

From Exclusion to Empowerment: Understanding Women's Reality on the Periphery in Pakistan

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Abstract

Women living on the social, economic, and geographical peripheries of Pakistan continue to face multiple and intersecting forms of exclusion. While significant progress has been made in policy development, educational access, and political representation, many women remain marginalized due to structural inequalities rooted in patriarchy, poverty, limited mobility, inadequate access to resources, and cultural norms. This article examines the lived realities of peripheral women in Pakistan and explores the transition from exclusion to empowerment through education, economic participation, social inclusion, and institutional support. Drawing upon feminist perspectives and intersectional analysis, the study argues that empowerment is not merely the provision of opportunities but a transformative process that enables women to exercise agency, challenge restrictive norms, and participate meaningfully in social, economic, and political life. The article highlights key barriers and emerging pathways to empowerment while emphasizing the need for context-specific and inclusive development strategies.

Keywords: Women's empowerment, gender inequality, peripheral communities, Pakistan, social exclusion, intersectionality, rural women.

Introduction

Pakistan has witnessed notable advancements in gender-focused legislation, educational expansion, and women's participation in public life over the past two decades. Despite these achievements, substantial disparities persist between urban and rural populations, as well as among women belonging to different socioeconomic, ethnic, and geographic groups. Women residing on the periphery, whether in remote rural regions, economically deprived communities, or socially marginalized groups, continue to experience exclusion from opportunities that are often accessible to their urban counterparts.

The concept of the “periphery” extends beyond geographical isolation. Women's deprivation encompasses social, economic, political, and cultural marginalization that restricts women's access to education, healthcare, employment, decision-making, and legal protection. Understanding the lived realities of women experiencing deprivation is essential for developing effective policies and interventions that address the root causes of gender inequality rather than merely its visible symptoms. Such an approach promotes inclusive development, empowers women, and contributes to achieving greater social justice and equality.

This article investigates the mechanisms of exclusion experienced by women on Pakistan's periphery and explores pathways through which empowerment can be achieved. It argues that meaningful empowerment requires structural transformation alongside individual capacity-building.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon feminist theory and intersectionality to analyze women's experiences. Feminist scholars argue that gender inequality is embedded within social institutions, cultural practices, and power structures that privilege men while constraining women. The concept of intersectionality underscores that women's experiences of inequality and deprivation are shaped by the interaction of multiple and intersecting social identities, including socioeconomic status, ethnicity, geographic location, age, and marital status. These overlapping dimensions of identity influence women's access to resources, opportunities, and rights, resulting in diverse and context-specific forms of disadvantage.

In Pakistan, gender-based exclusion cannot be understood solely through the lens of patriarchy. Rural residence, poverty, tribal affiliations, limited infrastructure, and restricted mobility often interact to produce unique forms of disadvantage. Consequently, empowerment strategies must address these intersecting dimensions rather than treating women as a homogeneous category.

Women on the Periphery: Dimensions of Exclusion

Educational Exclusion

Education is widely acknowledged as a critical driver of women's empowerment and a prerequisite for achieving gender equality and sustainable development. It enhances women's capabilities, expands their access to economic opportunities, strengthens their participation in decision-making processes, and improves their overall well-being. Despite notable progress in female literacy and school enrolment, significant educational inequalities continue to persist, particularly among women residing in peripheral and socioeconomically disadvantaged regions. These disparities are reinforced by a complex interplay of structural and cultural factors, including poverty, early marriage, inadequate educational infrastructure, restrictive gender norms, limited household resources, and concerns related to safety and mobility. Such barriers not only impede girls' educational attainment but also perpetuate intergenerational cycles of poverty and social exclusion. The relationship between poverty and disempowerment is therefore mutually reinforcing, as limited access to economic resources constrains individuals' ability to make autonomous choices, participate effectively in social and political life, and exercise their fundamental rights and capabilities. Consequently, improving women's access to quality education is essential for reducing gender inequalities and fostering inclusive social and economic development choices".¹

In many rural communities of Pakistan, girls' education is often considered secondary to domestic responsibilities and caregiving roles. Traditional gender norms frequently prioritize boys' education over that of girls, while economic constraints compel families to allocate limited educational resources to male children.² The absence of female teachers, inadequate school infrastructure, and the long distances between villages and educational institutions further discourage girls'

¹ Naila Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," *Development and Change* 30, no. 3 (1999): 437.

² Munazza Mubarak and Jahanzeb Waseh, "Impact of Education on Women Empowerment: A Case Study of Rural Pakistan," *Advance Social Science Archive Journal* 3, no. 2 (2025): 1012-1018.

enrollment and retention, particularly at the secondary level (UNICEF, 2020; World Bank, n.d.).³ Concerns about safety, mobility, and cultural expectations also contribute to high dropout rates among adolescent girls. As a result, many women enter adulthood with limited literacy, restricted access to information, and fewer opportunities for economic independence and social mobility.⁴

The implications of educational exclusion extend beyond individual women, exerting far-reaching effects on household welfare, community development, and broader socioeconomic progress. Restricted access to education limits women's opportunities for participation in the formal labor market, constrains their agency in household decision-making, and diminishes their awareness of health, legal, and political rights (Sen, 1999). Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that women with higher levels of education are more likely to engage in gainful employment, participate actively in community and civic affairs, and allocate greater resources to the health, nutrition, and education of their children, thereby fostering positive intergenerational outcomes and contributing to long-term social and economic development. In the context of rural Pakistan, expanding girls' access to equitable and quality education represents not only a fundamental issue of gender justice but also a strategic investment in human capital, sustainable development, and poverty alleviation. Addressing persistent educational disparities is therefore essential for promoting women's empowerment and achieving inclusive and equitable development.

Economic Marginalization

Women contribute substantially to Pakistan's informal and agricultural sectors, yet much of their labor remains invisible and undervalued. Rural women engage in farming, livestock management, handicrafts, and household production, often without formal recognition or remuneration.

³ World Health Organization, *Trends in Maternal Mortality 2000 to 2020: Estimates by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and UNDESA/Population Division* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2023).

⁴ Sidra Noreen and Zafar Iqbal, "Adult Participation in Basic Literacy Programs in Pakistan: Challenges and Practical Steps for Policy Administrators," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 44, no. 4 (2025).

Economic marginalization extends beyond low wages or unpaid labor; it reflects a broader system of unequal access to productive resources, financial opportunities, and economic decision-making. Women in peripheral regions frequently lack ownership rights over land, property, and agricultural assets, limiting their ability to accumulate wealth or secure credit. Even when women actively contribute to household income, their work is often categorized as supplementary rather than economically productive, reinforcing gendered perceptions of dependency.

Access to formal banking services, credit facilities, insurance schemes, and entrepreneurial support remains limited for many women, particularly in remote and underserved areas. Financial institutions may require collateral that women do not possess, while social norms and mobility restrictions can prevent them from engaging directly with markets and financial networks. As a result, women often rely on male relatives to access economic resources, reducing their autonomy and bargaining power within households and communities.

Furthermore, labor market segmentation confines many women to low-paying, insecure, and informal forms of employment. Seasonal agricultural work, home-based production, and informal service activities frequently lack legal protections, social security benefits, and opportunities for advancement. The absence of childcare facilities, safe transportation, and supportive workplace policies further constrains women's participation in the formal economy.

The rise of globalization and technological change has created new economic opportunities, yet women, particularly those living on the periphery of Pakistan often remain excluded from these developments due to limited digital access, inadequate skills training, and persistent infrastructural deficits. Gender disparities in access to technology, financial services, and productive resources restrict women's ability to participate in emerging economic sectors and benefit from digital transformation.⁵ Consequently, economic marginalization not only

⁵ Kate Bedford, "Gender and Development in the World Bank: An Evaluation of the Business Case for Equality," in *The Elgar Companion to the World Bank*, ed. Antje Vetterlein and Tobias Schmidtke (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024).

constrains income generation but also perpetuates cycles of poverty, social dependence, and exclusion across generations.

In Pakistan, rural women contribute substantially to agriculture, livestock management, handicrafts, and unpaid care work, yet their labor frequently remains undervalued and unrecognized within formal economic frameworks.⁶ Limited ownership of land and productive assets further weakens their economic bargaining power and financial autonomy (Agarwal, 1994). Moreover, women in remote regions of Balochistan, Sindh, and southern Punjab often face additional barriers, including restricted mobility, limited market access, and inadequate digital connectivity, which hinder their participation in entrepreneurial and income-generating activities. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive strategies that promote asset ownership, financial inclusion, market access, digital literacy, skills development, and greater recognition of women's economic contributions. Such measures are essential not only for advancing gender equality but also for fostering inclusive and sustainable economic development in Pakistan.

Political and Institutional Exclusion

Although women have gained representation through reserved seats in legislative bodies, many women on the periphery remain detached from formal political processes. Local power structures frequently restrict women's participation in community decision-making and governance. In many rural and marginalized areas, political participation is often mediated through male family members or influential community leaders, limiting women's opportunities to engage directly in local governance or electoral processes. Even where women possess the legal right to vote or contest elections, social pressures, limited mobility, low literacy levels, and economic dependency frequently prevent them from exercising these rights effectively.

Institutional barriers, including limited awareness of legal rights and inadequate access to justice mechanisms, further compound exclusion. Women

⁶ Hakimzadi Wagan et al., "Empowering Rural Women: Examining Their Role in Agriculture and Livestock in Taluka Hyderabad Rural, Sindh, Pakistan with a Focus on Sustainable Development Goals," *The Asian Bulletin of Green Management and Circular Economy* 4, no. 1 (2024).

facing discrimination, violence, inheritance disputes, or property-related conflicts often encounter significant obstacles when seeking legal remedies. Factors such as the distance to legal institutions, high litigation costs, lack of female legal professionals, and fear of social stigma discourage many women from pursuing justice. Furthermore, weak implementation of gender-sensitive laws and insufficient legal aid services disproportionately affect women living in peripheral regions. Research indicates that legal empowerment initiatives remain unevenly distributed across Pakistan, leaving many women without effective institutional support.

Social and Cultural Constraints

Traditional gender norms continue to shape women's lives across many peripheral communities. Expectations surrounding honor, family reputation, and gender-specific roles frequently limit women's mobility, educational choices, and employment opportunities. Practices such as early marriage, restrictions on public engagement, and unequal household decision-making can reduce women's autonomy. While cultural traditions vary considerably across Pakistan, patriarchal norms remain influential in defining acceptable behavior for women.

These deeply rooted social norms also influence women's access to healthcare, financial resources, and digital technologies. In many communities, women require permission from male guardians to travel, seek employment, or access public services, reinforcing their economic and social dependence. Gender stereotypes assigning women primary responsibility for unpaid domestic and caregiving work further reduce the time and opportunities available for education, skill development, and participation in public life.⁷ According to the World Economic Forum (2024), Pakistan continues to rank among the lowest-performing countries in global gender equality, reflecting persistent disparities in economic participation, educational attainment, political empowerment, and health outcomes.⁸

⁷ World Health Organization, *Trends in Maternal Mortality 2000 to 2023: Estimates by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and UNDESA/Population Division* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2025).

⁸ Saba Arshad, "The Evolution of Educational Access, Quality, and Gender Inequalities in the Public Education Sector in Punjab, Pakistan: A School-Level Panel Data Analysis" (PhD diss., University of Bristol, 2024).

Social acceptance of gender-based violence also remains a significant challenge. Although legislative reforms such as laws addressing domestic violence, workplace harassment, and child marriage have strengthened legal protections in several provinces, enforcement remains inconsistent due to limited institutional capacity, inadequate awareness, and prevailing social attitudes (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan). Consequently, many women continue to experience multiple and overlapping forms of exclusion that reinforce cycles of poverty, marginalization, and limited agency, particularly in geographically isolated and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities.

Health Inequalities

Healthcare access remains uneven across Pakistan's peripheral regions. Women often face difficulties accessing maternal healthcare, reproductive services, and specialized medical treatment due to distance, financial constraints, and inadequate infrastructure.

Limited health literacy and cultural barriers may further discourage women from seeking timely medical care. These challenges contribute to adverse health outcomes and reinforce cycles of poverty and dependency.

Pathways to Empowerment

Education as a Transformative Force

Education serves as a foundational pathway toward empowerment by enhancing knowledge, confidence, and economic opportunities. Educated women are more likely to participate in decision-making, access employment, and advocate for their rights.

Investments in girls' education, particularly in rural and underserved areas, have demonstrated positive effects on household welfare, health outcomes, and community development. Expanding access to secondary and higher education remains essential for reducing gender disparities.

Economic Empowerment and Financial Inclusion

Economic independence is a critical component of empowerment. Access to vocational training, entrepreneurship opportunities, microfinance initiatives, and

digital technologies can enable women to generate income and increase financial autonomy.

Women's participation in income-generating activities not only improves household economic conditions but also enhances their social status and bargaining power. However, economic programs must be accompanied by efforts to address structural barriers that limit women's access to resources and markets.

Digital Inclusion of Women in Pakistan

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has transformed the way individuals access information, education, healthcare, financial services, and employment opportunities worldwide. In Pakistan, digital transformation has accelerated through increased mobile phone penetration, expanding internet infrastructure, digital financial services, and government-led e-governance initiatives. These developments have created significant opportunities for women, particularly those residing in peripheral and underserved regions, to participate more actively in economic, educational, and social life. Digital inclusion has therefore become an important component of women's empowerment by reducing geographical isolation, expanding access to essential services, and strengthening women's participation in the digital economy. However, despite these advancements, substantial gender disparities continue to restrict women's access to and effective use of digital technologies, limiting their ability to benefit from ongoing digital transformation (International Telecommunication Union.

Digital inclusion extends beyond providing internet connectivity or digital devices. It encompasses equitable access to digital infrastructure, affordability of internet services, ownership of digital devices, digital literacy, online safety, and the ability to use technology effectively for education, employment, entrepreneurship, healthcare, civic engagement, and financial inclusion (United Nations Development Programme.⁹ In Pakistan, where considerable disparities exist between urban and

⁹ Christoph Nedopil, Mengdi Yue, and Tianshu Sun, *(Re)orienting Sovereign Debt to Support Nature and the SDGs: Instruments and Their Application in Asia-Pacific Developing Economies* (Beijing: United Nations Development Programme, 2023).

rural populations, digital inclusion has emerged as a strategic priority for promoting gender equality and inclusive socioeconomic development.

The widespread adoption of mobile technology has significantly expanded opportunities for Pakistani women. Mobile phones provide access to communication, educational resources, employment information, digital marketplaces, government services, and emergency support. According to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), mobile broadband coverage has expanded considerably over the past decade, increasing opportunities for digital participation across the country. Smartphones enable women to communicate independently, participate in online learning, access telemedicine services, and engage in entrepreneurial activities without requiring physical mobility, which is often constrained by social and cultural norms.

Education represents one of the most important areas where digital technologies can empower women. Online learning platforms provide flexible opportunities for women and girls to continue formal education, acquire vocational skills, and participate in professional development regardless of geographical location. Digital education is particularly valuable in rural and peripheral regions where educational institutions are scarce, transportation is limited, or cultural norms restrict girls' mobility. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), virtual classrooms, and educational applications allow women to acquire technical, entrepreneurial, and language skills that enhance their employability and economic independence. The COVID-19 pandemic further demonstrated the critical role of digital learning while simultaneously exposing significant inequalities in internet access and digital device ownership among women and girls.¹⁰

Digital technologies have also expanded women's economic opportunities by facilitating entrepreneurship and participation in online markets. Women-owned small businesses increasingly utilize social media platforms, e-commerce websites, and digital marketing tools to reach customers beyond their immediate communities. Home-based entrepreneurs can advertise products, receive digital

¹⁰ Padma Rani, Bhanu Bhakta Acharya, and Kulveen Trehan, eds., *Digital Inequalities in Media Education in South Asia: Context and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (London: Routledge, 2025).

payments, and establish business networks without leaving their homes. Freelancing platforms have similarly created employment opportunities for educated women, enabling them to participate in software development, graphic design, content writing, virtual assistance, and digital marketing while balancing household responsibilities. These flexible employment models have become particularly important for women facing mobility restrictions or limited access to conventional labor markets.

Financial inclusion has improved considerably through digital financial services such as branchless banking, mobile wallets, and digital payment systems. Services including Easypaisa and JazzCash have enabled millions of Pakistanis to access financial services without visiting traditional bank branches. For women living in peripheral communities, these technologies facilitate secure savings, money transfers, bill payments, and access to financial resources. Digital financial inclusion strengthens women's control over household finances, supports entrepreneurship, and enhances resilience during economic emergencies by enabling direct government cash transfers and social protection programs.

Healthcare access has similarly benefited from digital innovation. Telemedicine platforms, mobile health applications, and online medical consultations allow women in remote areas to obtain healthcare advice without extensive travel. Digital health services improve access to maternal healthcare, reproductive health information, child nutrition guidance, vaccination awareness, and mental health support. In regions where healthcare facilities remain limited, digital technologies help reduce geographical barriers and improve healthcare accessibility for women and their families.

Despite these opportunities, Pakistan continues to experience one of the largest digital gender gaps in South Asia. According to the GSMA (2024), women in low- and middle-income countries are significantly less likely than men to own smartphones or use mobile internet, and Pakistan exhibits one of the widest gender disparities in digital access. Women, particularly those residing in rural and peripheral regions, are considerably less likely to own mobile phones, possess internet-enabled devices, or access digital services independently.

Several interconnected factors contribute to this digital divide. Economic constraints remain a major obstacle, as many women cannot afford smartphones, computers, or internet subscriptions. In low-income households, digital devices are frequently prioritized for male family members due to prevailing gender norms and resource limitations. Consequently, women often rely on shared devices or have no regular access to digital technologies, limiting their ability to participate in online education, employment, or financial services.

Educational inequalities further reinforce digital exclusion. Female literacy rates remain lower than those of men, particularly in rural Pakistan, reducing women's capacity to use digital technologies effectively. Digital literacy involves not only operating technological devices but also understanding online communication, evaluating digital information, protecting personal privacy, and using digital platforms safely and productively. Without targeted digital skills training, access to technology alone cannot guarantee meaningful digital participation.

Social and cultural norms constitute another significant barrier to digital inclusion. In many communities, women's use of mobile phones or social media is closely monitored or restricted due to concerns regarding family honor, privacy, or perceived moral risks. Male family members often regulate women's access to digital devices, reducing opportunities for independent communication, education, and employment. These restrictions demonstrate that the digital gender gap is deeply rooted in broader patterns of gender inequality rather than merely technological limitations.

Online safety also remains an important concern. Women frequently encounter cyber harassment, online abuse, identity theft, cyberstalking, and privacy violations, discouraging active participation in digital environments. Fear of online violence often results in self-censorship or complete withdrawal from digital platforms. Addressing these concerns requires stronger cybersecurity legislation, effective reporting mechanisms, digital rights protections, and public awareness campaigns promoting respectful online behavior.

Closing Pakistan's digital gender gap requires coordinated efforts involving government institutions, telecommunications providers, educational

organizations, civil society, and the private sector. Expanding affordable broadband infrastructure, reducing internet costs, increasing smartphone affordability, and investing in community-based digital literacy programs are essential policy priorities. Gender-responsive digital policies should promote women's ownership of digital devices, strengthen digital entrepreneurship, improve online safety, and integrate digital skills into educational curricula. Such interventions can ensure that women from peripheral communities are not excluded from the country's ongoing digital transformation.¹¹

Digital inclusion is increasingly recognized as a fundamental driver of women's empowerment and sustainable development in Pakistan. Equitable access to digital technologies enhances women's educational attainment, economic participation, healthcare access, financial independence, and civic engagement. Although important progress has been made, persistent structural, economic, educational, and sociocultural barriers continue to limit women's digital participation. Addressing these challenges through inclusive policies and sustained investment will be essential for narrowing the digital gender gap and enabling women across Pakistan to fully participate in the opportunities created by the digital economy.

Community-Based Initiatives

Grassroots organizations and community-based initiatives have become important drivers of women's empowerment in Pakistan. These programs provide essential services such as education, legal awareness, vocational skills training, and leadership development that are designed to address the specific needs of local communities. By responding to local realities, they create opportunities for women to enhance their knowledge, skills, and participation in society.

Community involvement is a key factor in the success of these initiatives because it helps challenge traditional gender norms while encouraging collective responsibility for social change. The active participation of men, religious leaders,

¹¹ Mariagrazia Squicciarini, Garance Sarlat, and Anna Rita Manca, *Empowering Women for the Good of Society: Gender-Based Resilience* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2023).

and community elders can strengthen community support for women's rights and contribute to the long-term sustainability of empowerment efforts.

Pakistan has enacted various laws and policies to safeguard women's rights and advance gender equality. Despite these legal developments, significant challenges remain in their implementation. Weak enforcement mechanisms, limited institutional accountability and low public awareness often prevent these laws from achieving their intended impact. Strengthening implementation and increasing awareness are therefore essential for ensuring that legal protections lead to meaningful improvements in women's lives.

Public policies should also recognize Pakistan's social, cultural, and regional diversity. Development strategies must ensure that women from marginalized and underserved communities are included in planning processes and receive equitable access to resources and opportunities.

The journey from exclusion to empowerment is complex and varies across different social and geographical contexts. Women living in Pakistan's peripheral and underserved regions face multiple and overlapping challenges shaped by factors such as poverty, cultural norms, geographic isolation, and limited access to public services. Although education, economic participation, and legal reforms provide important pathways toward empowerment, persistent structural inequalities continue to restrict their full effectiveness.

Women's empowerment should therefore be viewed as a multidimensional process that involves positive change at the individual, household, community, and institutional levels. Achieving sustainable progress requires not only expanding women's access to education, employment, and legal rights but also transforming the social, cultural, and institutional structures that perpetuate gender inequality.

Furthermore, policies that focus solely on enhancing women's individual capabilities may fail to address the broader structural barriers that limit their opportunities. A comprehensive and integrated approach combining quality education, accessible healthcare, economic inclusion, effective legal protection, and broader social transformation is essential for achieving meaningful, inclusive, and lasting women's empowerment in Pakistan.

Conclusion

Women on the periphery of Pakistan continue to navigate complex realities characterized by exclusion, inequality, and constrained opportunities. Despite persistent challenges, pathways to empowerment are emerging through education, economic participation, digital inclusion, community engagement, and policy reforms.

The journey from exclusion to empowerment requires more than access to resources; it demands the redistribution of power, recognition of women's agency, and transformation of social institutions that perpetuate marginalization. By adopting inclusive and context-sensitive strategies, policymakers, civil society organizations, and local communities can contribute to creating a society in which all women, regardless of their location or social status, can exercise their rights, realize their potential, and participate fully in national development.

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