

# Exploring Gender Disparities Related Challenges in Competencies for Sustainable Development at Higher Educational Institutions in Pakistan

Dr. Rani Gul<sup>1</sup>, Fazal Rabbi<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Sadia Batool<sup>3</sup>, Dr. Tahseen Tahir<sup>4\*</sup>,  
Memoona Asif<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Education, University of Malakand, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup>PhD Scholar, Department of Education, University of Malakand, Pakistan

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, Karakoram International University Diamer Campus, Gilgit, Pakistan

<sup>4</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Education, University of Haripur, Pakistan

<sup>5</sup>MPhil in Education, Department of Education, University of Malakand, Chakdara,  
Pakistan.

Email: drtehseen78@gmail.com

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## Abstract

The goal of sustainable development in Pakistani higher education is to equip teachers and students with cutting-edge knowledge that is critical to economic prosperity, to foster responsible citizenship, and to revitalize living systems. Although previous research has highlighted obstacles to competencies for sustainable development, this paper focuses on gender inequality and its consequences for attaining sustainable development competencies in Pakistan. We review the literature on sustainability and its relationship to higher education using a theoretical narrative method, highlighting the potential and constraints. Since there hasn't been much research done in the Pakistani context, most of the information in our review comes from international research. The results provide educators, decision-makers, and scholars with useful information on how to tackle important obstacles to sustainable development.

**Keywords:** gender disparities, higher education, Pakistan.

## 1. Introduction

Globally, there is recognition and acceptance of the importance of higher education in sustainable development (Barth et al., 2007). A comprehensive strategy is required to achieve the multifaceted aim of sustainable development, which recognizes the various difficulties that various societal groups face. Research has already shown that identifying sustainability challenges is critical to achieving development goals in the fast-paced world of today. In the

process of teaching for sustainable development, there are sustainability challenges pertaining to research and development, implementation and monitoring, and assessment (Alam, 2010; Saeed, Sattar, Iqbal, Imran, & Nadeem, 2012). However, gender equality and equity, health issues, environmental issues like water, climate, biodiversity, disaster management, peace, and human development make up many sustainability issues facing higher education. These challenges are important to discuss because these provide root causes to the study under investigation.

## **2. Gender Disparities in Sustainable Development Competencies:**

Gender disparities in competencies for sustainable development within higher education have garnered increased attention in recent years. Despite the great academic accomplishment of women, they are continually confronting tough challenges in their struggle to obtain a successful position across different professional fields. To exemplify the global nature of this issue, findings from Asian countries, such as Japan, Kuwait, India, Turkey, Pakistan, and Malaysia, show alarmingly low percentages of female vice-chancellors (Forestier, 2013).

The root of these challenges, as confirmed by current research (Guzura & Chigora, 2012; Sithole, Manwa & Manwa, 2013; Chabaya & Gudhlanga, 2013; Moyo, 2022; Zvavahera), are firmly established in continuous inequalities of gender with in the fabric of family as well as within the norms of the institutions which have restricted women to an inferior role (Gul et al., 2022). Specifically, women's entrance into higher education as well as their remarkable contribution to research, innovation and many other domains are greatly affected by this persistent biasness of gender (Olah et al., 2018). Moreover, female academics are confronting a lot of challenges which include cultural, organizational, empowerment and personal barriers (Alsubaihi, Shroog, 2016; Moodly et al., 2019; Ali et al, 2021). These challenges are often manifested in the form the dominance of man, the silencing of women's voices and a male centralized networking structure (Gul & Khilji, 2021). Moreover, a series of interrelated constraints are faced by female academics, which include cultural as well as institutional restrictions (Mousa & Mohamed, 2023). These challenges include limited opportunities for empowerment, accusations of low productivity, growth of masculine power distance, extended working hours, and heavy teaching loads (Mousa & Mohamed, 2023). The situation is further complicated by restrictions on women to fully participate in research, and activities other than teaching and administrative role (Hakiem & Rafif Abdulaziz, 2022).

As we can see that numerous studies have been conducted concerning gender disparities in sustainable development, but little research has been done on the challenges women are confronting at higher education sector in Pakistan. Therefore, this study explores the major challenges to gender disparities in sustainable development competencies, with a specific focus on the major issues confronting women working at higher education sector at Pakistan. Due to dearth of literature on this issue in the context of Pakistan, in this study we used a narrative method to review and discuss the data collected from participants based on literature from international and national context (Gul & Khilji, 2023).

### 3. Methods and Materials

This study will use a qualitative research design. This approach was the most appropriate for the research as it allowed for viewpoints and experiences of the participants, captured contextual knowledge, and allowed for in-depth examination. The sample was consisting of 23 female faculty members from the University of Malakand, as well as 17 female academic faculty members from the University of Swat. Semi structured interview protocol was used as an instrument for the study. The participants were interviewed by the researcher, keeping the code of ethics of research which included voluntary nature of participation, participants confidentiality, and their availability. The collected data was analyzed using the Thematic Analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach including familiarity, coding, generation, searching for themes, naming, and defining themes, and final reporting was used for the study.

### 4. Results and Discussion

Based on the interviews, the major themes such as Access to educational growth and training opportunities, occupational segregation, limited access to decision-making roles, unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities emerged which are discussed below.

#### I. Disparities to Educational Access and Growth:

Participants of the study revealed that one important component that shapes competencies for sustainable development is educational access, a critical factor shaping competencies for sustainable development. One of the participants stated that,

“Women frequently encounter structural barriers that impede their educational growth, such as restricted access to educational resources, cultural prejudices, and societal expectations, even while they demonstrate equal or even greater academic capability”.

Participants further revealed that in some parts of Pakistan, especially the rural ones, girls frequently don't have easy access to higher education. Lower enrollment rates among girls can be attributed to several factors, including safety concerns, lack of transportation, distance to universities and colleges and economic concerns. When a family is struggling financially, they might think that sending their sons for higher education is a better investment for the future. For girls from low-income families, the cost of books, uniforms, and various school-related fees might be difficult. (...) In other places, fears about safety can prevent girls from attending school or from leaving the house altogether. Parents who are afraid of assault or harassment may not let their daughters go to school. The lack of female teachers might also deter parents from sending their girls to school, particularly in rural areas. Due to cultural concerns, female teachers may be preferred in conservative cultures to teach girls.

The participants mentioned that in addition, social expectations and traditional gender norms can prevent girls from pursuing an education. Cultural norms may prioritize boys' higher education over girls', leading to early marriages and discouraging families from investing in their daughters' education (Gul, Ayub, et al., 2021). Existing research unfolds the reasons behind gender inequality in terms of education and developmental prospects in higher learning institutions.

According to a research report of the World Bank, 2020, Pakistan was also identified as having the gender stereotypes that hinder women's representation in some sectors where they have actionable careers, and this drawback stems from gender biases that should not be tolerated in learning institutions. The report provided precise policy recommendations to increase female access to education by addressing the lack of girls' enrollment and their non-consideration in course development. Socioeconomic study on accesses and growth of education were looked at under Anderson & Brown (2022). Their research proved that it is easier for people of lower SES to attain higher education. To help learners from the low-income households, the study suggested that scholarship programs and tutoring should be introduced. Other research carried out by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021) cross-nationally indicated that the differences are not always only in gender but also encompass other aspects that encompass class and the ethnic background. To further educate all the staff, it was suggested that focused interventions aimed at specific demographic subgroups be established. This is according to UNESCO report on disparity in education in Pakistan (UNESCO, 2018). And it drew attention to issues faced by inferior classes including rural people and persons with disabilities. To address these disparities, this study emphasized policy intervention, infrastructure development and information dissemination. According to World Bank (2020), early marriages and pregnancies can furthermore hinder girls' education. When girls are married or have kids, they are often restricted from performing obligatory tasks which makes it difficult for them to attend school. According to Rouse and Johnson (2017), it signifies that even if the girls can access schools, there are questions regarding the quality education that they are likely to receive. Accessibility to materials, quality of classes and teaching aids, additional facilities such as laboratories and library as well as equipment hinder the learning process, thus contributing to low enrollment rates among students.

Disparities of educational attainment are difficult to determine because they are bounded by factors like sex, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and race. Collectively, the studies (Ahmad et al., 2022) reviewed herein highlight the need for policy-driven initiatives, funding, sponsorship, and social transformation to tackle the existing disparities. Through these changes, both educational institutions and policymakers can begin to partake in erasing the gaps that currently exist and offering all the individuals an equal chance at success. There is, therefore, a need to conduct more studies and engage in more partnerships to ensure that strategies are developed further, and that more knowledge is achieved concerning the complex issues that are connected to the education achievement gap. To overcome these challenges, it is crucial to address them through developmental social policies, community involvement, and awareness in fighting gender stereotype and working to enhance girl child education. Policies can be made locally, but local communities should be included as well as efforts must be made to alter the society's perception regarding the importance of educating girls in Pakistan.

#### Limited Access to Decision-Making Roles:

Although women have excelled in their performance in different education sector, they are facing some hard conditions as they try to secure a successful place in all the fields of work. The cause for these issues, as supported by the current studies (Guzura & Chigora, 2012; Sithole et al. , 2013; Chabaya & Gudhlanga, 2013; Moyo, 2022; Zvavahera), are well rooted in maintaining the

gender disparities within the context of family as well as unfavorable institutional norms that have confined women into a subordinate position. In particular, changes especially in women's access to higher education, as well as their remarkable participation in research, innovation and in many other fields, are greatly influenced by this gender biasness ((Bukhari et al. , 2021). Research by Gender Equality Research Institute (GERI, 2021) show that women are over-represented in low-wage, powerless positions, thereby, lacking the ability to shape decisions within and on sustainable development in and outside learning institutions.

#### Unequal Distribution of Domestic Responsibilities:

The third category of analysis relates to women and the subject of gender inequalities pertaining to the distribution of domestic work, which is a barrier to women's engagement in sustainable development initiatives. A study conducted by Brown and Johnson in 2018 reveals that stereotyped gender roles and pressure restrict women's time and engagement for promotion and involvement in sustainability initiatives.

To address this literature challenge, we must employ a holistic approach that engages educational institutions and the whole society. Measures aimed at supporting female employment and improving work--family reconciliation policies and institutions are essential for women's engagement in SDGs.

#### Discrimination to Resources and training opportunities:

In the context of Pakistan's academic environment, female academics experience gender bias and discrimination, as discussed in the literature up to 2022. This discrimination can be seen in aspects such as recruitment and promotions, where women are not hired or promoted to certain jobs as often as men are promoted. Furthermore, research resources such as research grants and laboratory facilities for women are limited due to disparity leading to reduced skill development chances for the female academics. It is still difficult for women to be valued for their knowledge and expertise due to the stereotypes and prejudices in gender roles, which affects their confidence in academic environments (Ali, T., & Coate, K. 2022). These difficulties are exacerbated by a lack of female mentors and role models, reducing the guidance and support necessary to more accurately and efficiently navigate the academic environment. Inadequate representation in grants and scholarships, unfair remuneration, and policies that inadvertently reinforce prejudice make the academia hostile for women scholars and affects their health and career advancement. To avoid such conditions, it is required to fight it through intervention, policy changes, and cultural approaches to make the environment to be more supporting for female academics in Pakistan. Thus, it is crucial to refer to academic journals and reports from organizations that deal with gender issues in Pakistan for the most recent and specific information.

**Inadequate Support Systems and lack of Recognition:** The issues of lack of support systems and lack of recognition of women's competencies for sustainable development in Pakistan emerged critical in the research up to 2022. The previous studies reveal most women in academia suffer from a lack of proper organizational support, including issues like, the lack of childcare facilities, flexible working conditions (Muhammad Tufail et al., 2022). These problems are instrumental in limiting the ways in which women can demonstrate work-family fit, and therefore, reduce the extent to which they can engage with professional development activities that would otherwise

enhance their skills and ensure career advancement. Furthermore, the failure to acknowledge women's competencies is a major hurdle. Research shows that women academics might not be given adequate recognition for their participation in sustainable development processes (Bukhari et al., 2021). This lack of recognition not only reduces motivation but also discourages improvement of skill levels and engagement in further sustainability activities. The existing gender-related inequalities in terms of recognition mean that women's potential in academia is not fully utilized, which hinders the advancement of sustainable development goals (Gul, Zakir, et al., 2021).

Additionally, some of the studies pointed out that men and women academics' interface family and society demands with academics which leads to inadequate time and resources to pursue professional development and new competencies (Ahmad et al., 2022). Likewise, few opportunities for women academics to interact and collaborate with other professions in limited exposure interdisciplinary and alternative views on sustainable development.

## **5. Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the comprehensive narrative review on "Gender Disparities in Sustainable Development" of higher education sector in Pakistan shows that the social issues that affect the female academics are complex and systemic. The review confirms that gender biases and discriminative practices continue to prevail in organizations, thereby limiting women's career mobility and skills acquisition in their careers. Similarly, sociocultural barriers coupled with the lack of support structures makes it difficult for women to overcome these issues which hinders their abilities to competently participate in sustainable development (Gul, Ayub, et al., 2021).

Gaps in educational achievement are identified as a significant problem, with studies suggesting that women have lower levels of education and are less likely to be enrolled in post-secondary education. The studies reveal the importance of policy interventions for considering the structural discrimination, gendered culture, and male-centric norms that limit women's prospects in education (Gul, Ayub, et al., 2021). In addition, occupational segregation and limited representation in decision-making structures are some of the underlying factors that maintain gender disparities and hinder the application of gender perspectives in sustainable development (Gul & Khilji, 2023). The unequal distribution of household chores becomes a primary barrier to women's engagement in sustainable development initiatives. Inequality in resource allocation as well as capability to access more and better training resources also entails woman's competencies. Discriminations in hiring and promotion processes as well as inequality in rewards such as grants, and lab facilities affect the mental health and professional development of female academics. Sociocultural factors such as recognition gaps and Sociocultural barriers intensify the problem by making women lack representation in leadership positions, adding to the problems that female academics encounter. The review makes us aware of the requirement of effective strategies, policies, and changes in culture to support women and promote their competencies for the enhancement of sustainable development in Pakistan's higher education sector (Said et al., 2021). The teaching techniques and approach require to be improved and needs to be at par with the new changes in the world for encouragement of sustainable

development in Pakistan. The review also unfolds other information regarding how the higher education institutes can attain the objectives of sustainable development by enhancing gender opportunities for enhancing their competencies practice.

**Implications of the study:** These conclusions have important implications and ramifications. The society and its policymakers, educational institutions, and other key stakeholders bear the responsibility to make efficient and effective changes both at political and cultural levels. Support in terms of mentorship, sponsorship, and raising awareness are however vital in the eradication of barriers. Besides, campaigns that target the removal of stereotyped roles of women and girls' education value are vital in closing the gaps of educational achievements. It is important to appreciate and acknowledge the competencies of the female academics in sustainable development for there to be a positive change in the patriarchal culture that dominates most institutions of higher learning. It is important to realize that this is a dynamic field and more research is needed as well as combined efforts to improve strategies and get a better view of the complex issues that lie behind the gender issue in sustainable development in higher education. Researchers, policymakers, and educators are therefore urged to respond to this analysis by developing an inclusive agenda that can promote progression towards gender equality as well progress the competencies for D for sustainable development.

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