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POPULATION BULLETIN
POPULATION RESEARCH CENTRE, IBA SESS

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- Towards 2030: Women's Political Representation and the Quest for Gender Equality in Pakistan



Edited By: Neelma Faraz

NEWS FROM THE OFFICE OF PRC

Webinar: AI Literacy in Academia

As part of our ongoing series of webinars and international collaborations, the Population Research Centre (PRC) hosted a session on September 27th with Dr. Christina Agvent, who delivered an insightful presentation on the topic of “AI in Research and Academia.” Dr. Agvent explored the profound impact of artificial intelligence on academic research, highlighting its role in enhancing data analysis, Streamlining literature reviews, and fostering innovation in learning methodologies. She also discussed ethical considerations and the evolving relationship between AI and human expertise in academia.

POPULATION RESEARCH CENTRE

Webinar Series

AI LITERACY IN ACADEMIA



SPEAKER
DR. CHRISTINA AGVENT



MODERATOR
DR. ANUM TARIQ

Dr. Christina Agvent is the Founder of Trifecta Education LLC. With a PhD in Adult Learning and Development and an MA in Computers in Education, she brings over 30 years of experience in merging traditional teaching with modern technology. A strong advocate for AI in education, her book, AI-engagED: Future-proof Education, provides practical strategies for educators and students to integrate AI into learning effectively.



FRIDAY
SEPTEMBER 27, 2024

4:00 PM PKT
7:00 AM EST



WEBINAR ID : 817 7139 8212
PASSCODE : 421491

The session attracted a diverse audience of over 100 students, faculty members, and researchers. Engaging discussions followed the presentation, with participants raising questions about AI-driven research methodologies and its implications for future academic landscape.

Faculty Achievement

Dr. Lubna Naz has been elected as a member of the Executive Council of the Population Association of Pakistan (PAP). The Population Association of Pakistan (PAP) is a leading professional body dedicated to advancing population research, policy, and advocacy in Pakistan. It brings together scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to discuss key demographic challenges and promote evidence-based solutions. Her election to this prestigious position reflects her dedication and contributions to the field of population studies.

Workshop – Basic Demographic Methods

On Dec 3rd, PRC and the Population Association of Pakistan (PAP) jointly hosted an introductory-level workshop on basic demographic methods, led by Dr. Farid Midhet, Dr. Saima Bashir, and Dr. Ayesha Sheraz. The workshop discussed fundamental demographic techniques, data collection methods, and the basics of demographic analysis. It aimed to provide participants with a foundational understanding of population studies and how these methods can be applied to address key demographic issues.

25th Annual Population Research Conference



PRC, in collaboration with the PAP, hosted the 25th Annual Population Research Conference on December 4-5, 2024, at the main campus of IBA Karachi. The event featured an inaugural session by Dr. Akbar Zaidi and thematic panels on key demographic issues. Technical sessions focused on critical topics such as migration, health, and data-driven development. PRC played a pivotal role in event coordination, media coverage, and social media engagement, earning appreciation from PAP and other partners for its efforts in ensuring the event's visibility and success. PRC officials, including Dr. Asma Hyder, Dr. Khadija, and Dr. Junaid Alam, also led and actively participated in panel discussions and technical sessions.





Workshop – Writing Literature Review

PRC organized a workshop on "A Systematic Approach to Writing Literature Reviews" on February 21st at the IBA Main Campus. The session was facilitated by Ms. Maria Hassan, who provided valuable insights into structuring and streamlining literature reviews using a systematic approach.

The workshop was well received, drawing students from various academic disciplines who were keen to enhance their research and writing skills. Through interactive discussions and practical guidance, participants gained a deeper understanding of effective literature review methodologies, ensuring clarity and coherence in their academic work.



Training & Capacity Building

Members of Team PRC had the opportunity to attend two significant training sessions aimed at enhancing their skills in data interpretation, visualization, and application to policy-making. Both sessions were jointly organized by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) as part of the "Data for Development (D4D)" initiative.



The first session, titled "Persuading with Data," was held in Lahore in September 2024. This training targeted mid-career professionals and researchers, focusing on improving their ability to utilize data for evidence-based development planning at the provincial level. The training aimed to help participants leverage data to enhance policy-making and improve the effectiveness of public sector departments, making data a crucial tool for informed decision-making and planning.



The second session was a 5-day immersive workshop focused on data visualization and storytelling. This training emphasized the critical skills needed to transform complex datasets into clear, compelling narratives. Under the guidance of expert trainers, participants learned to use cutting-edge tools such as PowerBI, Datawrapper, and Looker Studio. These tools are essential for creating impactful data visualizations that can inform and guide policy decisions effectively.

Research Publication

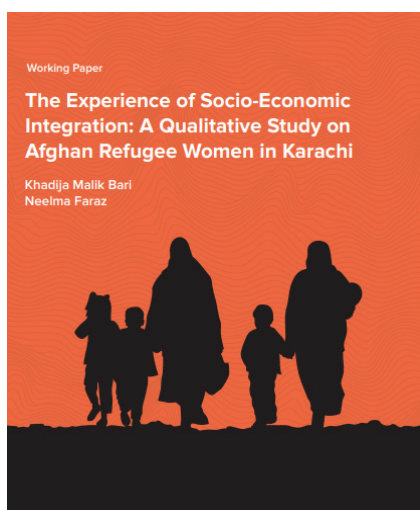
PRC officials are actively engaged in high-quality research. Their work spans various disciplines, aiming to drive policy change and improve societal well-being.

- **"Inequality of Opportunity in Child Nutrition in Pakistan"** co-authored by **Dr. Lubna Naz** examines socio-economic and regional disparities in child stunting using data from the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (2017–18). The study employs the Dissimilarity Index (D-index), Oaxaca decomposition, and Shapley decomposition to analyze key determinants of nutritional inequality.

Findings reveal that maternal education, access to water and sanitation, and wealth status are the primary contributors to stunting disparities, with rural areas facing a significantly higher burden than urban regions. Southern provinces, particularly Balochistan and Sindh, exhibit the highest prevalence of stunting, largely due to poor infrastructure and lower maternal education levels. The study underscores the urgent need for targeted policies to improve maternal education, sanitation services, and economic conditions, thereby ensuring equal opportunities for child health and development across Pakistan. The full paper is available at [10.1371/journal.pone.0318425](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0318425).

- **The Experience of Socio-Economic Integration: A Qualitative Study on Afghan Refugee Women in Karachi—** by Team PRC—examines the unique challenges Afghan refugee women face in Pakistan. Funded by a research grant from SDPI, the study draws on in-depth interviews and qualitative analysis to highlight systemic barriers to financial inclusion, formal employment, and education. Issues such as inconsistent document recognition, bureaucratic hurdles, and high tuition fees hinder access to essential services, while limited healthcare, inadequate housing, and social isolation further compound

vulnerabilities. The persistent fear of deportation adds to their uncertainty, forcing many women to rely on informal financial arrangements, exposing them to financial risks and exploitation. Cultural constraints also restrict mobility, limiting access to opportunities. However, structured support networks, such as those provided by the Aga Khan community, demonstrate the positive impact of organized assistance on social integration. The study concludes with actionable recommendations advocating for consistent recognition of refugee documentation, targeted scholarships, improved healthcare access, and structured community support. On December 14, Dr. Khadija Bari presented this policy brief at the Data for Development (D4D) Symposium in Islamabad, where it was well-received. Symposium participants emphasized the urgent need for gender-responsive policies to address the unique needs of Afghan refugee women, ensuring their socio-economic empowerment and integration into Pakistani society. The full working paper is available at <https://prc.iba.edu.pk/pdf/experience-socio-economic-integration.pdf>.



Towards 2030: Women's Political Representation and the Quest for Gender Equality in Pakistan

In recent years, the role of women in Pakistan's development has gained increasing attention, particularly in efforts to bridge gender gaps in political participation, economic opportunities, and social mobility. While progress has been made in areas such as female literacy, workforce inclusion, and policy representation, significant barriers persist, hindering full gender equality. These challenges are central to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which aims to empower women and girls, and SDG 16, which focuses on building inclusive institutions and ensuring equal participation in decision-making processes.

Pakistan has made some strides toward achieving these 2030 goals, with policy reforms, legislative efforts, and grassroots initiatives driving change. Programs aimed at increasing female literacy, financial inclusion, and political representation indicate a commitment to gender equality. However, the country still faces considerable hurdles, including entrenched cultural norms, legal limitations, and socio-economic disparities that continue to restrict women's full participation in public life.

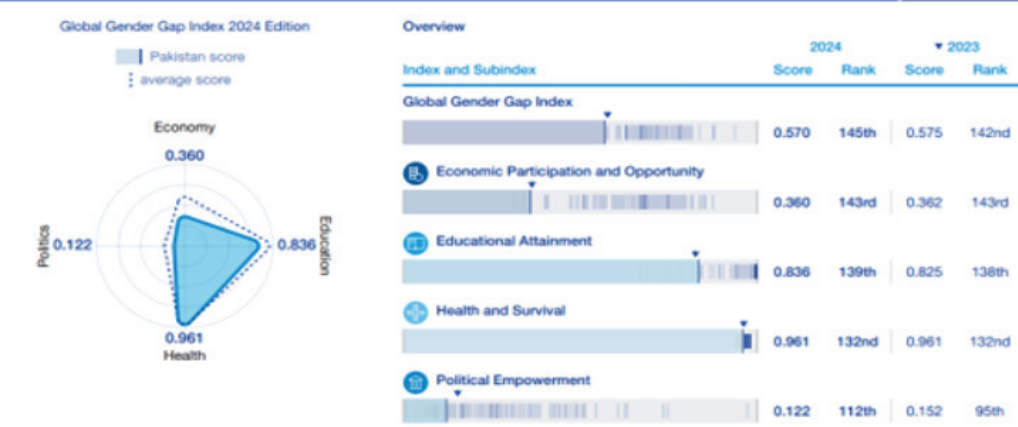
Achieving SDG 5 and SDG 16 by 2030 requires a comprehensive and sustained approach—one that strengthens legal protections, enhances women's access to education and employment, and fosters a political environment where women can contribute meaningfully. This essay examines the evolving political participation of women in Pakistan within the broader context of gender equality, economic empowerment, and the structural barriers that must be addressed to ensure an inclusive and equitable future.

Pakistan's Gender Gap & Electoral Participation

Pakistan continues to rank among the lowest in global gender gap indices. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2024, Pakistan remains one of the most gender-unequal countries, particularly in economic participation and political empowerment. This ranking underscores the persistent structural challenges women face in accessing leadership roles and decision-making positions.

Electoral participation is a vital component of gender equality. Pakistan has long faced a gender gap in voter registration, peaking at 13.17 million in 2016 before gradually declining to 11.81 million in 2021. In the last elections, registered voters surpassed 128 million, with 46.13% (59.32 million) being women and 53.87% (69.26 million) men. This reduction in the gender gap to under 10 million—the lowest in a decade—reflects a slow but positive shift toward a more gender-balanced electorate.

The recent FAFEN report provides valuable insights into evolving voting patterns among women in Pakistan. One key finding is the increasing divergence in women's voting preferences compared to men's in 18% of surveyed communities. While nationwide trends still show alignment with male voting patterns, regional and urban-rural variations highlight an emerging gender-based political agency. This shift suggests that women are asserting greater independence in their political choices.



Global Gender Gap Index Indicators

2024

Data source: World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report – 2024

Urban centers exhibited the highest levels of electoral divergence, with Islamabad leading at 37%, followed by Balochistan at 32%—a surprising development given the province’s deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and historically low female political participation. Balochistan has long faced significant gender inequality, with limited access to education, economic opportunities, and political representation for women. Given these challenges, such a high level of electoral divergence raises important questions about potential shifts in women’s political agency in the region.

While the exact reasons behind this trend require further research, possible factors could include localized advocacy efforts, increased awareness of women’s rights, or shifting socio-political conditions that uniquely influence female voter behavior. However, despite this unexpected progress, systemic barriers continue to restrict women’s full participation in politics, underscoring the need for sustained efforts to promote gender-inclusive governance in the region.

Conversely, Balochistan also illustrates how localized socio-political dynamics impact women’s electoral choices. Factors such as governance, security, and awareness of fundamental rights play a crucial role in shaping the voting behaviors of women in conflict-prone and rural regions. Reports from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) highlight that, unlike their male counterparts—who may prioritize economic or political stability—women in these areas often vote based on security and rights-based concerns.

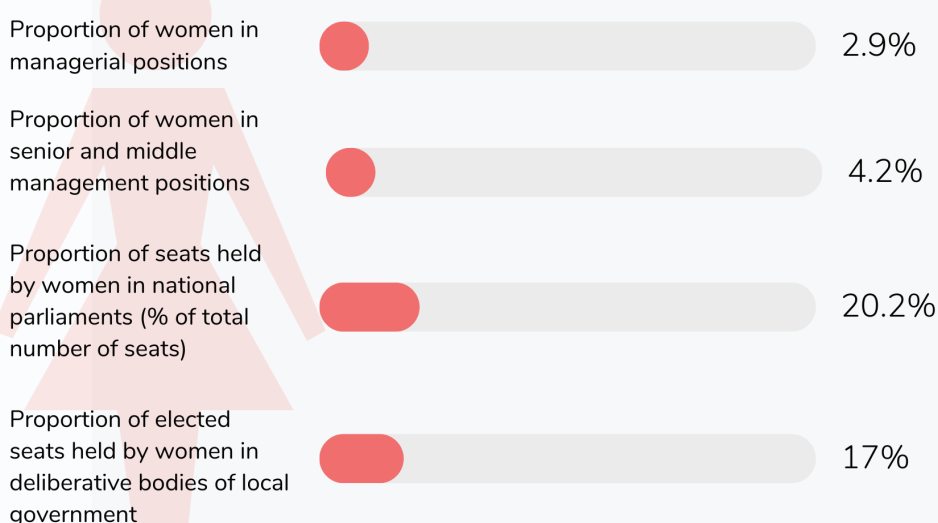
Despite progress in women’s electoral participation, several structural barriers continue to limit their full engagement in the political process:

- Cultural norms in many regions discourage women from voting.
- Security concerns, particularly in conflict-prone areas, further hinder their political involvement.
- Logistical challenges such as restricted mobility, inadequate polling facilities, and a lack of voter education disproportionately affect female voters.

Beyond Political Participation: Other Dimensions of Gender Equality

Women's political engagement is closely linked to other areas of gender equality, including leadership, economic empowerment, education, and grassroots activism:

- **Women in Leadership:** The appointment of female policymakers and increased representation in political parties indicate progress toward inclusive governance. Notably, the number of female candidates in the 2024 election nearly doubled compared to 2018. However, the proportion of women in leadership positions remains alarmingly low, highlighting ongoing challenges in achieving gender parity in decision-making roles.



Women in Leadership

Pakistan

Data Source: Womenomics: The economics of gender equality in the workforce. UNDP Pakistan

- **Economic Empowerment:** Programs supporting female entrepreneurship and financial inclusion, such as ASAAN (Easy) Accounts and the Ehsaas Program, have provided women with greater economic independence. BISP is recognized as the world's largest women-focused social safety net program, significantly contributing to poverty reduction and women's empowerment. Various evaluations of BISP indicate that it has helped alleviate financial hardships and strengthened women's decision-making power within families.
- **Educational Advancements:** According to UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report, Pakistan has witnessed improvements in female literacy, leading to a more informed and politically engaged electorate. The National Literacy Programme has established over 120,000 adult literacy centers, benefiting over 2.5 million learners—95% of whom are women.

- **Grassroots Activism:** Women's rights movements and civil society organizations have been instrumental in advancing gender equality by advocating for legal reforms, economic empowerment, and political participation. Through public awareness campaigns, policy advocacy, and grassroots mobilization, many movements and initiatives like Aurat March, The Women's Action Forum (WAF) and Women Initiative in Social Entrepreneurship (WISE) have challenged discriminatory norms, promoted women's access to education and employment, and addressed issues such as gender-based violence and workplace inequality.

Conclusion

The FAFEN report highlights a positive shift, particularly in urban areas, where increased access to education, growing employment opportunities, and wider media exposure have significantly shaped women's voting behavior and political awareness.

While progress has been made, women in Pakistan continue to face systemic barriers to political participation. Nevertheless, the persistence of cultural restrictions, deep-rooted patriarchal norms, security concerns, and limited mobility continue to marginalize millions of women, excluding them from meaningful participation in the democratic process.

To build a more inclusive democracy, political parties, policymakers, and civil society organizations must:

- Recognize and accommodate the distinct priorities of female voters by integrating gender-sensitive policies and platforms that reflect their needs and aspirations.
- Expanding economic and educational opportunities to empower women as independent decision-makers, equipping them with the skills and resources necessary to engage in political discourse.
- Promoting inclusive governance by ensuring women's voices are heard at all levels of policymaking, from local councils to the national assembly, through equitable representation and meaningful participation.

By addressing structural barriers and fostering inclusive governance, Pakistan can make meaningful progress toward ensuring women's voices shape a more just and equitable society.

