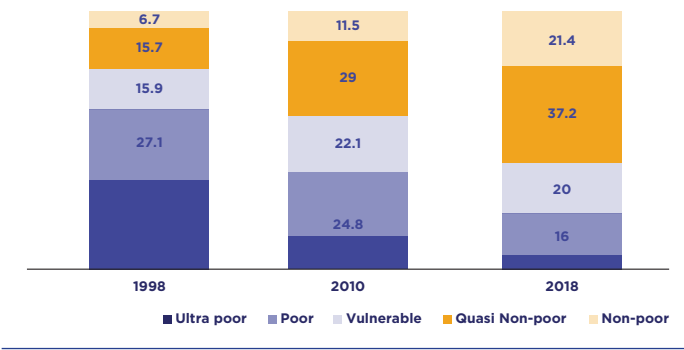
There are millions and millions of our people who hardly get one meal a day. Is this civilization? Is this the aim of Pakistan? Do you visualize that millions have been exploited and cannot get one meal a day! If that is the idea of Pakistan. I would not have it.

*Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Founding Father of Pakistan*

Ending poverty in all forms and dimensions by 2030 is the first of the SDGs. Social protection is critical for alleviating poverty and ensuring sustainable development in a country. The Constitution of Pakistan recognizes social security as a civil right, and the country has a history of social protection programmes initiated in the 1980s and 1990s followed by microfinance programs in the early 2000s. In 2007, the country adopted its first National Social Protection Strategy that recognizes the need for a holistic social protection provision to combat poverty and inequality. The commendable Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), initiated in 2008, is a flagship social protection programme of Pakistan, one of South Asia's largest cash transfer programmes, that specifically provides unconditional cash transfers to women.

With a population of more than 220 million, Pakistan is facing high levels of poverty. The Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index (MPI), based on various deprivations against three domains: education, health, and living standards, was adopted by the Planning Commission of Pakistan in 2016, and recent trends show signs of positive development. The overall deprivation has substantially declined across the country, as the MPI dropped by 16% nationally between 2004 and 2015. Still, regional and geographic disparities in poverty levels persist nationwide, and multidimensional poverty is significantly higher in rural areas.

Figure 4.1: Poverty Bands Overtime in Pakistan from 1998-2019 (% distribution)



Source: PIDE Report 2021

Moreover, various forms of shocks, both economic and environmental, have a disproportionately greater adverse impact on the people living in poverty as they lack resources to deal with and recover from such crises. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic seriously hampered poverty alleviation initiatives in the country in 2020-2021, followed in 2022 by the devastating floods that triggered an unprecedented deluge across Pakistan affecting 33 million people. In addition, the country has been faced with a high inflation rate, particularly food inflation, which has imposed a disproportionate burden on poor and low-income households and, as per the current estimations, may push between 6 and 9 million people into poverty.

To address the negative spiral of multidimensional poverty, the Government established a Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety (PASS) Division in 2019 to streamline the social protection programmes at the federal level. It is a governing ministry for 4 organizations with the mandate of providing relief to the population (Benazir Income Support Programme, Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal, Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund, and Trust for Voluntary Organizations). The new social protection initiatives under the PASS division have performed well in expanding the social safety net to support the most vulnerable. Some of the ambitious goals of the PASS division include creating an enabling environment for poverty reduction, social safety nets and access to healthcare for at least 10 million families, and livelihood opportunities for 3.8 million individuals.

Despite a tremendous journey of over two decades in this area and substantial progress, the country continues to face a series of challenges in ensuring social protection for its people. Whereas the overall envelope significantly increased from only 0.1% of GDP before 2008 to 2.3% in 2018, large scale commitments are required to meet the ambitious goals set by the Government and agreed through its international commitments. The social protection policies and systems would also benefit from holistic and targeted interventions, including integration of the initiatives with the pro-poor growth agenda of the country.

**Social Protection through Safety Net from Women - BISP**

The Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), launched in 2008, is the single largest social protection initiative in the country. It is a unique case in social protection as it explicitly targets most vulnerable women with unconditional cash transfers. Also, BISP was the first safety net programme that included women working in agriculture sector, i.e., 48.4% of the labor force.



The BISP extends direct support to women under its cash transfer initiatives. Unconditional Cash Transfer (UCT) aims to cushion the adverse impacts of financial crises on the most vulnerable, of which majority are women. Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) provides additional top-ups to support the primary education of children aged 5 to 12 years. A larger transfer is provided to those with daughters in primary school, which aims to address the gender gap in primary education.

With a budget of PKR 300 billion in the ongoing fiscal year, BISP continues to have a strong impact on women's empowerment. The trend shows positive changes in, for example, women's mobility and political participation. Between 2013 and 2019, women's mobility increased from 46.5% to 53.3% and voting from 71.3% to 76.9%. However, the analysis shows that BISP alone is not sufficient to graduate the most vulnerable women out of poverty. It needs to be coupled with both micro and macro-level interventions to create economic opportunities for those facing multidimensional poverty, such as micro-credit and entrepreneurship opportunities.

## 5. Violence Against Women and Girls and Access to Justice

### Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG):

We cannot accept a world in which one half of humanity is at risk in the streets, in their homes or online.  
We must end violence against women and girls - now.

*António Guterres, UN Secretary-General*

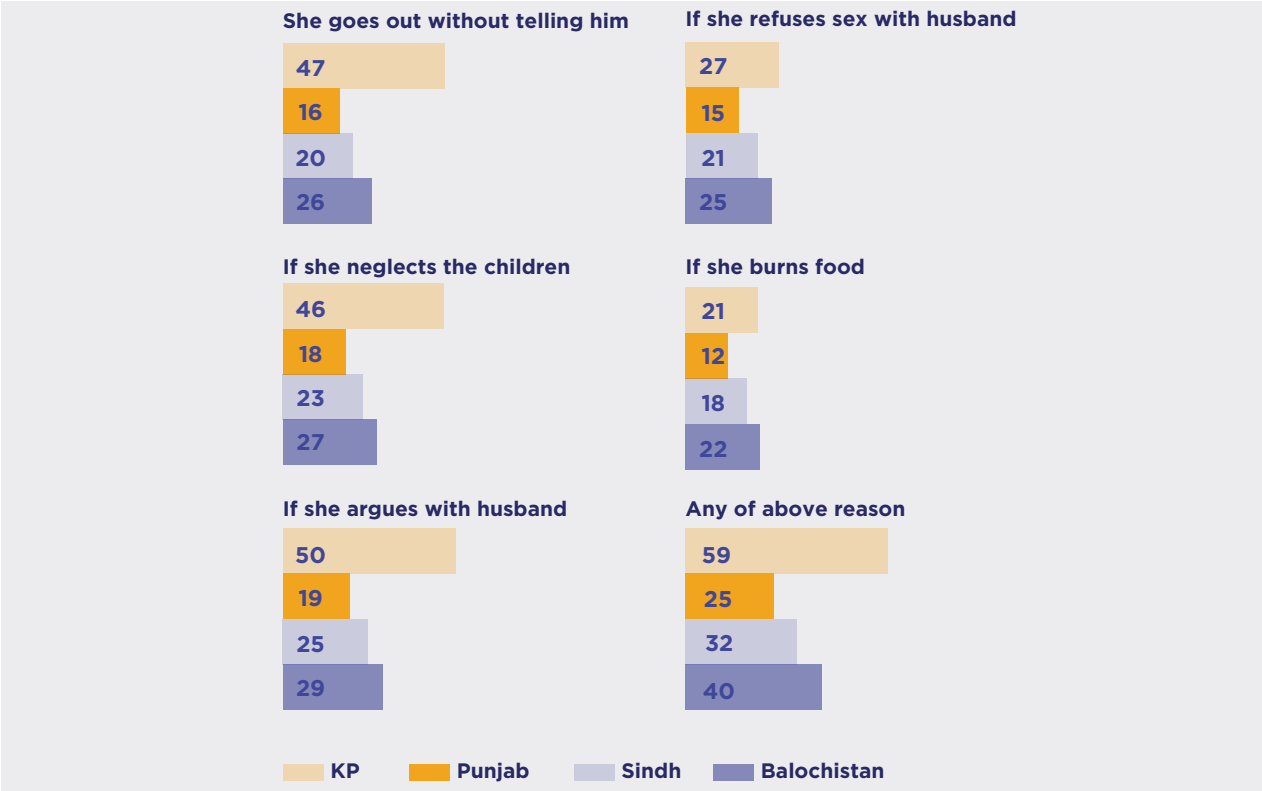
VAWG is a global issue of pandemic proportion, that can be found in every region of the world and impacts all areas of sustainable development. The Government of Pakistan has introduced various laws, legislative amendments and policies at federal and provincial levels to address VAWG and provide justice to the survivors.

In Pakistan, VAWG manifests in various forms, including domestic violence, sexual and physical assault, harassment in workplaces and public spheres, honor killings, and trafficking and forced marriage. In recent years, women are also getting increasingly vulnerable to harassment and bullying in online spaces and the cyber sphere. It is evident that enhancing women's access to justice is essential for reducing gender inequality, discrimination and violence and is also essential for sustainable economic development. A study by the International Centre for Research on Women found that households lose nearly \$146 million in income annually due to VAWG and spend \$19 million on violence-related expenditure. Further, Pakistan has an annual direct cost of \$189.7 million due to VAWG.

According to the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) 2017-18, 23% of ever-married women (15-49 years) report having experienced physical violence, 26% emotional violence, and 5% sexual violence at the hands of husbands or intimate partners. The incidences of violence were found to be slightly higher in rural areas as compared to urban areas. Furthermore, all forms of violence were higher among women with no education and declined in the case of women with higher education. Twenty-eight percent of women facing multidimensional poverty experienced physical or sexual violence, as compared to 16% of women from wealthier economic backgrounds.

Widely accepted patriarchal social norms also limit women’s ability to recognize most forms of violence as a violation of their human rights, and thus they do not report it. A cross-provincial picture on justifications regarding physical violence by intimate partners shows that between 25% (Punjab) and 59% (KP) women believe that beating of a wife by a husband is justified. The data shows that of those who never reported domestic violence, 24% believed that the violence was not serious, 15% were embarrassed to report to it, 12% did not want to bring a bad name to the family, 9% feared further violence, and 8% didn’t report for the fear that their marriage would end.

Figure 5.1: Justifications by Women (Ages 15-49 years) regarding Beating of a Wife by Husband (in %)



Source: Various issues of provincial MICS Reports

Looking at workplace harassment, it has been found that more than 90% of working women, in both private and public sectors, acknowledge being harassed, yet more than 50% do not know that harassment at the workplace is a crime and only 17% of women reported such incidents to their organization’s inquiry committees. The Protection of Women Against Sexual Harassment in the Workplace Act 2010 was enacted to prevent and address harassment in the work environment, and the law was further amended in 2022 to extend its jurisdiction beyond formal workplaces to home-based workers and any other sphere where women may face harassment. Federal and provincial Ombudspersons have been appointed to provide a redressal mechanism under the law. However, amid the positive steps taken, implementation remains a challenge.

The situation regarding harassment in public spaces is no different. Whereas more than 80% women face harassment in public places according to a Women Safety Audit undertaken by UN Women in 2020, the majority (90.3%) of respondents did not consider it to be a crime, and have normalized it as a part of their daily life. When shared with the

families, 85% told them to ignore the incident giving a message of silence to the women and girls.

With an increasingly growing digital world, violence against women and girls has now found new channels and platforms, and in recent years, a surge has been witnessed in online abuse, harassment, and violence cases, especially those targeting women. Sixty-eight percent of the individuals targeted by online harassers were found to be women, whereas the vast majority of perpetrators were men. At the same time, the expansion in access to reporting channels also led to an increase in the number of reported incidents.

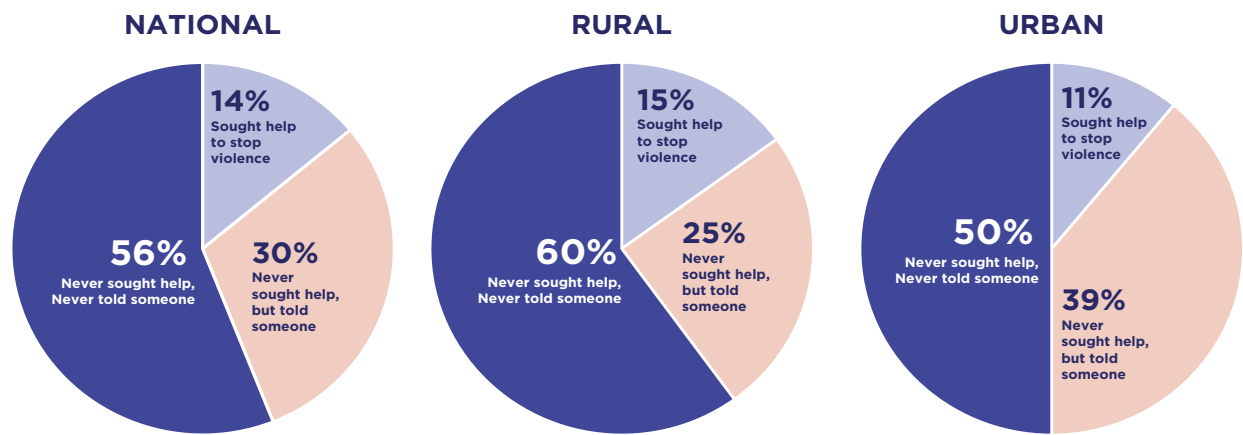
Access to Justice:

Violence against women can end only when the culprits get punished.

Mukhtar Mai, Survivor and Human Rights Activist

Once a survivor has experienced any form of violence, services for seeking redress, support and justice are often inaccessible or inadequate. The process of obtaining quick and responsive justice is daunting for many women, that is one reason why the level of reporting of gender-based violence incidents is very low, and official figures show that 56% of women survivors never sought help nor told anyone. This further substantiates that the figures reported regarding cases of violence are just the tip of the iceberg.

Figure 5.2: Ever Married Women (Ages 15-49 years) who Sought Help after experiencing violence (%)



Source: Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) 2017-18

For those survivors who are compelled or choose to pursue justice, the journey is not easy. Women’s access to support and justice has long been an issue of grave concern, and the barriers they face start from the initial report to the police, and persist throughout the chain of actors that they need to reach out to, such as medico-legal health officers, prosecutors, lawyers, shelter staff, to court staff. These difficulties, which stem from societal, procedural and structural flaws, result in deplorably low rates of conviction for VAWG crimes. In essence, many survivors are further victimized in a justice system that is largely patriarchal, complex and inefficient. In this arduous process, which may take several months to years, survivors incur numerous, at times backbreaking,

costs, including financial, health related and emotional. It is no surprise that many women drop their cases before they reach a conclusion and even for those who persist till the end, the low level of conviction rate (around 2%) means that they are unable to obtain justice.

The Government of Pakistan has introduced various laws, legislative amendments and policies at federal and provincial levels to curtail and address violence against women and girls. However, weak implementation of laws and a lack of awareness among survivors of violence as well as duty-bearers often limit the effectiveness of these provisions. As a result, Pakistan ranks 129 out of 140 countries worldwide in the Rule of Law Index 2022, rising two positions since the previous year (10th from last in 2021, to 12th from last in 2022).

In many parts of the country, informal justice systems are still used to deal with crimes, civil disputes, and family matters as people do not have access to or trust in the formal justice system. One of the major challenges is that most formal supply-side actors, including lawyers, judges, and police, have limited subject-specific training, especially on the newly enacted laws, and also lack gender-sensitive and survivor-centric attitudes and mindsets. In response, the criminal justice system requires a major change. The police and other justice sector stakeholders need more sensitization as well as greater female representation – evidence has shown that women duty-bearers in such institutions can respond to complaints of VAWG more effectively and also serve as role models. The police's public image must be improved, and officers sensitized to gender issues so that they handle women's complaints with empathy and the investigative process is humanized.

Insufficient and inconsistent data collection and analysis on VAWG is another major challenge that has led to inadequate, ad-hoc and ineffective policy reforms and weak institutional response to curb this menace. As a result, the right to live a life free from violence and to obtain gender-responsive and timely justice remains elusive, particularly for the most vulnerable.

**Key Legislations for Addressing VAWG**

- Prevention of Anti-Women Practices (Criminal Law Amendment) Act 2011 (pertaining to forced marriages and inheritance deprivation in the name of custom)
- The Women in Distress and Detention Fund (Amendment) Act 2011
- Right to Ownership (Women) Act 2011
- The Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act 2011
- The Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010
- Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act Sindh (2013) and Balochistan (2014)
- Child Marriage Restraint Act (Punjab Marriage Restraint Amendment Act 2015, Sindh 2014)
- Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offences relating to Rape) Act 2016
- Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offences in the name or on pretext of Honor) Act 2016
- Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act 2016
- Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016
- Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Domestic Violence Against Women Act, 2021
- Anti-Rape (Investigation & Trial) Act 2021

Note: This is not an exhaustive list

## 6. Women's Political Participation

As a woman leader, I thought I brought a different kind of leadership. I was interested in women's issues, in bringing down the population growth rate... as a woman, I entered politics with an additional dimension - that of a mother.

*Benazir Bhutto, Former Prime Minister of Pakistan*

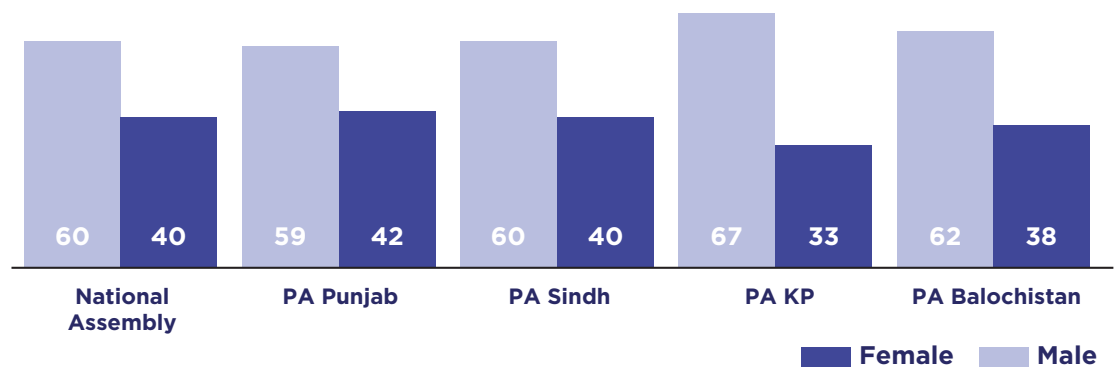
Women have traditionally remained underrepresented in leadership positions in the political and public sphere in Pakistan, but the environment is slowly changing. The Government has taken various measures to accelerate women's electoral and political participation, in line with Article 7 of CEDAW and the Beijing Platform of Action. Some of the considerable developments in women's political participation include two tenures of a female prime minister (1988-1990 and 1993-1995), and a female speaker of the National Assembly (2008-2013). The Elections Act of 2017 and subsequent provisions ensure the protection of women's right to vote, contest elections and take an active part in politics. In 2002, women's representation in parliament increased to 17%, above the world average of about 15% of that time, which was a quantum leap that brought forth many opportunities to enhance women's participation, leadership, and voice. At the local level, provincial governments provide up to 33% of seats for women through a combination of direct and indirect elections.

However, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Pakistan ranks low, at 115 out of 190 countries, in terms of representation of women, which highlights the systemic and socio-cultural challenges to women's political participation. The major factors hindering women's participation in the political sphere, be it as members of the parliament, candidates, political workers, or voters, include low levels of literacy; patriarchal mindset; limited mobility and decision making; financial constraints; structural barriers against participation in political/ leadership activities; violence and harassment in the public and private spheres; and disproportionate share of responsibilities for the family and home.

In terms of voter turnout, a huge gap exists between male and female voters in the electoral rolls (68 million males as compared to 56.7 million females). The highest gender gap is recorded in Balochistan and the lowest in Islamabad Capital Territory. In terms of women voters' turnout, the figure for the National Assembly elections in 2018 was at 40%, while for men it was 60%. Additionally, women's electoral participation is 8.5% which is lower in big cities as compared to rural areas.

Under-registration of women is one of the most significant factors behind women's limited participation in political processes in general and elections in particular. A recent report by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) mentioned several reasons for women not having Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC)s, including lack of mobility and limited access to the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) centers, financial limitations, and a low interest among households to register women for civic documents. The lack of CNICs closes a whole set of opportunities for women to enhance their role in public life other than registration as voters.

Figure 6.1: Gender-wise Voter Turnout in the 2018 Election (%)



Source: Election Commission of Pakistan

Despite the guarantees by the Constitution and aspirations of the legislative framework, it can be seen that women’s political participation remains low in Pakistan. Gender biases and prejudices against women candidates in male dominated power dynamics of the national politics continue to exclude women from playing an active role in public life. To bring about substantial change in the electoral systems, acceleration of the implementation of laws and policies is essential as well as bringing about change in negative social norms. Women engaged in political activities at all levels need to be supported and capacitated to play an active role through enhancing their position as leaders and making the political arena safer for them to engage efficiently in decision-making and political and public life.

7. Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

People say I am a genius. I might be one, but I am not the only one. There are many other Pakistani girls and boys like me. All those gems need, is a little bit of polishing. And I will do it. That’s my aim.

*Arfa Karim (Late), first female computer scientist of Pakistan and youngest Microsoft certified professional*







In today’s digital world, information is a critical component for empowering women and girls. The internet has brought information to one’s fingers, rapidly revolutionizing the social, economic, and cultural fabric of societies across the globe. Enhancing access to information and communication technology (ICT) is an indispensable instrument for promoting gender equity and equality. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, the gender digital divide remains vast.

Pakistan ranked the second last, 133 out of 134 countries on gender equality in internet usage in the Network Readiness Index 2020. Nearly 50% of women in Pakistan don’t know how to use the internet and only 15% of women are using it.

A major issue is the lack of access to IT tools, computers and smartphones. Only 30% of women own a mobile phone in Pakistan, of which 19% have a simple phone and the 11% have a smartphone, with ownership varying across socio-demographic profiles. Only 6% of women (aged 15-64 years) use computers as compared to 11% of men in the

country. Various factors limit women’s access to technological devices, but one of the main reasons is lack of permission to use a phone or a computer, as reported by nearly one-third of young women.

Figure 7.1: Mobile Ownership (in %)

|   |  Mobile Phone |  Smart Phone |  No Phones |
|---|--|---|--|
|  | 52%  | 27%   | 21%  |
|  | 19%  | 11%   | 70%  |
|  | 36%  | 19%   | 45%  |

Source: PSLM 2019-20

Few women bank accounts or access to digital banking and they are mostly dependent on their husbands or male family members for accessing financial services. For example, only 6% of the women have a bank account and 7% use mobile phones for financial transactions. On average, 18% of women borrow each year in Pakistan, however, only 2% of women borrow from formal sources. Microfinance has slowly increased women’s access to finance in Pakistan. The 2015 National Financial Inclusion Strategy (NFIS) aimed to expand financial services to youth and women, especially in the rural areas. The strategy significantly raised the number of women accessing microloans. Fifty percent of microcredit clients are women, which has visibly and gradually moved the industry towards a gender balance. However, huge gaps still remain. Less than 5% of the women in Pakistan are included in the formal financial system, as compared to the regional average of 37% for South Asia.

Digital new technologies and digitized economy are critically improving women’s empowerment at a global level if made accessible. According to the 2021 Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA) report, 46% of women considered that mobile phone provides access to useful information that they would not otherwise be able to access easily. In Pakistan, women’s access to digital platforms and services are constrained by patriarchal cultural and social norms but also a lack of awareness of the availability or potential benefits of digital technology. Even for those who do use the internet, a majority do not leverage the opportunities it provides. Eighty percent of the internet users in Pakistan use it for non-productive activities, i.e., chat, voice and video calls, watching videos or movies, etc. To alleviate poverty on a sustainable basis, women’s financial inclusion is essential, which can be accelerated by linking them with the modern digitized economy.



## 8. Gendered Impact of COVID-19

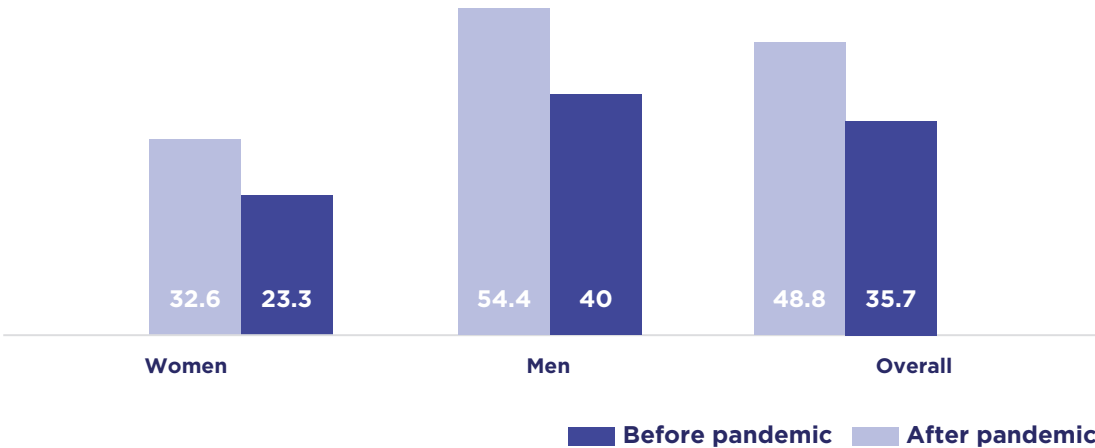
We know with certainty that climate and environmental crises and disasters are escalating. When we foster and invest in women's resilience, we are building the defences of the future as well as the assets of today. Resilience and empowerment go hand in hand.

*Sima Sami Bahous, Executive Director UN Women*

COVID-19 had an unprecedented impact on every facet of life across all geographical boundaries. In Pakistan, the economic fallout from the pandemic has greatly affected all sectors of the economy, particularly industry and services amid the large stimulus packages by the Government. The pandemic also disproportionately affected women in various ways, not only shrinking their space for employment and increasing the burden of unpaid care and domestic work but also restricting access to services and basic healthcare among others. Nearly one million children, with a majority of girls, dropped out of primary and secondary education mostly due to school closure and income shocks.

Over the last two decades, Pakistan has shown encouraging progress regarding poverty reduction from 40% to 24%, however, this took a major hit due to the pandemic with an estimated employment loss of 12.5 to 15.5 million for Pakistan. To protect people from poverty, the Government launched a large stimulus package worth \$6 billion (PKR 1.2 trillion) to provide support to the most economically vulnerable in the country. The payment of utility bills was deferred for 2 months for poor households. The Government allocated PKR 203 billion to deliver one-time emergency cash assistance to 16.9 million families at risk of extreme poverty, representing nearly 109 million people or half of the country's population. These emergency cash transfers were the largest in Pakistan's history, made possible through the nationwide cash transfer delivery system developed under the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP).

Figure 8.1: Respondents working before and after COVID-19 by sex (%)



Source: Tas et al., (2022)

The pandemic further exacerbated the economic vulnerability of women by significantly hitting the feminized sectors including hospitality, tourism, retail and the



informal sector. Since women's employment in Pakistan is mostly concentrated in the informal sector and low-paying jobs, they are often the first to be fired and the last to be hired during crises and recessions. Further, a study conducted in 2020 found that almost a quarter of the women reported facing salary reductions, while 37% of those engaged in home-based labor reported delayed payments.

The adverse impacts of income loss were higher for women as they usually take responsibility for the survival of household members by cutting back on consumption or increasing unpaid work as an alternative to purchasing goods. Although both women and men experienced a fall in household income due to the pandemic, evidence suggests that women's limited income led to a decline in daily nutrient intake among female-headed households, more so than male-headed households. The burden of unpaid care and domestic work, which already fell disproportionately on women, also increased dramatically during the pandemic.

Lockdowns and mobility restrictions left many women vulnerable to increased gender-based violence. An alarming 40% of respondents reported a greater threat of domestic violence, while over half reported increased instances of child beating, which can be attributed to the economic stresses and frustrations caused by the pandemic and lack of support from services and family members due to the safety measures.

The pandemic also had serious negative health effects, which were felt especially within the most vulnerable populations. A survey done in 2020 reported that more than 1 in 3 women who needed pre- or postnatal care during the pandemic, did not visit a trained healthcare professional. Most of them said this was because of limited mobility, financial issues, and the fear of contracting the virus. Furthermore, women reported facing mental health issues and extreme stress during the time of the pandemic.

As the Government is building back from the pandemic, it is clear that some of the challenges have exacerbated and some hard-won gains have been lost. For example, before the pandemic 32.6% of women were working, now only 23.3% are in employment. To build back a better and more equitable world, it is essential that women are at the center of rapid post-pandemic recovery, resilience and economic stabilization.

### **Floods 2022 leading to Crisis within the Crisis:**

While the Coronavirus pandemic continued to spread havoc across Pakistan and exacerbated existing gender inequalities, in June 2022 Pakistan was faced with another catastrophe caused by climate change. Rain-induced floods, accelerated glacial melt, and resulting landslides destroyed millions of homes and key infrastructure, submerged entire villages and ruined livelihoods. According to the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), around 33 million people - that is, one in seven - were affected by these floods, with nearly 8 million displaced and a loss of life of more than 1,700 people, one-third of whom were children. Preliminary estimates suggest that, as a direct consequence of the floods, the national poverty rate will increase by 3.7 to 4.0 percentage points, pushing between 8.4 and 9.1 million people into poverty. As of October 2022, 94 districts were declared as "calamity hit," accounting for more than half of all districts in the country. The impact of COVID-19 and floods have collectively exacerbated the challenges faced by women, girls and other marginalized segments of the population in accessing information, health services, education, livelihoods, WASH and protection from GBV.

### Conclusion

Woman occupies an exceedingly important place in the world. In view of her capabilities, nature has assigned vast duties to her. If you failed in them, you will not only harm your individual-self but also severely hurt your collective life.

*Fatima Jinnah, Mother of the Nation of Pakistan*

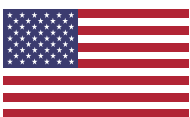
This Summary Report has presented a comprehensive snapshot of the situation of women in Pakistan in 2023 based on the data provided by NGDP. It analyses progress, challenges, gaps and ways forward in terms of achieving SDG 5 and the Agenda 2030. It is published at a time when the country, hardly recovered from the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, is faced with the unprecedented humanitarian crisis brought by the monsoon of floods 2022, as well as economic shock due to inflation, high unemployment, external financial crisis, and political instability. The findings of the report portray the gendered differentials across various sectors, socioeconomic classes and the urban-rural divide. As multidimensional poverty is intensifying in incidence and intensity, women are most hit, especially women in rural areas, informal employment or those with little or no education, who are most vulnerable to be left behind.

The findings of the report specifically highlight that education and employment opportunities can significantly improve women's well-being, decision-making, and agency. Various socioeconomic indicators quoted in the report show that Pakistan has a long way to go before women can take their rightful place as equal members of society, and realize their full potential to contribute to the economy and society as a whole.

However, the report provides examples of positive trends on gender equality and women's empowerment and the critical steps taken by the Government towards formulating policies and laws to protect and fulfil women's human rights. More girls are enrolled in basic education than a generation ago; universal health initiative is expanding healthcare services for women; and social protection programmes, especially BISP, continue to have a strong impact on women's empowerment. Women in Pakistan are also more vocal than ever before and are increasingly claiming their space in all spheres of life. The report also presents some success stories and best practices at national and provincial levels including legislations, policies and initiatives which give rise to hope for a better future.

Concerted and continuous efforts are required, on the part of legislators, policymakers, and society as a whole, to address the remaining barriers to women's empowerment. There has been substantial progress in recent years, nevertheless, the progress is slower than required to achieve the targets Pakistan has set for itself through its national and international commitments. All stakeholders, including government institutions, parliamentarians, development actors, international partners, civil society organizations, academia, religious leaders, and media, must be engaged in a meaningful and collaborative way, so that every woman and girl in Pakistan is empowered with all her rights to live a healthy and productive life with dignity, equality, and safety.





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