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# Why Women Work Less in Pakistan: A Multi-Level Analysis and the Role of CPEC

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates why many women in Pakistan remain underrepresented in formal employment. It examines the issue through multi-level analysis: macro-societal, meso-organizational, and micro-individual. It further highlights that traditional roles and cultural expectations shape what women are "supposed" to do when it comes to work. In many cases, these ideas limit their choices before they even begin. Inside the workplace, institutional structures often perpetuate exclusion. Company rules, hiring practices, or office culture can make it harder for women to get in — or to move up. Then it examines how family duties, lack of support, and pressure from those around them critically influence their choices and decisions. The paper also explores how the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was expected to create inclusive jobs but failed to address pre-existing gender disparities. The failure was due to skill mismatches, lack of local inclusion strategies, and the male-dominated nature of key industries. The main goal of this paper is to understand these layers of challenges and suggest practical ways forward, so more women can step into the workforce and stay there on equal ground.

**Keywords:** Women, Workforce, Social Norms, Personal Barriers, CPEC

#### Introduction

In Pakistan, women face a critical challenge of underrepresentation in the Labor market. This study explores the structural causes of this issue at three levels of frameworks: the macro-societal level (social norms and legal frameworks), the meso-organisational level (institutional practices and workplace dynamics), and the micro-individual level (personal choices and constraints). Each level comes with different barriers women confront, shaping the landscape of women's employment outcomes in Pakistan.

Structurally, the women in Pakistan fit into gender roles that are influenced by traditional, religious, and patriarchal norms. That is why women struggle to choose a career path that challenges those decades-old, infused socio-cultural factors.<sup>1</sup> These norms result in limited career options, restricted mobility, and occupational segregation, especially in non-traditional sectors.<sup>2</sup> Even though participation of women in education and the workforce has increased in the 21st century, disparities remain consistent. For instance, women earn approximately 20% less than

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Amber Ferdoos, "Social Status of Rural and Urban Working Women in Pakistan," Google Books, 2025, <a href="https://books.google.com.pk/books/about/Social Status of Rural and Urban Working.html?id=U-l40AEACAAJ&redir esc=v">https://books.google.com.pk/books/about/Social Status of Rural and Urban Working.html?id=U-l40AEACAAJ&redir esc=v</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Jawad Syed, "Employment Prospects for Skilled Migrants: A Relational Perspective," *Human Resource Management Review* 18, no. 1 (March 2008): 28–45, <a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2007.12.001">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2007.12.001</a>.

men in similar roles.3

Within this complex backdrop, China Pakistan Economic Corridor CPEC, a flagship project of BRI between Pakistan and China, has been promoted to create jobs in sectors such as infrastructure, energy, and manufacturing.<sup>4</sup> However, the expected potential of CPEC to address gender disparities remains limited due to issues such as skills mismatch, sectoral segregation, and the absence of gender-sensitive hiring practices.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, this study seeks to ask: What are the societal, organisational, and personal factors contribute to the underrepresentation of women in Pakistan's workforce, and how does CPEC intersect with these dynamics?

### Methodology

This paper employed a qualitative research method to understand multi-level barriers that negatively influence women's participation in Pakistan's labor force. The secondary data was collected from academic journal articles, policy documents, UNDP and SDPI reports, and labour statistics. Official reports, labour market studies, and labour force surveys were also synthesised using a descriptive and analytical approach. Additionally, case studies from Job Talash provided insights into women's income expectations and labour market preferences.

While the primary data, such as interviews and surveys, were not employed in this paper, reputable and secondary sources were consulted to draw policy-relevant conclusions. Furthermore, the paper looks at macro-societal norms, organisational practices, and individual-level factors through the lens of gender and employment. It also focuses on CPEC and CPEC-related opportunities for women in urban and semi-urban contexts.

Multi-Level Insights on Barriers to Women's Opportunities in Pakistan

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the lack of opportunities for women, particularly within organisational diversity management, a three-level framework is employed: the macro-societal level (big-picture societal forces), the meso-organisational level (institutional and organisational practices), and the micro-individual level (personal choices and decision-making).

#### Macro-societal Level

The Macro-societal level examines how broad societal forces, such as culture, religion, gender norms, legal structures, and economic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Kate Vyborny et al., "Analyzing Gender Differences in Pay in the Pakistani Labor Market," Iza.org, 2025, <a href="https://g2lm-lic.iza.org/publications/pb/analyzing-gender-differences-in-pay-in-the-pakistani-labor-market/">https://g2lm-lic.iza.org/publications/pb/analyzing-gender-differences-in-pay-in-the-pakistani-labor-market/</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Dr Ayesha Khan et al., "The Impact of CPEC on the Economy of Pakistan," *Journal of Positive School Psychology* 6, no. 10 (November 23, 2022): 4214–23, https://journalppw.com/index.php/jpsp/article/view/14260.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Zahid Khan et al., "Debunking Criticism on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," *The Chinese Economy* 53, no. 6 (July 24, 2020): 477–87, <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/10971475.2020.1792065">https://doi.org/10.1080/10971475.2020.1792065</a>.

systems, shape women's career choices. These contextual factors either enable or constrain equal opportunities for females.

Sociological and institutional forces influence equal opportunity in any workplace, as organisations exist in society and are influenced by societal factors. Therefore, an organization's discriminatory policies and decisions must also be analysed in the context of prevailing societal norms.<sup>7</sup> For instance, when an organisation faces market uncertainty, it adjusts its strategies to comply with societal/cultural norms and relevant laws.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, people and organisations are like interpreters or translators who understand and respond to the norms of their society. In the context of Pakistan, religious and cultural expectations shape the role of men to be primary, while women are supposed to focus on domestic responsibilities. This patriarchal interpretation leaves limited incentives for females to engage in work outside.

Even though Islam allows women to be women, it also has stricter behavioural requirements on women than on men. Those requirements emphasise workplace conduct and modesty among women. This is why it is common in traditional family dynamics to discourage females from pursuing work in specific sectors.

Moreover, regulatory frameworks also influence gender inclusion in any organisation. For instance, a comparative study in China revealed that the high rate of women's participation was directly proportional to proactive state efforts and policies focused on women's rights and equal opportunity. The results suggest that the state's regulatory and progressive policies can help promote and protect women's work and social life rights.

#### Meso-Organisational Level

The Meso-organisational level serves as an intermediary between macro-society and micro-individual experiences. The organisation's management, structure, and policies shape the employees' career

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Jawad Syed, "Employment Prospects for Skilled Migrants: A Relational Perspective," *Human Resource Management Review* 18, no. 1 (March 2008): 28–45, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2007.12.001.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell, *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis, Press.uchicago.edu* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/N/bo3684488.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Doug Guthrie and Louise Marie Roth, "The State, Courts, and Maternity Policies in U.S. Organizations: Specifying Institutional Mechanisms," *American Sociological Review* 64, no. 1 (February 1999): 41, https://doi.org/10.2307/2657277.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Jawad Syed, Faiza Ali, and Diana Winstanley, "In Pursuit of Modesty: Contextual Emotional Labour and the Dilemma for Working Women in Islamic Societies," *International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotion* 1, no. 2 (2005): 150, <a href="https://doi.org/10.1504/ijwoe.2005.008819">https://doi.org/10.1504/ijwoe.2005.008819</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Fang Lee Cooke, "Equal Opportunity? The Role of Legislation and Public Policies in Women's Employment in China," *Women in Management Review* 16, no. 7 (November 2001): 334–48, https://doi.org/10.1108/eum0000000006115.

paths at this level.<sup>11</sup> Formal procedures govern diversity management, which may or may not align with societal expectations or norms.

Despite the organisation's claim to promote equality, its policies are often symbolic. The constraints to implementing such policies can vary from cultural resistance to a lack of institutional commitment. The gap between the policies and practice is the key barrier to genuine inclusion.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, macro-societal norms influence organisational decisions considerably. Either societal attitude shifts or when legislation mandates gender inclusion, the organisations will be more likely to revise their recruitment practices, workplace culture, and performance evaluation accordingly. Any changes at the national level can create ripple effects within organisational settings.

#### Micro-individual level

At the micro-individual level, unique identities, experiences, and job preferences influence the career decisions of each woman.<sup>13</sup> That means, female employees from disadvantaged groups may also be deprived of opportunities due to their barriers and constraints, other than influences at macro-societal and mesoorganisational levels.

Limitations in an inclusive organisation can also be there for women due to family expectations, internalised social norms, or safety issues. These factors are the reason why women choose traditional roles aligned with their gender expectations over available institutional opportunities. For example, in the Central Civil Service (CSS) exam in Pakistan, most women prefer the Pakistan Administrative Service (PAS) instead of the Foreign Service of Pakistan (FSP). Rejection of FSP is due to the nature of the service, which requires frequent travel and long postings abroad. These conditions contradict societal expectations regarding women getting married and settling down with someone. Therefore, women choose career options that provide them with work-life balance. Hakim's (2006) preference theory also supports the idea that women are more likely to prefer work-life balance over career

574

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Jawad Syed, "Employment Prospects for Skilled Migrants: A Relational Perspective," *Human Resource Management Review* 18, no. 1 (March 2008): 28–45, <a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2007.12.001">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2007.12.001</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Dickens, Linda. "Still Wasting Resources? Equality in Employment." In *Personnel Management*, 3rd ed., edited by Stephen Bach and Keith Sisson, 137–169. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Jawad Syed, "Employment Prospects for Skilled Migrants: A Relational Perspective," *Human Resource Management Review* 18, no. 1 (March 2008): 28–45, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2007.12.001.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Tariq Butt, "Results of Latest CSS Exam: KP Aspirants Fare Poorly," Thenews.com.pk (The News International, May 9, 2021), <a href="https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/832808-results-of-latest-css-exam-kp-aspirants-fare-poorly?utm\_source=chatgpt.com">https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/832808-results-of-latest-css-exam-kp-aspirants-fare-poorly?utm\_source=chatgpt.com</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> CSP, "CSS Examination Detailed Guide," Csssyllabus.pk (https://www.csssyllabus.pk/, February 9, 2025), <a href="https://www.csssyllabus.pk/2025/02/css-examination.html?utm\_source=chatgpt.com">https://www.csssyllabus.pk/2025/02/css-examination.html?utm\_source=chatgpt.com</a>.

advancement than men.<sup>16</sup> These preferences help understand persistent gender disparities in leadership roles, income, and career choices. While women are primarily considered homemakers at the macro-societal level, this reinforces the micro-level through being pressured to choose flexible work arrangements.

## Job Preferences among Women in Pakistan

Pakistan's labour market reflects deep gender inequalities shaped by structural and traditional patriarchal norms and socio-economic constraints. As a result, women's job preferences are significantly influenced beyond individual choice.<sup>17</sup>

Traditional gender roles confine women to domestic responsibilities, labelling them a "housewife" or a "homemaker" and limiting their human capital as inferior to that of a man. Consequently, women are overrepresented in the secondary sectors of the Labor market. Those secondary sectors are characterised by low-wage and low-mobility occupations such as retail, service work, or informal labour. Such roles rarely provide women with career advancement opportunities or financial independence.

In Pakistan, women face cultural pressure to cover themselves in the form of "Purdah" (veil) for their gender seclusion. The tradition of veiling then restricts women to staying inside the home. Moreover, women are also prohibited from accessing education, employment, and social services. <sup>19</sup> In this environment, the career-focused women face institutional and societal resistance to independence. <sup>20</sup>

Even though the challenges persist, there has been gradual progress. According to a gender profile report by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), public awareness regarding women's rights and opportunities is increasing.<sup>21</sup> Also, women's literacy rate rose from 13.7 per cent in 2000 to 19.6 per cent in 2008.<sup>22</sup> Despite these gains, the number of women with jobs is relatively small compared to other nearby countries like India,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Catherine Hakim, "Women, Careers, and Work-Life Preferences," *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling* 34, no. 3 (August 2006): 279–94, <a href="http://www.catherinehakim.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/BJGC-2006-article.pdf">http://www.catherinehakim.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/BJGC-2006-article.pdf</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Amber Ferdoos, "Social Status of Rural and Urban Working Women in Pakistan," Google Books, 2025,

https://books.google.com.pk/books/about/Social Status of Rural and Urban Working.html?id=U-I40AEACAAJ&redir esc=v.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Jawad Syed and Mustafa Özbilgin, "A Relational Framework for International Transfer of Diversity Management Practices," *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 20, no. 12 (December 2009): 2435–53, <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/09585190903363755">https://doi.org/10.1080/09585190903363755</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> United Nations, "Peace and Economic Growth," Human Development Reports, 2023, https://hdr.undp.org/content/peace-and-economic-growth.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Hamza Alavi, "Pakistan: Women in a Changing Society," *Economic and Political Weekly* 23, no. 26 (1988): 1328–30, <a href="https://doi.org/10.2307/4378673">https://doi.org/10.2307/4378673</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> SDPI, "Country Gender Profile Study," Sdpi.org, 2020, <a href="https://sdpi.org/country-gender-profile-study/project\_detail">https://sdpi.org/country-gender-profile-study/project\_detail</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Pakistan Bureau, "Labour Force Survey 2009 - Pakistan," Ilo.org, June 29, 2025, <a href="https://webapps.ilo.org/surveyLib/index.php/catalog/6844">https://webapps.ilo.org/surveyLib/index.php/catalog/6844</a>.

Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to people's growing awareness, the government has also taken some steps that have contributed towards promoting opportunities and equal pay rights of females. For example 2001, Pakistan ratified the International Labour Organisation (ILO) 's Equal Remuneration Convention. The convention aimed to promote opportunities and equal pay for equal work, regardless of gender; however, its implementation remains inconsistent and often symbolic.

In developing countries like Pakistan, careers requiring travel or irregular working hours are often perceived as unsuitable for women (Nath 2001). For example, women are least passionate about engineering and technology; since childhood, they are discouraged from pursuing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) due to prevailing deep-seated societal norms.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, a significant change is underway. Globalisation and technological advancements are driving the shift to engage women in various areas demanding skill sets. As a result, their career options have now expanded beyond traditional roles in agriculture or home-based manufacturing.<sup>25</sup> Women now make a significant contribution to Pakistan's economy.

Although men dominate the senior positions in private and public institutions, women's leadership in mid-level and leadership roles is gradually increasing. This change has been driven by economic necessity, shifting social norms, and increased educational opportunities. As women access education and financial independence, their employment and career development preferences also change.

## **Income Expectations of Women**

Over two decades, the role of women has significantly increased in the labour market, reflecting the mindset shift of people and the evolving socio-economic landscape of the country. Yet, genderbased income disparities remain intact. To understand the income expectations of female job seekers, it is critical to get insights into financial goals and the factors influencing their career choices.

According to a policy brief from the Gender, Growth and Labour Market in the Low-Income Countries program, the participation of women in the labour force is much lower than that of men. Moreover, the percentage of women is around 49% while it's 76% for men in Pakistan, and the women who do manage to work are paid approximately 20% less than men working in similar

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Mustafa Özbilgin and Jawad Syed, *Managing Gender Diversity in Asia : A Research Companion* (Cheltenham, Uk; Northampton, Ma: Edward Elgar, 2010).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Vikas Nath, "Empowerment and Governance through Information and Communication Technologies: Women's Perspective," *International Information & Library Review* 33, no. 4 (September 2001): 317–39, <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/10572317.2001.10762556">https://doi.org/10.1080/10572317.2001.10762556</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> World Bank, "Snapshots," World Bank, 2024, <a href="https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/snapshots">https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/snapshots</a>.

jobs.26

To further examine these disparities, data from Job Talash, an experimental job-matching platform developed by the Centre for Economic Research in Pakistan, provides valuable insights. The platform enrolled over 10,000 job seekers and 1,200 firms in Lahore, collecting detailed information on education levels, employment history, job preferences, and salary expectations.<sup>27</sup> This data reveals critical patterns in gendered labour market behaviour.

## **Insights on Salary Expectations**

Women tend to set their salary expectations lower than men. For example, 32% of women expect salaries below PKR 20,000 per month, whereas only 16% of men have similar low salary expectations. While the salary expectations increase with higher education levels, the gender gap persists and even widens at higher education levels. At the top-tier educational level, men expect salaries that are on average 27% higher than those of women with the same academic credentials.<sup>28</sup>

### **Salary Disparities**

The Job Talash data also sheds light on actual salary offers. Regardless of gender, job seekers expect higher salaries than employers are willing to offer. However, the difference between expected and posted salaries is consistently more pronounced for women.

Importantly, occupational sorting alone does not explain this gap. In about 62% of the occupations, men are paid more than women for equivalent positions. Furthermore, Larger firms typically offer higher salaries and exhibit even wider gender salary gaps. As firm size increases, the salary gap between men and women also increases. Mixed-gender firms tend to offer higher wages than male- or female-dominated firms. Within male-dominated and female-dominated firms, the average salary listed is higher for male-dominated ones. <sup>30</sup>

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> BR Web Desk, "Pakistan Has Largest Gender Employment Gap in South Asia, Significant Pay Disparity: ILO," Brecorder, July 17, 2025, <a href="https://www.brecorder.com/news/40373138/pakistan-has-largest-gender-employment-gap-in-south-asia-significant-pay-disparity-ilo?utm\_source=chatgpt.com.">https://galm-lic.iza.org/publications/pb/analyzing-gender-differences-in-pay-in-the-pakistani-labor-market/.</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Kate Vyborny et al., "Analyzing Gender Differences in Pay in the Pakistani Labor Market," Iza.org, 2025, <a href="https://g2lm-lic.iza.org/publications/pb/analyzing-gender-differences-in-pay-in-the-pakistani-labor-market/">https://g2lm-lic.iza.org/publications/pb/analyzing-gender-differences-in-pay-in-the-pakistani-labor-market/</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Matthias Doepke, Michèle Tertilt, and Alessandra Voena, "The Economics and Politics of Women's Rights," *Annual Review of Economics* 4, no. 1 (September 2012): 339–72, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-061109-080201.

 $<sup>^{\</sup>rm 30}$  https://www.theigc.org/publications/understanding-gender-barriers-pakistani-labour-market-deep-dive-job-search-process

## China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Youth Opportunities

The CPEC is a megaproject between China and Pakistan designed to promote mutual development and bilateral economic cooperation between the two countries.<sup>31</sup> With an investment of over \$62 billion, CPEC focuses on infrastructure, energy, and industrial development in Pakistan.<sup>32</sup> As per Pakistan's demographic profile, the median age is approximately 22.7 years, and youth (aged 15-29) constitute over 60% of the total population. CPEC, therefore, aims to unleash the potential of the so-called demographic dividend for national progress and development.<sup>33</sup>

CPEC promises to address the unemployment issue in Pakistan by creating thousands of jobs across the energy, logistics, construction, and manufacturing sectors. Despite its economic magnitude, its capacity to develop sustainable, inclusive, and high-quality jobs is still under evaluation. According to the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, CPEC has created over 75000 jobs; yet, a lack of female inclusion, low skill requirements, and the temporary nature of employment persist.<sup>34</sup>

## **Quality of Jobs**

CPEC has successfully created new job opportunities for job seekers in sectors such as construction and logistics; however, most jobs are labour-intensive, short-term, and offer low wages. For instance, highway and bridge construction projects require workers on a project basis with limited job security and prospects for promotion.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, jobs created under CPEC rarely offer privileges such as healthcare, pensions, or training, which are factors important for decent employment as defined by the International Labour Organisation.<sup>36</sup>

Women, already facing cultural and mobility restrictions, face exclusion from these disproportionate job patterns. They face hindrances to participating in physical labour or related field work. Their concentration in informal sectors—home-based work, textile

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Dr Ayesha Khan et al., "The Impact of CPEC on the Economy of Pakistan," *Journal of Positive School Psychology* 6, no. 10 (November 23, 2022): 4214–23,

https://journalppw.com/index.php/jpsp/article/view/14260.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Akash Khan et al., "THE IMPACT of CPEC on PAKISTAN ECONOMY: AN ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK," *RUSSIAN LAW JOURNAL* XI, no. 12s (2023): 12,

https://www.russianlawjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/download/2088/1169/2432.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Muhammad Muzammil, Shujaa Waqar, and Shahid Rashid, "C E N T R E O F E X c E L L E N c E c H I N a -P a K I S T a N E c O N O M I c c O R R I D O R Minitry of Planning, Development Reform Pakistan Institute of Development Economics Employment Outlook of China Pakistan Economic Corridor: A Meta Analysis Written By," 2018,

https://www.cpec.gov.pk/brain/public/uploads/documents/working-paper-028.pdf.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Zahid Khan et al., "Debunking Criticism on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," *The Chinese Economy* 53, no. 6 (July 24, 2020): 477–87, <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/10971475.2020.1792065">https://doi.org/10.1080/10971475.2020.1792065</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Zahid Khan et al., "Debunking Criticism on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," *The Chinese Economy* 53, no. 6 (July 24, 2020): 477–87, <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/10971475.2020.1792065">https://doi.org/10.1080/10971475.2020.1792065</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> International Labour Organization, "Decent Work," International Labour Organization, January 28, 2024, https://www.ilo.org/topics-and-sectors/decent-work.

piecework, or teaching— and CPEC's structure worsen gender disparities. Women's earning potential and career growth will remain limited unless proactive, inclusive mechanisms are implemented.<sup>37</sup>

### **Skills Mismatch and Education Gaps**

Another major challenge is the notable skill mismatch between the CPEC-related jobs and the qualifications of the available Pakistani workforce. Most labor forces lack mechanical and electrical engineering, digital systems, data analytics, and environmental management training.<sup>38</sup> These fields are the backbone of the energy, telecommunications, and transport logistics industries. This mismatch causes underemployment and reliance on foreign labour for technical roles.

Due to structural barriers in accessing education and training, the representation of women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields is also low. According to UNESCO, only 21% of engineering students in Pakistan are women, and their participation in professional settings is also relatively low.<sup>39</sup> Considering this, a specific approach should be taken to fill this gap; otherwise, women would be unlikely to access the high-skilled jobs created through CPEC.

Pakistan officials must invest in gender-sensitive skills development programs to address the skill mismatch issue. By focusing on technical training, STEM outreach, and boot camps in secondary schools, those programs can help facilitate women's entry into high-growth sectors. Also, incentives such as scholarships, gender quotas, and public-private partnerships can further support the process.

#### **Local Inclusion**

Local communities in underdeveloped and rural regions of Pakistan, such as Gwadar, Tharparkar, and Gilgit-Baltistan, face barriers to accessing CPEC job opportunities. These barriers are due to limited mobility, cultural restrictions, and information asymmetry. Women in rural areas are unaware of the job openings and face cultural barriers to work outside their communities.<sup>40</sup> As a result, the benefits of regional development and poverty reduction are unevenly distributed.

https://journalppw.com/index.php/jpsp/article/view/14260.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Jawad Syed and Mustafa Özbilgin, "A Relational Framework for International Transfer of Diversity Management Practices," *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 20, no. 12 (December 2009): 2435–53, https://doi.org/10.1080/09585190903363755.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Dr Ayesha Khan et al., "The Impact of CPEC on the Economy of Pakistan," *Journal of Positive School Psychology* 6, no. 10 (November 23, 2022): 4214–23,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> mujeebayeesha, "Analyzing the Gender Disparity in STEM Careers in Pakistan - a Statistical Overview | WEmpower Pakistan," WEmpower Pakistan, February 3, 2021, <a href="https://wempowerpakistan.org/analyzing-the-gender-disparity-in-stem-careers-in-pakistan/?utm">https://wempowerpakistan.org/analyzing-the-gender-disparity-in-stem-careers-in-pakistan/?utm</a> source=chatgpt.com.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Zahid Khan et al., "Debunking Criticism on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," *The Chinese Economy* 53, no. 6 (July 24, 2020): 477–87, <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/10971475.2020.1792065">https://doi.org/10.1080/10971475.2020.1792065</a>.

Companies involved in CPEC projects should employ more local people, especially women, and offer training to prepare them for the jobs. It's not enough to provide positions; women need the proper support to enter confidently. At the same time, the government and other decision-makers should ensure communities are included by organising job fairs, local job websites, and simple workshops. These actions can help women engage in CPEC in a significant way.

## The Need for Gender-Responsive CPEC Planning

The strategic importance of CPEC can only be unleashed if the economic potential of women is also integrated into CPEC's planning and implementation. To do so, the following steps should be taken:

- Gender audits of hiring practices
- Establishment of safe transport and workplace environments
- Inclusion of childcare facilities
- Legal and financial support for women-led small enterprises in Special Economic Zones (SEZs)

Unless these points are ensured in CPEC's structure, it would be more like patriarchal labour. Without these safeguards, CPEC risks reinforcing patriarchal labour structures and ignoring women, the largest labour resource.

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