



Issue Brief # IB-24-2024

August 28, 2024

Only Half the Citizen: Gender Equality in Pakistan

**Areeba Naveed
Research Intern**



Only Half the Citizen: Gender Equality in Pakistan

by

Areeba Naveed

The treatment of women in Pakistan is a polarising issue within the socio-political landscape of Pakistan. This inequality is seen in women's participation in politics, the labour force, and education; with the Gender Inequality Index (GII)¹ reporting that the gender gap for seats in parliament was less than 59.7% that of men, for labour force participation, it was 56.1%, and for secondary education, it was 4.8%, which is much larger than the world average, where the gender gap was 47.6%, 27.1% and 6.8% respectively. The intersection between social norms and cultural practices is what greatly impacts gender equality within Pakistan; one of the main reasons is the backbone of Pakistani society being heavily patriarchal (Chauhan, 2014).

To understand this issue more deeply, we first need to understand the concept of gendered citizenship. The concept of citizenship has origins in ancient Greece, but the conceptualised definition by Kymlicka and Norman (1994) entailed that citizenship was not just a status but an identity paired with a set of responsibilities and expression of membership in a political community. They also emphasised that the number of rights possessed defines a huge part of citizenship. This is where the gendering of citizenship comes in, as it is dependent on the difference in public and private treatment; this divide is able to challenge the exclusion of women within these spheres (Chari, 2009), e.g., in the public sector there are no rules on gender equality within government jobs (Chauhan, 2014). Gendered citizenship essentially describes that one gender has limited freedom, as opposed to the other, in this case, women, essentially becoming only half a citizen to that of a man. Due to the adherence to conventional gender roles, and patriarchal values, women have been left to a lower status in all facets of Pakistani society (Khawaja, 2017). But how has gendered citizenship woven its way into the context of Pakistan? This issue brief will discuss the ways in both public and private divide have been created since

¹ The GII ranks gender equality on a scale of 0-1, 1 being the worst. The percentages indicate gender gap, larger the percentage, the more gender inequality e.g. gap between men and women was 56.1% for labour participation in Pakistan, i.e., there were 56.1% more men in the labour force as compared to women. <https://hdr.undp.org>

Pakistan's creation, and how post-partition, women's agency has been exploited at the behest of patriarchal norms.

The Indo-Pakistan partition in 1947 was one of the most violent events in history, massacres and abductions, primarily of women reaching the tens of thousands (Whitehead, 1999). The mass suicides during 1947 in Thoa Khalsa, Rawalpindi where approximately ninety women drowned themselves in a well (Butalia, 1993) and twenty were killed by village elders (Whitehead, 1999), during the civil violence that ensued during partition, as a means of preserving the family honour; an old Rajput tradition of self-immolation. The plight and suffering of women, is often romanticised and seen as a symbol of martyrdom for the community and 'religion' (Butalia, 1993; Whitehead, 1999). Honour crimes (honour killings) also articulate the same message, linking the preservation of family 'honour' to the women, failure to uphold the family name, often results in the violent murder of those women, annually over 1000 women are killed because of honour killings in Pakistan (Syed-Tariq, 2022).

While it is often assumed culturally that advocacy for women's rights and equality in a sense interferes with religion; within South Asian culture, religion is widely and interchangeably used with culture, in other words, distorting what constitutes as religion (Mukhopadhyay, 1995). The opportunity for interpretation of the vision for Pakistan by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, by the religious-political parties, which saw his vision for 'a state for Muslims' as an 'Islamic State' is where the blatant discrimination started. The weaponisation of religion into every crevice of society and state, caused rulers to succumb to the demands of the religious right. By 1954 the Women's National Guard and Naval Reserve, were forced to close, as result of outcry by the religious right deeming it 'un-Islamic' (Shaheed 2010).

During Z.A Bhutto's government, in the 1970s, an 'Islamic Socialism' was introduced. Bhutto also actively introduced constitutional articles which prevented sex-based discrimination in the workplace, and introduced affirmative action (Shaheed, 2010).

However, all of this came to screeching halt when Zia Ul-Haq, came into power and introduced his 'Islamisation' policies. Zia's policies were detrimental to women, as they further enforced conventional gender roles, and the idea of the 'subservient' woman (Awan, 2016). The introduction of the Hudood Ordinances made it clear that there was a bias against women, while both genders, it was evident that there was more severity on woman (Khan, 2009), such as in rape cases, the testimony of women was reduced to half of a man, so majority of female prisoners were those imprisoned under charges of zina, after alleging rape and not being able to provide sufficient evidence (Awan, 2016). Female news anchors and broadcasters also had to cover their heads, as the government wanted to 'Islamise dress', which was solely directed towards women (Khan, 2009). This indicates how women's agency became and has become increasingly challenged at the hands of a system which they were not and not allowed to be a part of, the lack of political representation, is what marginalises a group of people more (Shaheed, 2010).

The social reality of women is far more complex, as aside from public marginalisation, traditional forms of governance, such as tribal and ethnic affiliations continue to override the state (Shaheed, 2010).

Although political representation, and labour contribution may have increased over the years, where in 1990 it was 2.6% and 3.9% respectively (GII), that could also be attributed to the increasing population. Having said that, it will take more than a few short years to rectify centuries of systemic oppression; these patriarchal and cultural norms, have been woven into Pakistan's social and political fabric over the course of centuries, if not, millennia. However, cultural practices are not only to blame, but this marginalisation is also a consequence of the manipulation of religion to subjugate women.

Pakistan must address systemic issues present within the system; legal reforms aren't the only solution to mend the structural inequalities ingrained in society. There also needs to be a shift in attitude, to dismantle barriers which have systemically held more than half the population back, it will require sheer commitment, and collective effort.

References

- Awan, S.Z. (2016). Impact of Zia-ul-Haq's Gender Policies on Pakistani Society, *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture* http://www.nihcr.edu.pk/Latest_English_Journal/Jan-Jun%202016%20No.1/2.%20Impact%20of%20Zia-ul-Haq.%20shahzadi%20awan.pdf
- Butalia, U. (1993). Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency during Partition, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28(17), WS12–WS24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4399641>
- Chari, A. (2009). Gendered Citizenship and Women's Movement, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44(17) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40279185>
- Chaudhary, M. A. (2014). Interpreting Honour Crimes in Pakistan: The Case Studies of the Pukhtun and the Punjabi Societies, *Anthropos* <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43861694>
- Chauhan, K. (2014). Patriarchal Pakistan: Women's Representation, Access to Resources, and Institutional Practices. In: Gender Inequality in the Public Sector in Pakistan. *Palgrave Macmillan*, New York. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137426475_4
- Jamal, A. (2006). Gender, Citizenship, and the Nation-State in Pakistan: Willful Daughters or Free Citizens? *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 31(2), 283–304. <https://doi.org/10.1086/491676>
- Khan, S. (2009). SHARI'AT LAWS OF 1979, AND THEIR IMPACT ON WOMEN IN PAKISTAN, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44147728>
- Khawaja, A. S. (2017). Women in Security Policymaking: A Case Study of Pakistan. *Strategic Studies*, 37(1), 90–107. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48535988>
- Mukhopadhyay, M. (1995). Gender Relations, Development Practice and "Culture." *Gender and Development*, 3(1), 13–18. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4030419>
- Shaheed, F. (2010). Contested Identities: gendered politics, gendered religion in Pakistan. *Third World Quarterly*, 31(6), 851–867. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27896585>
- Syed-Tariq, S. (2022). Honor Killings and Pakistan: Continuing Challenges, *Centre of Biomedical Ethics and Culture, SIUT Sindh Institute of Medical Sciences (SIMS)*
- Whitehead, A. (1999). Women at the Borders. *History Workshop Journal*, 47, 308–312. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4289621>