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Gender Mainstreaming in Pakistan's National Security Policymaking

Pakistan's National Security Policy of 2022-2026, a 64-page document discussing a full spectrum of areas and issues viewed as national security priorities, featured less than a dozen lines of text referencing the role of women in national security. The featured content acknowledged that greater inclusivity of women was required in forums and institutions connected to policy formulation and decision-making, while stating that women and transgender persons deserved protection and safe, equitable access to essentials at home and in public spaces.

An issue that involves nearly half of the country's population, and affects it in its entirety, requires treatment beyond an honorary mention. It necessitates a deeper dive into what inclusivity, protection and equitable access entails for the lesser represented genders, as well as the impact that inclusivity can have on the national security policymaking process.

This paper discusses the state of gender mainstreaming in Pakistan's national security institutions, why equitable treatment and representation is essential, and how gender mainstreaming can be beneficial.

Landscape of Women's Representation in Pakistan's National Security Apparatus

Pakistani women contribute to Pakistan's national security framework by serving in law enforcement, the armed forces and in government.

As of late 2024, women participation in the police force lies at or under 5%, with the highest percentage being in the Federal Capital (5.04%) and the lowest being in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (1.46%).¹ The gender disparity in representation is for a variety of reasons, ranging from structural inadequacies to socio-cultural constraints.

Police work remains a male-dominated profession, partly due to its inherent nature and partly due to a lack of gender responsive approaches towards problem areas. The work involves activities such as night patrolling, traffic duty, investigations, and conducting raids, which are inherently intimidating or deemed unsafe for the female officer; issues include risk of injury, exposure to sexual harassment and assault, and condescending public attitudes.² It also involves engaging with criminals or individuals viewed as unsavory characters, both of which run counter to the kind of work environment that is considered acceptable for women in Pakistan.

Additionally, it entails a commitment of long hours and a heavy lack of work-life balance; while the latter affects male police officers as well, for female officers it often means resigning from work –by choice or by compulsion – in favor of an alternative that is more conducive to a productive home life and which is perceived to offer better personal safety with or without male accompaniment. The lack of facilities addressing personal hygiene care, transport and assisted childcare for mothers, exacerbates circumstances.³ In general, the profession itself is viewed socially as crass and unsuitable for women, reducing them to unfavorable stereotypes should they choose this as a career. Issues such as these discourage women’s integration and retention in the police service, and also adversely affect reporting of crimes against women; victims of gender-based violence in particular are far more likely to report to women than they are to men.

Women in Pakistan’s armed forces are perceived by society with greater favorability and accorded respect. As a profession, it is viewed in Pakistan as an honorable endeavor that offers both personal security as well as social approval. Earlier this year, the National Assembly was informed that 80% of all fields within the Pakistan army are open for female induction, the areas not open to them involving prolonged exposure to an environment considered hostile and those requiring extreme physical endurance.⁴ In the Pakistan Air Force, as of last year, there are a total of 34 female pilots, including war-ready fighter pilots.⁵ Within the Pakistan Navy, women largely serve in non-combat roles in naval operations, information technology, engineering, medical care, education, and public relations.⁶ With greater social acceptability, significantly greater personal security and facilities, and the implementation of female-specific training and development programs at home and abroad, retention within the armed forces is stronger.

Government institutions where national security policy-making and decision making is implemented feature extremely low representation of women. In September this year, the National Assembly Special Committee on Gender Mainstreaming convened a session in Parliament to express concern over the issue, citing 0.99% women representation in the Ministry of Interior and zero percent representation in the National Security Division.⁷ The issue had been raised earlier in the year as well by the same committee, citing Pakistan’s placement at 146 out of 148 in the 2025 Global Gender Gap Index Report.⁸

Women also shape national security decision making through platforms that interact with and influence policy-making. These include academic institutions, think tanks, and non-governmental organizations, the employees of which engage regularly with government institutions or government representatives as consultants, conference panelists, part of Track II initiatives, entrepreneurs, etc.

Representation within the think tanks sector in senior roles remains severely limited. Of the nine most prominent think

tanks operating in the federal capital as of November 2025, seven do not feature women in a role at the Director/Chair level or above, the senior-most rank featured being that of Associate Director. Of the remaining two, one employs two female directors, while the other employs only one. Given that there is no arguable lack of qualified women at the mid-career mark or beyond in the thematic area of security, it raises the question of whether the issue lies in imbalanced hiring practices, or in the reluctance or apathy of potential female applicants.

By contrast, in Islamabad-based universities, women representation is significantly more balanced; most departments working on areas pertinent to national security feature equilibrium in male and female representation. However, when it comes to representation at academic forums such as national or international conferences, particularly those organized by think tanks (including the ones studied above), the programs of such events overwhelmingly feature male panelists, with women often included in a token capacity to satisfy event sponsors or the attending audience.

It is important to note that issues of national security in both research and academic institutions currently present a gendered lens. For instance, while women working on areas such as nuclear proliferation, arms control and disarmament, and strategic stability, are no longer a rarity, their number does not yet compare to their male counterparts. It is implicitly understood that women opting to work on these areas, by virtue of their fewer numbers, will be encouraged; they also end up receiving greater career support, whether on part of domestic platforms or in the form of opportunities offered by foreign research institutions as a form of affirmative action.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Pakistan play an important role in shaping the debate on national security issues and acting in a guidance capacity, including collaboration with government institutions. Prominent examples include the work of the Aurat Foundation, such as its collaboration with the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) on training and capacitating women peace architects to address the negative fallout of violent extremism in their communities, integrating gender perspectives in national security strategies, and advocacy for women’s inclusion in governance and decision making; the work of Shirkat Gah in consistent advocacy for treating human security issues such as gender violence, food insecurity, and inadequate healthcare as traditional security concerns, as well as their research on how armed conflict and violent extremism disproportionately affects girls and women; and the work of the PAIMAN Alumni Trust in empowering women, the youth, educators and religious leaders in helping to form community-led initiatives for resilience, social harmony and peace building. It is worth mentioning that a great number of the NGOs working in Pakistan, including the ones mentioned above, feature women prominently at the helm.

Against the broader context, however, it is viable to argue that perceptions of national security in Pakistan largely continue to follow a state-centric military approach, and that women's participation in national security policy and decision making remains at a definitive low.

Policy Recommendations

Gender mainstreaming in Pakistan's national security policymaking requires focused treatment, not only to create greater space for integrating women into the apparatus but also to shine focus on how girls and women are among those who are most greatly impacted by national security threats.

Three priority areas of work are recommended in this regard.

1. Concerned stakeholders must work on gender-disaggregated data collection practices. This would allow for improved monitoring and evaluation of programs aimed at uplifting vulnerable sections of the population, offer evidence-based insight into initiatives aimed at alleviating the gender gap, and offer insight into disparities that do not show up with aggregated data for issues like employment, enrollment in educational institutions, access to healthcare, etc.
2. Connected to the previous recommendation, gender impact assessment needs to be institutionalized as part of all government policy making and implementation. Policy initiatives need to evaluate, prior to proposed implementation, whether they affect men and women differently in terms of who benefits and how; whether there is a difference in the needs of men and women that the policy aims to address; whether it creates a burden for or tilts the balance in favor of one gender over the other; whether there are any unintended impacts stemming from an unequal access to facilities and services, etc.
3. Quota-based recruitment should be initiated in government institutions as well as in state-backed research institutions, including equitable representation at the senior-most levels. This can be complemented by initiating capacity-building programs to develop issue expertise, offering funded opportunities for foreign academic collaboration and exposure, and pushing for systems that prioritize research and knowledge creation rather than administrative overstretch created by an undue focus on optics.

Law enforcement agencies must ensure provision of adequate facilities that cater to female needs, such as maintaining personal hygiene, and childcare support. Systems must also incorporate measures that cater to ensuring a reasonable work-home balance. This is particularly important in a society where married women and women with children are expected to fulfill obligations in the family setup; the lack of such measures is a major factor in why the

recruitment and retention of women in law enforcement agencies remains problematic. Steps to be taken can include offering fixed work shifts, assigning greater part in roles that do not require working nights (such as training academies, complaint desks, etc.), institutionalizing family-friendly policies such as maternity leave and leave during childcare emergencies, clear policies against harassment with strict oversight mechanisms to ensure implementation, clear pathways for career progression, etc.

In connection to the above, it must be mentioned that the greater majority of working women in Pakistan, across the socio-economic spectrum, play the role of the primary parent and homemaker. Efforts must be made to emphasize the importance of the boys and men in the household offering an equal hand in taking care of responsibilities, reflecting an equitable division of both physical and emotional labor. These efforts can be incorporated into civics lessons at the school and university level, and can also be offered by the institutions employing women, as a mandated program for their husbands, brothers, and sons. The previous recommended policy measure, if enacted, would struggle to achieve its objectives without equal participation of men in the unpaid labor of the household.

Government collaboration should be strengthened with NGOs working on issues typically considered as non-traditional challenges that have a disproportionate impact on women, using their learning and knowledge, as well as supporting more initiatives that aim to address the gender gap. Treating issues such as gender violence, food insecurity, climate change, etc. as non-traditional threats is detrimental and ignores both the urgency of these challenges as well as their centrality to national security. Universities must mandate teaching courses on these issues as part of the curricula of International Relations and Strategic Studies programs; research focusing on these issues must be incentivized and transnational collaboration should be explored with regional universities in particular, given that the impact of such challenges is felt most strenuously across immediate borders and makes it a shared concern.

The success of the measures recommended will also depend on promoting transparency and accountability. Mechanisms for periodic reporting on the progress of measures, evaluation mechanisms to assess the efficacy and the impact of resource allocation, and independent monitoring bodies from civil society to oversee progress and implementation, will collectively support policy implementation.

The benefits of these policy recommendations are measurable, ranging from fostering trust between the government and the public, strengthening community resilience and engaging them as stakeholders, and reducing gender vulnerabilities, to strengthening the legitimacy of state institutions. It is worth noting that measures such as these align clearly with the thematic priorities outlined in the National Security Policy 2022-2026, including strengthening national cohesion, addressing socio-economic equalities,

deepening internal security, and prioritizing human security in the national security policymaking process.

About the author

Aiza Azam is a lecturer at the Department of International Relations, and Coordinator for outreach and events for Faculty of Aerospace and Strategic Studies (FASS). She is currently pursuing her PhD at the Department of Strategic Studies, FASS. Her previous experience has primarily included senior management positions at a number of research institutions in Islamabad, as well as in the corporate sector in Karachi. Prior to joining Air University, from 2019 to 2021, she was Head of Business Development for China at a well-known textile exports firm in Karachi. In September 2018, she undertook a 5-month Fellowship at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, where she presented her research on developing state narratives with a particular focus on the Balochistan issue. From 2017 to 2019, she served as Vice President at the Center for Strategic and Contemporary Research in Islamabad, alongside being Visiting Faculty for the Department of International Relations at the National Defence University.

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