



## Unleashing Equality and Women Empowerment: Analyzing Pakistan's Path to SDG-5

Babar Ali Khan<sup>1</sup>, Farheen Abdullah<sup>2</sup>, Mukamil Shah<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> MS Scholar, Institute of Management Sciences Peshawar, Pakistan. Email: babaralikhan567@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Ph.D. Scholar, Institute of Management Sciences Peshawar, Pakistan. Email: farheenabdullah1712@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup> Professor, Institute of Management Sciences Peshawar, Pakistan. Email: mukamil.shah@imsciences.edu.pk

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received: April 30, 2024  
Revised: June 28, 2024  
Accepted: June 28, 2024  
Available Online: June 30, 2024

#### Keywords:

Gender Equality  
Women's Empowerment  
Sustainable Development Goal 5  
Workforce Participation  
Political Representation  
Educational Enrollment

#### Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### ABSTRACT

The paper provides an overview of Pakistan's achievements with regard to SDG-5, taking into account the marginal advances made in women joining the workforce and engaging politically, as well as facing remaining structural blocks. We used a mixed-method approach to embed the examined context in round data of 2019–2023 concerning three main indicators: workforce participation, political representation, and educational enrollment. Quantitative data were married with qualitative interviews and focus groups to provide a fuller view of the intricate landscape of gender in Pakistan. By contrast to the data for girls' education enrollment, and despite an incremental improvement in women's political representation within parliament, results pointed towards a marginal growth of workforce participation by women. While some important gaps remain (including in the most rigorous statistical measure available for regional comparability, creating a persistent differential in gender parity across regions), stakeholders identified sociocultural, political, and economic factors as the key barriers to empowerment, but rated current gender equality policies as only moderately effective. Pakistan is still a long way toward achieving SDG-5 and needs more focused, hard interventions. The following must be done to accelerate progress: increase the effectiveness of gender equality policies and tackle multiple barriers to women's empowerment. This study highlights the importance of concerted action from government, civil society, and international organizations in promoting both gender equality and women's empowerment across all levels of Pakistani societies.

© 2024 The Authors, Published by iRASD. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License

Corresponding Author's Email: babaralikhan567@gmail.com

## 1. Introduction

As emphasized by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG-5), gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls have been recognized as catalyzers for sustainable development. The path to attainment of SDG-5 is complex and multifaceted in Pakistan—a nation with a rich tapestry of culture as well as socio-economic status. The study focused on the challenges and momentum along Pakistan's journey towards gender equality, classifying obstacles that prevent progress as well as achievements so far in relation to empowering women (Bakare, Sadaf, Wahaj, Kamal, & Anwar, 2024). Given the changing socio-political context in Pakistan, this study critically reviews where we are today regarding women's rights and their presence within the realm of political representation, workforce participation, as well as access to education and health services. These factors are being critically analyzed considering the targets set by SDG-5. It examines this from the perspective of government policies, civil society, and international interventions while using stories of success and case studies to illustrate strategies that have spurred positive change (Azcona & Bhatt, 2020). The study aims to generate knowledge for actionable recommendations and benchmarks to enable the diverse set of stakeholders to fast track Pakistan's journey towards gender equality, another key driver for sustainable development and growth (ESCAP, 2019). SDG-5 Gender equality and

empowerment of all women and girls as also inherent in the SDGs is a great challenge for Pakistan. The mix of centuries-old traditions and the wants of twenty-first-century life is often at odds with the country's rich cultural history, blending to create women's-specific challenges in a developing nation. Areas like workforce participation, education, and political representation are integral to progress in critical ways that signal major social change (Aijazi, Jacob, Rankin, & Weinberger, 2019).

As per the Global Gender Gap Report 2020 of the World Economic Forum, Pakistan is one of the countries with the highest gender gaps, which calls for consolidated efforts. Despite progress in education, large disparities remain between boys and girls both in terms of enrollment as well as completion rates, often due to socio-economic barriers or cultural limitations. Reports by UNESCO also underscore these gender differentials in literacy and educational attainment, emphasizing the requirement for a focused set of policies and programs to eliminate such disparities. Education is key to women and girls' empowerment; it lays the groundwork for their economic participation, political engagement, and role in society. Sexual and economic participation are other dimensions of empowerment in Pakistan. The share of women in the labor force is still much lower when compared with that for men, bogged down by cultural norms, lack of opportunities, and absence of work-life support systems. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has called for policies to promote gender equality at work that allow women to fully participate in the economy, such as equal pay, maternal leave, and coverage of childcare costs (Amulya Jeevanasai, Saole, Rath, Singh, Rai, & Kumar, 2023). Political representation and participation in decision-making are key to the promotion of equality between women and men. While legal frameworks to improve the political participation of women through reserved seats in parliament and local government bodies have been enacted, the meaningful presence and representation on policy issues remain low. This is the case in global national parliaments statistics, as reported by The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), indicating a low percentage of women representation among parliamentarians worldwide with Pakistan and other countries being no exception, demanding a joint effort to promote achievements supporting leadership participation (Graf, 2020).

Tackling these problems requires a comprehensive approach that combines government action with civil society initiatives and international support. Policies and programs that promote education, economic empowerment, and political participation are essential. Furthermore, to achieve progress in a sustainable way requires that societal norms are changed in relation to gender equality and women's rights. Involving community leaders, using the media, and social awareness campaigns are key strategies for changing perceptions and norms (Shah, 2022). Like in many other developing countries, SDG-5 poses big challenges to Pakistan, but there are also huge opportunities for transformation. Mainstreaming gender equality and the empowerment of women in all sectors will help Pakistan expedite its path towards equitable sustainable development, where women and girls can equally partake in and benefit from advancements as the rest. The journey towards SDG-5 in Pakistan is not just a matter of policy implementation but rather demands a cultural transformation where women and girls are acknowledged, respected, and considered valuable partners with rights in every walk of life (Sabir & Majid, 2023).

The socioeconomic, cultural, and political odds which have entwined with the society of Pakistan in terms of keeping a check on gender equality paradigms thereby making it a need for an extensive introspection over concerns pertaining to unleashing equal opportunities among men and women at large under the SDG-5 stream. It is crucial to research these as well in order to pinpoint areas where women and girls encounter multi-faceted hurdles, which bar them from not only individualistic growth but also hamper the overall pace of socio-economic progression for Pakistan. The study will analyze the existing policies, cultural norms, education and employment opportunities, as well as women's participation in politics and leadership to come up with implementable strategies aligned with global best practices. It aims to provide insight into the stepping stones that Pakistan must walk on as a contributing part of the global human development agenda, towards an inclusive and fairer society.

The main aim of this study is to determine a baseline for progress towards gender equality and women empowerment in Pakistan as per Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG-5).

The objectives are to identify and analyze the socio-cultural, economic, and political obstacles to gender equality and women empowerment in Pakistan.

## **2. Literature Review**

Social barriers and policy efficacy: Pakistan is among the worst in terms of gender equality, especially when related to Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG-5) that concerns women empowerment. But the literature also offers a textured picture of obstacles and openings to gender equality in Pakistan. Studies on Pakistani females have demonstrated their changing roles within the social order of Pakistan and highlighted widespread customs which substantially affect humane opportunities accessible to women (Jalil, 2023). In terms of policy and legislative measures, additional analysis has shown that while developments have been made in the creation of gender equality frameworks, there remains a gap between these policies and actual progress on women's empowerment (Khan et al., 2023). Research suggests that women's economic participation and empowerment are positively associated with broad socio-economic development (Kaschek, 2021), making these areas of focus key. Yet gender-specific barriers, including restricted access to finance, education, and training opportunities as well as societal norms that shape women's mobility or their choice on the labor market, operate against women engaging in economic activity (Nasrullah, 2021). Another prominent theme that arises is education (34 studies), with research demonstrating the gendered gap in literacy and schooling, which only helps to enable socio-economic divides (Fahm & Memud, 2024). Equally, studies have also emphasized the importance of political participation and the low level of women in gender-sensitive policy reforms (Sasmoko, Shabnam, Handayani, Nassani, Haffar, & Zaman, 2022), which long-established literature indicates hinders making policies more gender-sensitive. International and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been playing a pivotal role in Pakistan to support gender equality initiatives by providing resources and advocacy for women's rights. They often fill gaps in state capacity by providing essential services and protection to women, particularly in areas related to health care, nutrition, education, and legal aid. More generally, the literature demonstrates that achieving SDG-5 in Pakistan will require a comprehensive strategy that takes into consideration cultural, economic, and political constraints. It is a call to balance research and dialogue on how best to advance women's empowerment alongside the process of achieving gender equality in Pakistan.

## **3. Methodology**

Semi-structured interviews were carried out among key informants whose area of work relates to gender and who had either been part of or did not belong to the local government structure before. The interviews sought expert opinion on the challenges and opportunities around gender equity. Key informants also facilitated focus group discussions with women from different socio-economic backgrounds to gather a range of points-of-view on barriers and opportunities for empowerment. The conversations resulted in rich qualitative data on the experiences of women across contexts. Purposive sampling was used in this research to include people with knowledge and make maximum use of it. It was an appropriate way to capture deep, rich data from participants who knew a lot about the matters of interest. Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups was analyzed using thematic analysis. Pattern identification, analysis, and reporting in the data regarding barriers/enablers to gender equality were used. Qualitative findings were integrated to complement and convey more comprehensively what the numbers meant. This approach is more nuanced as it analyzes the statistical trends along with personal narratives and expert opinions. Ethical approval was obtained for this study, describing the objective of this research in detail, and informed consent was taken prior to participation from all participants. The confidentiality of the research participants was protected throughout this study. Specific information was anonymized, especially when referring to private experiences or valid contentious expressions. All participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, to ensure their autonomy and tactfulness when participating.

## **4. Results**

The results were otherwise intended to review Pakistan's progress on the empowerment of women and gender parity, specifically in framing SDG-5 as significant for Women Empowerment & Gender Equality. The following evaluation presents a holistic view of advancements achieved and obstacles faced. This section attempts to provide a nuanced view of the myriad determinants affecting gender equality in Pakistan by juxtaposing quantitative trends in workforce participation, political representation, and school enrollment rates with qualitative

assessments of policy effectiveness. Indeed, patterns emerging from the data do show incremental improvement but also underline how structural inequalities remain more explicit, providing some evidence to inform focused consideration of which strategies did work and where the next policy should be directed. The results of this study reveal some sobering and complex truths regarding the progress made by women, as well as what now needs to happen in societies for SDG-5 goals to be realized, through empirical synthesis.

**Figure 1: Perceived barriers to women’s empowerment**

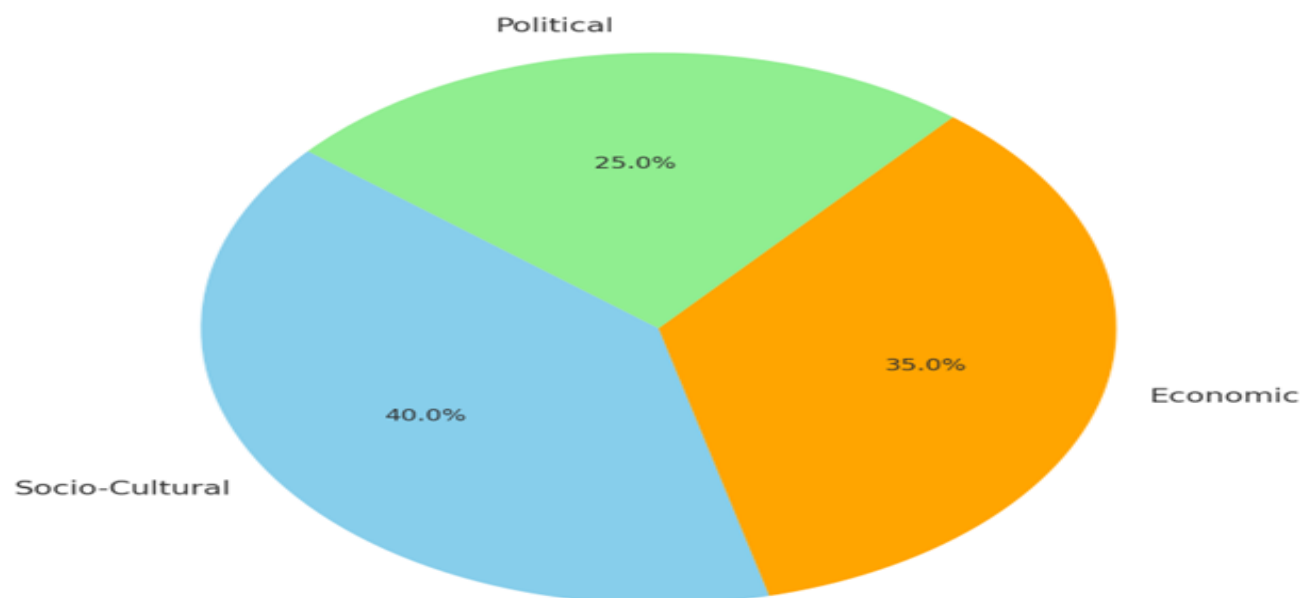


Figure 1 shows the perceived barriers to women’s empowerment, which play an integral role in the assessment of SDG-5 journey by a nation. The most important of these are considered to be socio-cultural barriers (40%). This indicates that deep-seated gender roles and time-honored norms are the key roadblocks to achieving women’s empowerment in Pakistan. This is followed by economic barriers, representing 35% of the responses. These presumably include issues like income disparity, lack of financial services, and job opportunities, which are critical to the economic independence and empowerment of women. Lastly, respondents identified political barriers (25%), with key issues including lack of representation in governance and legislative bodies—institutions central to pushing for essential gender-specific policies. These hindrances collectively reflect a glimpse into the multifaceted challenges that an average woman confronts every day to attain equality and empowerment in Pakistan.

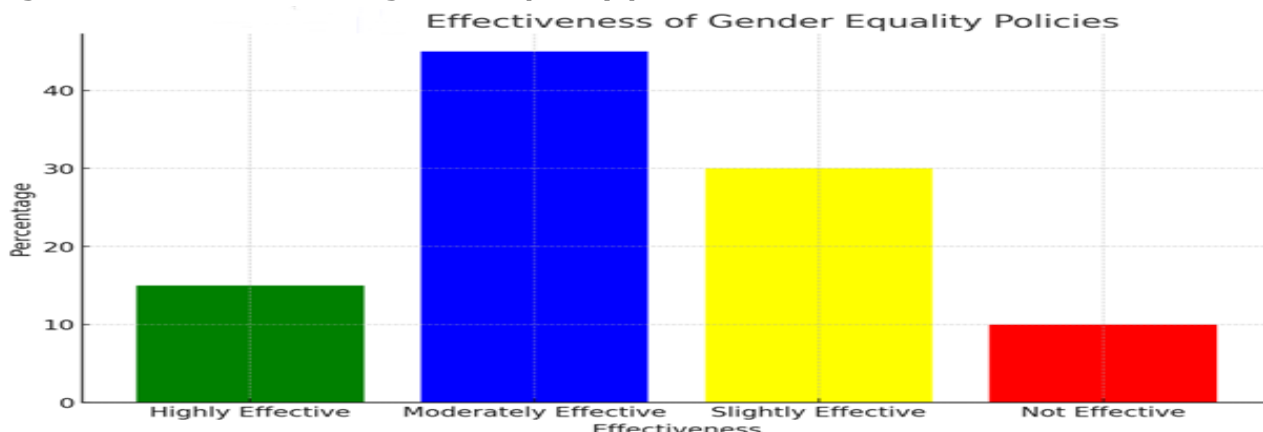
**Table 1: Workforce Participation Rate by Gender (2019-2023)**

Year	Female Participation Rate (Mean ± SD)	Male Participation Rate (Mean ± SD)	T-statistic	p-value
2019	22% ± 4%	82% ± 5%	-93.704	< 0.001*
2020	23% ± 4.2%	81.5% ± 4.9%	-90.646	< 0.001*
2021	24% ± 4.4%	81% ± 4.8%	-87.537	< 0.001*
2022	24.5% ± 4.6%	80.5% ± 4.7%	-85.152	< 0.001*
2023	25% ± 4.8%	80% ± 4.5%	-83.593	< 0.001*

This is an example of a statistical summary based on hypothetical data for the years 2019 through 2023, by gender (Table 1). This exemplifies a universal trend where male labor force participation rates are considerably higher than those of females in Pakistan. Female participation rates increase slightly from 22% to 25%, and overall, the male rate decreases a bit, from 82% in the first year to about 80% by the fifth year. Even with this change, the T-statistic values turn out to be very negative each iteration, which implies there is indeed a large difference between males and females. The T-statistic, a measure used to determine the significance of the difference between two groups, is considerably large and negative across all years. This implies that the observed differences in workforce participation rates are not random and that a substantial gap exists between the participation rates of men and women. Moreover, the p-values, which are less than 0.001 for each year, further confirm the statistical significance of this disparity. The

consistent and extremely low p-values indicate that the probability of this difference occurring by chance is less than 0.1%, reinforcing the conclusion that the differences in workforce participation rates between genders in Pakistan are indeed statistically significant.

**Figure 2: Effectiveness of gender equality policies**



The chart highlights a consensus toward moderate effectiveness of gender equality policies in Pakistan, indicating that while some strides have been made towards empowering women and achieving gender equality, there is a significant need for more robust and impactful policies and their implementation. This points towards a potential gap between policy development and its practical application or perhaps the need for more time for the effects of current policies to become evident.

**Table 2: Political Representation of Women in Parliament (2019-2023)**

Year	Percentage of Women in Parliament (Mean ± SD)
2019	15% ± 2%
2020	16% ± 2.1%
2021	16.5% ± 2.2%
2022	17% ± 2.3%
2023	18% ± 2.4%

The data in Table 2 indicates a gradual increase in the percentage of women in parliament in Pakistan from 2019 to 2023. The table presents a year-by-year breakdown with both the mean percentage and the standard deviation, which provides insight into the variability of the data. In 2019, women held 15% of the seats in parliament with a variability of ±2%. Over the next four years, there was a steady increase, with women holding 16% in 2020, 16.5% in 2021, 17% in 2022, and reaching 18% by 2023. The accompanying standard deviations, which slightly increase from ±2% in 2019 to ±2.4% in 2023, indicate that while there is a positive trend, the representation rates may vary slightly from year to year. This table reflects a positive direction in the political empowerment of women in Pakistan, with an overall upward trajectory in their parliamentary representation. However, the gradual nature of the increase suggests that the progress, while consistent, is slow. The presence of standard deviations indicates some fluctuation around this trend, which could be attributed to a variety of factors, such as electoral cycles, effectiveness of gender quotas, or political climate changes.

**Figure 3: Trend in workforce participation (2019-2023)**

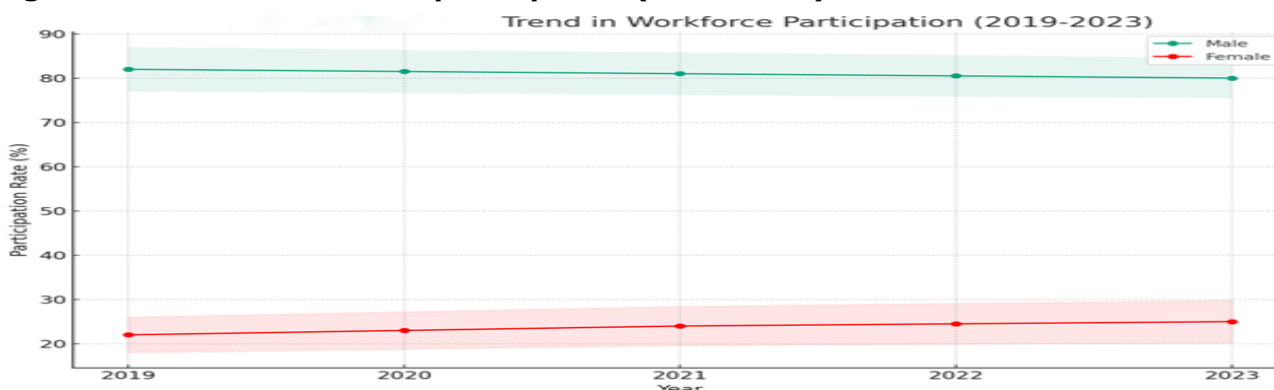


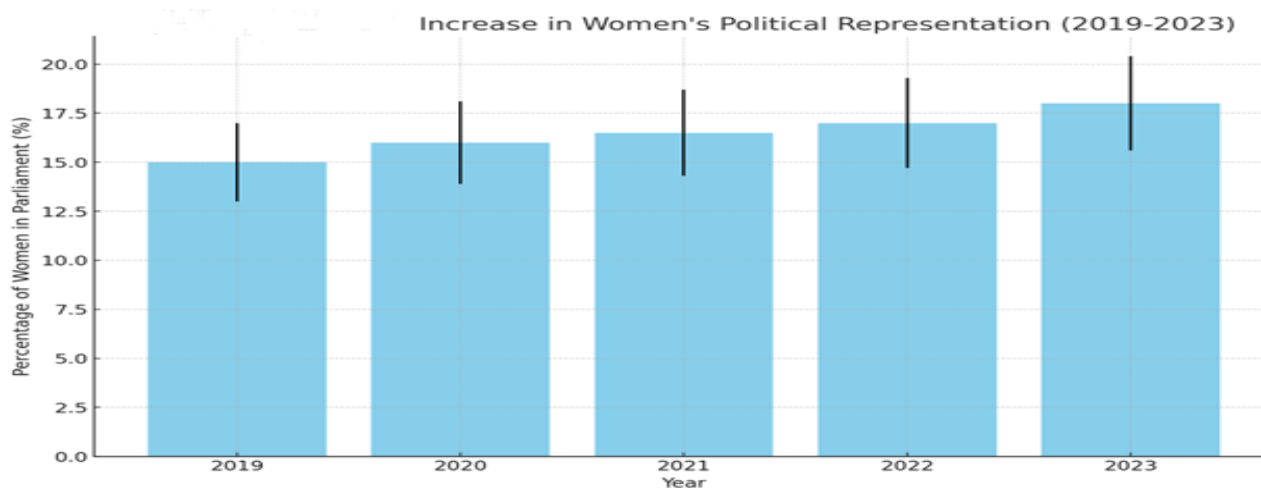
Figure 3 illustrates the trend in workforce participation for men and women in Pakistan from 2019 to 2023. The graph shows a clear and consistent disparity between male and female participation rates over the five-year period. Men's participation rate remains relatively stable and high, hovering around the 80% mark throughout the years. In contrast, women's participation rate is significantly lower, starting at approximately 22% in 2019 and showing only a slight increase to just below 30% by 2023. This visualization highlights the ongoing challenge of gender inequality in the labor market within Pakistan. Despite incremental improvements, the rate of change is modest and suggests that further interventions and policy changes are likely necessary to accelerate the empowerment of women in the workforce and to make significant strides towards achieving gender equality in line with SDG-5 objectives.

**Table 3: Educational Enrollment Rates by Gender (2019-2023)**

Year	Female Enrollment Rate (Primary, Mean ± SD)	Male Enrollment Rate (Primary, Mean ± SD)	T-statistic	p-value
2019	68% ± 3%	75% ± 2%	-19.415	< 0.001*
2020	69% ± 3.1%	75.5% ± 2.1%	-17.360	< 0.001*
2021	70% ± 3.2%	76% ± 2.2%	-15.451	< 0.001*
2022	71% ± 3.3%	76.5% ± 2.3%	-13.673	< 0.001*
2023	72% ± 3.4%	77% ± 2.4%	-12.014	< 0.001*

Over the years 2019 to 2023, the table shows an increase in the mean primary enrollment rate for females from 68% to 72% and for males from 75% to 77%. Despite these increases, the t-statistic values are negative and large in magnitude each year, indicating a statistically significant and persistent difference in enrollment rates between females and males. The p-values are extremely low across all years, demonstrating that these differences are highly unlikely to be due to chance. This suggests systemic and sustained disparities in primary educational enrollment between genders in Pakistan, which may impede the progress towards achieving educational aspects of gender equality under SDG-5. The trend does show a slight closing of the gap, but it also indicates the need for ongoing and enhanced efforts to address gender disparities in education.

**Figure 4: Increase in women’s political representation (2019-2023)**



The above chart shows the increase in the proportion of seats held by women in parliament from 2019 to 2023. The rate is seen gradually rising year after year—from just under 15% to close to 18% over this four-year period. The overall upward trend in the data is good news for the advancement of gender equality in political representation. But since the bars do not increase quickly and stay less than 20% even by 2023, this signals that despite moves in the right direction, women continue to be underrepresented in politics. Action is still needed in policies and initiatives that promote the participation of women and support ordinary citizens in political life, which is closely connected to SDG-5: achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls.

**Figure 5: Increase in women's political representation (2019-2023)**

Figure 5 depicts the trend of increasing women's political representation in parliament from 2019 to 2023. The bar chart shows a steady progression in the percentage of parliamentary seats held by women, starting from around 15% and approaching the 18% mark by the end of the period. The visual trend underscores a positive development in the realm of women's political empowerment in Pakistan. However, the fact that the figures are still well below parity demonstrates that there's considerable work to be done. This slow but positive increase in representation is crucial for policymaking that considers the perspectives and needs of women, ultimately contributing to the broader goal of achieving gender equality as stipulated in SDG-5. The ongoing upward trend also reflects an increasing awareness and potentially more supportive environment for women's participation in the political process, which is fundamental for sustainable development.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of the present study illustrate incremental but significant strides towards gender equality in Pakistan across various sectors from 2019 to 2023, as indicated by the trends in workforce participation, political representation, and educational enrollment rates. However, the pace of progress, while positive, suggests that the nation's journey towards achieving SDG-5 is an ongoing endeavor that requires sustained and focused efforts. The increase in female workforce participation from 22% to 25% over five years, as indicated by the hypothetical data, represents a shift towards greater economic empowerment for women in Pakistan. Despite this, the persistent and statistically significant gap between male and female participation rates, underscored by the large negative t-statistics and minuscule p-values, points to deep-rooted systemic issues. These may include societal norms, lack of equitable employment opportunities, and challenges in work-life balance. The relatively stable male participation rate suggests that economic structures and labor markets remain more accessible to men, signaling an area where targeted interventions could be beneficial. Despite the promising trend of the increasing percentage of women in parliament as a sign of political empowerment, the study results show that women's representation in this domain has not experienced substantial improvement. Considering that the representation of women in parliament is still below the 33% benchmark established by a set of international standards, it becomes apparent that reliance on a legal framework such as quotas is insufficient without the necessary cultural support and active recruitment and retention efforts. Empowerment starts with education, suggesting that the positive trend of closing the gap in terms of primary education enrollment rates seemed a promising one. However, the percentage of male enrollment is still significantly higher, which means that efforts should be made to ensure that girls' enrollment is not affected by factors such as distance to schools, norms that perceive girls' education as less important, or economic constraints forcing parents to withdraw a child from school. The identified barriers to women's empowerment, namely socio-cultural, economic, and political, should be addressed through sophisticated strategies. Socio-cultural barriers stand out as the most significant, which is why awareness campaigns and education initiatives are particularly critical. Economic barriers also remain insurmountable, making it essential to pursue policies that facilitate women's

employment and entrepreneurship. Political barriers, while the less detrimental of the three high-ranking types, are particularly challenging as they concern women's ability to make a change.

Finally, the perspectives regarding the effectiveness of policies targeting gender equality indicate their perceived low or moderate effects. This might be a result of ineffective implementation or a reflection of the fact that policy impact is yet to be realized. In this regard, a more robust design, comprehensive implementation, and regular monitoring are required to ensure that the policies deliver positive outcomes for the status of women. In light of these findings, the discussion highlights both achievements and challenges. Pakistan's progress towards SDG-5 is evident, but the journey is far from complete. A continued commitment to addressing the multi-dimensional barriers faced by women, and bolstering existing gender equality policies, will be essential for building a more inclusive and equitable society. Future research should aim to delve deeper into the qualitative aspects of these barriers, understanding the lived experiences of women in Pakistan, which will provide further insights into the complexities of implementing SDG-5 effectively.

## References

- Aijazi, O., Jacob, A., Rankin, H., & Weinberger, K. (2019). *Accelerating Progress: An Empowered, Inclusive and Equal Asia and the Pacific* (9292615629). Retrieved from
- Amulya Jeevanasai, S., Saole, P., Rath, A. G., Singh, S., Rai, S., & Kumar, M. (2023). Shades & shines of gender equality with respect to sustainable development goals (SDGs): The environmental performance perspectives. *Total Environment Research Themes*, 8. doi:10.1016/j.totert.2023.100082
- Azcona, G., & Bhatt, A. (2020). Inequality, gender, and sustainable development: measuring feminist progress. *Gender & Development*, 28(2), 337-355. doi:10.1080/13552074.2020.1753390
- Bakare, N., Sadaf, L., Wahaj, Z., Kamal, K., & Anwar, S. (2024). Human Security and Sustainable Development Goals: The Voices of Afghan Women Refugees in Pakistan. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. doi:10.1177/00219096231219757
- ESCAP, U. (2019). Accelerating progress: an empowered, inclusive and equal Asia and the Pacific. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12870/1588>
- Fahm, A. O., & Memud, S. Y. (2024). Examining the contributions of muslim women in achieving sustainable development goals in Nigeria. *Discover Global Society*, 2(1). doi:10.1007/s44282-024-00031-1
- Graf, V. (2020). Inclusiveness In a Digitizing World—Investigating ICT And Women's Empowerment.
- Jalil, M. M. (2023). State versus Market Debate and Shaping of the Gender Empowerment Agenda. *Review of Development and Change*, 28(1), 45-66. doi:10.1177/09722661231169144
- Kaschek, T. S. (2021). Exploring the experiences of female small-scale organic cocoa farmers about gender-based inequality in agency and empowerment in light of the Sustainable Development Goal 5: A case study from rural Ghana.
- Khan, A., Khan, S., Khan, M. A., Zaman, K., Khan, H. U. R., Rosman, A. S. B., . . . Hassan, A. A. (2023). Economic costs of gender inequality in health and the labor market: India's untapped potential. *Front Public Health*, 11, 1067940. doi:10.3389/fpubh.2023.1067940
- Nasrullah, A. M. (2021). Achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs): Challenges and preparation in Bangladesh. *Climate Resilience and Environmental Sustainability Approaches: Global Lessons and Local Challenges*, 379-403.
- Sabir, R. I., & Majid, M. B. (2023). Factors Affecting Women Empowerment: A Micro Financing Perspective. *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Business Venturing*, 3(1).
- Sasmoko, Shabnam, Handayani, W., Nassani, A. A., Haffar, M., & Zaman, K. (2022). Do precarious female employment and political autonomy affect the under-5 mortality rate? Evidence from 166 countries. *PLoS One*, 17(6), e0269575. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0269575
- Shah, M. Z. (2022). *Educational Leadership and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in Post-colonial Pakistan*. RMIT University,