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Keywords: Gender Equality, Corporate Pakistan, Equal Pay, Women's Leadership, Anti-Harassment, Patriarchy, Institutional Barriers, International Labor Organization, CEDAW

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Workplace Gender Equality Policies in Pakistani Corporations



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Abstract

Gender equality in the workplace is a key yet unrealized agenda in the Pakistani business world. Women remain largely excluded from the professional sphere due to women-friendly institutional constraints and entrenched patriarchal norms. Although the constitution and law formally ensure equal rights for all, in practice Pakistani corporations have not been able to translate these commitments into policies that are implemented and enforced on the ground and that make a difference for working women. This study critically analyses the nature of gender equality policies in Pakistani corporations, especially Equal Pay, Women in Leadership, anti-harassment policies, and family-friendly workplace policies. In pursuit of these goals, the study adopts a qualitative research approach and relies mainly on secondary sources such as policy documents, institutional reports, and academic literature.

Keywords: *Gender Equality, Corporate Pakistan, Equal Pay, Women's Leadership, Anti-Harassment, Patriarchy, Institutional Barriers, International Labor Organization, CEDAW*

Introduction

Gender equality in the workplace is a central issue in international relations and in domestic governance in the twenty-first century. Women's equal participation in economic life has been highlighted as critical to sustainable development by all global institutions such as the UN, the International Labor Organization and UN Women (Adams, 2013) (United Nations, 1979); (International Labour Organization, 2023). As a signatory of formal endorser of SDGs, Pakistan has embraced these normative commitments. However, it remains one of the lowest countries globally in the Global Gender Gap Index, shining a light on significant and concerning gaps between international commitment and actual practice. The gender pay gap in the corporate environment is alarmingly wide in Pakistan, ranging from 30 to 40 percent; women are underrepresented at leadership positions; and anti-harassment policies are ineffective and on paper only (World Economic Forum, 2024) (International Labour Organization, 2023; Kabeer, 1999; National Commission on the Status of Women, 2023)

The Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010 was a groundbreaking law that placed a duty on workplaces to have inquiry committees to look into complaints of sexual harassment at the workplace level. Employers are required to display the code of conduct at work and to all organizations, public and private, the Act applies. Yet, enforcement has been weak, however. It is the fact that many small and medium enterprises that make the backbone of the corporate structure in Pakistan do not have any formal HR departments and thus, often circumvent the requirements of Act with limited legal liability. (Htun & Weldon, 2018)



Female workers under the Maternity Benefit Ordinance (1958) are entitled to paid maternity leave, which has been amended over the years. But this act is mainly directed at registered establishments, excluded from the scope of which are women working in informal sectors or on contract with registered organizations and those who are women. All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1996 and a number of International Labor Organization (ILO) (United Nations , 1979) conventions on equal remuneration and discrimination in employment. These international commitments are therefore a normative framework for global governance of gender in Pakistan which has been signed and accepted as a formal commitment. (World Economic Forum, 2024) (Kabeer, 1999) (Government of Pakistan, 1973) (Government of Pakistan, 2010) (International Labour Organization, 2023)

Research Methodology

In this study, an exclusive qualitative research approach is used, and only secondary sources are provided to the reader. The material is used in collecting data are academic journals, institutional reports, government policy documents publications of international organizations, and credible news articles. The aim is to examine the existing situation of gender equality policies in Pakistan corporation and to discuss the transformation of these policies into reality for working women.

The study is specifically targeted towards Pakistan corporation because of their strategic and symbolic role in the gender equality paradigm of the country. A key difference between the analysis in this report and a micro-societal level analysis is that this report focuses on the experience of women in corporate workplace, rather than the policies and norms. Secondary data sources were critically assessed for relevance, credibility, and timeliness; preferences was given to sources published since 2018, thereby ensuring the analysis is based on the current policy context.

Literature Review

The Gender Pay Gap in Corporate Pakistan

Gender pay gap is one of the more measurable forms of structural inequality in the corporate world. The gap in wages between male and female in Pakistan doing similar jobs is one of the largest in South Asia. According to the ILO Women at Work Report (2023), the average wage of Pakistani women is 30-40 percent lower than that of their male counterparts in similar job positions. (National Commission on the Status of Women, 2023)

The reason behind the gender age gap in Pakistan's corporate landscape are a number of factors. One, females are overrepresented in low paying industries and in lower positions of organizational structures. Second, as in most corporations in Pakistan, the salary negotiation is unwritten, unregulated and is systematically discriminating against the women, who are socialized against salary negotiation. (Htun & Weldon, 2018) Third, the design of many organizations' bonus and incentive systems include performance-based criteria that are not gender neutral, such as types of unpaid care, which further limit women's ability to work overtime and build relationships and networks that directly shape their appraisal performance. (United Nations , 1979) (World Economic Forum, 2024) (Government of Pakistan, 2022) (Government of Pakistan, 1973) (Government of Pakistan, 2010)

Lack of pay transparency laws in Pakistan allows companies to ensure that the pay gap remains hidden from the public eye. In contrast, there is no similar obligation in Pakistani corporations, as was applied to UK companies that fall under the scope of Gender Pay Gap Reporting Regulations, 2017. (Government of Pakistan, 2022)

Women in Leadership: Representation and the Glass Ceiling

Women's participation in leadership roles in Pakistani companies is extremely low. The OICCI report (2024) noted that women occupy around 19 percent of management-level posts in corporate Pakistan, which drops drastically at senior levels of management and on the boards. The trend of fewer women in the higher ranks of organizations is well documented in IR and organizational studies literature, which is known as the "glass ceiling". (Kabeer, 1999)

There are multiple intersecting forces that strengthen the glass ceiling phenomenon in the Pakistani context of business. Structural exclusion of women from opportunities to build relationships places them at a disadvantage in terms of the cultures of informal networking, which are often dominated by men, such as afterhours events and client entertainment contexts that inform relationship building decisions and lead to promotions. (United Nations, 1979) (National Commission on the Status of Women, 2023)

The diversity at board level is even more limited. The Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP) has called on listed companies to have a board member who is a woman, but this has been a slow process so far. In 2023, less than 10% of the board seats in the top 100 listed companies in Pakistan were occupied by women. (Connell, 2009)

Policy Protection and Implementation

All employers in Pakistan are legally bound to have a formal procedure for sexual harassment complaints as per the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010). The application of this legislation in corporate Pakistan is very inconsistent, 14 years after its enactment. Numerous institutions have established inquiry committees in the abstract, but fail to have the proper procedures, staff members, or institutional autonomy to effectively process complaints in a fair, confidential, and pressure-free manner. (Adams, 2013)

A study revealed that most of the female respondents were not aware of their formal rights under the 2010 Act and that those who were aware were very reluctant to make formal complaints due to fear of professional reprisals, social stigma or organizational inaction. (Khaskheli et al, 2024), This trend is common to the situations of the few legal rights that are formally recognized and protected in IR research and is known as the "chilling effect" of weak institutional enforcement, where formal legal protection is not enough to promote rights-claiming behavior when the informal social and professional costs of claiming rights are high. (Htun & Weldon, 2018) . (Shaheen & Zia, 2022)

Under the Act, the Federal Ombudsman for Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace (FOSPAH), is the main external accountability body. Complaints which cannot be solved at the organizational level are forwarded to FOSPAH and dealt with by it. Awareness of FOSPAH among working women is low and the load of cases reported to FOSPAH, although increasing, is known to be a fraction of the real cases of workplace harassment in Pakistan. (Kabeer, 1999) (Government of Pakistan, 2022)

Policies for a Family-Friendly Workplace

The maternity leave policy, flexible working arrangements and provision of on-site childcare facilities are all widely acknowledged as important enabling conditions for women's continued participation in the labor force internationally. However, the extent and level of these policies are highly variable across the Pakistani corporate world depending on the size, sector and ownership of the corporation. (Government of Pakistan, 1973) (Government of Pakistan, 2010)

Generally, larger multinational companies that have operations in Pakistan offer maternity leave in accordance or beyond the statutory requirements and some have offered partial flexibility on working hours. (Government of Pakistan, 2022)

Family-friendly policies are mostly missing in small and medium enterprises where most of the formal sector jobs are found in Pakistan. The Maternity Benefit Ordinance covers registered establishments, but it is not well enforced, and many SMEs do not have formal HR systems. Women working in these environments are often confronted with the dilemma of either staying or leaving from the occupation because of the absence of reproductive and caring considerations. This is the latter which directly affects the low percentage of females in the labor force in Pakistan's corporate sector. (United Nations , [1979](#))

Paternity leave, one of the significant policy measures that can help in the redistribution of duties within the household and the acceptance of fathers' role in family care, is largely missing from the policy frameworks of Pakistani companies. Importantly, a large body of research has consistently shown that while gender equality in the workplace can be achieved, that cannot be done without simultaneous shifts in the gender divide of unpaid domestic work. Lack of paternity leave provisions in the corporate culture of Pakistan is a testament to the prevailing belief that care is a woman's job, and gender equality policies need to squarely address this belief to create a lasting impact. (World Economic Forum, [2024](#)) . (Shaheen & Zia, [2022](#))

The Importance of International Organisations and Government Activities

International organizations have gained greater influence in creating discourse and practice around gender equality in the workplace in Pakistan. The International Labor Organization (ILO), UN Women and the World Bank have all worked with government and private sector actors in Pakistan to push gender-inclusive labor market policies (Kabeer, [1999](#)) .UN Women's "HeForShe" campaign, which is followed by many companies in Pakistan, asks male leaders to publicly pledge to create gender parity as a central value of the organization. Although symbolic aspects of campaigns matter in influencing organization culture, their actual effectiveness relies on whether senior leadership commitment is realized in terms of tangible changes in policies and in terms of resource allocation. (United Nations , [1979](#)) (International Labour Organization, [2023](#))

ILO's Better Work Program and its overarching Decent Work Agenda have affected Pakistan's labor standards discussions although the extent to which Pakistan has been engaged in the Better Work Program has been more limited than that of some other regional states. Both the Equal Remuneration Convention (Convention No. 100) and Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (Convention No. 111) adopted by ILO have been invoked in the national policy debate on equal pay, and they have been partially implemented in Pakistan's domestic labor law. (World Economic Forum, [2024](#)) (Htun & Weldon, [2018](#)) (Government of Pakistan, [1973](#)) (Government of Pakistan, [2010](#))

The National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) is the main government body responsible for the implementation of the policy of gender equality in Pakistan. While the NCSW has accomplished a lot in the field of research and policy on workplace gender equality, institutional capacity and funding for the NCSW is significantly lower than the need. The Commission's recommendations to the legislature, such as those for pay transparency and enforceable board diversity quotas and enhanced childcare facilities, have been discussed in the legislative arena, but so far have failed to result in significant legislation in the corporate world. (National Commission on the Status of Women, [2023](#)) . (Shaheen & Zia, [2022](#))

Corporate Initiatives & Best Practices

Many of the Pakistan companies, especially those that are multinational owned or companies that want to meet the minimum requirements in the law to achieve gender equality are implementing gender equality programs that are more extensive than required. Unilever Pakistan has been acknowledged for its "Un-stereotype" campaign and gender balanced representation in managerial positions in the organization. Engro Corporation has undertaken initiatives to develop a talent pipeline of senior female employees through a formal mentorship

program and career development interventions. (Government of Pakistan, [1973](#)) (Government of Pakistan, [2010](#))

The Overseas Investors Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OICCI) representing a large segment of the Pakistani Multinational Corporate Sector (MCS) has sought to improve the Gender Equality Policy among its members and has issued guidelines for corporate actions. These frameworks are an important form of voluntary governance, but are not legally binding, and provide reputational incentives for member companies to 'go the extra mile' in respect of gender equality performance. (Kabeer, [1999](#)) . (Shaheen & Zia, [2022](#))

There is a relatively better performance among the banking and financial sector corporations in some of the gender equality indicators in part due to the fact that this sector is more vulnerable to international regulatory standards and investors' scrutiny. SBP has provided guidelines to financial institutions to promote gender-inclusive employment practices. But, even in this relatively more progressive industry, there has been under representation of women at the board and C-suite level. (Shaheen & Zia, [2022](#))

Structural and Cultural Barriers to Policy Implementation

In Pakistan corporate environment, there are several interrelated hurdles that hinder the success of even well-intentioned policies.

Perhaps the most ubiquitous obstacle is the patriarchy of institutional culture. Gender hierarchy is normalized, naturalized and reinforced in society as a whole and in Pakistan corporations, and is reinforced by regular interactions within the corridors of society. Even if men do not have an intent to discriminate, when they are in positions of power within businesses, they are likely to adopt the gender norms of the wider culture in how they run their business and make decisions. (Government of Pakistan, [2022](#))

A second key structural challenge is the lack of strong enforcement measures. The labor inspection system in Pakistan is under-resourced, under-resourced on labor staff and lacks the independence, training and capacity to effectively monitor compliance of companies with gender equality legislation. Without a credible threat of enforcement, corporations have less incentive to invest in going beyond symbolism in implementing policies. (Connell, [2009](#))

Key Findings

- Pakistan has a formal legal framework for gender equality in the workplace, such as the constitution, the Protection Against Harassment Act (2010) and international treaty obligations under the CEDAW and ILO conventions, but implementation of these frameworks in the corporate sphere continues to be weak and sporadic.
- Pakistani corporations have a gender gap of about 19 percent at the level of management (as per the international recommended percentage of 30 percent), and that gap widens significantly in the senior management and board levels.
- Gender pay gap is estimated to be 30 to 40 percent in the corporate sector in Pakistan which is one of the highest in the South Asian region, which is maintained through informal compensation systems, lack of pay transparency and gendered performance evaluation systems.
- In practice, anti-harassment procedures required by the 2010 Act are underutilized, and many companies have the procedure in place on paper but fail to provide any of the required procedural safeguards or training for those responsible for making complaints or investigations or to ensure that the committees are independent of management.
- The policies are more likely to be in place in multinational companies than in SMEs who provide most formal corporate jobs in Pakistan, such as maternity leave and flexible working.

- Existing international bodies such as ILO, UN Women, and the World Bank have helped to shape the policy debate; however, their impact on the practices of companies is low without a robust domestic enforcement framework.
- A few companies, mainly multi-nationals or large-listed companies, have introduced substantial and positive measures to promote gender equality which show what can be done, but these best practices have yet to be adopted on a wider level in the corporate world.
- Gender equality policies are still failing to deliver tangible results in the real world, due to deep structural barriers such as patriarchal institutional cultures, lax regulatory enforcement and social mobility restrictions.

Discussion

The results of this report suggest a pervasive and worrisome trend: despite a formal structure of gender equality policy from constitutionally enshrining gender equality to committing to it in international treaties to enacting specific legislation to address gender equality in the workplace there has been little progress in the lived experience of women in corporate environments. An analysis of this gap cannot be limited to stating that the gap is a lack of policy; instead, it must move beyond that to understanding the structural and cultural forces that create this gap.

From a constructivist IR perspective, the gap between Pakistan's international norm commitments on gender equality and the actual practices in the corporate world can be attributed to the problem of "decoupling," which occurs when states speak and act a norm but do not engage in the behaviors it prescribes. The ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against the Woman (CEDAW), endorsement of the Beijing Platform for Action and the formal acceptance of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations are all indicators of the normative acceptance of gender equality as an international standard in Pakistan. However, the implementation of these pledges within the country is incomplete and limited.

Realism theory explains the non-achievement of workplace gender equality policies in Pakistani corporations even though there are legislation and international commitments. In the Realism perspective, the primary focus of states and institutions is ensuring their own interests, power, and stability, not moral values or ideal principles. In Pakistan's context, the implementation of gender equality policies by corporations could be primarily for the purpose of creating a positive impression on the public, meeting expectations of international organizations, securing foreign investment, or adhering to international corporate expectations, rather than for the purpose of meaningful change. Realists would argue that strong individuals, in the corporate setting and especially those in a leadership position, who are mostly men, are more inclined to keep the system the same that sustains their authority and control.

Consequently, gender equality policies are frequently enacted in symbolic, but not real, ways. Realism also makes sense of why institutions are weak in providing enforcement mechanisms, since they focus on economic and organizational interests rather than social justice issues. However, realist theory holds that Pakistan has signed on to international agreements like CEDAW and it has goals set under the SDGs with regard to gender equality, but unless these attain the goals of political and corporate elites, they will not guarantee domestic change. Hence, the importance of realism in understanding the disconnect between policy promises and the realities of workplaces regarding gender equality policies in Pakistani corporations, where power structures, institutional interests, and social hierarchy remain influential in the implementation and enforcement of gender equality policies.

The liberal feminist institutional point of view would suggest that stronger enforcement measures should be put in place to address this de-coupling, and that more resources should be put towards gender equality institutions like the NCSW and FOSPAH, and that there should be mandated, not voluntary, reporting on gender equality indicators by corporations. The view is that the basic issue is not cultural but institutional even within highly patriarchal social environments, corporate behavior can be modified if appropriate incentives, accountability systems, and legal requirements are put in place.

The structural feminist point of view, however, would argue that institutional reform cannot occur without a change in the gendered power relations undergirding corporate life. For as long as senior decision-making positions in Pakistani companies continue to be dominated by males, formal gender equality policies will continue to be applied in a manner that entombs the informal gender divide in decision making. This vision requires a more radical agenda to cure the symptoms of gender inequality as well as its structural causes.

Recommendations

- The government should enact a pay transparency law that mandates companies exceed a certain size to publicly disclose data on gender pay gaps, and have penalties for those that fail to comply.
- The SECP should adopt a compulsory disclosure and minimum representation framework to replace the voluntary gender diversity framework in the listed companies' Boards.
- The 2010 Protection Against Harassment Act should be modified to increase the institutional capacity of FOSPAH, increase public awareness of women's rights under the Protection against harassment Act and impose tighter penalties for corporate non-compliance.
- The government, in collaboration with the private sector, should institute a National Corporate Gender Equality Index that monitors and publicly reports on corporations' progress on key gender equality metrics that provides reputational incentives for improvement.
- Paternity leave should be made a mandatory provision within companies, and should be implemented to shift the burden of domestic responsibilities and eliminate the structural disadvantages for women's career development.
- OICCI and the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI) and other industry associations should create peer learning platforms to scale up gender equality best practices from leading companies to the rest of the corporate community.
- There is a need for the corporates to change their behavior and this can be achieved by imposing more external accountability, such as by linking the development of programs for the corporate sector to the achievement of gender equality benchmarks.
- There is a need for universities and professional institutions to incorporate gender equality and women's labor rights into the curriculum of business and management education to create a new breed of business managers who have a strong sense of social responsibility towards fairness in the workplace.

Conclusion

Gender equality in the workplace is a significant turning point for Pakistan in its corporate sector. Compared to 20 years ago, the formal policy structure is more robust. There are constitutional safeguards, there is a landmark law, there are international pledges and a lot of companies have begun to take the issue of gender equality seriously. There are constitutional protections, there is a landmark legislation, there are international commitments and a growing number of companies are introducing gender equality initiatives of real substance. These are genuine advances and deserve to be recognized.

However, the shift in formal policies has not been proportionate to the shift in experience for women who work in Pakistani corporations on a day-to-day basis. There is still a very large gender pay gap, women's participation in leadership positions is still very low, anti-harassment policies are not well established or implemented and structural and cultural obstacles to the full participation of women in corporate life are still very strong. What is happening in the workplace versus what is written in the policy documents is the main issue that needs to be taken up by Pakistani corporations, regulators and civil society with far more seriousness and urgency.

Equality for women is not a one-woman, one-vote issue; it's a matter of fairness for everyone in the corporate world. It is the matter of national economic interest, integrity of the institutions and capability of the Pakistan to fulfil its commitments to the Pakistani people and its international community. The evidence examined in this report is clear that there is meaningful progress to be made, and that this takes the form of institutional change rather than incremental adjustment and institutional change, which is deliberate, accountable, and sustained.

