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Gendering Climate Security:

Women's Agency in Pakistan's National Security Policy

Executive Summary

The global climate crisis continues to challenge the traditional security frameworks as a threat multiplier. In its efforts to address the issue, Pakistan has broadened its national security framework to address climate related challenges as a threat to its national security, under a citizen centric approach. This is a welcome move and one that policy makers have deferred for far too long. However, the framing of the climate security framework still remains predominantly state-centric, emphasising infrastructure, resource management, and institutional response, while the gendered dimensions of climate vulnerability and resilience are still neglected. Women's contributions to climate adaptation and community survival frequently remain either invisible, undervalued, or excluded from formal policy, trade and investment frameworks. This exclusion and limited participation of women weakens the adaptive capacity, undermines local resilience mechanisms, and perpetuates structural inequalities, thereby reducing the overall effectiveness and inclusivity of Pakistan's national security framework/policy. This paper contributes to the debate on human security by proposing that climate resilience can be achieved by adapting gender inclusive approach and effective national security policy should involve

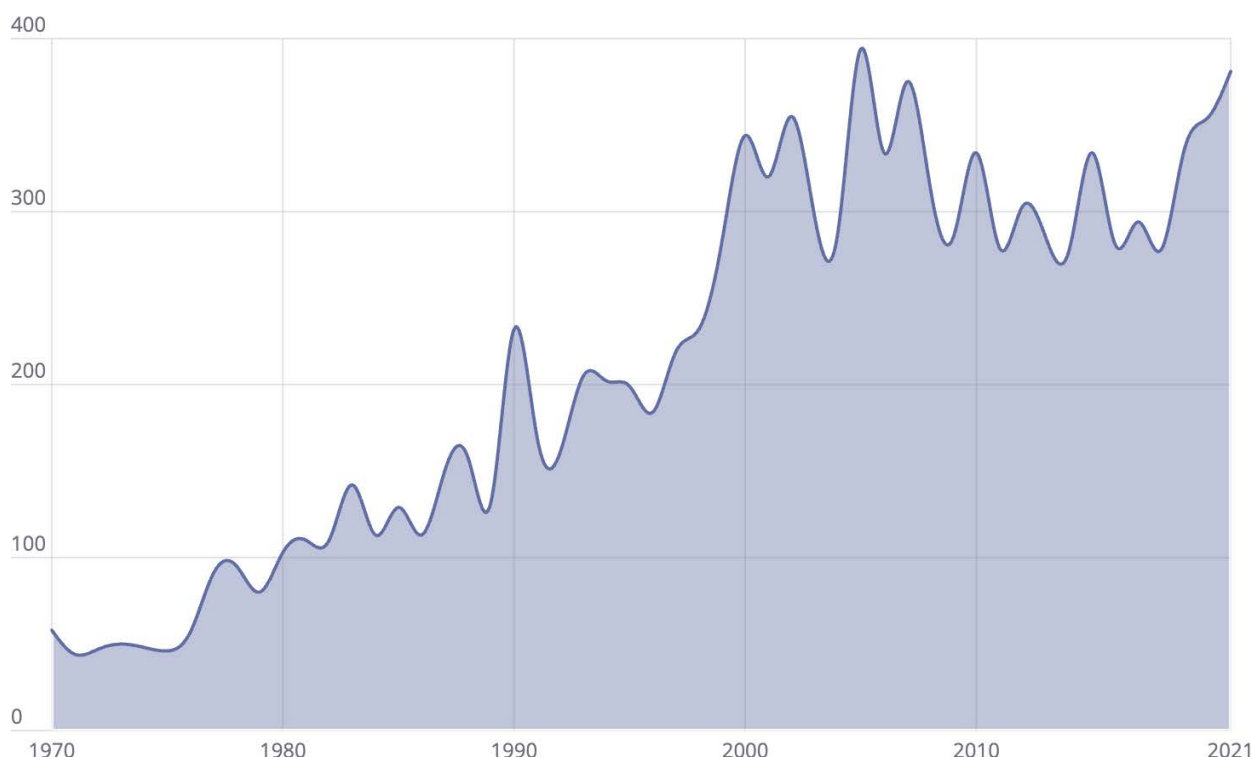
the contributions of women at the community level as well as their lived reality.

Introduction

Over the last few years, the international community has unanimously treated climate crisis under the umbrella of Non-Traditional Security (NTS) threats. The primary rationale behind the shift from traditional paradigm to a more human centric approach is to explore the intersection between five different pillars i.e. human security, gender, environment, power and resources. For developing and agrarian economies like Pakistan, the implications of climate change extend beyond the realm of NTS and directly affect national stability, governance and social cohesion. (O'Brien & Barnett, 2013)

Climate change is the most significant traditional security threat of the twenty-first century particularly for countries like Pakistan who have been the worst hit by it. According to the 2021 Global Climate Risk Index, Pakistan ranks fifth among the most affected countries by climate change. Although contributing to less than one per cent in global carbon emissions, in the recent floods of 2025, the country has suffered losses amounting to PKR 822 billion,

Number of climate-related natural disasters in recent decades



Data: The international disasters database 2022

claiming 1,039 lives, displacing over 4 million people, and causing unprecedented destruction of homes, crops, and infrastructure nationwide. This is accompanied with the looming danger of droughts and rising temperatures for prolonged periods of time. (CRED, 2025).

The statistics also show that the frequency of natural disasters has been continuously increasing over the recent decades (Figure-1). The country's heavy reliance on agriculture for its economy further accentuates the threat posed by it. Each year a significant number of crops, agriculture is affected by flash floods affecting the livelihoods of millions. The severity of the challenge and its impending economic cost has transformed this environmental challenge into a pressing national security concern.

Discussing the particular case of women in Pakistan, women constitute the operational backbone of the country's climate resilience, yet their contributions remain structurally absent from formal security frameworks. In the agricultural sector alone, approximately 68% of women are employed compared to only 28% of men (IWMI, 2024; Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, cited in MHRC, 2022). Pakistan's climate shocks fall disproportionately on the agriculture sector where the floods historically damage nearly 15% of the country's rice crop and 40% of its cotton, and the loss of over 1.2 million livestock per major event (NIH, 2024). In Southern Punjab alone, as per research, 90% of households

face moderate-to-severe water insecurity and 73% face severe food insecurity. These insecurities are borne primarily by women who manage them at the household level (NIH, 2024b). Globally, women bear the primary responsibility for sourcing water, food, and fuel, yet governance structures routinely exclude their knowledge from adaptation planning (Right for Education, 2025).

The governance gap compounds this. Women hold 17% of parliamentary seats yet drove nearly half of the legislative agenda in 2024-25. This is clearly disproportionate and it reveals how much policy energy is extracted from a group that has largely been ignored by the formal structures. Cross-national evidence demonstrates the climate impact of such exclusion; the lack of women agency makes the climate stakes explicit when women hold less political power, governments are measurably less likely to adopt climate legislation.

The 2022 floods made the force-multiplier dynamic concrete. Over 8 million women required urgent health-care; 650,000 pregnant women were directly affected. The documented rates of gender-based violence rose sharply in displacement camps. The disaster did not create these vulnerabilities; it concentrated and accelerated ones already present.

Women's local knowledge and adaptive capacity have been shown to directly reduce flood vulnerability at the community level. Integrating gender-responsive approaches across the full disaster management cycle improves outcomes for entire communities. Excluding women from this cycle is not only an equity failure, but also a security failure.

Pakistan's 2022 National Security Policy, the country's first, marked climate change as one of its primary non-traditional security threats. The policy framed climate change as a threat multiplier affecting water availability, agricultural land, food production, and human development.

The NSP framing of security beyond military paradigms toward human security represents a genuine conceptual advance. But it stops short of identifying who actually manages security at the household and community level. The policy majorly focuses on institutional responses; water governance reform, agricultural modernisation, disaster management infrastructure. The actors who absorb climate shocks before institutions arrive are absent from this framework. In Sindh, Balochistan, and southern Punjab, women manage household water supply, maintain food systems, preserve seed diversity, and coordinate informal disaster response. None of this appears in the policy.

The Labour Force Survey (2024–25) gives this invisibility a number, a statistical face. Only 22.7% of women participate in the formal labour force. And of those who do work, nearly half receive no wages, classified as unpaid family workers. The majority are concentrated in sectors the policy framework treats as background conditions rather than active inputs.

What the Labour Force Survey describes is not just an economic marginalisation. It reflects a policy architecture that treats women's labour, including their daily climate adaptation work, as a resource to be drawn upon without being counted, consulted, or compensated. A security framework that ignores this reality is an incomplete framework, at best.

Objective and Methodology

This policy paper is qualitative in nature and aims to assess the structural and institutional barriers that constrain women's resilience and exclusion from policymaking along with some add on to the emerging scholarship on gendered climate security by examining women's invisible yet critical role in Pakistan's climate adaptation and security landscape. This paper briefly reviews the empirical evidence of gender inequality and institutional constraints and social barriers to women's inclusion in formal decision-making processes and offers practical policy recommendations. This study employs a qualitative policy analysis approach, combining textual analysis of the NSP with secondary data drawn from international and national reports and a review of the climate and gender literature. The secondary data is gleaned from organisations such as the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), UN Women, World Bank and FAO.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework:

Feminist Political Ecology Theory (FPE)

The theory of Feminist Political Ecology examines the relationship between four different pillars i.e. gender, environment, power and resources. The theory is employed in the current study as it effectively positions women as critical agents of ecological sustainability by highlighting their role under four different strands (Elmhirst, 2018) i.e. Gender and Access to resources, Post Humanism, bodies and nature, Ethics of Care, Sufficiency, and collective management of shared resources, De-colonial Feminist Political Ecology.

Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) provides an important framework for understanding the relationship between gender, environment, and power. It puts women as the commoners whose agency in resource management is never fully acknowledged. The theory makes a strong argument that since the access to the natural resources like land, water, and forests etc. is shaped by existing social and economic inequalities, women become increasingly vulnerable. This is also because in processes like privatisation, urbanisation and development, the resource ownership and the decision-making both are led by patriarchal structures which undermine women's agency. This eventually results in environmental and climate policies that totally neglect women's informal and customary rights to resources; despite the crucial role women play in sustaining rural livelihoods in agrarian economies.

The theory also posits that there is an interconnected relationship between humans, nature, and everyday life. FPE emphasises that issues such as climate change, pollution, food insecurity, and environmental degradation all directly affect people's health, wellbeing, and social conditions, particularly amongst the marginalised communities and hence shouldn't be dealt separately. This approach broadens the understanding of climate security by linking environmental risks with gender inequality, health, and social justice.

The framework also highlights the importance of care, community resilience, and local knowledge in responding to environmental crises. It critiques development approaches that prioritise profit and market-based solutions while ignoring unpaid care workers/work and community-based sustainability practices, many of which are carried out by women. At the same time, the colonial perspectives within FPE challenge the dominance of Western knowledge systems and stress the value of Indigenous and local environmental knowledge. (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Sultana, 2011).

International Climate Security Frameworks and Women's Inclusion

Climate change is a global crisis with profoundly unequal impacts. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), more than 3.3 billion people are currently classified as highly vulnerable to its effects, with women and girls disproportionately affected, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Women's equal and meaningful participation in climate-related decision-making is essential to promoting peace, stability, and resilience. As part of its 2023–2025 Strategic Plans, Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) launched its Women and Climate Security Initiative, focusing on the link between climate change and the Women, Peace and Security agenda. This strategic priority aims to support local women leaders to address the gender-climate-security nexus, accelerating their work in climate security across the WPHF portfolio and promoting strategic initiatives in partnership with member states, civil society organisations and the private sector. (Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund [WPHF]).

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 was adopted at the Third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, held from 14 to 18 March 2015 in Japan. The conference represented a unique opportunity for countries: (a) To adopt a concise, focused, forward-looking and action-oriented post 2015 framework for disaster risk reduction. Moreover, the Sendai Framework propagates the idea that disaster risk policy and practices require a more gender perspective and that women should play a leading role in disaster prevention and response. Moreover, the conference called on state parties to ensure that the decision-making data should be broken down in accordance with gender, age and disability, allowing the impact of disasters on women, children, and the elderly and disabled people to be better understood. ((United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2015)

Human-Centric Approach

Human security has emerged as an important and evolving concept within contemporary security studies, shifting the focus of security from the protection of states to the protection of individuals and communities regardless of their gender, ethnicity, language, colour, religion, caste, etc. The new paradigm has challenged the limitations of the state centric paradigm and its unilateral scope of protecting only the state territories. The modern version of human security paradigm encapsulates a number of other elements such as protection from poverty, economic instability, diseases, natural catastrophes, violence and environmental degradation. In short, the human security approach reorients policy from territorial protection toward addressing the vulnerabilities and needs of individuals and communities.

The World Bank's report, 'World Development Report 2000/2001': Attacking Poverty reflects a broader understanding of human wellbeing and vulnerability. The report

identifies empowerment, opportunity, and security as the three central pillars of poverty reduction, emphasising that reducing vulnerability to economic crises, natural disasters, disease, disability, and violence is essential for sustainable human development. In this context, security extends beyond economic protection and incorporates concerns related to conflict prevention, public health, environmental sustainability, and social stability. The report therefore highlights the interconnected nature of development and security, arguing that long-term human wellbeing depends upon resilience against both economic and non-traditional threats (Department for International Development [DFID], 2018).

NSP's Climate Security Architecture

Pakistan took a step in the right direction by focusing more on 'citizen and human security' approach in its NSP 2022-26. This paradigm shifts away from the state centric security approach and offers a more inclusive and broad framing of traditional and non-traditional security threats. The NSP's citizen centric approach views national security as being aligned with the principles of safety, dignity, livelihoods, and social cohesion. However, practical implementation of this policy is still limited primarily because women's agency and needs in the process have been overlooked. Another gap in the policy framework is the institutional and resource centric approach it predominantly takes to finding climate solutions. The climate crisis policy response is heavily relying on managing water resources, introducing agricultural reforms, disaster preparedness and infrastructure development. Such a policy orientation, marginalises community-level actors and overlooks informal systems of resilience which operate outside formal institutions. Decision-making bodies related to climate policy and disaster management are predominantly male-dominated, resulting in policies that do not fully account for gender-specific experiences and contributions. (Asma Khwaja, 2017)

Women's Climate Agency in Pakistan

Evidence from various studies strongly demonstrates that women's agency in climate resilience is manifested across three major domains; i.e. water management, Food Security and Seed Preservation and disaster response. In water scarce areas, fetching water and securing the water supply is primarily women's responsibility. Therefore, during drought season, it is their responsibility to adapt to climate stress through seeking alternative sources or rationing etc. Moreover, in agrarian societies like Pakistan, women are in charge of production of indigenous varieties of seeds that are climate resilient. They also contribute to food security during extreme weather events because of their knowledge of the local agricultural best practices.

During the 2022 and 2025 floods in Pakistan, women were marginalised from decision-making in relief although they

were the primary care-givers, and played a crucial role in disaster relief like evacuations and providing community care. Several official accounts reiterate the fact that before organised relief efforts were initiated, the women served as informal relief network in flood affected areas.

Despite playing such crucial role, women's contribution in agriculture, disaster relief and community care is largely undocumented in the policy framework, leading to a disconnect between ground realities versus strategic planning.

Policy Recommendations

As the National Security Policy of Pakistan reaches its first review, the following policy interventions are proposed for inclusion. These interventions are divided into three timelines — short, medium, and long term — to ensure that Pakistan's climate crisis response is inclusive and representative of women's agency as climate security actors and first responders.

Short Term

1. Revise the NSP to explicitly recognise women as climate security actors. The systematic evaluation of differences between men and women in their different experiences or impacts of climate change must form an integral part of these measures.
2. Ensure that all climate assessments collect gender-disaggregated data. The Sustainable Development Goals as well as the global frameworks for climate change, disaster risk reduction and human rights, already seek states to disaggregate data by sex, age, disability status and other characteristics to monitor the experiences of women and other groups.
3. Strengthen coordination among state agencies to integrate gender indicators into national climate risk frameworks.

Medium Term

4. Establish Climate Working Groups at both national and provincial levels, with the aim to ensure coordination among the state, civil society and international organisations. Their course of action should help identify the gender gaps, promote gender-responsive policies and practices, and develop practical action plans to integrate women into climate security and adaptation frameworks.
5. Pakistan's energy transition presents both an opportunity and a risk from a gendered climate security perspective. The state must ensure that the Just Energy Transition framework is designed and implemented through a gendered lens. Women in rural and peri-urban areas are disproportionately dependent on

traditional fuel sources and are therefore the most directly affected by any transition away from them. A gender-responsive JET framework should ensure women's meaningful representation in energy governance bodies. It should prioritise household and community-level renewable energy access rather than centralised infrastructure alone. The economic opportunities generated by the transition, including renewable infrastructure, skills development, and community energy management, must be explicitly opened to women. Without this, the transition risks replicating the same structural exclusions that the NSP's climate security framework has thus far failed to address.

Long Term

6. Ensure that women's climate agency is acknowledged and that they are well represented in the climate-security governance structures. This requires moving beyond tokenistic inclusion toward institutionalised mechanisms that guarantee women's substantive participation in climate policy design, implementation, and review at all levels of governance.
7. Institutionalise gender-responsive budgeting in climate adaptation programmes, ensuring that financial allocations reflect the gendered distribution of climate vulnerability and the disproportionate burden women bear as informal climate security actors.
8. Formally recognise and document women's indigenous and local knowledge in climate adaptation planning. Women's knowledge of seed preservation, water management, and community-level disaster response constitutes an underutilised national resource. Its exclusion from formal policy frameworks represents both an equity failure and a strategic one.

If implemented in their true spirit, these recommendations will help bridge the gap between policy and practice in Pakistan's NSP by embedding gender considerations into the core of climate security planning.

Conclusion

The Pakistan climate security architecture can only bear fruit when the climate policies are synergised with the realities and stakeholders on ground. The underrepresentation of women in the formal decision-making structures of the state is not just a policy weakness but it also negatively affects the state's ability to respond to climate related national security threats. As the scale of climate crisis widens, resilience in the face of it is not possible only through the traditional approaches focusing on infrastructure and centralised governance but it now demands a more gender specific approach. This approach is fundamental in integrating primary knowledge from the women as the actors on ground in climate crisis. Women's inclusion in the

climate security frameworks can help shift climate policy from a reactive approach to one that is proactive, preventive, community-centred, and sustainable. In this sense, a gender-responsive climate security approach is not simply an additional reform, but an essential step toward building a more inclusive, practical, and forward-looking national security strategy for Pakistan in an age of climate uncertainty.

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