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Bridging the Gap Between Formal Commitments and Gender Equality: Pakistan's Legal and Policy Framework, Implementation Gaps, and Reform Pathways

Zarfishan Qaiser*, Rohaida Nordin and Nur Hafilah Binti Musa

Faculty of Law, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Correspondence: p134012@siswa.ukm.edu.my

Abstract Gender equality is a fundamental cornerstone of the rule of law, substantive justice, and inclusive social development and therefore remains an essential priority in state governance, public policy, and development agendas. Pakistan has demonstrated a substantial formal commitment to gender equality through its accession to international human rights instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), together with constitutional guarantees and an expanding body of gender-responsive legislation and public policies. Despite these important legal and policy developments, a persistent gap remains between formal commitments and their effective implementation, limiting the realisation of substantive gender equality in practice. This article critically examines Pakistan's legal and policy framework for gender equality by identifying the structural, procedural, institutional, and substantive barriers that impede consistent implementation. It argues that Pakistan's principal challenge lies not merely in the absence of laws and policies but also in the fragmented and uneven institutional mechanisms through which existing commitments are translated into practical outcomes. The analysis identifies institutional fragmentation, weak enforcement capacity, inadequate coordination, resource constraints, procedural deficiencies, and socio-cultural barriers as mutually reinforcing factors contributing to implementation failures. Moving beyond the identification of legal and institutional shortcomings, the article proposes an integrated reform pathway aimed at narrowing the distance between formal commitments and substantive gender equality through strengthened enforcement, institutional coordination, transparent monitoring, accountability, and responsive governance. It concludes that meaningful gender equality requires not simply additional law-making but effective, accessible, and adequately resourced legal and institutional mechanisms capable of translating existing commitments into measurable, sustainable, and substantively equal outcomes.

Index Terms gender equality; Pakistan; legal framework; governance; implementation gap; accountability; substantive equality

I. Introduction

Gender equality has gained increasing prominence in contemporary global development discourse, emerging as a fundamental concern of human rights, democratic governance, the rule of law, and sustainable development [1], [2]. It is no longer regarded solely as a matter of protecting women's rights; rather, it is increasingly recognised as an essential component of equitable governance, social justice, economic progress, and inclusive development. Achieving meaningful and sustainable development therefore requires gender equality to be integrated into the legal, institutional, administrative, and policy frameworks through which states pursue their developmental objectives. This recognition is reflected in the growing body of international commitments, enforceable legal standards, and development frameworks aimed at eliminating discrimination and ensuring that women and girls can enjoy

their rights equally and effectively [2], [3].

At the international level, the commitment to gender equality has progressively evolved from recognising equality as a fundamental human right towards emphasising its practical implementation, institutional accountability, and measurable outcomes. The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 reinforced this commitment by placing gender equality at the centre of the global development agenda through Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls [2], [4]. Importantly, progress towards gender equality is closely interconnected with other development objectives because persistent gender disparities continue to affect access to justice, education, healthcare, economic participation, political representation, and wider social and economic development. Accordingly, meaningful assessment requires attention

to lived outcomes as well as to the formal adoption of national and international commitments.

Within this global context, Pakistan has undertaken substantial formal commitments to gender equality through its international treaty obligations, constitutional guarantees, federal and provincial legislation, and national and provincial policies [5], [6]. Pakistan acceded to CEDAW in March 1996, thereby accepting an important international framework for the elimination of discrimination against women [7].

Nevertheless, the existence of extensive legal and policy commitments has not always resulted in a corresponding transformation in women's everyday lives and their effective enjoyment of rights. Persistent gender disparities are evident in access to justice, economic participation, political representation, education, inheritance and property rights, and protection from gender-based violence [4], [8]. The present analysis therefore maintains that the achievement of gender equality cannot be assessed solely by determining whether legislation has been enacted, whether policy documents have been adopted, or whether institutions have formally been established. The more consequential issue is whether legal norms are effectively implemented, consistently enforced, adequately monitored, and translated into observable improvements in women's substantive equality across different social and geographic contexts.

The central argument of this article is that Pakistan's gender equality challenge is increasingly one of implementation, institutional capacity, and public accountability rather than simply a deficit of formal normative commitments. Although gaps and deficiencies in particular laws undoubtedly remain, a continuing emphasis on legislative enactment alone risks obscuring the institutional and structural conditions that determine whether legally recognised rights become practically accessible and enforceable [9]. As the literature indicates, even progressive legislation cannot produce transformative equality where enforcement institutions lack resources, coordination, and accountability; where implementation varies across provinces; where monitoring systems fail to generate reliable sex-disaggregated data; or where socio-cultural structures continue to constrain women's ability to claim and exercise their formally recognised rights [3], [10].

To address these interconnected problems, this article advances the proposition that Pakistan requires a recalibration of its existing legal and governance framework. Recalibration does not mean abandoning legislation already in force or simply introducing additional laws. Instead, it entails reconsidering and strengthening the relationships among legal norms, administrative institutions, implementation mechanisms, monitoring systems, gender-responsive policymaking, financial allocations, and accountability arrangements so that existing commitments generate substantive outcomes. The article therefore shifts its analytical focus from asking whether Pakistan has committed itself to gender equality to asking whether the country's legal and governance architecture is sufficiently coordinated, resourced, transparent, and accountable to deliver gender equality in practice, including at provincial

and local levels.

II. Literature Review

The existing literature on gender equality in Pakistan demonstrates a substantial and persistent gap between formal legal commitments and their practical realisation. Scholarship examining Pakistan's constitutional and legislative framework generally recognises significant protections concerning equality and non-discrimination, including constitutional guarantees and obligations arising under CEDAW and the SDGs [5], [11]. However, researchers increasingly argue that progressive laws alone do not necessarily produce substantive equality, particularly when implementation mechanisms remain weak, inaccessible, or unevenly resourced. Studies of women's social, legal, economic, and political participation provide important evidence of continuing barriers despite formal recognition of rights [12], [13].

A recurring theme in the literature is the implementation gap associated with institutional fragmentation, limited administrative capacity, inadequate inter-agency coordination, and weak enforcement. Studies addressing gender-based violence, women's inheritance and property rights, political participation, and access to justice indicate that statutory protections are frequently undermined by procedural barriers, institutional weaknesses, patriarchal social norms, and unequal access to effective remedies [1], [14]. The literature also highlights the significance of Pakistan's federal-provincial governance structure, particularly following the Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment, which expanded provincial legislative responsibilities while contributing to variation in legislation, institutional capacity, and implementation practices across jurisdictions [6], [15].

Another important body of research emphasises weaknesses in monitoring, sex-disaggregated data, accountability, and gender-responsive budgeting. Although Pakistan has established gender-related institutional mechanisms and adopted relevant policy commitments, available assessments suggest that implementation monitoring has too often focused on formal compliance rather than measurable improvements in the circumstances of women and girls [10], [15]. More recent institutional reporting also identifies efforts to strengthen data systems, fiscal tracking, and the ability of public bodies to use gender evidence in policy implementation, while showing that capacity-building remains an ongoing requirement [16].

Overall, the literature indicates that Pakistan's central challenge involves not only remaining legal deficiencies but also the fragmented governance, implementation, and enforcement processes through which existing commitments are carried into effect. This study builds on those findings by bringing together legal, institutional, procedural, financial, monitoring, and accountability dimensions in a recalibrated framework for advancing substantive gender equality under SDG 5. The contribution is integrative and normative: it seeks to explain how different implementation failures interact and how reform measures might be coordinated across levels of government.

III. Research Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative, socio-legal, and doctrinal research methodology to examine critically the relationship between Pakistan's formal commitments to gender equality and their implementation in practice. The doctrinal component examines the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, relevant federal and provincial legislation, international commitments—particularly CEDAW—and the framework and indicators associated with SDG 5 [2], [6], [7]. The socio-legal component complements this legal assessment by analysing secondary literature and institutional reports concerning the influence of enforcement capacity, administrative arrangements, governance structures, monitoring systems, resource constraints, and socio-cultural factors on the practical realisation of legally recognised rights. No original interviews, surveys, or other primary empirical datasets were generated for this article.

The analysis is organised around the relationship between normative commitments and practical outcomes. First, it examines Pakistan's international, constitutional, legislative, and policy commitments to gender equality. Second, it considers the implementation gap and identifies legal, institutional, procedural, fiscal, and structural factors that may limit the effectiveness of those commitments. Third, it develops a recalibrated legal and governance approach centred on substantive equality, institutional accountability, gender mainstreaming, gender-responsive budgeting, and measurable SDG indicators. Finally, it advances an integrated reform pathway showing how these dimensions can operate together to strengthen Pakistan's implementation of SDG 5. The proposed framework is an analytical recommendation rather than a tested causal model.

IV. Results and Findings

Pakistan's commitment to gender equality is reinforced by international obligations, particularly its accession to CEDAW on 12 March 1996 [7]. CEDAW requires States parties to take appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women and to secure the effective enjoyment of their rights. The subsequent SDG framework provides a broader development agenda within which these commitments may be pursued. SDG 5 addresses discrimination, violence, harmful practices, unpaid care work, leadership, sexual and reproductive health and rights, economic resources, enabling technology, and gender-responsive laws and policies [2]. Pakistan's constitutional framework supplies an additional normative foundation. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the law. Article 25 expressly prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex while permitting special provisions for the protection of women and children. Article 27 addresses discrimination in appointments to public service, subject to its stated qualifications, and Article 34 directs the State to take steps to ensure women's full participation in all spheres of national life. Articles 35 and 37 address the protection of marriage, family, mothers and children, and the promotion of

social justice and welfare [6], [11]. These provisions should be read with attention to the distinction between enforceable fundamental rights and the Constitution's Principles of Policy, whose constitutional status and mechanisms of implementation differ.

Taken together, these provisions establish that gender equality is not merely a discretionary policy preference but is closely linked to Pakistan's constitutional order and its international human rights commitments. The constitutional framework consequently provides a normative basis for moving beyond passive non-discrimination towards measures that enable women's meaningful participation in social, economic, institutional, and political life. At the same time, the practical enforceability of each provision must be assessed in light of its specific constitutional character and the legislation and institutions established to give it effect [6].

Pakistan has progressively introduced legislation addressing different dimensions of gender inequality. Legislative interventions include workplace harassment protections, measures concerning violence against women, women's property and inheritance rights, and other forms of gender-based discrimination. At the federal level, the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, subsequently amended in 2022, and the Enforcement of Women's Property Rights Act, 2020, illustrate the development of statutory remedies and institutional responsibilities [17], [18]. Provincial legislative activity has likewise expanded following the devolutionary changes introduced by the Eighteenth Amendment [6]. This development permits responses to particular provincial contexts but also produces variation in legal definitions, institutional mandates, enforcement procedures, and penalties. National and provincial gender policies, plans, and SDG-related strategies have expanded the formal policy agenda. Institutions such as the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW), provincial commissions, and relevant ombudsperson offices provide monitoring, advocacy, and complaint-related functions, although their mandates differ [10], [15].

Despite the proliferation of laws and policy measures aligned with SDG 5 and aimed at protecting and advancing women's rights in Pakistan—including legislation addressing workplace harassment, domestic violence, sexual violence, property and inheritance rights, and other forms of gender-based discrimination—the existence of an extensive legal framework has not, in itself, eliminated the barriers to substantive gender equality [12]. Women are constitutionally guaranteed equality and non-discrimination, while a range of statutory provisions further recognise and protect their rights. Nevertheless, a significant gap persists between these normative commitments and their practical realisation [14]. Women continue to encounter institutional, economic, social, cultural, and procedural barriers that restrict their ability to claim and effectively enjoy rights formally guaranteed by law [4]. The persistence of these barriers demonstrates that legal recognition represents only the starting point of the equality process; substantive equality requires that legally recognised

rights are accessible, enforceable, and capable of producing meaningful improvements in women's lived realities [15].

The problem does not lie solely in the absence of legislation; it also concerns the capacity and willingness of public authorities to implement and enforce the laws already enacted. Laws do not operate in isolation: their effectiveness depends on the institutional, administrative, financial, and social structures within which they are administered [1], [15]. Progressive legislation is unlikely to produce transformative outcomes when enforcement institutions lack sufficient infrastructure, resources, trained personnel, inter-agency coordination, or transparent mechanisms of accountability [9]. Legislative enactment, whether undertaken in response to domestic advocacy or international commitments, cannot by itself constitute evidence of meaningful progress. Pakistan's obligations under CEDAW and other applicable human rights treaties, together with its political commitment to the SDGs, require appropriate domestic measures, institutionalisation, and enforcement consistent with the legal status of each instrument [7], [11]. The measure of the State's commitment should therefore include the extent to which it translates legal norms into practical and sustainable improvements in women's rights.

Accordingly, the implementation of gender equality and SDG 5 must be examined through the multiple barriers that intervene between legal commitment and substantive outcomes. These include substantive and structural barriers arising from discriminatory social norms and unequal power relations, procedural barriers arising from inaccessible mechanisms, delays, and weak enforcement procedures; and institutional barriers arising from inadequate infrastructure, limited resources, weak coordination, and insufficient accountability [12]. The challenge is therefore not simply whether Pakistan has adopted gender equality laws or committed itself internationally to SDG 5, but whether these commitments have been sufficiently embedded within the legal, institutional, administrative, financial, and governance framework of the State. Without such integration, SDG 5 risks remaining a normative aspiration rather than a measurable programme of transformative equality [3]. The transition from formal equality to substantive equality consequently requires not another proliferation of laws alone, but the political will, institutional preparedness, implementation mechanisms, and accountability necessary to make existing rights effective in practice [11].

The resulting framework illustrates an important paradox. Legislative activity demonstrates Pakistan's continuing normative commitment to gender equality, but the proliferation of legislation does not necessarily correspond to effective implementation. In some areas, the principal challenge has shifted from the absence of legal recognition towards questions of enforcement, institutional capacity and coordination [1].

V. Discussion

The enactment of legislation, however progressive its substantive content, cannot by itself guarantee meaningful legal or social reform. Merely proclaiming rights, responding to public pressure, or enacting legislation in fulfilment of international

commitments is insufficient unless the broader governance system is prepared to operationalise those rights [9]. Law does not operate in isolation or in a vacuum; its effectiveness depends on the institutional, administrative, financial, procedural, and infrastructural environment in which it is implemented [15]. Consequently, gender-responsive legislation must be accompanied by institutional preparedness, workable enforcement procedures, appropriate policy instruments, trained personnel, adequate financial and infrastructural resources, and clearly assigned responsibilities. These components must be aligned with the objectives of the law so that the exercise of recognised rights does not depend entirely on administrative discretion or shifting governmental priorities [12]. A law that declares a right without providing workable means for asserting it risks remaining a statement of normative aspiration rather than an instrument of substantive change.

The transformative potential of legislation therefore lies not only in the rights that it formally recognises but also in the mechanisms that it builds into the legal and governance system for making those rights effective. Gender-equality legislation should contain, or operate alongside, mechanisms for implementation, institutional coordination, monitoring, financing, enforcement, and accountability [3]. Such mechanisms should facilitate not merely compliance with the law but a transformation in the social conditions that reproduce inequality. In this sense, legal transformation and social transformation are interconnected: a law becomes genuinely transformative when its implementation alters the institutional practices, social relations, opportunities, and power structures that have historically constrained the enjoyment of rights [11]. The objective should consequently be to move beyond legislation as a discrete legal instrument towards legislation as an integrated component of State governance, connected with the executive, legislature, judiciary, administrative institutions, financial structures, policy processes, and monitoring mechanisms [14].

The most significant weakness in Pakistan's gender equality framework lies in the distance between legal recognition and practical enjoyment of rights, as documented in research on sexual violence, inheritance rights, and access to justice [1], [14]. A substantial body of legislation may establish rights on paper while leaving the underlying conditions that prevent women from exercising those rights largely unchanged. This disconnect is particularly visible in areas such as violence against women, inheritance and property rights, access to justice and economic participation. Women may possess legally recognised rights while facing family pressure, social stigma, geographical barriers, financial constraints, institutional discrimination and procedural obstacles when attempting to enforce them [15].

The implementation gap should not be understood as a single institutional failure. Rather, it results from the interaction of several factors operating at different levels. At the structural level, inadequate public resources, limited institutional capacity, and fragmented governance restrict implementation. At the substantive level, patriarchal norms, discriminatory customary practices, and unequal access to economic resources

may limit women's ability to claim and exercise recognised rights [11]. At the procedural level, delays, inaccessible complaint mechanisms, weak investigations, limited legal assistance, and inconsistent enforcement impede effective access to justice [3], [5]. These barriers frequently reinforce one another; formal remedies are especially difficult to use when financial dependence, social pressure, and institutional weakness operate simultaneously.

The constitutional devolution introduced by the Eighteenth Amendment fundamentally altered Pakistan's governance architecture by abolishing the Concurrent Legislative List, subject to the continuing shared competence over criminal law, criminal procedure, and evidence and substantially expanding the legislative and administrative responsibilities of the provinces [15]. This constitutional restructuring enabled provinces to legislate and formulate policies in areas directly relevant to gender equality and women's protection. While devolution was intended to bring governance closer to local realities and enable provinces to develop context-sensitive responses, the transfer of responsibilities was not accompanied by a sufficiently developed and coordinated institutional architecture capable of effectively absorbing these expanded functions [6], [12]. The resulting challenge is therefore not simply one of legislative fragmentation, but of institutional preparedness for devolved governance. Responsibilities were increasingly located at the provincial level, while provincial institutions often continued to face limitations in administrative capacity, specialised expertise, infrastructure, coordination mechanisms, and financial resources necessary to implement the newly devolved mandates effectively [3].

This institutional and administrative mismatch has contributed to a fragmented gender governance landscape in which the distribution of responsibility does not always correspond with the distribution of capacity. Provincial departments, commissions, and other relevant institutions may possess formal mandates concerning women's rights and gender equality, yet their ability to discharge those mandates is affected by inadequate staffing, institutional weaknesses, limited resources, overlapping functions, and insufficient coordination with federal bodies and other provincial institutions. The absence of sufficiently dedicated and sustained financial arrangements for gender-related responsibilities further compounds the problem. Consequently, the transfer of functions has not always been accompanied by the institutional conditions necessary for their effective implementation. The result is a system in which legislative authority, institutional responsibility, financial capacity, and implementation mechanisms do not always operate in effective alignment [1].

This becomes particularly problematic when examined against Pakistan's commitment to SDG 5. Gender equality is a national constitutional and international commitment, but its implementation increasingly depends upon provincial institutions operating within a devolved governance structure [15]. Where provinces have different legislative approaches, institutional capacities, enforcement mechanisms, and resource constraints, the practical enjoyment of gender-related rights may

become uneven across jurisdictions. The problem, therefore, cannot be resolved merely through the enactment of additional provincial legislation [8]. What is required is institutional alignment following devolution: legislative responsibilities must be matched with adequate institutional capacity, specialised human resources, infrastructure, predictable financing, intergovernmental coordination, monitoring mechanisms, and clearly defined accountability. Without such alignment, devolution risks producing not decentralized effectiveness but a fragmented system in which responsibility is dispersed while accountability remains uncertain [8].

Legal rights become meaningful only where institutions possess the capacity, resources, and authority required to enforce them. Pakistan's gender-related institutional framework includes federal ministries, provincial departments, commissions, police organisations, courts, ombudsperson offices, and other specialised mechanisms. However, the effectiveness of these bodies can be affected by resource constraints, staffing deficiencies, overlapping mandates, limited case-management systems, and weak coordination [10], [15]. Institutional fragmentation also creates uncertainty over responsibility. When multiple agencies share related duties without clearly assigned lines of accountability, failures may be difficult to identify or remedy. The problem is therefore not simply the number of institutions but the adequacy of institutional design. A recalibrated approach should specify which institution is responsible for each relevant SDG 5 target, what resources it can deploy, which indicators it must report, how performance will be independently reviewed, and what corrective action follows when implementation is deficient.

A further obstacle concerns the allocation and continuity of resources. Provincial ombudsperson offices, women's development departments, and district-level implementation bodies may face difficulties arising from shortages of trained personnel, inadequate budgets, or dependence on time-limited development programmes [9], [15]. Where externally supported programmes are not incorporated into stable government systems, activities may be difficult to sustain after project funding ends. These weaknesses may leave formally constituted institutions unable to provide timely and effective assistance. Sustainable financing should therefore be treated as an essential implementation condition rather than an optional supplement to legal reform.

Institutional fragmentation presents a related challenge. Responsibility for gender-related enforcement is divided among the police, labour and social-welfare departments, judicial bodies, and specialised commissions. Without effective coordination, complaints may move slowly between jurisdictions and referral procedures may be informal or inconsistently followed [3], [9]. Capacity gaps compound these difficulties. Officials responsible for implementing gender-related law need appropriate training in complaint procedures, evidentiary requirements, respectful treatment of complainants, and referral pathways for survivors of domestic or workplace violence. Where frontline procedures are unclear or inconsistently applied, complainants can encounter additional delays and dis-

tress that discourage further reporting. Formal coordination protocols and continuing professional education are therefore essential.

Addressing these weaknesses requires reform aimed at actual institutional functioning, not merely further legislation. Priority measures include dedicated budget allocations linked to specific enforcement responsibilities, a clearly designated coordinating authority or coordinated inter-agency mechanism, mandatory and recurring training for frontline officials, and standardised case-tracking systems capable of generating reliable accountability data [16]. Transparent reporting, independent review, and proportionate administrative consequences for non-implementation could help make enforcement obligations more meaningful. Such targeted institutional strengthening would provide a more credible route through which existing legal commitments could become consistently accessible, enforceable outcomes for women throughout Pakistan.

Effective implementation of gender equality also requires credible and sustained monitoring. Pakistan has institutions responsible for producing and reporting gender-related information, including the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics and specialised bodies such as the NCSW. However, the availability, comparability, and disaggregation of relevant data can remain uneven [10]. Differences in provincial indicators, incomplete sex-disaggregated information, and limited coverage of marginalised groups may undermine evidence-based policymaking [8], [15]. Without reliable data, implementation cannot be adequately assessed; without measurable indicators, performance across institutions and provinces cannot be compared; and without accountability, monitoring risks becoming a routine administrative exercise rather than a mechanism for institutional improvement. SDG 5 indicators should therefore be incorporated into departmental performance frameworks, legislative oversight, financial planning, and regular public reporting [2], [16].

Legal reform alone cannot eliminate deeply embedded gender inequalities. Patriarchal social structures influence women's access to property, education, employment, political participation and justice. Informal dispute-resolution mechanisms may further reproduce discriminatory norms where formal legal institutions are inaccessible or socially distrusted [1]. Economic dependence can also restrict women's ability to challenge discriminatory practices. A woman who lacks independent income, legal assistance or family support may possess a formal legal right but remain practically unable to exercise it [8]. This demonstrates why substantive equality requires attention to the conditions of rights enjoyment [15]. The transformative effectiveness of law depends upon whether women can realistically access the institutions through which legal rights are enforced.

Pakistan's legal framework recognises equality, but the effectiveness of implementation should be judged by whether women experience equality in practice. Legislative and policy review should therefore consider not merely whether a measure is formally gender-neutral, but whether it produces fair

and effective outcomes for different groups of women. Gender equality should not be treated exclusively as a narrowly defined "women's issue". It is simultaneously a constitutional issue, a rule-of-law issue, an economic-development issue, a governance issue, and an integral concern of sustainable development [2], [4]. Accordingly, responsibility for gender equality must extend across public institutions rather than remaining confined to a small number of specialist agencies.

The first element of the reform agenda is the harmonisation of Pakistan's gender-equality legal framework. Pakistan does not necessarily require continuous expansion of gender-related legislation; rather, greater attention should be directed towards ensuring coherence between existing federal and provincial laws, institutional mandates and enforcement mechanisms. A systematic review of the legal framework is therefore necessary to identify contradictions, legislative gaps, jurisdictional uncertainty and variations in standards of protection across provinces. Harmonisation, however, should not be understood as an attempt to reverse provincial autonomy following the Eighteenth Amendment. Instead, it should establish a constitutionally appropriate framework of commonly agreed minimum standards of gender equality protection for the protection of gender-related rights across jurisdictions, while allowing provinces to adopt more progressive measures according to their particular circumstances [5]. Such a framework should provide common minimum principles concerning protection from gender-based violence, access to justice, women's property and inheritance rights, institutional complaint mechanisms, enforcement standards, gender-disaggregated data, monitoring and reporting, and institutional accountability [6], [15]. In this way, harmonisation would address fragmentation without undermining the constitutional distribution of legislative powers.

The second component concerns the strengthening of institutional accountability. Pakistan already possesses numerous institutions with mandates relating to gender equality; the central challenge is to transform these broad mandates into clearly defined, measurable and enforceable responsibilities [15]. Every institution responsible for implementing gender-related legislation should operate through a clear accountability chain comprising a defined mandate, adequate resources, measurable indicators, reporting obligations, independent monitoring and corrective mechanisms. Institutional performance should therefore be assessed not merely by the existence of programmes or policies, but by demonstrable outcomes [8]. For instance, institutions dealing with gender-based complaints should be evaluated according to indicators such as the number of complaints received and processed, average resolution time, enforcement rates, accessibility of services and outcomes for affected women. Accountability should also extend to legislative oversight, with Parliament and provincial assemblies receiving regular reports on the implementation of gender-related legislation and progress towards SDG 5. This would shift institutional responsibility from general commitments to measurable performance and make non-implementation more visible and subject to correc-

tive action.

A further element of the reform agenda is the institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming across the wider governance system. Gender equality should not remain confined to ministries, departments or institutions specifically designated for women's affairs [2]. A transformative approach requires gender considerations to be incorporated into legislation, policymaking, budgeting and implementation across all sectors of government, including finance, education, health, labour, justice, infrastructure, economic development and social protection [16]. This is particularly important for the achievement of SDG 5 because gender inequality is produced through interconnected social, economic and institutional structures and cannot be addressed through women-specific policies alone. For example, increasing women's economic participation requires not only gender-specific initiatives but also supportive labour regulation, childcare provision, safe transportation, access to education, social protection and appropriate fiscal policies [12]. Gender equality should therefore be treated as a cross-cutting governance responsibility, rather than the exclusive responsibility of women-focused institutions.

Legal commitments to gender equality must also be supported by adequate and sustainable financial resources. Gender-responsive budgeting should therefore be strengthened as a mechanism for connecting legal and policy commitments with actual government expenditure [11]. Public budgets should identify the resources allocated to gender equality interventions, their intended beneficiaries, expected outcomes and gender-specific performance indicators, while also providing mechanisms for assessing actual expenditure against planned objectives. The emphasis should consequently move beyond budget allocation towards budget performance. Departments and institutions receiving resources for gender-related initiatives should be required to demonstrate the measurable improvements generated by those resources [15]. This would help address the persistent problem whereby formal policy commitments are made without corresponding financial capacity for implementation and would make public expenditure itself an instrument of gender-equality accountability [16].

The final and most important element of the proposed reform agenda is the integration of SDG 5 indicators into domestic governance and accountability mechanisms. SDG indicators should not remain confined to periodic reporting exercises or international commitments; they should become part of the ordinary machinery through which government performance is planned, monitored and evaluated [2], [10]. This requires establishing a clear institutional chain linking each relevant SDG 5 target to national and provincial indicators, a designated responsible institution, corresponding budgetary resources, implementation activities, systematic data collection, performance review and corrective action. In this model, SDG 5 would cease to function merely as an aspirational international commitment and become an operational component of domestic governance. Integrating SDG 5 indicators into institutional planning and performance assessment would also

provide a mechanism for identifying implementation failures, allocating responsibility and measuring whether legal and policy interventions are producing substantive improvements in women's lives. Taken together, harmonisation, institutional accountability, gender mainstreaming, gender-responsive budgeting and the integration of SDG 5 indicators provide a coherent reform pathway through which Pakistan can move from fragmented legal recognition towards coordinated, measurable and outcome-oriented implementation of gender equality [1].

VI. Conclusion

Pakistan's legal and policy landscape demonstrates a substantial normative commitment to gender equality. Constitutional guarantees, international obligations, legislation, policies and specialised institutions collectively establish an important foundation for the advancement of women's rights and the achievement of SDG 5. Yet persistent gender inequalities demonstrate that normative commitment alone is insufficient. The central problem is increasingly located in the gap between recognition and realisation. Rights formally recognised in law may remain inaccessible where institutions lack capacity, responsibilities are fragmented, enforcement is weak, monitoring is inadequate and structural inequalities continue to shape women's ability to claim their rights. This is particularly important in relation to gender equality and SDG 5.

Gender equality cannot be treated as an isolated social-welfare concern that is addressed through a limited number of women-specific programmes or institutions [16]. It must be embedded within Pakistan's broader development architecture and incorporated into every relevant stage of governance and development planning. Legislative commitments concerning women's equality must therefore be reflected in policymaking, budgeting, institutional performance, development programmes, monitoring frameworks, and accountability mechanisms [16]. The State's commitment to gender equality should not depend upon whether it happens to occupy a particular position on the governmental priority list; rather, once rights have been constitutionally or statutorily recognised, the State must establish the institutional and financial arrangements necessary to give those rights practical effect. The real measure of legislative success is consequently not the enactment of the law itself, but its capacity to become embedded within the functioning of the State and to generate sustained legal, institutional, and social transformation.

The article has therefore argued that Pakistan does not require a strategy centred exclusively on additional legislation. Rather, it requires a recalibration of the existing legal and governance architecture. Such recalibration should move the system from formal equality towards substantive equality, from fragmented institutional responsibility towards coordinated governance, from policy commitments towards measurable implementation, and from monitoring towards meaningful accountability. The proposed transformative framework connects five essential dimensions: law, institutions, implementation, monitoring and accountability. Its central premise is that SDG 5 should be embedded within mainstream gover-

nance rather than treated as a discrete women's rights agenda. Gender equality should be reflected in legislative review, policymaking, budgeting, institutional performance and development planning.

Achieving gender equality in Pakistan requires moving beyond the formal recognition of rights towards their effective realisation in women's lived experiences. The central challenge is therefore not solely legislative; it is also institutional and administrative, requiring effective governance, adequate resources, continuing coordination, monitoring, and accountability. Pakistan does not necessarily need an uninterrupted expansion of gender-related legislation; instead, it needs to recalibrate and strengthen the arrangements through which existing legal commitments are implemented and enforced. Harmonising minimum protection standards, strengthening institutional accountability, mainstreaming gender considerations in policymaking and budgeting, and incorporating SDG 5 indicators into ordinary planning and performance review can help narrow the gap between formal commitments and practical outcomes. Ultimately, Pakistan's progress towards SDG 5 will depend not merely on the number of laws enacted, but on the State's demonstrated capacity to make legal and policy commitments operational, measurable, accessible, and enforceable. Such implementation can contribute to transforming gender equality from a formal aspiration into a substantive and enduring component of national development and public governance.

Author Contributions

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Data Availability

No primary empirical datasets were generated or analysed for this qualitative doctrinal and secondary-source study. The legal texts, official policy documents, institutional reports, and scholarly publications examined are identified in the references. Where materials are available online, corresponding source links have been provided.

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