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Unveiling Gender Disparities in Urban Pakistan's Higher Education
by

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Abstract

This literature review examines persistent gender disparities in urban Pakistan's higher education, highlighting socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers restricting women's academic and professional mobility. Despite increased female enrollment, patriarchal norms, mobility constraints, financial dependence, and discriminatory structures hinder full participation in education and the workforce. Using frameworks of distributive and recognition-based justice (Hennessy, 1999; Höffe, 2013; Young & Allen, 2011) and intersectionality (Crenshaw et al., 2021; Collins, 2019), the paper explores how systemic exclusions intersect with class, gendered expectations, and policy inefficiencies.

Findings reveal although Pakistan's National Education Policy promotes gender equity, implementation remains weak due to systemic neglect and resistance. Women employ diverse strategies—from negotiation to activism—to navigate constraints, but resilience alone cannot counter structural inequities. The review calls for targeted reforms, including policy interventions for gender equity in higher education, gender-sensitive institutional reforms, economic incentives and support mechanisms and bridging the policy-practice gap. Without dismantling entrenched barriers, higher education will remain an incomplete path to empowerment rather than a transformative force for equity and mobility.

Keywords: gender disparities, higher education, urban Pakistan, institutional barriers, intersectionality, policy reforms, distributive justice, recognition-based justice

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Introduction

Despite global advancements in gender equity, urban Pakistani women continue to face entrenched barriers hindering their academic and professional mobility. Although Pakistan has made progress in raising female literacy rates, significant disparities remain: the national literacy rate stands at 62.3%, with male literacy at 73% and female literacy notably lower at 51% (UNESCO, 2020). Even in urban areas, where literacy reaches 80%, systemic socio-cultural and institutional obstacles continue to limit women's full participation in higher education (Ali & Hussain, 2017).

The presence of universities and professional networks in cities does not guarantee equitable access. Restrictive gender norms, limited mobility, and institutional biases disproportionately affect women—especially those from lower-income backgrounds—undermining both enrollment and long-term professional outcomes (Ali et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2020). While urbanization is often assumed to foster gender equity, it frequently reproduces patriarchal structures constraining women's academic and career trajectories (Mughal et al., 2023).

Social expectations and institutional inefficiencies further reinforce these barriers, as dominant cultural narratives encourage women to prioritize caregiving and marriage over education and employment (Malik & Courtney, 2011; Salehjee & Watts, 2022). The 'doctor bride' phenomenon—where women's academic achievements are valued more for increasing marriageability than for enabling professional independence—illustrates how education is often instrumentalized to serve traditional gender roles (Ashraf et al., 2023). Even for those who access higher education, challenges persist in the form of social stigma, economic dependence, and lack of institutional support, all contributing to high dropout rates and underemployment

among educated women (UNESCO, 2020). Moreover, gender inequality is embedded in institutional structures, including male-dominated leadership, gender-insensitive policies, and discriminatory workplace practices restricting post-graduation professional mobility (Salehjee & Watts, 2022). To critically examine these intersecting dynamics, this paper draws on the frameworks of distributive and recognition-based justice (Hennessy, 1999; Höffe, 2013; Young & Allen, 2011) and intersectionality (Crenshaw et al., 2021; Collins, 2019). These perspectives offer insight into how structural inequities shaped by gender, class, and socio-economic status obstruct women's access to and advancement in higher education. The urgency of this inquiry is not solely academic but also rooted in lived experience. My own journey reflects many of the systemic injustices explored in this review, offering context and personal grounding for analysis.

Background and Context

The struggle for gender equity in Pakistan's urban educational landscape is not a distant or abstract concern—it is lived and embodied. My own educational and professional journey reveals the structural and cultural barriers explored in this paper. Gaining admission to one of Karachi's most prestigious schools was a moment of academic achievement, yet it was met with familial resistance—not due to a lack of merit, but because my brother had not been accepted into the same institution. This response highlighted how gendered expectations often override individual accomplishments and reflect the persistent prioritization of male educational paths.

During my undergraduate studies, my academic efforts were frequently viewed through the lens of marriageability rather than personal growth or professional aspiration. The widespread 'doctor bride' phenomenon—where women's education is encouraged primarily to enhance marriage prospects—resonated strongly with my experience. It represents a broader societal pattern in which women's learning is celebrated only when it reinforces patriarchal

ideals of domestic respectability, not when it challenges them. Even after entering the workforce and securing a position at a multinational company, I was compelled to sacrifice career progression in favor of fulfilling gendered domestic expectations. These experiences affirm Young and Allen's (2011) argument social exclusion is not only about denied access but also about restricted agency within existing structures. The injustices I encountered—both distributive and recognition-based—are deeply personal and echo the broader challenges faced by many urban Pakistani women.

Theoretical Frameworks

To examine the systemic barriers affecting urban Pakistani women's access to higher education, this literature review draws on two key theoretical lenses: distributive and recognition-based justice (Hennessy, 1999; Höffe, 2013; Young & Allen, 2011), and intersectionality (Crenshaw et al., 2021; Collins, 2019). Distributive justice highlights material inequities in educational access, while recognition-based justice emphasizes societal and institutional misrecognition undermining women's identities and contributions within academic spaces (Gewirtz, 1998).

Intersectionality complements these perspectives by analyzing how overlapping social positions—such as gender, class, and cultural norms—interact to shape women's experiences in education. Together, these frameworks offer a multidimensional understanding of the structural and socio-cultural forces constraining women's participation and progression in higher education.

Distributive and Recognition-Based Justice in Urban Higher Education

Building on the theoretical foundations outlined above, distributive and recognition-based justice offer critical insights into how structural inequities manifest within Pakistan's urban

higher education system. While universities in urban centers may provide improved infrastructure, access remains deeply unequal. Höffe's (2013) interpretation of Rawlsian justice underscores how educational resources are often allocated in ways benefiting privileged groups, leaving women from lower-income households with limited opportunities (Malik & Courtney, 2011). Financial dependency, societal expectations, and institutional neglect further constrain women's ability to access and succeed in higher education (Aslam, 2009; Shaukat & Pell, 2017).

Young's (1990) concept of recognition-based justice expands this analysis by emphasizing exclusion rooted in cultural and institutional misrecognition. Urban women's academic efforts are frequently undervalued, seen as secondary to their roles within the family. Degrees from prestigious institutions may enhance marriage prospects but often fail to translate into professional mobility (Malik & Courtney, 2011). Within academic spaces, gendered norms continue to shape access to research opportunities, leadership roles, and mentorship, reinforcing institutional patterns of marginalization (Ali et al., 202; Salehjee & Watts, 2022). These dimensions of injustice, while distinct, intersect in ways further complicating women's educational journeys—especially when considered through the lens of intersectionality.

Intersectionality and Urban Educational Exclusion

To fully understand the layered barriers urban Pakistani women face, it is necessary to consider how intersecting social identities shape their educational experiences. Intersectionality, as articulated by Crenshaw (1989) and expanded by Collins (2019), reveals how gender, class, and cultural expectations converge to produce compounded exclusion. While urban women statistically have greater access than rural counterparts, those from lower-income backgrounds experience persistent marginalization due to economic limitations, family responsibilities, and rigid gender norms (Maqsood et al., 2012).

Even in proximity to universities, structural challenges remain. Policies promoting female enrollment rarely translate into sustained support for retention or graduation. Classroom dynamics, career counseling, and institutional resources often privilege men, leaving women—particularly from less advantaged backgrounds—without the necessary scaffolding to succeed (Salehjee & Watts, 2022).

These overlapping injustices result in an academic landscape where participation is possible, but progression is constrained. Without addressing these structural inequities, higher education continues to reflect—and reproduce—existing gender hierarchies. The next section examines how these challenges are reflected in policy gaps and institutional practices, offering insight into the limitations of current equity efforts.

Literature Review

Building on the theoretical foundations and systemic patterns outlined above, existing literature highlights how urban women in Pakistan continue to face structural barriers to higher education, shaped by socio-cultural constraints, economic disparities, and institutional deficiencies (Durrani, 2008; Maqsood et al., 2012). While urban centers offer better educational infrastructure than rural areas, gendered discrimination remains deeply embedded in social systems, limiting women's full participation in higher education (Mughal et al., 2023; Shaukat & Pell, 2017).

Although Pakistan's National Education Policy and constitutional provisions formally advocate for gender equality in education, they fail to dismantle entrenched structural inequalities preventing women from fully benefiting from academic opportunities (Ahmed, 2012; Salehjee & Watts, 2022). The urban-rural divide in literacy rates (80% vs. 55%) often

masks the reality even in metropolitan cities, gendered social expectations and institutional barriers limit women's educational and professional mobility (Ali & Hussain, 2017)

The aim of this is to review and synthesize existing literature on gender disparities in education, socio-cultural constraints, economic limitations, and institutional gaps, as well as the coping strategies women employ to navigate these challenges. While some women resist and negotiate societal norms, others are forced to conform to restrictive expectations to access education and employment opportunities. Understanding these intersecting challenges is essential for developing policy interventions going beyond performative solutions and contribute to meaningful educational equity.

Method

This paper is grounded in a literature review examining the systemic barriers urban women in Pakistan face in accessing and completing higher education. Sources were identified through Google Scholar and the University of Alberta library databases, including ERIC, JSTOR, ProQuest, Scopus, and EBSCOhost. The review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, government reports, and institutional publications addressing gender equity, education policy, and women's social mobility in Pakistan.

Search terms included: 'gender disparities in higher education Pakistan,' 'urban women's education barriers,' 'higher education and empowerment,' 'education policies Pakistan,' and 'institutional barriers to women's mobility.' The search was limited primarily to publications from 2000 to 2024, with the inclusion of a few foundational works from the 1990s. Priority was given to literature offering empirical evidence, theoretical perspectives, and policy analysis relevant to the lived experiences of urban Pakistani women in higher education.

The inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed articles, academic books, and policy documents specifically examining urban Pakistani women's access to higher education, particularly research addressing socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers affecting their educational and career trajectories. Additionally, studies discussing gender-sensitive policies, educational reforms, and interventions aimed at improving women's participation in higher education were included. To maintain focus on urban contexts, studies exclusively centered on rural education were excluded. Furthermore, opinion-based articles, research lacking empirical data or theoretical grounding, and studies did not explicitly discuss gender-related barriers in higher education were omitted to ensure a rigorous and evidence-based analysis.

Once the literature was synthesized, recurring issues across multiple sources were organized into five focus areas reflecting the structural, socio-cultural, and economic barriers shaping urban women's experiences in higher education in Pakistan: Urban Accessibility and Gendered Limitations, Socio-Cultural Constraints and the 'Doctor Bride' Phenomenon, Economic Barriers and Financial Dependency, Institutional Barriers to Women's Participation and Progression, and Coping Mechanisms and Resilience Strategies. Research on gender disparities focused on statistical trends and structural inequalities affecting women's academic progression, while studies on socio-cultural constraints examined family expectations, marriage pressures, and gendered surveillance hindering educational continuity. Economic barriers were assessed through literature analyzing financial constraints, funding disparities, employment restrictions, and workforce exclusion discouraging women from pursuing higher education. The institutional gaps in higher education policies were analyzed by identifying gender biases in academic leadership, discriminatory university policies, and the absence of gender-responsive reforms. Finally, studies on coping strategies explored how women resist, negotiate, or conform

to societal norms to access education and employment opportunities. Following is a description of the five themes.

Urban Accessibility and Gendered Limitations

While urbanization is often assumed to enhance women's access to higher education, studies reveal proximity to universities does not automatically translate into equitable participation (Durrani, 2008). Gendered norms and patriarchal constraints continue to restrict women's educational and professional aspirations, creating a paradox of access without agency (Wilkinson, 2002). Despite an increase in female enrollment in universities, completion rates remain alarmingly low, as women frequently face pressure to prioritize marriage over career development (Maqsood et al., 2012). Furthermore, gendered academic tracking channels women into socially 'acceptable' fields such as education and healthcare, while STEM and business disciplines remain male-dominated due to persistent stereotypes regarding women's roles in the workforce (Mohsin & Syed, 2020).

Socio-Cultural Constraints and the 'Doctor Bride' Phenomenon

One of the most deeply entrenched socio-cultural barriers to higher education for urban women in Pakistan is the prioritization of marriage over career aspirations (Maqsood et al., 2012). Even within educated families, a woman's degree is often perceived as a social asset enhancing her desirability in the marriage market, rather than as a tool for professional advancement (Mohsin & Syed, 2020). This restrictive cultural mindset discourages long-term educational and career pursuits, leading to high dropout rates and premature career exits (Zakaria, 2013). Women who seek to pursue further studies or careers beyond their families' expectations often face active resistance, further limiting their autonomy and reinforcing gendered dependency structures (Ashraf et al., 2023).

The doctor bride phenomenon is a striking example of recognition-based injustice (Young & Allen, 2011), wherein women's education is acknowledged only within patriarchal structures, reinforcing their lack of agency over career choices. Medical education for women in Pakistan is often framed as an investment in social status rather than in professional or intellectual growth. Families encourage women to study medicine, not with the intention of practicing as doctors, but because a medical degree enhances marriage prospects by signaling intelligence, discipline, and prestige (Ashraf et al., 2023). However, once married, these women are often pressured to leave the workforce, reinforcing the perception their education was merely a stepping stone to securing an advantageous marriage rather than a means for personal or professional development (Mohsin & Syed, 2020).

Despite women constituting 70% of medical students in Pakistan, studies indicate only 50% enter the workforce, and an even smaller percentage remain in active practice long-term (Mohsin & Syed, 2020). The systemic barriers driving women out of the workforce include family-imposed restrictions, gendered career expectations, lack of workplace support for working mothers, and rigid patriarchal norms (Ashraf et al., 2023). In many cases, even women who are willing to practice medicine face resistance from their in-laws, who view a working woman as a threat to traditional family dynamics (Zakaria, 2013). Those who persist in their medical careers often do so by navigating familial negotiations, working reduced hours, or choosing less demanding specialties allowing them to balance domestic responsibilities with limited professional engagement (Ashraf et al., 2023).

The doctor bride phenomenon exemplifies intersectionality (Crenshaw et al., 2021), where gender and class-based expectations intersect to create disparate educational and professional outcomes. Women from lower socio-economic backgrounds face even greater

constraints, as their families lack the financial means or social capital to support careers outside the home. These conditions highlight the compounded effects of distributive and recognition-based injustices—not only do women have less control over their career choices, but they also lack institutional support to challenge these norms. Addressing these interconnected barriers requires not only policy interventions to support women's workforce participation but also cultural shifts recognizing women's education as a right and a pathway to independence, rather than a tool for marital leverage (Mohsin & Syed, 2020).

Economic Barriers and Financial Dependency

Economic constraints play a critical role in restricting urban women's access to higher education, as families often prioritize sons over daughters when allocating educational resources. This systemic preference for male education reflects distributive injustice (Höffe, 2013) where educational resources are unequally distributed, favoring male students while leaving women at a systemic disadvantage (Wilkinson, 2002). Even when women manage to enroll in universities, they frequently encounter financial hardships, as scholarships and funding opportunities are disproportionately allocated to male students, limiting their ability to sustain their education (Maqsood et al., 2012).

Additionally, gendered labor market structures create barriers to employment opportunities for female graduates, preventing them from achieving financial independence (Malik & Courtney, 2011). Many women remain financially dependent on their families, reinforcing the perception investing in their education offers limited long-term returns. This lack of economic autonomy further discourages families from supporting women's higher education, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion Fraser (1997) would describe as both distributive and

recognition-based injustice—denying women access to resources while simultaneously devaluing their contributions to the workforce.

Institutional Barriers to Women’s Participation and Progression

While access to higher education has expanded for women in urban Pakistan, significant institutional barriers continue to restrict their academic and professional mobility. These challenges go beyond enrollment and are rooted in the structures and shape practices within higher education institutions. Core barriers include the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership, the absence of gender-sensitive policies, lack of support for balancing academic and family responsibilities, limited campus safety, and discriminatory hiring practices. These conditions reinforce gender disparities in decision-making, career advancement, and access to academic opportunities.

The interplay of intersectionality, distributive injustice, and recognition-based injustice (Crenshaw et al., 2021; Hennessy, 1999; Young & Allen, 2011) further intensifies these challenges. Women from marginalized and lower-income backgrounds often face overlapping forms of exclusion, making it even more difficult to fully participate in academic and professional spaces. Without addressing these systemic issues, women’s educational achievements risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative, reinforcing structural inequalities and limiting the long-term benefits of higher education. The following subsections examine key dimensions of institutional barriers: gender representation in academic leadership, mobility restrictions and gendered surveillance, and workforce exclusion resulting from discriminatory hiring practices.

Gender Representation in Academic Leadership

Despite increased female enrollment in universities, women remain greatly underrepresented in faculty and leadership positions within academic institutions (Durrani, 2008). The absence of female mentors, limited access to research opportunities, and discriminatory institutional policies further hinder women's academic and professional growth (Maqsood et al., 2012). The lack of gender-inclusive leadership perpetuates male dominance in decision-making roles, restricting the implementation of gender-sensitive policies essential to addressing the unique challenges women face in academia.

University policies in Pakistan fail to accommodate gender-specific needs, such as childcare support, flexible academic programs, and protections against gender-based harassment, further marginalizing women within academic spaces (Salehjee & Watts, 2022). The absence of institutional reforms means many women either struggle to balance their academic and family responsibilities or are forced to abandon their professional aspirations altogether. The lack of recognition-based justice (Young & Allen, 2011) in university policies disregards the unique socio-cultural constraints women navigate, making it difficult for them to pursue leadership roles or sustain long-term academic careers. Without proactive institutional policies supporting women's academic advancement and professional development, gender equity in higher education remains an unfulfilled promise rather than a structural reality.

Mobility Restrictions and Gendered Surveillance

Even in urban settings where universities are physically accessible, mobility constraints and gendered surveillance severely restrict women's participation in higher education (Salehjee & Watts, 2022). Concerns about safety, moral policing, and coeducation prevent many women from traveling independently to attend universities, reinforcing the idea they should remain

within protected domestic spaces (Mughal et al., 2023). These restrictions reflect recognition-based injustice, where women's presence in public educational spaces is regulated and scrutinized, limiting their autonomy and freedom of movement (Young & Allen, 2011).

Additionally, public spaces and transportation systems remain largely male-dominated, perpetuating structural inequalities restricting women's freedom of movement (Giusta & Bosworth, 2020). These mobility restrictions disproportionately impact women from lower-income urban communities, who lack access to private transport and financial resources needed to overcome institutional barriers (Mughal et al., 2023). The intersectionality of gender and class (Crenshaw et al., 2021) exacerbates these challenges, as working-class women face compounded disadvantages due to both economic constraints and cultural restrictions on mobility. The combination of institutional inefficiencies and mobility constraints makes higher education an inaccessible or unsustainable pursuit for many urban women, particularly those from economically marginalized backgrounds.

Workforce Exclusion and Discriminatory Hiring Practices

Even for women who successfully complete higher education, securing stable employment remains a significant challenge. Discriminatory hiring practices, wage gaps, and workplace biases limit women's professional mobility, reinforcing the idea their careers are secondary to their domestic responsibilities (Ahmed, 2012). Despite their academic qualifications, many women find themselves either underemployed or entirely excluded from the workforce due to employer biases and rigid gender norms.

The compounded effects of intersectionality, distributive injustice, and recognition-based injustice (Crenshaw et al., 2021; Hennessy, 1999; Young & Allen, 2011) create an academic environment where urban women must constantly navigate socio-cultural and institutional

constraints to secure their place in higher education. Policies focus solely on increasing female enrollment fail to address the systemic inequities preventing women from fully benefiting from academic and professional opportunities. Without addressing these intersecting injustices, policy interventions will continue to be performative rather than transformative. A true commitment to gender equity in education must extend beyond enrollment statistics to ensure women are not only granted access but also empowered to thrive within academic institutions. Although structural challenges remain, women do not remain passive in the face of adversity. Instead, they adopt various coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies to navigate institutional, cultural, and economic constraints—demonstrating the complexity of their agency within restrictive systems.

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience Strategies

Urban women in Pakistan employ a range of responses to navigate the socio-cultural and institutional conditions limiting their access to and progression within higher education. Through the lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw et al., 2021), these responses vary based on women's socio-economic positions, family expectations, and cultural constraints. Some benefit from supportive structures, while others negotiate within or resist patriarchal norms in pursuit of education and career aspirations. These coping mechanisms are not uniform; rather, they reflect diverse forms of agency shaped by women's lived realities. The following subsections outline four broad categories identified in the literature—System Successes, System Fighters, Motivated Realists, and Neutral Acceptors—each illustrating different ways women respond to the challenges they face.

System Successes: Leveraging Social Capital

Some women overcome educational barriers due to strong family and community support. Categorized as 'System Successes' by Shaukat and Pell (2017), these women benefit

from progressive familial structures encouraging higher education and career development, allowing them to pursue their ambitions with fewer constraints. Their experiences highlight the importance of social capital, mentorship, and financial stability in mitigating gendered obstacles. Research indicates women from privileged socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to access leadership roles and professional success due to these supportive networks (Kazi & Raza, 2012).

System Fighters: Challenging Patriarchal Norms

In contrast, ‘System Fighters’ actively resist gender norms and institutional discrimination, often at great personal and professional risk. These women challenge patriarchal structures through activism, legal advocacy, and policy reform efforts. They participate in gender equity movements, academic discourse, and professional networks seeking to dismantle systemic exclusions (Salehjee & Watts, 2022). However, their struggle is often met with resistance, as they face workplace discrimination, career stagnation, and familial pressure to conform to traditional roles (Dogra, 2017). While their resilience drives incremental change, the emotional and social costs of their activism remain high.

Motivated Realists: Strategic Negotiation within Constraints

A significant portion of urban women adopt a pragmatic approach, navigating patriarchal constraints without directly confronting them. Termed ‘Motivated Realists,’ these women negotiate with family and institutional structures to achieve their academic and career goals while adhering to societal expectations. This approach allows them to access opportunities without provoking resistance, making it a strategic compromise in restrictive environments. They often choose professions such as education and healthcare, where gender norms are less restrictive, enabling them to achieve economic independence without facing overt resistance

(Maqsood et al., 2012). Their strategy reflects the limitations of Pakistan's education system, where women must compromise their aspirations to align with social acceptability (Mohsin & Syed, 2020).

Neutral Acceptors: Reinforcing Gendered Expectations

At the other end of the spectrum are 'Neutral Acceptors,' women who conform to traditional gender roles without resistance. Their acceptance of societal norms perpetuates the cycle of gender inequality in education and employment. These women often view higher education as a means of securing a better marriage rather than achieving professional autonomy (Wilkinson, 2002). However, their choices must be understood within the context of patriarchal conditioning, which limits their exposure to alternative pathways and reinforces dependence on male family members (Mughal et al., 2023).

Together, these four categories—System Successes, System Fighters, Motivated Realists, and Neutral Acceptors—illustrate the range of ways urban women in Pakistan respond to the constraints imposed by socio-cultural and institutional structures. Their coping strategies reflect varied forms of agency shaped by access to resources, family dynamics, and socio-economic status. However, while these responses demonstrate individual resilience and adaptability, they also expose the limitations of relying on personal strategies to overcome systemic inequality. The following section explores why individual resilience alone is insufficient and emphasizes the urgent need for structural reforms addressing the root causes of gender inequity in higher education.

Beyond Individual Resilience: The Need for Structural Change

While mentorship programs, peer support, and community networks offer important forms of assistance for women navigating gendered challenges in higher education, they remain

insufficient without broader systemic reforms (Mohsin & Syed, 2020). Persistent hiring biases, discriminatory academic policies, and underrepresentation of women in leadership point to the need for structural change beyond reliance on individual resilience (Durrani, 2008). Without institutional mechanisms promoting gender equity in education and employment, the burden of overcoming these barriers continues to fall disproportionately on women, reinforcing long-standing inequities within Pakistan's higher education system.

Drawing on intersectionality and the principles of distributive and recognition-based justice, the literature emphasizes the need for holistic reform addressing not only policy gaps but also entrenched societal and institutional norms. Without these efforts, gender disparities in academia and the workforce will persist, and higher education will remain a limited and unequal opportunity for urban Pakistani women. To move from critique to action, the following section outlines policy recommendations grounded in the literature, highlighting the systemic changes needed to ensure higher education becomes a space of empowerment and equity.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The literature makes it clear individual resilience alone cannot overcome the deep-rooted structural barriers urban women face in higher education. Sustainable change requires coordinated action across policy, institutional, and cultural levels. The following recommendations identify key strategies for addressing the systemic obstacles limiting women's academic access, retention, and professional advancement.

Policy Interventions for Gender Equity in Higher Education

Barriers to women's participation in urban Pakistan's higher education system call for policy reforms going beyond enrollment statistics. Many current policies overlook the complex socio-cultural, economic, and institutional challenges women face, limiting the impact of formal

access (Kazi & Raza, 2012). Policies must acknowledge access alone does not ensure inclusion; meaningful participation requires dismantling structural norms limiting women's autonomy in educational spaces. Effective interventions must account for lived experiences and focus on equitable participation and outcomes. This calls for institutional reforms moving beyond rhetoric to embed gender responsiveness in the day-to-day functioning of universities.

Gender-Sensitive Institutional Reforms

Higher education institutions must adopt gender-sensitive policies supporting women both academically and personally. These include flexible learning schedules, affordable childcare, and enforceable measures against gender-based harassment. Such provisions help reduce dropout rates and support academic success (Salehjee & Watts, 2022). Institutions should also prioritize gender diversity in leadership and faculty roles to promote inclusive decision-making and challenge male-dominated academic structures (Durrani, 2008).

Economic Incentives and Support Mechanisms

Equitable access to financial resources is essential for increasing women's participation and persistence in higher education. Targeted scholarships, need-based aid, and funding for marginalized groups can help offset economic disadvantages. Current funding systems often favor male students, reinforcing educational inequality (Malik & Courtney, 2011). Expanding financial support increases women's ability to complete their education and pursue long-term professional goals.

Bridging the Policy–Practice Gap

Despite national commitments like Pakistan Vision 2025, the gap between gender equity policies and institutional practice remains wide. Many initiatives lack accountability structures and remain symbolic (Government of Pakistan, 2014; Shaukat & Pell, 2017). To close this gap,

educational reforms must be grounded in justice-oriented frameworks. Recognition-based justice emphasizes valuing women's contributions and creating institutional cultures where inclusion is actively practiced (Young & Allen, 2011). To understand the full scope and urgency of these reforms, it is essential to revisit the broader findings, which illustrate how entrenched structural barriers continue to limit women's educational participation and potential in urban Pakistan.

Findings and Conclusion: Toward Transformative Gender Equity in Higher Education

The literature review reveals urbanization in Pakistan has not resulted in equitable outcomes for women in higher education. Despite improved enrollment figures, urban women continue to encounter entrenched socio-cultural norms, economic inequality, and institutional barriers restricting their academic and professional advancement. Gendered expectations, mobility restrictions, financial dependence, and workplace discrimination disproportionately affect women, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Although national education policies, including Pakistan Vision 2025, promote gender equity, the gap between policy and lived experience remains substantial. Weak implementation, limited institutional accountability, and resistance rooted in patriarchal values diminish the effectiveness of these initiatives (Durrani, 2008; Salehjee & Watts, 2022). Most policies focus on numerical inclusion while failing to provide the structures necessary for sustained academic engagement and equitable career progression.

The literature identifies four recurring patterns in women's responses to systemic barriers. Some rely on strong family support and social capital to navigate challenges ('System Successes'), while others actively resist through advocacy and reform efforts ('System Fighters'). Many pursue academic and professional goals by negotiating with societal norms ('Motivated Realists'), and some conform to traditional roles, viewing education primarily as a

means to enhance marriage prospects ('Neutral Acceptors'). These coping strategies reflect varied forms of agency shaped by social class, access to resources, and cultural expectations, but they also underscore how the burden of navigating exclusion continues to fall on individuals rather than institutions.

Through the combined lens of distributive justice (Höffe, 2013), recognition-based justice (Young & Allen, 2011), and intersectionality (Crenshaw et al., 2021), the literature review demonstrates how inequities persist not only due to material deprivation but also through cultural devaluation and institutional bias. Women are not only underrepresented in decision-making spaces but often lack recognition for their academic and professional contributions. Effective change requires targeted financial support, gender-responsive academic environments, and institutional mechanisms promoting representation, accountability, and safety. Policy interventions must address both access and retention while challenging the cultural narratives limiting women's autonomy. Education must be framed not as a social asset for marriage but as a legitimate right and a pathway to economic independence and civic participation.

Bringing the discussion full circle, the literature review makes clear equity in higher education cannot be achieved through access alone. Transformation depends on dismantling the structural, cultural, and institutional barriers restricting women's full participation. When equity is defined not only by who enters academic spaces but by who thrives within them, higher education can serve as a genuine platform for gender justice and social mobility in urban Pakistan.

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