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The Political Underpinnings of Women Empowerment in Pakistan: Traces From Past to Present

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Abstract

Empowerment of women has been designed through an intricate interface of political ideologies, constitutional developments, and legislative reforms in Pakistan, spanning from the pre-partition era to the present. This review critically examines the political underpinnings of women's empowerment with a particular focus on the evolution of women-centered policies and legal frameworks in Pakistan, and more specifically, the province of Punjab during 2008–2018. This qualitative review of secondary sources, including historical records, constitutional provisions, and legislative documents, traces how different political regimes have influenced the direction and effectiveness of women-centered policies. The findings reveal that while Pakistan has established a robust constitutional and legislative framework supporting gender equality, significant gaps persist between policy formulation and implementation. Provincial autonomy following the 18th Constitutional Amendment enabled Punjab to introduce comprehensive pro-women laws addressing workplace harassment, political representation, violence against women, and inheritance rights. However, these initiatives are often constrained by weak enforcement mechanisms, socio-cultural barriers, limited institutional capacity, and exclusion of marginalized groups, particularly in rural and informal sectors. The study concludes that despite notable progress, women's empowerment in Pakistan remains uneven and requires stronger institutional accountability, inclusive policy design, and effective implementation strategies. The paper contributes to the existing literature by providing a comprehensive political and legislative analysis while identifying critical areas for future research and policy intervention.

Keywords: *Women Empowerment; Gender Equality; Gender Policy; Political Development; Legislative Reforms; Punjab; Pakistan*

Introduction

Women's empowerment in Pakistan has evolved through a complex interplay of political ideologies, colonial legacies, constitutional developments, and legislative reforms. From the pre-partition era to contemporary governance, the trajectory of women's rights reflects both progressive initiatives and persistent structural constraints. Early reformist movements, political parties, and influential leaders recognized the importance of women's participation in nation-building; however, socio-cultural norms and patriarchal systems consistently limited the realization of these ideals.

Post-independence, successive governments in Pakistan have introduced constitutional guarantees and legal reforms aimed at promoting gender equality. Notably, the constitutions of 1956, 1962, and 1973 institutionalized women's rights, while later regimes both democratic and military, introduced policies with varying degrees of commitment and effectiveness. The devolution of power following the 18th Constitutional Amendment marked a significant shift, enabling provincial governments, particularly Punjab, to enact targeted legislation addressing women's issues.

Despite these advancements, a critical gap persists between policy formulation and implementation. This review examines the political and legislative underpinnings of women's empowerment in Pakistan, with a focused analysis of Punjab's pro-women legal framework (2008–2018), highlighting both achievements and limitations.

Problem Statement

Although Pakistan has made substantial legislative and constitutional commitments toward women's empowerment, these efforts have not translated into proportional improvements in women's socio-economic and political status. The persistence of patriarchal norms, weak institutional mechanisms, and implementation gaps undermines the effectiveness of pro-women policies.

Particularly in Punjab, while an extensive body of gender-focused legislation has been enacted between 2008 and 2018, questions remain regarding its practical impact, accessibility, and inclusivity. Many laws are criticized for limited scope, inadequate enforcement, and failure to address intersectional inequalities such as class, rural-urban divides, and informal sector exclusion.

Therefore, the central problem lies in understanding how political structures and legislative initiatives shape women's empowerment, and why these measures often fall short in achieving substantive gender equality.

Objectives of the Study

This review article aims to:

1. Trace the historical evolution of women's empowerment within the political context of Pakistan.
2. Examine the role of political regimes and constitutional developments in shaping gender policies.
3. Analyse key legislative measures introduced in Punjab (2008–2018) for women's empowerment.
4. Critically evaluate the effectiveness and limitations of these laws and policies.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative review-based methodology, relying on secondary data sources. The analysis is grounded in:

- Historical documents and political records
- Constitutional provisions and legislative texts
- Reports from governmental and non-governmental organizations

- Scholarly literature on gender and development

A thematic and chronological approach is employed to examine the evolution of women's empowerment. The study particularly focuses on Punjab's legislative framework (2008–2018), analyzing key laws related to workplace harassment, political representation, and violence against women, inheritance rights, and family laws. The review critically evaluates these policies by assessing their scope, institutional mechanisms, and reported outcomes, highlighting discrepancies between policy design and implementation.

Political Underpinnings of Women Empowerment: Before Partition

Before the establishment of Pakistan in 1947, the British colonial government, which ruled over British India for more than hundred years, implemented certain policies aimed at improving the conditions of women. These policies were driven by a combination of factors, including humanitarian concerns, pressure from social reform movements and the desire to have a progressive image. However, the extent and effectiveness of these policies varied across different regions in United India.

Various political parties emerged during the pre-partition era, each with its own stance on women empowerment. Indian National Congress, which represented a broad spectrum of the Indian nationalist movement, included members who were committed to women rights and actively advocated for reforms. Though, there were also conservative elements within the party who were resistant to momentous changes in gender roles and women's empowerment.

Likewise, All India Muslim League put emphasis on protecting the religious and cultural identity of Muslim while addressing the women's issues. Their approach to women's empowerment was often shaped by Islamic principles and aimed to reconcile modernity with religious norms (Khan, 1999). Political leaders of the pre-partition era had diverse views on women's empowerment.

Some leaders, such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Mahatma Gandhi, and Abul Kalam Azad recognized the importance of women's rights and actively supported their empowerment. They believed that the progress of the nation depended on the progress of women and advocated for their education, participation in public life, and equal rights. Some, however, held more conservative views and emphasized traditional gender roles and cultural practices.

They believed that women's primary role was within the domestic sphere and opposed radical change to existing norms. Women activists and organizations played a crucial role in raising awareness and lobbying for reforms, challenging the prevailing perceptions and pushing for greater gender equality. It was a period of transition and struggle, with varying degrees of commitment to women's rights and empowerment among different actors. Arya Samaj and Aligarh Movement also played a crucial role in raising awareness about women's issues and advocating for change (Mankekar, 2002).

During the 19th century, Begum of Bhopal established All India Muslim Ladies Conference, which supported various women's causes for an important period of time. One of its notable effects was its substantial influence on female education in specific regions of Indian subcontinent. Concurrently, the British Government implemented measures that contributed to the inclusion of women from subcontinent in the broader socio-political progress.

In 1891, British colonial government passed Age of Consent Act, which raised the minimum age from 10 to 12 for female marriages. This was a noteworthy step towards protecting young girls from child marriage, although the age limit remained relatively low. Subsequently, the Sarda Act of 1930 further increased the age of consent to fourteen.

The Government of India Act, 1935 was a remarkable constitutional development during the pre-partition era. While it was primarily a framework for British India, it included provisions related to women's rights and empowerment. For instance, it granted limited franchise rights to some women for the first time. Though the extent of women's political participation was limited, it set a precedent for future discussions on gender equality in the constitutional framework.

All India Muslim League played a pivotal role in addressing women's issues of that time. In 1937, Muslim League passed the Women's Protection Bill, which aimed to regulate polygamy and provide certain safeguards for women in marriage. This bill was an attempt to address concerns about the practice of polygamy and to ensure fair treatment for women within the framework of Islamic law (Khan, 1999).

In addition to that, Muslim League established a dedicated women's committee with the aim of increasing women's participation in the League and challenging traditional customs in 1937. By 1938, the uplift of women became one of the fundamental principles of All India Muslim League's political manifesto. During the Patna session held in December of that year, a special resolution was adopted, providing a clear and specific outline of the role of women within the League. Notable figures such as Begum Salma Tassaduq Hussain, Mumtaz Shahnawaz, and Shaista Ikramullah emerged as prominent leaders representing the Muslim women. These efforts laid the foundation for future developments in women's empowerment (Khan, 1999).

All India Muslim League adopted Lahore Resolution in 1940, which renowned as Pakistan Resolution afterwards. It laid down the demand for a separate Muslim-majority state in British India, which eventually led to the creation of Pakistan. While Lahore Resolution did not explicitly address women's empowerment, it emphasized the principles of democracy, equality, and safeguarding the rights of all citizens, which provided a foundation for future constitutional perspectives on women's rights. It is important to note that despite these initial steps toward women's empowerment, the pre-partition era was characterized by a largely patriarchal society with astonishing gender disparities. Women's access to education, economic opportunities, and political participation remained limited and traditional cultural practices often limited their rights (Khan, 1999).

Political Underpinnings of Women Empowerment: After the Partition

The partition of India and the creation of Pakistan in 1947 brought about new challenges and opportunities for women's empowerment. The government of Liaquat Ali Khan recognized the importance of women's rights and their role in society. It emphasized women's education and their participation in social and economic development.

The first Five Year Plan (1955-1960) under this government allocated resources for women's education and healthcare. However, progress in implementing policies for women's empowerment remained limited. Begum Shaista Ikramullah became first woman who was part of

the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan in 1947. She engaged in the discussions and debates on the country's constitution and advocated for women's rights (Saigol, 2016).

Then Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) marked the initial endeavor to mobilize women outside Muslim League. Following its success in attracting a large number of women and proving its value, the WVS served as a precursor to Pakistan's first fully established women's organization. Begum Ra'ana Liaqat Ali played a pivotal role in driving this initiative forward. On 22 February 1949, she organized a conference in Karachi, bringing together more than hundred females across the countrywide. This activity concluded with the formation of "All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA)", with Begum Raána, who became the President of the organization. It aimed to promote the wellbeing of Pakistani females, foster awareness among them regarding claiming and safeguarding their rights, and enhance their choices regarding economic and social activities (Saigol, 2016).

Pakistan, initially, continued to use the laws included in All India Act1935 as a colonial heritage. However, as Pakistan sought to establish its own legal framework, it gradually started to develop and enact its own laws and regulations. The country adopted its first constitution in 1956 which included certain provisions targeting specifically females.

The Constitution of 1956 enshrined the principle of gender equality, affirming that all citizens, regardless of gender, were equal before the law. The constitution granted women the right to vote, ensuring their political participation and representation in the democratic process. This was an important step towards women empowerment and their inclusion in political decision-making (Saigol, 2016). Traditional cultural norms, patriarchal practices, and societal expectations often hindered the full realization of women's rights and their equal participation in various spheres of life.

The implementation of constitutional provisions related to women's empowerment remained limited, and progress in women's rights was gradual. The military regime of Ayub Khan (1958-1969) brought some improvements for women in terms of education and employment opportunities. However, the regime focused more on economic development and modernization, which had mixed impacts on women's empowerment. While some women gained opportunities in education and the workforce, gender disparities persisted, particularly in rural areas (Saigol, 2016). Moreover, 1962 Constitution of Pakistan included provisions aimed at improving women's political participation, education, and economic opportunities. For instance, it granted women the right to vote and contest elections, and it emphasized the importance of women's education.

It also provided for reforms in family laws to improve women's rights within the family structure. It aimed to address issues such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and custody rights, with the goal of ensuring fairness and protecting women's rights in family matters.

Fatima Jinnah (sister of Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah) actively participated in politics and advocated for women's rights during Ayub Khan's regime. Although she did not hold an official political position, she played a vital role in supporting her brother's vision and participated in the presidential elections of 1965. Women's National Guard was formed during Ayub Khan's regime to encourage women's participation in national development and social welfare activities.

The government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971-1977 followed the separation of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh) vigorously, introduced reforms for women empowerment. Women's rights groups and civil society activists advocated for the inclusion of women's rights provisions in 1973 Constitution, worked towards the implementation of women's reserved seats in the parliament, and campaigned for legal reforms to protect women's rights (Saigol, 2016).

Then the Constitution of 1973, enacted under Bhutto's leadership and women held prominent positions in his cabinet. The constitution guarantees fundamental rights for all citizens, including women. These rights included equality before the law, non-discrimination, rights of inheritance and equal protection of the law. The constitution provided special quota in national as well as provincial legislatures, enabling them to have a voice in the decision-making process (Khan & Zia, 1995).

During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of organizations with a focus on women's issues were established. Nigar Ahmad, a famous women's rights activist of her era, founded the Aurat Foundation which focused on promoting women's rights and providing support services to marginalized women.

Similarly, a prominent feminist organization, Women's Action Forum (WAF) formed during this era. It proved as key organization advocating female's rights, including opposing discriminatory laws and advocating for legal reforms. Some notable other organizations also established during that time e.g. Shirkatgah in 1975 and in 1980 Pakistan Women's Lawyers Association was established. Additionally, new service-delivery organizations like Adult Basic Education Society and SOS Children's Village also emerged during this period (Khan, 2018).

Since the adoption of 1973 Constitution, it has undergone several amendments, some of which have directly or indirectly impacted women empowerment like Eighth Amendment (1985) introduced a separate electorate system for women in local government elections. This amendment aimed to increase women's political participation and representation at the grass root level and Fifteenth Amendment (1988) which abolished the requirement for religious leaders' certification for the validity of a marriage under Islamic law. This amendment aimed to protect women's rights and prevent misuse of religious authority in matters of marriage. Moreover, Seventeenth Amendment (2003) introduced reserved seats for women in the national and provincial assemblies. It increased the number of reserved seats for women in the parliament, ensuring their representation and political participation (Aurat Foundation, 2011).

Afterwards, the military regime of Zia-ul- Haq (1977-1988) implemented policies that had a mixed impact on women's empowerment. The conservative Islamization policies constrained women's rights and their role in public life (Rouse, 1984). However, despite restrictions, women's rights groups continued to work, providing support services to women, advocating for women's legal rights, and documenting human rights violations. Asma Jahangir was a renowned human rights lawyer and activist who fearlessly fought for women's rights and campaigned against human rights abuses during Zia-ul-Haq's regime. Despite facing repression, WAF continued to resist Zia's oppressive policies and campaigned for women's rights, including organizing protests against discriminatory laws (Mumtaz, & Shaheed, 1987).

The governments led by Benazir Bhutto (1988-1990; 1993-1996), the first female Prime Minister of Pakistan, emphasized women's empowerment and gender equality. Bhutto's government focused on legislative reforms to protect women's rights, increased women's

political representation, and introduced affirmative action policies. They also launched social welfare programs to address women's education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Begum Nasim Wali Khan was a prominent politician and activist of that time. She played a vital role in Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and later founded Awami National Party (ANP). She advocated for women's rights, education, and Pashtun nationalism (Khan, 2018). Civil society organizations, in this era, actively campaigned for women's empowerment. They supported the government's initiatives to promote gender equality, pushed for legislative reforms to protect women's rights, and raised awareness about issues such as domestic violence, honor killings, and biases against women (Nuri, Khan, & Khan, 2011). Farida Shaheed was a prominent feminist scholar and activist of that time, who worked extensively on gender issues and advocated for women's rights, particularly in the areas of reproductive health and violence against women (Kabeer, 2005).

The military regime of Pervez Musharraf (1999-2008) claimed to prioritize women's empowerment and implemented some reforms to enhance women's rights. Musharraf's government claimed “Enlightened Moderation” policy and passed legislation to protect women against harassment at the workplace, introduced reserved seats for women at national, provincial and local levels, and emphasized girls' education (Nussbaum, 2000). Sherry Rehman is a prominent politician and human rights activist. She served as a Member of Parliament and held several key positions, including Minister for Information and Broadcasting and has been actively involved in legislative initiatives related to women's rights and social issues. Likewise, Nighat Saeed Khan was a women's rights activist and founder of the non-governmental organization ASR Resource Centre. She focused on issues related to gender-based violence and women's political empowerment (Abbass, Kharl & Xiaoqing, 2018).

Subsequent governments after the democratic transition, including those led by Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, continued to emphasize women's empowerment. They implemented various policies to improve women's access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Marvi Memon was a member of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and served as a Member of the National Assembly. She actively worked on women empowerment and poverty alleviation through initiatives like Benazir Income Support Program. Similarly, Shireen Mazari has been a prominent politician and associated with Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. She contributed in advocacy for women's rights and worked on legislation related to gender-based violence (Ministry of Human Rights, 2021).

Legislation by Provincial Government of Punjab for Women Empowerment 2008-2018

A research study, focusing Bahawalpur one of the three divisions of South Punjab (Ashraf, Ibrar & Ashraf, 2017) described the status of women. They face patriarchal bias in every field of life. The women of rural areas were vulnerable towards physical violence and sexual abuse. Under the provisions of the 18th amendment to the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan, provincial governments had the authority to establish women development centers and address women issues at the provincial level. The Women Development Department was established in 2012 in the province of Punjab to promote conducive environment for formulating policies,

legislation and institutional reforms to guarantee gender equality without discrimination. The key objectives of the Women Development Department included:

- Providing support to women through training, financial assistance and uplifting of their social status.
- Ensuring equal access to justice for all women without discrimination.
- Introducing new legislation to assist female victims of violence, including domestic violence.
- Taking measures to prevent and address violence and crimes against women.
- Collaborating with NGOs to eliminate all forms of discriminatory behavior towards women.
- Creating opportunities to enhance women's status and participation in all spheres of life.
- Ensuring genuine gender equality in society.

The first and foremost step to safeguard women from all kinds of violations of fundamental rights was to introduce legal reforms and promulgation of new laws in Punjab because after 18th amendment, the women development had become the subject of the provinces. Consequently, Punjab Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2012 was introduced. Government claimed to achieve this extensive milestone towards women empowerment during their first democratic tenure 2008-2013.

The second tenure from 2013-2018, Punjab government accelerated in presenting pro-women laws and amendments one after the other, to meet the numerous commitments done under international conventions and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Punjab Commission on the status of women established after passing its act in 2014. The laws regarding violence against women and children along with various amendments in the rules emanated for sustenance of women development and guarded women's rights (Sarwar & Chaudhry, 2021). A list of laws is given below which were enacted by Punjab Provincial Assembly to safeguard the rights of women and girls during 2008-2018.

1. Punjab Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2012
2. Punjab Commission on the Status of Women Act, 2014
3. Punjab Fair Representation of Women Act 2014
4. The Punjab Reproductive, Maternal, Neonatal and child health Authority Act, 2014
5. Child Marriage Restraint 1929 - Punjab (Amendment) Act of 2015
6. Muslim Family Ordinance 1961 (Punjab Muslim Family Laws (Amendment) Act, 2015)
7. Family Courts Act, 1964 (Punjab Family Courts (Amendment) Act, 2015)
8. Punjab Partition of Immovable Property (Amendment) Act, 2015
9. The Punjab Land Revenue (Amendment) Act, 2015
10. The Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act, 2016
11. Punjab Women Protection Authority Act, 2017

Punjab Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2012

First law was the Punjab Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2012, which addressed the prevalent issue of workplace harassment that hindered women's participation in both the private and public sectors in Pakistan. This act provided legal protection to women against harassment as it defined harassment as any unwelcome sexual actions, verbal communication, or acts of a sexual nature that created a hostile work environment or subjected women to punishment or unfavorable conditions. The act bounded all public and private

employers to establish an inquiry committee to handle harassment complaints, with at least one woman as a member and allowed women to file complaints directly with the committee (Uzma, Heaney-Mustafa & Afzal, 2020).

Women could also file their complaints to Punjab Ombudsperson Office to redress their issue. They could also give application there to change any member of the committee in whom she did not have confidence to remain unbiased in decision. Further, the victim could also appeal to Governor or President if dissatisfied by the decision of the earlier authorities. Critique on this law started just after its promulgation. Harassment was not the phenomenon of workplace alone. Women faced harassment everywhere in the streets, markets and even at domestic level. Moreover, the entire informal sector was excluded from this law. Hence, the enactment of this law was not only limited but a host of institutional setup was needed to enact this law. Above all, the bias towards complainant in this regard needed to be addressed by awareness raising and capacity building of the organizational committees.

There used to be a male oriented approach in hiring, promotions, and even wages, which was the most leading reason for gender pay gap as well as workplace harassment. Some toxic work environments used harassment as a tool to transmute women for their own interests. In addition, an insecure workplace environment, as some of the women preferred to leave the jobs instead of reporting the incidents because of fear of backlash and due to social stigma. Moreover, these laws are still incapable to attest their fairness and justice to the victim. Stigmatization of girls by the law enforcing agencies makes it even more vulnerable to report the incidence. Even though certain laws, like the 2012 Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, was established but lacks practical framework to ensure their effectiveness.

Punjab Commission on the Status of Women Act, 2014

Through the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women Act, 2014, the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW) was established by the Punjab Assembly as a monitoring body to ensure that the laws, regulations and functions of the Punjab government protect women rights. Efforts should be made to expand women's access to social and economic opportunities and to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women.

The PCSW commenced its work in March 2014. It continued to monitor the application of laws and policies that guarantee gender equality and eliminate injustice against women. It is also responsible for promoting and monitoring the enforcement of laws and obligations affecting women and girls to which Pakistan is a signatory and informs the government before it accepts or enters into any applicable international commitment, agreement, law or convention. The main role of the commission was to conduct research, collect information to make policy recommendations and prevent violations of women's rights. Furthermore, PCSW encompass the interaction with experts and individuals and establish connections with similar organizations in other countries.

The commission has power of civil courts to summon or compel a person to appear in person and produce documents. It may also intervene to restore women's rights by visiting all prisons, shelter homes, or any other place where women are sheltered. PCSW provided toll free helpline 1043 with 24/7 availability, attended by trained women call agents or legal advisors to

address the complaints. Moreover, Women Development Department, in most of its tasks, developed support from PCSW e.g. Working Women Hostels (WWHs) facility for outstation working women.

Punjab Fair Representation of Women Act 2014

The Punjab Fair Representation of Women Act of 2014 changed the rules of 66 public institutions to increase women's representation in all institutions to at least 33%. The landmark act is the first of its kind and aimed to promote women's representation in public administration and in any decision-making body for women empowerment. This law particularly aimed at breaking down the barriers came along in women' way to get fair representation in all decision-making bodies. This was an important milestone in achieving all-inclusive approach in governance.

Equal remuneration for equal work and increased quotas for women in public service employment was introduced. Representation of women in public organizations and selection committees was mandated. The training and capacity building of those women included in decision-making bodies were absent to get the aspired results of this law. Some feminist critiques pointed that the law didn't address the ground issues of caste, disability or ethnicity which otherwise had a profound effect. Moreover, the selection criteria were imprecise and vague which did not get required results of this law to get active participation from womenfolk in decision-making bodies.

The Punjab Reproductive, Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health Authority Act, 2014

Millennium Development Goals regarding maternal and child health in Punjab proved hard to achieve. In response to this situation, the Punjab government introduced many new programs within the framework of growth and expansion, the most important of which were the integration of LHW program and Maternal and Neonatal Child Health (MNCH) program to improve maternal health against morbidity and mortality under this authority.

Then, the Sustainable Development Goals had been agreed upon globally, aggressive measures were needed to improve maternal, newborn and child health and nutrition in Punjab. To achieve these goals, Punjab's RMNCH sector exasperated to improve service quality. For the said purpose, The National Family Planning and Primary Health Care, also known as the Women's Health Workers Program (LHWP), was expanded. The already global initiative had extended healthcare services to rural populations and urban communities by deploying more than 42,000 Lady Health Workers (LHWs) and 1757 Lady Healthcare Workers (LHS) across Punjab to cover 57% (30% urban and 73% urban). MNCH program (2006-2012) was launched nationwide with the aim of improving maternal, newborn and child health of the population, especially the poor, the underprivileged and the weak. The program was integrated into IRMNCH&NP in 2014.

Additionally, the program introduced new officers of Community Midwives (CMWs) to manage births in the community force. Nutrition of women, youth, children and newborns with special focus on reducing stunting in rural and underdeveloped urban slum areas of Punjab were of grave concern. Compliance with Primary Health Care (EPHS) and Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) guaranteed in delivery and on-site services. Facilities provided by LHWs in 36

districts of the province, included the screening of children under 5 years of age and counseling of PLW, IYCF, and provision of iron, Vitamin A and MMS to mother and child. IRMNCH and nutrition services provided through lady health workers i.e. registration, home visits, health education and awareness etc. Each LHW supervised by a women's health manager, and each director has an average of 20-25 LHWs reporting to him.

Child Marriage Restraint 1929 - Punjab (Amendment) Act of 2015

Punjab Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act of 2015 focused on restricting child marriage and protecting women from forced marriages. The amendment prohibited the marriage of any child under the age limit which was fixed at eighteen for girls and twenty for boys. If a person married their children before the permitted age, they could face a punishment of up to six months' imprisonment and a fine of fifty thousand rupees (PCSW, 2015). The amendment allowed family courts to investigate child marriage cases registered with the union councils. The amendment also increased the fine and imprisonment sentence, but a person can obtain bail by paying a fine of fifty thousand rupees. The Punjab Family Court Act was established in 1984 to establish family courts[1] for the speedy and effective resolution of family affairs and marriage disputes.

The 2015 Amendment stated that the defendant had a maximum of fifteen days to appear for trial after a complaint regarding a marriage dispute was registered. On the trial day, the defendant had to file a written statement and to present witnesses and evidence. If the defendant failed to submit the required items on the specified day, they could submit them on the next day, within a maximum of fifteen days. The amendment also addressed matters related to divorce and the surrender of dowry.

Muslim Family Ordinance 1961 (Punjab Muslim Family Laws (Amendment) Act, 2015)

The Punjab Muslim Family Laws (Amendment) Act of 2015 introduced amendments to the Muslim family laws in Punjab. The amendment mandated that marriages must be registered by licensed documents. Failure to do so could result in a three-month imprisonment and a fine of up to Rs.1000. Marriage registrars were required to complete all sections of the document (nikahnama) with the consent of both parties, and failure to comply could lead to a fine of PKRs. 25,000 and a three-month jail sentence.

The law of succession was also amended, allowing the children of deceased heirs to collect their father's share from the grandparents' property. The amendment stated that a married man could not remarry without the permission of the Arbitration Council. Registering a marriage without permission could lead to a fine of five lac rupees, a one-year jail sentence, and the

[1] The primary objective of the family court is to facilitate a compromise between the parties involved. If a compromise is not possible, the court records statements from both parties, evaluates contradictions, and considers witness testimonies and evidence. In cases of divorce, the court promptly issues a divorce decree. The family court also determines the maintenance fee that the husband or father must pay for the wife and children, up to a maximum of 14 months. This maintenance fee increases by 10% annually. Failure to pay the maintenance fee leads to the court striking off the defendant's defense.

payment of the entire dowry to the wife. Consent from previous wife was mandatory if a man seek remarriage. Failure to obtain permission could result in a three-month imprisonment and a fine of one lac rupees. In case of divorce, a man must apply to the chairman council for the divorce to be registered. Failure to register a divorce could lead to a one-year jail sentence and an Rs.5000 fine. Divorce was considered active after ninety days, and the husband had the right to reverse the divorce during this period. If the wife was pregnant at the time of divorce, the activation period was extended until the end of the pregnancy.

Family Courts Act, 1964 (Punjab Family Courts (Amendment) Act, 2015)

According to amendments in Family Courts Act, the matters of personal property, properties of the wife and child, and all other matters rising out of the *Nikahnama* came under this act. Women could hold the 50% of their portion of mentioned Dower in case of *khula*, which women were destined to return if they apply for *khula* (divorce by Judicial Order). Family courts empowered to pass provisional orders for maintenance of family, and could acquire evidence of income and assets from the employer of the husband. The Family Judge could take notice of an offence under the MFLO and the Punjab Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act, 2015, and could call parties to Court.

Punjab Partition of Immovable Property (Amendment) Act, 2015

The Partition of Immovable Property Act 2015, Punjab, was passed as part of the women empowerment package. It was to enable women to seek court intervention to expedite the partition of family property, particularly in case with multiple joint owners. The amendment required consent from all joint owners for the appointment of an officer for partition, and women co-owners could not be disregarded in the process.

The Punjab Land Revenue (Amendment) Act, 2015

The Punjab Land Revenue (Amendment) Act 2015 addressed the issues related to land ownership and inheritance. The amendment mandated revenue officers to notify joint landholder's promptly after inheritance and should submit a private partition scheme within thirty days, failing which the officer can initiate proceedings for partition. The amendment also required the officer to record the statements, thumb impressions, and signatures of at least two respectable individuals as witnesses during the mutation process. This ensured that the legal heirs were correctly identified, preventing future disputes.

At that point, inheritance laws were amended to ensure women's rights, and property rights were extended under various schemes, such as Jinnah Abadi Scheme and regularization of residential occupants of state land, with joint ownership for husbands and wives. To address potential misuse of authority, the amendment established the District Enforcement of Inheritance Rights Committee to investigate cases where legal heirs were excluded from inheritance mutation due to malpractice and appropriate action would be taken against responsible individuals or revenue officers. The judiciary would show sympathy towards women who were denied their property rights in family inheritance. The Supreme Court always emphasized the court's responsibility to protect inheritance laws derived from Islamic principles.

The court declared that a woman's decision to relinquish her property right without coercion hold a heavy burden, and there was no specific limitation on female rights in property. The law allowed women to challenge the decision and claim their property share even if they initially gave it up voluntarily after the partition (Sarfraz, 2021).

The Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act, 2016

The Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act of 2016 was a viable legislature intended to provide fortification and justice to women. The act established violence against women centers (VAWCs) across Punjab to safeguard women from domestic, sexual and psychological violence, stalking and associated crimes. Women could file complaints against any gender aggressor. The act also addressed those individuals who made false complaints. District Women Protection Officers (DWPOs) had powers to enter premises by force, if necessary, to assist victims of violent crimes. They could bring victims to VAWCs for enquiry and support. DWPOs also had the authority to relocate the aggressor for up to 48 hours to facilitate investigations (Khan, 2020).

The violence against women centers provided protection and justice and enhanced the quality of investigations into gender-based crimes, by this means, reduced domestic violence (GoP, 2019). Protection measures included help desks for females in 680 police stations out of 709 police stations in the province. Moreover, the act was focused on enhancing the execution of legal initiatives designed to support and uplift women i.e. step to provide free legal advice to economically underprivileged women at the district level. This service was made reachable through the nomination of two focal persons, preferably females, who were selected by pertinent departments to handle criminal and civil matters. In addition, legal aid cells were established in collaboration with Bar Councils to further simplify the legal provision for women.

Punjab Women Protection Authority Act, 2017

The Punjab Women Protection Authority Act of 2017 was passed by the Punjab assembly to launch an authority which was devoted to safeguard women victims of violence from all kind of harms and provide them with shelter, rescue, and therapy whatever they need after experiencing any form of violence. The key objective of this authority was to work autonomously with the Bait-ul-Maal, a government institution that provided financial assistance and support to vulnerable individuals. The Punjab Women Protection Authority mandated for the execution of the Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act, the formation of violence against women centers, the foundation and activation of district women protection committees, and the recruitment of women protection officers. Numerous acts related to women's protection issues fall under the control of this authority (Naseer, Syed & Habib, 2021).

In 2017, Punjab also introduced Punjab Gender Policy, which aimed to promote gender equality and women's empowerment throughout Punjab. Furthermore, efforts were made to address women's health issues, predominantly in rural areas, by providing prevailing Mobile Units with necessary facilities for breast cancer screening.

Major Findings

Several key findings that review yield, are as under:

- While women's empowerment has been part of political discourse since the pre-partition era, progress has been gradual and uneven due to entrenched patriarchal norms.
- Pakistan's constitutions provide formal guarantees of gender equality, yet enforcement remains inconsistent.
- Democratic governments tend to introduce more progressive gender policies, whereas military regimes show restrictive impacts, particularly during Islamization phase.
- Devolution enabled Punjab to enact comprehensive pro-women legislation, including laws addressing harassment, violence, representation, and health.
- Establishment of bodies like the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women and Violence Against Women Centers represent significant progress in institutional support.
- Many laws suffer from weak enforcement mechanisms, lack of awareness among women, social stigma and underreporting and limited outreach to informal and rural sectors.
- Measures such as quotas improved representation but did not always ensure meaningful participation due to lack of capacity-building.

Conclusion

Women's empowerment in Pakistan is deeply rooted in its political history and legislative evolution. While significant strides have been made, particularly in the post-2008 period in Punjab, the effectiveness of these efforts remains constrained by structural, cultural, and institutional barriers.

The existence of progressive laws alone is insufficient; their success depends on robust implementation, societal acceptance, and institutional accountability. The gap between legal provisions and ground realities continues to limit the transformative potential of these reforms. Thus, women's empowerment in Pakistan remains a work in progress, requiring sustained political commitment, inclusive policymaking, and systemic reforms.

Future Research Recommendations

Future studies should consider:

- Empirical assessment of specific laws (e.g., Violence Against Women Act 2016) to measure real-world outcomes.
- Examination of how class, rural-urban divide, education, and disability influence women's access to legal protections.
- Analysis of gender policies across provinces to identify best practices.
- Investigation into women's empowerment in informal economies, often excluded from legal frameworks.
- Evaluation of bodies like PCSW and Women Protection Authority in delivering justice and services.
- Qualitative research on societal attitudes, stigma, and behavioral constraints affecting law utilization.
- Study of bureaucratic, administrative, and governance challenges in enforcing gender laws.

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