



Gender Mainstreaming and Empowerment: Evaluating Policies in the 21st Century

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
History Revised format: May, 2024 Available Online: Jun, 2024 Keywords gender mainstreaming, empowerment, policy evaluation, gender equality, women’s rights, qualitative research	This paper evaluates gender mainstreaming as a strategy for promoting gender equality and empowering women in the 21st century. It examines the evolution, implementation, challenges, and impacts of gender policies across education, employment, and political representation. Using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, the study identifies progress made through gender-focused initiatives while highlighting persistent disparities. Findings reveal that effective gender mainstreaming enhances policy inclusivity, but structural and cultural barriers still limit comprehensive empowerment. The paper concludes with recommendations for strengthening institutional frameworks, monitoring mechanisms, and inclusive participation in policymaking

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Introduction:

Gender mainstreaming represents a transformative approach to embedding gender perspectives into policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. The 21st century has witnessed global commitments—such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5)—that emphasize gender equality as a cornerstone for sustainable development. In Pakistan, gender mainstreaming has been institutionalized through frameworks like the National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women (2002) and the Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2010). Yet, challenges persist in aligning implementation with strategic intent. This article evaluates how effectively such policies translate into empowerment outcomes, focusing on education, employment, political participation, and social inclusion

Evolution of Gender Mainstreaming:

The concept of gender mainstreaming originated in the mid-1980s as part of the United Nations’ efforts to promote gender equality through systemic policy transformation. It gained international recognition at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), where the Beijing Platform for Action formally introduced gender mainstreaming as a key strategy for achieving equality between men and women. This approach emphasized the integration of gender perspectives into all stages of policy design, implementation, and evaluation, rather than treating women’s issues as isolated concerns. Globally, institutions such as the United Nations Development Programmed (UNDP), World Bank, and International Labour Organization (ILO) have since institutionalized gender mainstreaming in governance frameworks, budgeting processes, and capacity-building initiatives. In Pakistan, gender mainstreaming took root during the early 2000s with the **National Policy for Development and**

Empowerment of Women (2002), which sought to align national priorities with international commitments like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The establishment of the **National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW)** in 2000 and subsequent provincial commissions provided institutional mechanisms for monitoring gender equality and ensuring women's representation in public decision-making. Over time, initiatives such as gender-sensitive budgeting, women's development departments, and inclusion quotas in legislative assemblies strengthened Pakistan's commitment to mainstreaming gender concerns across sectors. Despite these advancements, the process remains challenged by socio-cultural barriers, limited institutional capacity, and inconsistent policy implementation, calling for renewed efforts to embed gender equity into every facet of governance and national development.

Implementation of Gender Policies:

The implementation of gender policies represents a crucial step from conceptual commitment to practical realization. Administratively, successful gender mainstreaming depends on the establishment of institutional mechanisms that ensure policy coherence across government departments. In Pakistan, frameworks such as the **National Gender Policy Framework (2020)** and the **Women Development Departments (WDDs)** at the provincial level play key roles in coordinating gender-focused programs. These bodies oversee the integration of gender perspectives in national planning, budget allocation, and performance evaluation. However, despite these institutional structures, gaps often emerge due to limited human resources, inadequate technical expertise, and inconsistent inter-agency collaboration. Budgeting strategies have evolved toward **Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB)**, an approach that aligns financial planning with equity objectives. Introduced through initiatives supported by UN Women and Pakistan's Ministry of Finance, GRB enables policymakers to identify gender gaps in resource allocation and promote equitable access to public services. Yet, its effectiveness is hindered by the lack of gender-disaggregated data and insufficient monitoring systems. Institutional accountability mechanisms—such as parliamentary oversight committees, the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW), and independent audits—are essential in ensuring transparency and evaluating the outcomes of gender policies. Strengthening these accountability frameworks, enhancing departmental coordination, and embedding gender-sensitive indicators into national statistics can significantly improve the policy implementation landscape and lead to tangible progress in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment.

Challenges in Policy Evaluation:

Evaluating gender policies presents a complex set of challenges that hinder effective measurement of outcomes and accountability. One of the most persistent issues is the **lack of reliable gender-disaggregated data**, which limits the ability to track progress accurately. Many government departments in developing countries, including Pakistan, still rely on outdated or incomplete databases, making it difficult to assess the real impact of gender-focused initiatives across sectors like education, healthcare, and employment. Without comprehensive baseline data, evaluations often remain anecdotal or donor-driven rather than evidence-based. **Social resistance** also poses a significant obstacle. Deeply rooted patriarchal norms and cultural perceptions frequently undermine gender reforms, particularly in rural and conservative areas. This resistance can manifest through limited female participation in policy feedback mechanisms, gender stereotyping in institutions, and reluctance to adopt progressive legislation. Moreover, **resource allocation constraints** further restrict policy effectiveness—gender units within ministries are often underfunded, and trained personnel for monitoring and evaluation are scarce. Donor dependency and inconsistent domestic funding lead to fragmented implementation and short-lived interventions. To address these challenges, there is a need for **capacity-building in gender data systems**, greater community engagement to reduce social resistance, and a sustainable increase in budgetary commitment. Establishing integrated digital platforms for data collection, promoting transparency in budget utilization and fostering partnerships between government, academia, and civil society can significantly improve the evaluation of gender policies and ensure that empowerment efforts yield measurable and lasting results.

Impact on Women's Empowerment

Gender mainstreaming has contributed significantly to women's empowerment across multiple dimensions—education, health, economic independence, and political representation. In Pakistan, female literacy rates have shown steady improvement, rising from around 36% in 2000 to over 50% in recent years, due largely to targeted programs like the Girls' Education Initiative and conditional cash transfers under the Benazir Income Support Programmed (BISP). Access to healthcare has also expanded through community-based schemes such as the Lady Health Worker Program, which has improved maternal and child health outcomes in rural areas. Economically, microfinance programs and women entrepreneurship initiatives launched under Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund and Kamiah Jaw and have enhanced women's participation in the labor force, though wage disparities and informal sector vulnerabilities persist. Politically, reserved seats in national and provincial assemblies have increased female representation and visibility in public life, enabling women to influence policy agendas and community development. However, despite these advancements, social norms, limited mobility, and unequal access to digital technologies continue to restrict full empowerment. Sustainable progress thus requires not only legislative reforms but also cultural transformation and inclusive participation across all sectors of society.

Future Directions for Policy Development:

The next phase of gender mainstreaming must focus on **institutional innovation, digital inclusion, and cross-sectorial collaboration**. Future policies should adopt a holistic approach that integrates gender perspectives into climate action, technological advancement, and sustainable economic planning. Strengthening **gender-responsive data systems** and establishing **national accountability frameworks** will be vital for tracking progress and identifying policy gaps. Enhanced coordination between federal and provincial institutions, supported by civil society and academia, can foster greater alignment between policy design and on-ground realities. Furthermore, **digital gender literacy** should be prioritized to bridge the growing technological divide that limits women's participation in e-governance, entrepreneurship, and education. Policies must also emphasize **intersectionality**, addressing the compounded disadvantages faced by rural women, minorities, and persons with disabilities. By embedding gender equality as a central principle of national development rather than a sectorial goal, Pakistan and other developing nations can move closer to achieving the broader vision of inclusive growth, social justice, and sustainable empowerment in the 21st century.

Future Directions for Policy Development:

The future of gender mainstreaming lies in leveraging technology, enhancing digital gender literacy, and ensuring inclusive governance reforms that place women at the center of national development. As the world transitions toward a digital economy, women's participation in technology-driven sectors has become essential for sustainable empowerment. In Pakistan, digital transformation offers a powerful tool to close gender gaps in education, employment, and entrepreneurship. Initiatives such as Digital Pakistan Vision and Women Empowerment through E-Commerce demonstrate the potential of ICT to promote inclusivity; however, limited access to the internet and digital devices continues to marginalize women, particularly in rural and low-income communities. Addressing this digital divide requires targeted training programs, affordable connectivity, and localized content in native languages to enhance digital gender literacy. Inclusive governance reforms are equally vital. Gender-responsive policymaking must be institutionalized across all levels of government, ensuring that women's voices are represented in decision-making processes from local councils to federal ministries. Establishing **Gender Innovation Hubs**—collaborations among government, academia, and the private sector—can help design and test innovative policies that integrate data analytics and AI for gender equity tracking. Furthermore, policy frameworks should incorporate gender-sensitive evaluation tools and accountability mechanisms to monitor outcomes and resource utilization effectively. Strengthening inter-ministerial coordination, ensuring transparency through open data systems, and fostering civic participation can transform gender mainstreaming from a theoretical framework into a living reality. Ultimately, embedding digital

inclusion and participatory governance in policy design will empower women not only as beneficiaries but as equal partners in shaping Pakistan's economic, social, and technological future.

Gender and Economic Participation:

Women's economic participation remains a vital indicator of empowerment and national development. In Pakistan and other developing countries, women contribute significantly to both formal and informal sectors, yet their participation is often undervalued and underreported. The informal economy—comprising home-based work, agriculture, and small-scale trading—absorbs a large portion of the female labor force but lacks adequate legal protection, social security, and fair wage mechanisms. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, women's labor force participation stands at around 23%, far below global averages, highlighting persistent structural barriers. Wage disparities continue to be a major concern, with women earning on average 30–40% less than men for equivalent work, reflecting deep-rooted gender bias and limited access to higher-paying, skilled positions. Financial inclusion initiatives, such as the State Bank of Pakistan's banking on Equality Policy (2021), aim to increase women's access to credit, mobile banking, and entrepreneurship opportunities. However, cultural constraints, limited financial literacy, and bureaucratic hurdles often impede women's ability to start or sustain businesses. To promote true economic empowerment, there is a pressing need to expand women-led enterprises, strengthen microfinance schemes, and embed gender equity in corporate governance and national labor policies.

Education and Skill Development for Empowerment:

Education serves as the foundation of women's empowerment, enabling social mobility, political awareness, and economic participation. Over the last two decades, Pakistan has made progress in reducing gender gaps in primary and secondary education through initiatives like Punjab Education Sector Reform Programmed (PESRP) and Tailam Sab Kay Lie. However, disparities remain, particularly in rural areas where socio-cultural norms and poverty restrict girls' access to education. The transition from education to employment also highlights a mismatch between acquired skills and market demands. Vocational training programs under the National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTTC) have attempted to address this gap by offering women-focused courses in IT, handicrafts, and entrepreneurship. Moreover, the rise of digital learning platforms—such as DigiSkills Pakistan—is creating new opportunities for women to engage in remote work and online businesses. Yet, challenges such as digital illiteracy, lack of mentorship, and limited technological infrastructure persist. For sustainable empowerment, education policies must move beyond access and focus on quality, relevance, and innovation—integrating STEM education, leadership training, and gender-sensitive curricula to prepare women for leadership roles in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy.

Education and Skill Development for Empowerment:

Education and skill development are the cornerstones of women's empowerment, shaping their capacity to participate fully in economic, political, and social life. Despite notable progress in expanding access to education, **gender disparities in quality and retention** continue to hinder equitable development. In Pakistan, while primary school enrollment for girls has increased in recent years, dropout rates remain high due to poverty, early marriage, and inadequate school infrastructure—especially in rural and tribal regions. Access to **quality education** is further constrained by unequal teacher distribution, gender-insensitive curricula, and limited access to science and technology subjects. Women's enrollment in **vocational and technical training** programs also remains disproportionately low, often limited to traditionally feminine trades such as tailoring or home economics, which restrict upward mobility in emerging industries. In higher education, female participation has improved significantly—with women comprising nearly half of university students in Pakistan—but representation remains skewed across disciplines. Fewer women pursue STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields due to societal biases, lack of mentorship, and limited institutional support. However, **digital learning platforms** have emerged as transformative tools for bridging educational and skill gaps. Programs such as DigiSkills Pakistan, Virtual University's E-Learning Initiatives, and Courser for Women have

empowered thousands of women to acquire market-relevant skills in IT, business, and digital entrepreneurship from their homes. These platforms mitigate barriers of mobility, cultural restrictions, and safety concerns that often prevent women from attending physical institutions. To fully realize the potential of digital learning, governments and educational institutions must invest in **digital infrastructure, internet access, and localized content** in regional languages. Additionally, fostering public-private partnerships to expand online training opportunities, providing mentorship networks, and promoting gender-inclusive policies in academia can create a sustainable pathway for women's empowerment through education. Ultimately, skill development rooted in digital literacy, innovation, and inclusivity will enable women to thrive as equal contributors to the knowledge economy of the 21st century

Political Representation and Leadership:

Women's political representation is a defining measure of empowerment and democratic inclusion. In Pakistan, the introduction of **reserved seats and gender quotas** has significantly improved women's visibility in political and governance structures. The **Constitution of Pakistan (Articles 51 and 106)** mandates 17% representation of women in the National and Provincial Assemblies, while local government acts in provinces like Punjab and Sindh further allocate 33% of seats for women in district and tehsil councils. This affirmative action has led to an unprecedented increase in the number of female legislators, policymakers, and community leaders over the past two decades. However, despite numerical gains, **substantive political participation** remains constrained by patriarchal structures, party hierarchies, and socio-cultural barriers that limit women's decision-making power. Many women enter politics through reserved seats rather than general elections, which often curtails their influence in major policy debates and resource distribution. Leadership programs such as **Women in Politics Support Program (UNDP-Pakistan)** and the **Aurora Initiative** have played a vital role in training women for governance roles, negotiation, and advocacy. Yet, systemic challenges persist—ranging from inadequate funding for female candidates to media underrepresentation and gender-based harassment within political spaces. The future of inclusive governance depends on transforming these symbolic presences into **substantive leadership**. Strengthening internal democracy within political parties, enforcing gender quotas in decision-making committees, and promoting mentorship for emerging women leaders can enhance participation beyond tokenism. Furthermore, incorporating digital platforms for political education and civic engagement will empower women to participate more actively in public discourse. By ensuring equitable access to leadership roles and decision-making power, Pakistan can move toward **Political Representation and Leadership:**

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Gender and Health Equity:

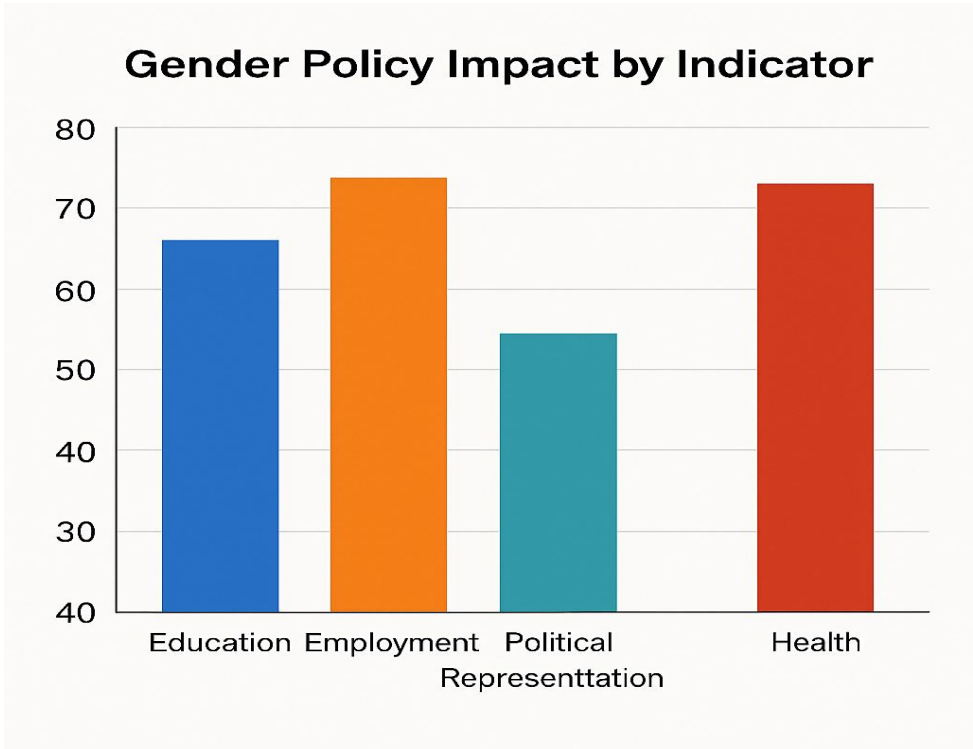
Gender and health equity are closely intertwined, as women's access to healthcare often reflects broader patterns of social inequality and institutional bias. In Pakistan, despite policy commitments to universal health coverage, **gender-based disparities** continue to influence health outcomes across all socioeconomic groups. Women face multiple barriers—ranging from restricted mobility and lack of financial independence to sociocultural norms that prioritize male health needs over female well-being. These constraints significantly affect access to quality healthcare, especially in rural and marginalized communities where healthcare infrastructure is limited and female medical personnel are scarce. Reproductive health and maternal care remain critical challenges. While initiatives such as the Lady Health Worker (LHW) Program and Maternal, Neonatal, and Child Health (MNCH) Program have improved maternal health indicators, issues like early marriage, inadequate prenatal care, and high maternal mortality rates persist. The absence of comprehensive reproductive rights education and stigma surrounding family planning further undermine women's autonomy in healthcare decisions. Additionally, **mental health**, long neglected in national policy, disproportionately affects women due to gender-based violence, domestic pressures, and social isolation. The integration of mental health into Pakistan's National Health Vision 2025 marks a step forward, but stigma, lack of trained professionals, and limited awareness continue to restrict access to psychological care. To achieve genuine gender and health equity, the healthcare system must adopt a **gender-sensitive approach**—ensuring that policies, budgets, and delivery systems explicitly address women's distinct needs. This includes expanding female healthcare workforce participation, enhancing access to reproductive and mental health services, and improving data collection on gender-specific health indicators. Collaborative efforts among the government, NGOs, and international partners can create inclusive frameworks that prioritize prevention, awareness, and equitable service delivery. Ultimately, embedding gender sensitivity in healthcare policy is not only a matter of social justice but a prerequisite for achieving sustainable national development and public well-being.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Data Systems for Gender Policies:

Effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are essential for ensuring that gender policies translate into tangible outcomes and sustainable empowerment. The foundation of this process lies in **gender-disaggregated data collection**, which allows policymakers to identify gaps, assess progress, and design interventions that address the specific needs of women and men. In many developing contexts, including Pakistan, a major limitation in gender policy evaluation is the absence of reliable and comprehensive data across sectors such as education, health, labor, and governance. Without accurate data, gender equality initiatives often remain symbolic, lacking evidence to guide decision-making and resource allocation. To address this, the establishment of **integrated monitoring systems** has become a global best practice. These systems consolidate information from multiple ministries and agencies, allowing for a unified evaluation of gender outcomes. Pakistan has made progress in this regard through mechanisms like the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) Gender Compendium and UN Women's Gender Equality Dashboard, which compile indicators on literacy, employment, health, and political representation. However, these systems require regular updating, standardized data protocols, and stronger inter-departmental coordination to remain effective.

Digital dashboards and data visualization tools are transforming how gender equality is tracked and communicated. By integrating real-time data collection with artificial intelligence (AI) and geographic information systems (GIS), policymakers can now map gender disparities across regions and monitor the effectiveness of interventions dynamically. Such innovations enable governments, NGOs, and international organizations to move from reactive to proactive policy formulation. Moreover, **evidence-based indicators**—aligned with frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5:

Gender Equality)—ensure that national strategies are measurable, transparent, and accountable. For Pakistan to advance gender-responsive governance, it must institutionalize digital M&E platforms within public administration, train officials in gender data analytics, and encourage open-data collaborations between the state and civil society. In doing so, gender policy evaluation will evolve from periodic reporting to a continuous learning process—strengthening accountability, improving outcomes, and embedding equality as a measurable dimension of national progress.



Summary:
The analysis underscores the dual success and shortfall of gender mainstreaming in the 21st century. While there has been notable progress in expanding educational and political opportunities for women, structural inequities, cultural biases, and institutional inertia continue to impede equitable outcomes. The study calls for a restructured gender governance model with stronger inter-ministerial coordination, continuous monitoring, and inclusive civic participation. By embedding gender-sensitive metrics into national policy evaluations, countries like Pakistan can foster more resilient and equitable societies.

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