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Gender-Inclusive Politics And Diplomacy In Pakistan: An Analysis Of Representation, Barriers, And Policy Reform

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Abstract

This research endeavors to examine the potentials and constraints of gender-inclusive diplomacy in Pakistan by using a framework of intersectional feminism. Notwithstanding the progress at the international level in integrating gender inclusivity into foreign policy, women in Pakistan could not be promoted in the foreign service and diplomatic structures. While figures such as Ms Maryam Nawaz, Ms Maleeha Lodhi, Ms Hina Rabbani Khar, and Benazir Bhutto show women's potential role in the diplomatic sphere. I take their presence to reaffirm symbolic markers rather than systemic change. This study raises a question: what structural, cultural, and institutional barriers restrict women's participation in Pakistan's foreign policy-making? Methodologically, the study employs qualitative research analyzing frameworks of gender equality in politics and Foreign Affairs. Comparative analysis with feminist foreign policy models offers a yardstick for evaluating Pakistan's approach. Findings uncover that women's exclusion is not merely based on gender but is designed by intersecting factors of religion, class, and regional identity. Gender mainstreaming efforts in Pakistan remain limited, as they often fail to account for these layered identities. The study concludes that women's representation is inadequate to accomplish inclusivity. Therefore, Pakistan must adopt structural reforms, including training opportunities and new employment frameworks for women. Since gender inclusive diplomacy is a strategic necessity for Pakistan, it should strengthen its diplomatic efficiency, long-term stability and global credibility by including women in diplomacy. Ultimately, inclusive diplomacy emerges not as a symbolic gesture but as a strategic necessity

Keywords: Intersectional feminism, Gender-inclusive diplomacy, foreign policy, Pakistan.

Introduction

The global initiative to mainstream the participation of women in foreign policy has grown substantially over the decades. International frameworks, such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)[1] and the Beijing Declaration 1995 (Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995),[2] have forced countries to adopt gender inclusive foreign policy. Many Countries, like Canada, Sweden and France, have adopted feminist foreign policy frameworks. At the same time, 83 nations have developed National Action Plans (NAPs) under UN Security Council Resolution 1325, emphasizing the female contribution in peace and security,[3] the number of states has been continuously increasing. These NAPs ensure that the governments of different states have been translating commitments into actual programs and policies. Such initiatives emphasize that women's inclusion is a moral imperative and strategic priority, as inclusive foreign policy enhances security, economic growth, and governance .[4]

Just like other countries striving for women's empowerment, Pakistan has also adopted new measures for women's empowerment. Seemingly, it has achieved considerable milestones in

[1] "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women." *UN Women*, (1979).https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women

[2] "Fourth World Conference on Women." United Nations, Beijing (September 4-15, 1995).

https://www.un.org/en/conferences/women/beijing1995

[3] Nasira Jabeen, *"Gender and Management: Factors Affecting Career Advancement of Women in the Federal Civil Service of Pakistan,"* PhD Thesis, Department of Management and Organization, The School of Management, (1999), 112–113.

[4] Zermeen Azam, Saman Rasheed, and Amna Majeed, "Evaluating the Importance of Female Leadership in Pakistan: Challenges and Opportunities". (2024), *Pakistan Languages and Humanities* Review 8 (2). Gujranwala, Pakistan:201-12. https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2024(8-II-S)20.

promoting women's leadership on the global stage,[5] but deep inside, the problem persists. For example, by electing Ms Benazir Bhutto as its first female prime minister for two consecutive terms, Pakistan became 1st Islamic majority country to break the entrenched political glass ceiling and open avenues for women's political leadership across the Islamic world;[6] However, women from underprivileged areas still cannot even dare to join politics.

Pakistan achieved another milestone by appointing Hina Rabbani Khar as the pioneering and youngest female foreign minister, serving the country in key diplomatic engagements.[7] Her appointment signifies and showcases the capability and zeal of a Pakistani woman to serve in high-level diplomacy. Pakistan has other noticeable appointments; late Asma Jahangir achieved international acclaim for her groundbreaking work in advancing human rights issues. Syeda Abida Hussain and Maleeha Lodhi represented Pakistan as ambassadors. Ms. Maleeha Lodhi served as the Pakistani permanent representative to the UN. Such accomplishments signify the potential of Pakistani women to succeed in policy and diplomatic leadership, even as structural and cultural barriers persist in achieving broader gender inclusion.

While these milestones highlight the Pakistani women's prowess, systemic barriers remain a challenge in integrating women into the foreign policy framework. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, systemic exclusion from decision-making and dogmatized religious principles have

[5] Farah Adil, Zain Khadija and Syeda Fizzah Zainab Gardezi, "Women Empowerment in Pakistan: The Role of CEDAW Convention," *Pakistan Journal of Law, Analysis and Wisdom* 3, no. 11 (2024): 99–110,https://pjlaw.com.pk/index.php/Journal/article/view/v3i11-99-110

[6] Clinton Bennett, "The Pioneer of Female Muslim Leaders," *Oasis,* (2021) https://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/pioneer-female-muslim-leaders-benazir-bhutto

[7] Shabana Fayyaz, "Feminist Aspect of Pakistan's Foreign Policy," in South Asian Women and International Relations, eds. Abhiruchi Ojha and Pramod Jaiswal (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

historically marginalized women from critical foreign policy roles.[8] Despite their capability, women face entrenched structural and cultural barriers such as limited access to education and professional networking, and rare opportunities at leadership positions.[9]

In this setting, this study will examine the causes of females' underrepresentation in aligning Pakistan's foreign policy. Women's exclusion is not solely due to gender but also to some other factors such as religion, ethnicity, class and their regional background, which limit women's participation in politics and foreign affairs. The efforts for gender mainstreaming in Pakistan often fail to notice these layered identities, resulting in minimal gains toward inclusivity in foreign policy-making.

The study is based on the fundamental question: how do some barriers limit Pakistan from adopting inclusivity in foreign policy making? Which factors limit the participation of women in Pakistan's diplomatic sector? To find out the possible answers, the study first provides a global context of women in foreign policy. The latter part critically reviews the gender initiatives of Pakistan and examines the efforts for inclusivity. The study also observed the initiatives for women's empowerment and the reluctance of women to join politics through an intersectional lens.

The central goal of this research is to explore various cultural and structural factors that affect Pakistani women's entry into the diplomatic sector. At the end of the study, some strategies rooted in intersectional feminism were identified to encourage inclusivity in diplomacy.

[8] Maria Mansab, "Unveiling Gender Disparities: A Feminist Analysis of Foreign Policy in Pakistan", Pakistan Vision 24, no. 2 (2023): 72–7

[9] Aleksandra Kruk, "Feminist Foreign Policy in Germany: Roots, Conceptualization, and Realization," Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, (2024): 191–193.

Global Context of Women in Foreign Policy

Across the globe, efforts to integrate gender equality into diplomacy and foreign policy have progressed significantly. In contemporary global and national challenges, the traditional notion of security is altered and broader and multifaceted threats have compelled states, international relations experts and civil society experts to advocate to increased women's participation in foreign policy, aiming to make it more inclusive and diverse in addressing global issues such as poverty, economic disparities, radicalization to extremism, and urgent challenges like climate change. The debate at the global stage about women's agency in making and executing foreign policy is not centered around the quantity of women in foreign ministries, but rather it focuses on women's appointments, where they can influence decision-making. Their participation in policy discussions brings innovation, openness, and collective thinking.

Recent evidence supports these claims, such as recent research by the 2023/24 Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Index, which indicates the clear relationship between gender equality and national stability. Nations that focus on women's status and engagement in parliament are more prosperous, democratic and better equipped to address climate change.[10] Therefore, gender imbalance in politics is not just a social injustice but is significantly correlated with conflict and violence. The outcome of UN research on gender social norms highlights that exclusion of women from decision-making limits the society's capacity for collective problem-solving on issues such as climate change and political polarization.

[10] "Women, Peace, and Security Index 2023/24" *Tracking sustainable peace through inclusion, justice, and security for women*. GIWPS & Peace Research Institute Oslo. (2023).https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/WPS-Index-full-report.pdf

Several countries have institutionalized gender mainstreaming by appointing women to high-level foreign policy posts, allocating resources to advance gender equality, and adopting formal initiatives. For instance, in 2009, during Barack Obama's First term, the United States recognized the inaugural ambassador-at-large position for the issues of women, setting a standard for prioritizing gender equality in diplomacy.[11] By 2020, thirty-four countries had appointed female foreign ministers, and nations such as Finland and Costa Rica had achieved substantial female representation in ambassadorial posts.[12]

Despite these initiatives, women continue to be severely underrepresented at the highest echelons of political leadership. A glass ceiling is apparent, with women leading as head of government or state only in 26 countries as of late 2024.[13] This disparity is even more prominent as only 23% women hold cabinet-level minister portfolios globally. In conflict-affected states, these numbers drop to 19%, highlighting that the time of political instability further limits women's participation.[14] The limited participation of women in high-ranking diplomatic posts is a global

[11] U.S. Department of State, Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 2009). https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/gwi/rls/rem/2009/index.htm

[12] Jamille Bigio and Rachel Vogelstein"Understanding Gender Equality in Foreign Policy", Council on Foreign Relations, (2020). https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/discussion-paper_bigio-and-vogelstein_gender-equality_or_0.pdf

[13] "In the Biggest Electoral Year in History, 113 Countries Have Never Had a Woman Head of State or Government, and Only 26 Countries Are Led by a Woman Today", UN Women, (press release, June 2024),https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2024/06/in-the-biggest-electoral-year-in-history-113-countries-have-never-had-a-woman-head-of-state-new-un-women-data-shows

[14] "Gender Equality: How Many Women Hold Cabinet Positions in 2024?", World Economic Forum, (June 2024), https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/06/gender-equality-women-hold-cabinet-positions-2024

issue as only 21% as women constitute only 21% of ambassadors and permanent representative posts.[15]

The UN Security Council has witnessed rising women's participation from 8% between 1990 and 2022 to 23% 2015 and 2014. The year 2024 has shown a significant increase in women's inclusion, as one-third of the Security Council (5/15) Members (33%) had a woman permanent representative.[16] Since the 1990s, a noticeable rise in the number of women addressing the Security Council has been witnessed. This trend has increased predominantly since 2015, when civil society organizations were requested to brief the Council. However, in 2024, due to an increased number of conflicts, especially in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Sudan, Haiti, Palestine and many others, the number of women from civil society briefing the council witnessed a decline for the second consecutive year. The UN witnessing a decline in the number of women defending Human Rights may stem from safety concerns that they are facing while representing their communities.[17]

Many countries are pushing gender equality in foreign policy through setting National Action Plans (NAPs) to systematically promote women's inclusion in peacebuilding, security and development initiatives.Sweden initiated a transformative step in advancing gender equality in foreign policy through introducing feminist foreign policy modalities in 2014. Subsequently, this approach is adopted by Canada, France, and Mexico, which focuses on representation, resources

[15]"Share of Women Ambassadors" (briefing, March 2025), European Parliament Think Tank, https://epthinktank.eu/2025/03/06/women-in-foreign-affairs-and-international-security-an-increasingly-salient-debate/share-of-women-ambassadors

[16]"Women at the UN Security Council: A Sea Change in Numbers", UN Women. (October 2022), https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2022/10/women-at-the-un-security-council-a-sea-change-in-numbers

[17] "Protecting Participation: Women Civil Society at the UN Security Council", Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, (January 2023–September 2024), https://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/protecting-participation-women-civil-society-at-the-unsc-2023-2024/

and rights.[18] In 2016, Australia launched initiatives on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, placing special emphasis on women's leadership, economic integration, and protection from sexual violence and harassment.[19] Similarly, over 80 nations have adopted NAPs under UN Security Council Resolution 1325, consolidating women's inclusion across diplomacy, development, and defense efforts.[20]

In developing countries, there is suspicion that prioritizing gender equality in foreign policy may divert limited resources from other traditional national interests, which is creating resistance to institutionalizing these efforts across diplomatic, security, and trade sectors. Furthermore, it is imperative to address gender inconsistencies domestically alongside international commitments. For example, Sweden's gender responsive foreign policy is part of a broader feminist government initiative, aligning both national and international gender equality goals.[21] Similarly, Canada, through its Equality Fund, helps organizations for women's rights both abroad and domestically, reflecting a wide-ranging approach to advancing gender equality. However, these examples are mostly from developed nations and remain exceptions rather than the norm, with most nations

[18] "A Feminist Foreign Policy to Advance Gender Equality Globally", Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), (June 30, 2021), https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2021/03/development-co-operation-tips-tools-insights-practices_d307b396/a-feminist-foreign-policy-to-advance-gender-equality-globally_21138678.html.

[19] Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy. Australian Foreign Minister, (February 29, 2016), https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/julie-bishop/media-release/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment-strategy

[20] A Feminist Foreign Policy to Advance Gender Equality Globally. OECD, (June 30, 2021), https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2021/03/development-co-operation-tips-tools-insights-practices_d307b396/a-feminist-foreign-policy-to-advance-gender-equality-globally_21138678.html

[21] Ghulam Sarwar and Armaghan Farid, "Unveiling Gender Disparities in Pakistan: Challenges, Progress, and Policy Implications for Achieving SDG 5," Journal of Development and Social Sciences 5, no. 2 (2024), https://ojs.jdss.org.pk/journal/article/view/1087

focusing disproportionately on external gender equality commitments while neglecting domestic challenges.

Gender equality in foreign policy is significantly beneficial for international diplomacy and security, as evidence shows that the victims of conflict and stagnant economic growth are mostly women. Research has shown that women's contribution to the foreign policy designing and implementation process contributes to economic growth, sustainable peace and supports democracy. Moreover, better inclusion of women in agenda-setting in the security sector helps battle radicalization and extremism, prioritizing gender equality not just as an ethical obligation but a strategic necessity.[22] Canada's Elsie Initiative for women peacekeepers and public commitment from senior leadership exhibit that promoting gender equality in foreign policy enhances global stability and national security.

While significant achievements have been made to incorporate women into foreign policy through feminist frameworks and global action plans, systemic challenges remain. Reducing the synchronizing of domestic and international policies, addressing the resource gap, and improving accountability are fundamental for realizing meaningful progress.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectional Feminism

The efforts on gender equality in foreign policy are centered around filling numbers as women are often given roles in humanitarian aid, cultural affairs, public diplomacy, rather than critical areas such as security, trade, and economy. These areas are considered high political issues

[22] Ibid.

and remain male-dominated.[23] This division strengthens the perception that diplomacy is more suited for men, while women's contributions are relegated to secondary, less strategic domains. In Pakistan, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) plays a key role in shaping the country's global engagement, and has traditionally had quite low representation of women, mostly in headship positions.

Even when women enter foreign policy roles, they are frequently assigned to areas considered appropriate for their gender, such as cultural diplomacy, development assistance, and humanitarian work, while security and strategic affairs remain dominated by men. These trends further reinforce patriarchal perceptions that women are only suited for soft diplomacy positions and that only men can handle critical foreign policy decisions.

Feminist foreign policy emerges as a transformative theoretical paradigm that challenges traditional state-centric approaches, instead advocating inclusivity and intersectionality in foreign policy. Anne-Marie Slaughter contended that women's inclusion in foreign policy-making would make the world better .[24] Feminist ideas promote human security issues and suggest that policies should prioritize economic equity, social stability and gender justice rather than the traditional militarized version.[25] Whereas, traditional international relations are structured systemically in a way that signifies state power, military strength and economic competition, often leaving inadequate scope for balanced gender roles in shaping global affairs. power, autonomy,

[23] Karin Aggestam, Annika Bergman Rosamond, and Annica Kronsell, "Theorising Feminist Foreign Policy," *International Relations* 33, no. 1 (2019): 23–39.https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0047117818811892

[24] Anne-Marie Slaughter, "More Women in Foreign Policy Could Change the World." The Atlantic, (November 28, 2012, https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2012/11/more-women-in-foreign-policy-could-change-the-world/265685/

[25] Valerie M. Hudson and Patricia Leidl, *The Hillary Doctrine: Sex and American Foreign Policy*.(New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

independence, and rationality, all typically associated with men.[26] Since feminism critically questions the conventional link between power and aggression, feminists believe that international politics cannot be fully comprehended without examining the gender role in structuring authority, decision-making, and distribution of resources.

The core assumption of feminism in IR is that the concept of security should not be limited to conventional military capability and territorial defense. Still, its focus must be on society's well-being, healthcare, education and protection from gender-based violence. They also believe that redefining security with a more comprehensive and inclusive approach can effectively address contemporary global challenges.[27] More so, foreign policy is not gender neutral because states' policies related to security, peace negotiations, trade and developmental aid impact men and women differently. For instance, international economic policies may inexplicably affect women, who often have fewer financial resources and face greater barriers in the workforce. Nevertheless, gender considerations are rarely integrated into policy analysis

Women are proven nonviolent conflict resolvers, as a large number of women in their homes and some in communities are making efforts to control the violence that permeates society. Francis Fukuyama presented an idea in 1998 that women are more peaceful than men, as they do not usually agree that using force is the right way to resolve a conflict. [28] Despite the recognition of all the positive aspects, the structural problem curbs many women, particularly from poor areas

[26] J. Ann Tickner, Gender in international relations: Feminist perspectives on achieving global security. (Columbia University Press, 1992), 2.

[27] Shepherd, Laura J. "The Paradox of Prevention in the Women, Peace and Security Agenda." *European Journal of International Security* 5, no. 3 (2020): 315–331. https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2020.15.

[28] Fukuyama, Francis. "Women and the Evolution of World Politics." *Foreign Affairs* 77 (1998). https://users.metu.edu.tr/utuba/Fukuyama.pdf.

of Pakistan, from entering political or foreign affairs. It can be examined as women from elite families (like Ms. Benazir Bhutto, Ms. Hina Rabbani Khar or Ms Maryam Nawaz) manage their entry, but their success can not be taken as a systemic change for marginalised women.

Feminism proposes that to restructure foreign policy and make it more inclusive, policymakers have to rethink how power and security work in global politics, and put more effort into bringing women into more influential roles rather than just increasing their number. [29] Moreover, the governmental policies of Pakistan treat women as a similar group, whereas there are layered identities; for instance, poor women from rural areas have no access to the facilities which the rich women of Pakistan can avail.

Kimberle Crenshaw developed the framework of intersectional feminism in 1989, highlighting deep inequality and exploring forms of social stratification like gender, race, class, and religion,[30] which is linked to the birth of new knowledge of discrimination. Intersectional feminism focuses on diversity within womenfolk and asserts that any feminist project must examine multiple angles of inequality. While applying to diplomacy, this theory helps understand how different clusters of women experience the field of foreign policy in Pakistan. So, some women leaders of Pakistan, namely Maryam Nawaz or Benazir Bhutto, are not resolving systemic inequities in Pakistan because these models at the intersections of class, gender, and region remain

[29] J. Ann Tickner, *Gender in international relations: Feminist perspectives on achieving global security*. (Columbia University Press, 1992), 1.

[30] Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

excluded. To fathom this deeper inequality is embedded in Pakistan's foreign policy culture, which is traversed by prevailing patriarchal structures at the global level in diplomacy.

Intersectional Challenges: Class, Norms, and Institutional Inequalities

The exclusion of women's participation in the foreign policy-making process is deeply ingrained in the long-standing cultural norms and institutional hurdles which persistently diminish their effective involvement. Pakistani institutions are somehow unable to address the inequality as they have been ignoring intersectional sensitivity.

Deeply entrenched customary patriarchal cultural norms, tribal values and established rigid gender roles have further created a gap and present major unaddressed challenges. In Mansab's (2023) view, traditional cultural norms have reflected the biological orientations, such as women are weak, fragile and lacking professional skills in the decision-making process, which has marginalized women's role and associated them with minor or non-central roles in foreign policy decision-making. This persistent marginalization has been deepened by colonial history and cultural constructs that have always prioritized patriarchal norms in leadership structure. Jabeen asserts that the role which has been set by cultural norms, reflect the responsibility of family nurturing and societal demand of managing and balancing professional and domestic life, has constrained women's ability to fully engage in professional forums.[31] According to Azam, these

[31]Nasira Jabeen, *"Gender and Management: Factors Affecting Career Advancement of Women in the Federal Civil Service of Pakistan,"* PhD Thesis, Department of Management and Organization, The School of Management, (1999).

challenges are further accompanied by religious misconceptions along patriarchal norms, which systematically highlight the religious beliefs. Moreover, it has become a major hurdle for women's participation in diplomatic and political roles.[32]

Structurally, institutional hierarchies in Pakistan favored gender biases which limit women's opportunities for advancement. Jabeen works identifies the systemic challenges: gender marginalization, partial recruitment procedure, lack of sufficient mentoring, and training prospects, which obstruct the women's opportunity to hold leadership roles in foreign policy.[33] Aggestam and True present a comparative perspective, which reflects challenges such as a lack of involvement in the foreign policy decision-making process, and feminist perspectives have been marginalized, in contrast to nations like Germany and Sweden, which advocate gender equality in diplomatic procedures. In Begum's view, economic dependency poses a major hurdle for women in acting more independently. In a country like Pakistan, where a major portion of women are more financially dependent on their male family members, it has escalated into a situation where women are inhibited from involvement in diplomacy and policy-making procedures.[34]

The cultural and structural barriers have further endorsed gender inequalities. Within political institutions, customary patriarchal norms not only demonstrate societal demand and structure but have also created lasting challenges for women in the foreign policy decision-making process. For example, the exams of MOFA and set entry requirements strangely benefit English-

[32] Zermeen Azam, Saman Rasheed, and Amna Majeed, "Evaluating the Importance of Female Leadership in Pakistan: Challenges and Opportunities". *Pakistan Languages and Humanities* Review 8 (2). Gujranwala, Pakistan (2024):201-12. https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2024(8-II-S)20.

[33] Nasira Jabeen, *"Gender and Management: Factors Affecting Career Advancement of Women in the Federal Civil Service of Pakistan,"* PhD Thesis, Department of Management and Organization, The School of Management, (1999).

[34] Azeema Begum, Political Participation of Females in Pakistan: Prospects and Challenges. UNISIA: *The Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* Vol. 41 No. 1 (2023), 39–76.https://doi.org/10.20885/unisia.vol41.iss1.art3

speaking, middle or upper-class candidates, mostly urban. In this scenario, rural women from underdeveloped areas such as Balochistan, interior Sindh, and KPK face difficulties due to their inaccessibility to elite education. In these areas, a large number of women face harassment or sometimes just fear of it, and a lack of gender-sensitive accommodation options, which prevent many women. To address these obstacles, there is a need for a multi-layered approach. Policy reforms formulated to ensure women's equality in leadership opportunities are crucial. Seeking inspiration from global examples of feminist foreign policies. Pakistan owns the potential to enact intersectional and inclusive policies which will endorse gender equality not only in diplomacy but in other leadership and management processes.[35] Furthermore, capacity-building methods, mentoring, training, and assisting with financial resources can fully empower women to address structural obstacles.[36] So, an amiable environment to empower women's active participation in diplomacy can create prospects of an effective and more inclusive foreign policy decision-making process.

The National Gender Policy Framework findings emphasized critical challenges to women's contribution in policymaking, including systematic constraints, economic reliance, restricted social exposure, and absence or lack of representation in major roles like leadership and management. Further accompanied by institutional barriers, non-gender responsive employment policies, geographic mobility constraints, educational inequalities, and vulnerabilities in safety crates, more challenges to women's inclusion in leadership and management roles. These are

[35] Nasira Jabeen, *"Gender and Management: Factors Affecting Career Advancement of Women in the Federal Civil Service of Pakistan,"* PhD Thesis, Department of Management and Organization, The School of Management, (1999),

[36] "Fourth World Conference on Women." United Nations, Beijing (September 4-15, 1995). https://www.un.org/en/conferences/women/beijing1995

further complicated by patriarchal systems that curb women's agency and decision-making power, reinforcing gender inequality in fields like foreign policy.[37]

Women's Political Participation in Pakistan

Pakistan is the first Islamic country to have a female prime minister (1988), is the permanent UN representative and yet Pakistan presents a compelling case study of symbolic representation and substantive exclusion when it comes to women's representation in foreign policy.

Despite having many high-profile female appointments, such as Ms Benazir Bhutto as prime minister, Ms Hina Rabbani Khar as foreign minister or Ms Maliha Lodhi as Pakistan's representative in the UN, women's broader representation as diplomats is significantly constrained. These high-profile appointees are important but cannot be confused with broader structural inclusions. It can be inferred that women from privileged backgrounds, such as Maryam Nawaz or Benazir Bhutto, can manage entry, but their achievements don't prove that systemic reform for women belongs to the poor class or region. The barriers to entry and then progress in foreign policy institutions are both culturally and structurally deeply entrenched in society.

Intersectional feminism reveals that not all women have the same privileges in politics. A woman from an elite background can break ceilings, whereas rural women remain excluded. Political parties do have women's wings, too, but they remain symbolic and reinforce tokenism. In

[37] National Gender Policy Framework Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, Government of Pakistan, (2022). https://pc.gov.pk/uploads/report/NGPF.pdf

political parties, women from urban Punjab have more representation, but women from the peripheries remain invisible.

Statistical data highlights the actual underrepresentation in various institutions. The number of women elected remains low in general elections of Pakistan , which diminishes their voice in legislative processes and governing institutions. Nonetheless, Pakistan's provincial and national assemblies have reserved seats for women to increase their number in the parliament or political sphere. [38] However, their active participation and performance in making and executing foreign policy, women encounter significant cultural and structural barriers that hinder women's political participation and grooming.

Societal Mindset and Cultural Norms

Pakistan has committed to various international conventions aimed at enhancing women's political participation. Despite the state's international commitments, women encounter deeply entrenched cultural barriers that restrict women's political participation, particularly at higher ranks where they can play a meaningful part in the formulation of foreign policy. The women's participation in the workforce in Pakistan is 21%; however, as per the set standard globally, 39% should be of females.[39]

Denial of equal participation in family decision-making, unequal access to resources, asymmetrical use of violence in the home, and unequal status in common law all help create the

[38] "In the biggest electoral year in history, 113 countries have never had a woman Head of State", UN Women, (2024), June).https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2024/06/in-the-biggest-electoral-year-in-history-113-countries-have-never-had-a-woman-head-of-state-new-un-women-data-shows

[39] National report on the status of women in Pakistan: Summary. UN Women (2023):6. https://pakistan.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/summary_-nrsw-inl_final.pdf

schoolhouse that ensures the perpetuation of the exclusory practices over time. The deep patriarchal nature of society established gender roles that burden women with domestic responsibilities, such as childbearing and nurturing, as the sole responsibility of women; the workhouse balance further complicates the circumstances for women. These social expectations reduce options for choosing a foreign policy as a career, which requires frequent geographic relocation and extensive public visibility.

The field of foreign policy requires networking and attending meetings and events. Most tasks are assigned in these informal sittings, which are culturally deemed unsuitable for females to attend. Moreover, a career in this field demands long hours, overseas postings, and frequent interactions in male-dominated environments, all of which are perceived as incompatible with traditional expectations of Pakistani womanhood. The cultural expectations for females are to behave honorably, which is characterized by obedience and modesty. These socio-cultural practices and norms are internalized in families and institutions alike, resulting in the auto-withdrawal of women from such career options.

Moreover, these values are reinforced by male-dominating religious organizations, which are a profound part of the political and social fabric of society. In some circumstances, religious interpretations might be used to reinforce inequality against women or to limit their participation in public affairs. Thus, misinterpretations of religious principles further reinforce these norms, with conservative leaders and extremist groups leveraging religion to justify the marginalization of women from public life.

Pakistan’s history reflects the institutionalization of some discriminatory policies against women. For instance, the Islamization policies during Gen. Zia-ul-Haq’s regime institutionalized discriminatory practices, creating lasting obstacles to women’s political and policy-making

participation.[40] The confusion of biological differences of females being fragile is usually associated with their decision-making and the belief that male inherit the ability to make bold decisions and be more assertive, which are prerequisites for stressful environments such as foreign policy execution.

Public and political perceptions also play a role in limiting women's advancement in foreign policy. A 2025 study by Fahd Humayun demonstrated that female politicians in Pakistan are viewed as less capable in foreign affairs roles, especially those related to security and strategy, unless they actively emphasize their credentials. This suggests that even among politically literate populations, implicit gender biases persist and influence evaluations of competence.[41] Such biases extend into the media and bureaucratic cultures, where women's presence in foreign affairs is still often framed as exceptional rather than normative

The patriarchal nature of society puts restraints on women's financial independence, education, and career choices. According to the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's Pakistan study by Iftekhar (2021), only 46% of women have access to education as compared to a male who stands at 71%. Culturally, higher education is not the priority for females as they don't increase family wealth; these notions and restrictions on women's mobility and safety concerns further restrict higher education. Socio-economic gaps have an important effect on women's political participation. In South Asia, where poverty and inequality are common, women from less economically privileged backgrounds face greater difficulties due to limited opportunities for

[40] Zermeen Azam, Saman Rasheed, and Amna Majeed "Evaluating the Importance of Female Leadership in Pakistan: Challenges and Opportunities". *Pakistan Languages and Humanities* Review 8 (2), (2024):201-12. https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2024(8-II-S)20.

[41] Fahd Humayun, *Enhancing evaluations of female politicians' suitability for the foreign affairs portfolio*. *Political Research Quarterly* (2025), https://doi.org/10.1177/10659129251314377

higher education, resources, and platforms. Even if young women make it to positions of influence, the grimly low number puts them at a disadvantage in positions where the majority rules. If a female subordination is viewed as natural or as divinely mandated, it is challenging to even conceive of a society that doesn't have inequality in its core.

Additionally, a shift in societal attitudes is essential. Cultural narratives that equate leadership and diplomacy with masculinity must be challenged through public discourse, educational reforms, and media representation. Feminist IR argues that true transformation in global politics requires redefining the very concepts of power and security. For Pakistan, this means reimagining diplomacy not merely as statecraft but as a mechanism for social justice, inclusive development, and gender equity.

Systemic Barriers to Women's Progress

The Government of Pakistan has been trying to empower women in all fields as guaranteed in the Constitution and the international commitments of the country. It has adopted a comprehensive legislative framework, including the ratification of many pro-women laws, notably the National Gender Policy Framework (2022), showing good practices are being implemented across the country.[42] However, some systemic barriers are difficult to fix, including culture, mobility constraints in some regions, harassment, and quality education etc. The absence of gender-responsive employment frameworks continues to marginalize women by rendering the workplace incompatible with the social realities many female diplomats face.

[42] National report on the status of women in Pakistan: Summary. UN Women (2023): 6. https://pakistan.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/summary_-nrsw-inl_final.pdf

The recruitment and employment practices in Pakistan are not gender responsive, which further reinforces institutional inequalities that disproportionately affect women. Cultural values and norms are deeply embedded in the state's political and bureaucratic institutions, shaping policies and power dynamics in ways that reinforce existing gender hierarchies. Women in the foreign affairs of Pakistan hold diplomatic positions, many at ambassador roles, which shows progress, but visibility remains limited at senior decision-making positions. Statistical evidence highlights the extent of underrepresentation. The data till 2023 shows only 113 out of 516 officers in Pakistan's Foreign Service were women, accounting for just 21.9%. The data of June 2025 shows that almost 25% of Foreign Service officers are women.[43] The women from rural areas, especially from Balochistan, KPK, and interior Sindh, face difficulties due to inaccessibility to the elite education system. Whereas the MOFA exams and requirements of entry excessively help English-speaking, either middle or upper-class candidates, this makes women from other areas privileged compared to women from poor areas and curbs the real representation of women in foreign affairs.

In addition, the buildings are not gender sensitive, as there are no on-site childcare facilities available, and long working hours make it difficult for them to join this field because they need flexible working hours to balance family and work. The absence of these provisions creates a workplace environment that implicitly favors male diplomats who are less likely to face the same domestic constraints. Moreover, the rules of maternity leave, which would be supportive, discourage women's long-term participation. These structural gaps are compounded by impervious recruitment procedures and promotion criteria that fail to account for gendered career

[43] "Women of Pakistan's Foreign Service: Shaping Diplomacy, Breaking Barriers", *Monthly Glory Magazine*, (June 2025), https://www.glorymagazine.pk/women-of-pakistans-foreign-service-shaping-diplomacy-breaking-barriers/

interruptions, thus limiting women's upward mobility within the institution. This exclusion is not a reflection of competence but of persistent institutional inertia, where gender-neutral policies reproduce gendered outcomes.

If one starts observing society, the conventional explanations of religion support the stereotypes of women as "delicate" or "unsuitable" for the high-pressure diplomatic field. Institutional practices, such as long working hours, unmatched capacity and harassment issues doubled the gender exclusion. Some religious conservatives unduly criticize women from traditional families, trying to join the diplomatic field. This limited representation is not simply a numeric imbalance but reflects deeper institutional barriers within recruitment and career progression systems.

Women are often assigned portfolios considered "soft," such as cultural diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and public relations, while "hard" areas like national security, defense, and trade negotiations continue to be male-dominated. The perception that strategic diplomacy requires assertiveness, frequent international travel, and engagement in high-stakes negotiation traits socially coded as masculine creates informal barriers that limit women's access to influential roles. The opinion in the mainstream political structure is that strategic diplomacy requires assertiveness and regular international travel and engagement. So, women are not well-suited for this job.

Patriarchal postulations about security, travel, and assertive approaches intersect with class privilege; this cannot be performed by a woman from a poor area, but a woman from an elite family can overcome these hurdles. It is because Women from underprivileged backgrounds have financial dependence, and would not be getting permissions for prolonged training or overseas postings. This inequality becomes justified because provincial and federal governments are aimed

at generating more income rather than integrating women into the economic mainstream. These steps are further limiting women's access to employment, education, and training in international relations, which is a prerequisite for joining a career in foreign policy.

Women's access to higher education and professional advancement is disproportionally restricted by limited mobility. Even limited mobility excessively constrains women's access to higher education and professional advancement. The 2024 UN Women report underscores stark educational disparities: 68% of men are literate, compared to only 52% of women, revealing a 16-point gender literacy gap that undermines women's ability to pursue remote or advanced schooling opportunities, which are prerequisites for careers in foreign policy.[44]

So, the political participation is compounded because of these disadvantages, where party structures already marginalize women's leadership. It could be argued that the gendered structure of political parties plays a fundamental role in limiting women's political mobilization and their agency in public decision-making. Women often face token representation within party ranks, and their participation is largely confined to women's wings with minimal influence on core policy platforms. Most often, parties utilize women's groups primarily for electoral mobilization rather than as legitimate actors, highlighting a broader paradox in which the state functions as a partner and as a patriarchal structure that undermines women's rights.

The Aurat Foundation research (2020) revealed that only 5% of female politicians surveyed had a role in high-level decision-making, and nearly 70% reported that party leadership rarely

[44] "In the biggest electoral year in history, 113 countries have never had a woman Head of State", UN Women. (24 June 2024), https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2024/06/in-the-biggest-electoral-year-in-history-113-countries-have-never-had-a-woman-head-of-state-new-un-women-data-shows

consulted them on policy matters.[45] This structural marginalization impedes the emergence of women leaders in foreign policy, where political capital and party backing are often prerequisites for appointments. Together, mobility restrictions and political exclusion create a reinforcing cycle of underrepresentation and systemic disadvantage for women.

Benefits of Inclusive Foreign Policy

Pakistan's foreign policy has been historically dominated by traditional security paradigms, which are dominated by a male decision-making structure that often undermines women's perspectives. Hudson (2020) in *The First Political Order* proves that Patriarchal nations, which are extractive and fail to incorporate half of their population's voice in policy making and governance, are conflict-prone and less stable, a finding that Pakistan cannot ignore. It is being witnessed that an inclusive and feminist foreign policy benefits the nation by enhancing diplomatic effectiveness and fostering sustainable peace and economic growth.

The pioneer countries, Sweden, Canada, and Mexico, adopted Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), underscoring gender equality, human security and multilateral cooperation as priorities. Sweden's FFP (2014), centred around disarmament, conflict resolution and inclusive peace processes, leading to stronger diplomatic credibility. Likewise, Canada's "Feminist International Assistance Policy" (2017) aims to direct 95% of its aid to gender equality initiatives, improving the country's global influence.[46]

[45] "Annual Report-2020", Aurat Publication and Information Service Foundation, (2020), https://af.org.pk/Annual%20Reports/Report_2020/Annual%20Report%202020.pdf

[46] *Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy*. Ottawa: Government of Canada (2017), https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/priorities-priorites/policy-politique.aspx?lang=eng

Inclusive feminist foreign policy could rebrand it as a progressive Muslim democracy. Countries with gender-equal labor forces grow faster.[47] If Pakistan leverages its female workforce (only 22% in the formal sector) via trade diplomacy, it could attract gender-conscious investments. The feminist approach in foreign policy can help Pakistan to reshape its global image by enhancing its soft power, attracting gender-sensitive investments, and aligning with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5). In particular, SDG 5 appeals to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. At the same time, Target 5.5 stresses ensuring women's effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership in economic, political, and public life.[48]

In South Asia, patriarchal norms restrict women's diplomatic roles, yet Bangladesh's success in female leadership (e.g., Sheikh Hasina's climate diplomacy) proves that inclusivity strengthens regional standing. In response to escalating tensions, over ten feminist and civil society organizations from India and Pakistan issued a joint statement calling for peace, dialogue, and justice. The statement urges both governments to prioritize diplomacy, uphold ceasefires, and protect marginalized communities affected by conflict.[49] Additionally, collaboration with Afghanistan on women's education and refugee support could stabilize bilateral relations while countering extremism, a strategy aligned with Hudson's (2020) findings that inclusive policies reduce conflict risks. Pakistan can redefine its foreign policy framework by addressing structural

[47] "Pursuing Women's Economic Empowerment", International Monetary Fund (May 31, 2018), https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Policy-Papers/Issues/2018/05/31/pp053118pursuing-womens-economic-empowerment

[48] "Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". UN: Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development(2015), https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda

[49]"India-Pakistan Feminists Call for Peace, Dialogue,", Times of India", (May 2025), https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/india-pakistan-feminists-call-for-peace-dialogue/articleshow/121146662.cms

and cultural barriers with inclusivity and incorporating a feminist approach, which can yield considerable benefits at the local, regional and international levels.

Domestically, feminist foreign policy must transcend symbolic effort. Quotas for women in the diplomatic corps are insufficient without institutional reforms such as access to education attainment, professional support, and laws to curb gender biases.[50] Training female envoys in trade and conflict resolution can boost Pakistan's economic outreach, particularly in textiles and agriculture, where women dominate labor but lack policy influence. Moreover, strengthening grassroots voices such as rural women activists in Sindh advocating for climate resilience can make foreign policy more responsive to marginalized communities.

The exclusion of women from foreign policy perpetuates instability and missed opportunities. Advancing gender equality in foreign policy will strengthen Pakistan's standing as a responsible global actor. By learning from global models, leveraging regional opportunities, and empowering local women, Pakistan can transform its international image, foster sustainable development, and dismantle entrenched gender barriers. A feminist foreign policy represents not just an ethical commitment but also a strategic necessity. Giving a voice to half of its population will enable Pakistan to project itself as a credible, inclusive, and forward-looking global actor

Conclusion

The women's exclusion from Pakistan's foreign policy apparatus is not only a matter of representation but a result of deep-seated structural, institutional, and layered complexities. The feminist international relations theory proposes that masculinist norms shaped the traditional

[50] Maria Mansab, "Unveiling Gender Disparities: A Feminist Analysis of Foreign Policy in Pakistan", *Pakistan Vision 24*, no. 2 (2023): 72–7

diplomatic institutions, which systemically continue to sideline women from strategic decision-making regardless of periodic high-profile appointments.

The selective symbolic inclusion and participation persist and are reinforced by gender-insensitive workplace practices, discriminatory political structures, and limitations on educational and professional mobility. These patterns are not isolated to a few countries, but it is a deeper power asymmetry embedded in the state and international system. So there is a dire need to reframe security to prioritize human well-being, economic equity, and gender justice. The foreign policy of Pakistan can become more inclusive and responsive to the complexities of global politics.

Pakistan needs institutional reforms such as gender-sensitive recruitments, mentorship systems, accountability in leadership appointments, and re-entry support for women to become standard components of diplomatic institutions and go beyond quotas and selective inclusions. Viewing diplomacy as inherently masculine, and relating feminist characteristics with childbearing and nurturing families, is not only limiting the potential of half the population but also damages the inclusivity and innovation required in diplomacy. For Pakistan, the road to an inclusive foreign policy lies not just in growing the number of women at the table, but in reshaping the table itself.

Increasing women's role in foreign policy would involve transforming governance institutions, tackling political parties' patriarchal culture, and addressing the lack of autonomy in their women’s wings. This would require strong civil society support, training, and support in the legislative process, financial resources, a cross-party women's caucus, and better media coverage. It is imperative to institutionalize gender equality in diplomacy and foreign policy not only for

moral and ethical reasons but also as a pragmatic strategy to ensure sustainable global peace and security.