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## Gender Inclusion in a Masculine Bureaucracy: Lived Experiences of Women Civil Servants in Pakistan

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### Abstract



*This article explores whether Pakistan's civil service, often viewed as male-dominated and hierarchical, is becoming more inclusive for women. The study draws on 30 in-depth interviews with women from various service groups, ranks, and career stages. It looks at how these women experience and manage inclusion at work. Rather than focusing only on exclusion and barriers, the women described the civil service as becoming more merit-based, supportive, and enabling. The findings suggest that culture can change, with attitudes about legitimacy, authority, and women's participation shifting. Using feminist institutionalism and gendered organization theory, the article views change as a gradual process. This research contributes to discussions on gender and governance in the Global South, showing that inclusion can increase even in traditionally male institutions. The findings are also relevant for public sector reforms, gender mainstreaming, and efforts to modernize Pakistan's bureaucracy.*

**Keywords:** Gender Inclusion, Bureaucracy, Pakistan Civil Services, Feminist Institutionalism, Women In Governance, Organisational Culture

### Introduction

More women are joining the civil services. More women are joining the civil services, marking a gradual but important shift toward a more diverse workplace. Policies supporting equal opportunity, anti-harassment laws, and gender-sensitive practices have helped drive this change (Government of Pakistan, 2010; UN Women, 2021). These efforts align with global goals like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5), which emphasize gender equality and women's empowerment as key elements of good governance (United Nations, 2015). Still, informal barriers such as gender stereotypes, work-life balance challenges, and limited access to networks continue to make it difficult for women to fully participate and advance in the civil service (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Kabeer, 2012). Changing work environment in bureaucratic institutions. More public organizations are now using gender-responsive policies, encouraging supportive leadership, and valuing diversity (OECD, 2019). These changes show a move from strict administrative cultures to more flexible and inclusive systems. Still, these reforms do not always lead to equal experiences at work. Research shows that even when formal rules support inclusion, the actual workplace culture can lag behind and allow subtle discrimination and bias to continue (Acker, 2006; Ely & Meyerson, 2010). It is important to understand how women deal with these issues to judge how well gender inclusion efforts are working.

Promotion systems and performance evaluations play a crucial role in gender inclusion. Merit-based advancement is essential for an efficient and fair bureaucracy, but hidden biases and social expectations often influence these processes (Castilla & Benard, 2010). Gender-neutral evaluation systems aim to ensure fairness and transparency, yet studies show that women still face challenges in reaching higher positions and leadership roles (World Bank, 2020). In Pakistan, issues such as limited mentoring, job segregation, and slow institutional change make it harder to achieve equal promotion (Haque & Khattak, 2019).

This study examines the civil service as a field that is gradually becoming more inclusive for women. It focuses on two main themes: changes in the work environment toward gender equality and the use of fair promotion and evaluation practices. The research draws on the experiences of women civil servants to connect policy with real-life situations, offering insights into how gender inclusion is managed in Pakistan's male-dominated bureaucracy. Since civil services are central to governance

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and policy implementation, promoting gender inclusion in these institutions is key to achieving broader social justice and development goals. The study highlights the need for ongoing efforts to remove structural barriers and create an environment where merit, not gender, determines professional advancement.

This study addresses a gap by examining how women officers at different ranks, service groups, and career stages experience gender inclusion in Pakistan's civil service. Using feminist institutionalism and gendered organization theory, the research places women's experiences within broader institutional and cultural changes. Through 30 in-depth interviews, the study explores women's views on their work environment, support, promotion, and decision-making roles. Unlike common narratives of exclusion, the data show that women often experience a changing work environment with real inclusion, fair evaluations, and professional independence. These findings help explain how bureaucratic institutions can move toward gender equality through both policies and everyday actions that shape workplace culture.

### **Literature Review**

Gender inclusion in public administration has become a central concern in governance and organisational scholarship, particularly in improving institutional effectiveness and electoral representation. Recent analyses underscore that gender-diverse bureaucracies enhance policy responsiveness and service delivery through incorporating a wider variety of perspectives (OECD, 2023; UNDP, 2021). Despite this recognition, women remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions within civil services across both developed and developing countries, reflecting persistent structural inequalities (World Bank, 2023).

The concept of gender inclusion goes beyond numerical representation to encompass fair participation in decision-making procedures. According to UN Women (2022), although women constitute a substantial share of the public sector workforce globally, their advancement into top-tier leadership roles remains limited due to institutional barriers such as gender bias, job segregation, and limited access to leadership opportunities. These findings align with earlier theoretical perspectives that describe bureaucratic institutions as "gendered organisations," in which norms and practices implicitly favour male dominance (Acker, 2006).

The transformation of civil services into gender-inclusive environments has been driven by both national reforms and international commitments, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). Governments are increasingly adopting gender mainstreaming strategies, flexible work arrangements, and anti-harassment policies to foster inclusive workplaces (OECD, 2023). These initiatives indicate a wider shift toward recognising diversity as an essential element of organisational performance and governance.

Recent research indicates that gender-responsive policies, such as guidance programs and leadership training, significantly improve women's professional experiences and growth prospects (UN DESA, 2022). However, literature highlights a gap between policy creation and implementation. Ely and Meyerson (2010) argue that while formal policies can promote equality, informal cultures often perpetuate subtle discrimination, such as exclusion from networks and decision-making spaces.

In developing countries like Pakistan, gender inclusion depends on cultural norms and institutional limits. Studies report that women in public administration face challenges in work-life balance, social expectations, and little support (Haque & Khattak, 2019). While gender-sensitive workplace policies exist, they often fail due to weak enforcement and ingrained attitudes (Bari, 2010).

Meritocracy is essential for civil service. Still, studies find that promotion and evaluation processes are not always gender-neutral. Castilla and Benard (2010) note the 'paradox of meritocracy': groups that highlight merit may unintentionally reinforce gender bias. Recent research shows women often get lower performance ratings and fewer promotions than men, even when their qualifications are similar (World Bank, 2023).

Gender-neutral evaluation systems aim to eliminate discrimination by standardizing performance criteria and securing transparency. However, implicit biases and organizational dynamics persist to influence decision making processes. Eagly and Carli (2007) note that women leaders commonly face higher expectations and greater scrutiny, which might hinder their advancement within bureaucratic hierarchies. Furthermore, limited availability of mentorship and professional networks restricts women's career progression, strengthening gender disparities in leadership positions (UN Women, 2022).

In the context of Pakistan, research shows that while formal policies support equal promotion, implementation gaps continue due to institutional inertia and socio-cultural barriers (Haq, 2018). Women civil servants frequently face difficulties in accessing influential roles and policy-making positions, demonstrating the need for more robust accountability mechanisms and institutional reforms.

The literature consistently identifies several structural and cultural barriers that impede gender inclusion in civil services. These include occupational segregation, gender stereotypes, and limited representation in leadership roles (Acker, 2006; OECD, 2023). Women are often concentrated in lower- and mid-level positions, which restricts their influence on policy formulation and organizational decision-making.

At the same time, emerging research highlights opportunities for advancing gender inclusion through targeted interventions. Capacity-building initiatives, leadership development programs, and gender-responsive governance frameworks have shown potential in promoting women's participation in public administration (UN DESA, 2022). Additionally, digital transformation and innovation in governance provide new avenues for enhancing inclusivity, although these must be carefully managed to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities.

Importantly, scholars emphasize the need to move beyond descriptive representation toward substantive inclusion. This involves ensuring that women not only occupy positions within civil services but also actively participate in shaping policies and institutional practices (Kabeer, 2012). Achieving this requires a comprehensive approach that integrates policy reforms, organizational change, and continuous monitoring of gender outcomes.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore women's experiences in the civil services of Pakistan. Grounded in an interpretivist epistemological framework, the research seeks to understand how gendered institutional dynamics are perceived, experienced, and negotiated in everyday bureaucratic practice. A phenomenological approach was employed to capture the subjective meanings participants attach to their professional roles and organizational environments. Data were collected through 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women civil servants selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity across service groups, ranks, and career stages. This variation enabled the study to capture a wide range of perspectives and to examine both generational and hierarchical differences in experiences of inclusion. Interviews were conducted in confidential settings in person before being transcribed for analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving an iterative process of coding, categorization, and interpretation. Initial open coding identified recurring patterns, which were subsequently organized into broader analytical themes reflecting dimensions of gender inclusion, including professional agency, institutional support, and evolving bureaucratic norms. The analysis was both inductive and theoretically informed, drawing on feminist institutionalism and gendered organization theory to interpret patterns of continuity and change within the institutional context. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality, given the sensitivity of discussing workplace experiences within hierarchical state institutions. While the qualitative nature of the study limits statistical generalizability, it enables a rich, contextually grounded understanding of institutional transformation and women's lived experiences within Pakistan's civil services.

### **Findings**

The analysis of qualitative interviews reveals a shifting landscape of gender inclusion within Pakistan's civil services. Contrary to dominant narratives that emphasize exclusion and systemic marginalization, participants described an institutional environment undergoing gradual transformation. Two central themes emerged from the data: (1) an evolving work environment toward gender parity, and (2) equal promotion and gender-neutral evaluation. Together, these themes highlight how bureaucratic norms and practices are adapting in ways that increasingly support women's professional participation and advancement.

#### **Theme 1: Evolving Work Environment Toward Gender Parity**

A key finding of this study is the perception among women civil servants that the bureaucratic work environment is progressively moving toward greater gender parity. Participants across service groups and career stages emphasized that, while the civil services have historically been male-dominated, there is a noticeable shift toward inclusivity in everyday organizational practices. Respondents

frequently contrasted current experiences with those of earlier generations, noting that institutional attitudes toward women have become more supportive and less constrained by traditional gender expectations.

This evolving work environment is reflected in routine professional interactions, where women reported being treated as competent colleagues rather than being defined primarily by their gender. Many participants highlighted that workplace culture has become more accommodating, with reduced instances of overt bias and greater recognition of women's contributions. Importantly, this shift was not solely attributed to formal gender policies but also to broader socio-cultural changes and the increasing presence of women within the bureaucracy itself.

This study evident that the increasing concentration of women in civil services reflects a positive shift toward gender inclusion in public administration. Since the last 10 years, more women have been entering civil services, due to improved access to education, awareness of career opportunities, and changing societal attitudes. The structured and rule-based nature of bureaucracy attracted many women as it offers job security, defined career progression, and a platform to contribute implicitly to governance and depict their competence. One respondent confirmed this by describing her view on ongoing changes in work environment.

*“Working environment is gradually proceeding towards gender less due to more participation of women in this job. I witnessed that me and my female colleagues have greeter acceptability and adjustability with experience. It is due to the changes in societal culture which advocate changes at work place. I receive the same respect and authority as my male colleagues (Iqra).”*

Recently, women increasingly pass the CSS exam with distinction, and recruited to powerful positions like Assistant Commissioners, Secretaries, and Foreign Service Officers. Civil service is considered a noble and respectable profession in Pakistani society. For women, a government job especially through CSS is often seen as a symbol of honour and prestige for the whole family. Parents are increasingly supportive due to success stories of female officers and awareness of the opportunities civil service offers. A female administrator highlighted the changing dynamics of work environment and social response.

*“My mother wants to study but she could not due to lack of opportunities. She is very intelligent and she imparted very sound knowledge in me. I am witnessing social change at work place; mindset of people is changing; they are accepting women in administration. I witnessed change in govt policy and public response. My mother-in-law is a strong lady so I became a strong lady at work place when my daughters will see me as strong lady at work place, they will become strong and high aspirants. When males witness different women credibility at work place, they automatically respect and regard women in administration (Maheen).”*

The findings suggest that institutional culture is not fixed but is continuously reshaped through everyday practices and interactions. In line with feminist institutionalist perspectives, these changes can be understood as gradual processes of adaptation, where informal norms evolve alongside formal structures. The growing normalization of women's presence within the civil services indicates a reconfiguration of gendered expectations, contributing to a more inclusive organizational environment.

### **Theme 2: Equal Promotion and Gender-Neutral Evaluation**

Another significant theme emerging from the data is the perception of fairness and meritocracy in promotion and evaluation processes. A majority of participants expressed confidence in institutional mechanisms governing career progression, emphasizing that performance, rather than gender, is the primary criterion for advancement. This perception of gender-neutral evaluation was consistently reported across different ranks, suggesting a broad-based trust in the system's procedural integrity.

Equal promotion opportunities in the civil services of Pakistan have become a critical aspect of the broader debate on fairness, meritocracy, and gender equality within public institutions. As one of the most prestigious and influential career paths in the country, the civil service plays a vital role in shaping national policies and administrative decisions. While efforts have been made to ensure that recruitment into the civil services is merit-based. Recent developments suggest some progress in creating a more level playing field, with women increasingly promoted to higher ranks.

A research participant with 15 years of experience narrated her view on equal promotion opportunities for female.

*“I am judged on the basis of my performance. Our organizational structure is good; there are clear rules and procedures for the officer’s evaluation. This is quite neutral and there is no gender discrimination in the department to measure performance (Zara).”*

In recent years, the discourse surrounding gender equality in Pakistan has increasingly focused on the representation and advancement of women in public institutions, particularly within the bureaucracy. Traditionally a male-dominated sphere, the Pakistani civil service has witnessed a gradual yet significant transformation, offering more equitable opportunities for women to escalate through the grades. This shift reflects broader societal and cultural changes and policy reforms aimed at promoting inclusivity and meritocracy. The growing presence of women in senior bureaucratic roles not only challenges long-standing gender norms but also underscores the importance of diversity in governance.

Another female depicted equal promotion opportunities for both males and females, *Promotion opportunities are equal and based on merit rather than gender. Whoever fulfil the criteria, requirement and competence is promoted irrespective of gender. Service rules and structure justify equal promotion criteria for all. I am evaluated fairly for promotion from my seniors (Hina).”*

Fair evaluation for promotion in the bureaucracy of Pakistan is a foundation of ensuring efficiency, transparency, and trust in public administration. The civil service, as the backbone of governance, relies on a merit-based system to identify and reward capable officers. The promotion criteria are formally structured around performance, irrespective of gender. In recent years, there has been increasing emphasis on reforming the evaluation process to ensure it reflects fairness, objectivity, and equal opportunity particularly for women and minority groups. Analyzing the mechanisms and recent developments in promotion evaluations offers a deeper understanding of the progress in Pakistan’s bureaucratic system.

Almost all (29 out of 30) women said they get the same shot at promotions as men. The research shows that women working for the Pakistani government are starting to feel like they have as good a chance at moving up as the guys do. This feeling points to things getting better in the government and shows progress toward equal opportunity. This might be because of better hiring practices, fair evaluations, and more acceptance of women as leaders. The results show a possible change in Pakistan's government culture. But, we need to keep an eye on things and offer support to make absolutely sure this feeling of equality turns into the real thing. The fact that women in the civil service feel like they have equal chance to get ahead shows a big change in what has traditionally been a men's world. This finding says that recent changes might be making a real difference in how women experience getting ahead at work. As more women join the government and take on mid- to high-level jobs, the rules are changing. More women in leadership positions affect both how things are done and workplace culture, making equal opportunity more realistic.

Participants noted that evaluation systems have become increasingly standardized and transparent, limiting the influence of subjective or discriminatory practices. Many respondents highlighted that their professional achievements are recognized on par with those of their male counterparts, and that opportunities for advancement are accessible based on merit. This sense of fairness was particularly evident among mid-career and senior officers, who viewed the system as enabling rather than restrictive.

While some participants acknowledged the persistence of subtle biases in informal interactions, these were not seen as significantly affecting formal promotion outcomes. Instead, the dominant narrative emphasized equal opportunity and institutional accountability. These findings challenge conventional assumptions of systemic gender discrimination by demonstrating the presence of mechanisms that support equitable career progression.

From a theoretical standpoint, this theme reflects processes of institutional alignment with meritocratic principles, where formal procedures increasingly reinforce gender neutrality. It also illustrates how bureaucratic systems can evolve to accommodate changing expectations of fairness and inclusion, even within historically patriarchal contexts.

Taken together, these themes indicate that Pakistan’s civil services are experiencing gradual yet meaningful shifts toward gender inclusion. The evolving work environment and the perception of gender-neutral evaluation mechanisms suggest that institutional culture is adapting in ways that support women’s participation and advancement. While these changes do not imply the complete

absence of gendered challenges, they point toward a more dynamic and responsive bureaucratic system.

These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender and bureaucracy by highlighting processes of transformation rather than static patterns of exclusion. They underscore the importance of examining lived experiences to capture how institutional change is enacted and perceived in practice.

### **Discussion**

This study set out to examine whether Pakistan's civil services traditionally conceptualized as masculine and hierarchical institutions are undergoing processes of gendered transformation. The findings contribute to ongoing sociological debates by challenging purely exclusionary accounts of bureaucracy and instead highlighting evidence of gradual institutional adaptation. While earlier scholarship has emphasized persistent gender inequalities in public institutions, the experiences of women civil servants in this study suggest that bureaucratic cultures are more dynamic and open to change than previously assumed.

The theme of an evolving work environment toward gender parity can be understood through the lens of gendered organization theory. According to Joan Acker (1990), organizations are not gender-neutral but are structured around implicit masculine norms that privilege male career trajectories and authority. However, the findings of this study indicate that such norms are not fixed. Instead, participants reported shifting workplace cultures characterized by greater acceptance, reduced overt bias, and increasing normalization of women's professional presence. This suggests that gendered organizational structures may be subject to gradual reinterpretation rather than static reproduction.

These findings are consistent with feminist institutionalist perspectives, which emphasise that institutions are continuously shaped through the interaction of formal rules and informal practices. Scholars such as Fiona Mackay, Meryl Kenny, and Louise Chappell (2010) argue that institutional change often occurs incrementally through processes of layering, adaptation, and reinterpretation. The evidence from this study supports this view, showing that gender inclusion in Pakistan's civil services is emerging through everyday practices and evolving norms rather than through abrupt structural reform.

The second major theme equal promotion and gender-neutral evaluation further complicates dominant narratives of bureaucratic inequality. Participants widely perceived promotion systems as increasingly merit-based and transparent. This perception aligns with Weberian principles of bureaucracy, which emphasise rational-legal authority and meritocratic advancement (Max Weber, 1978). While feminist critiques have long argued that meritocracy often masks gendered inequalities in practice (Acker, 1990), the findings of this study suggest that bureaucratic evaluation systems may be undergoing partial realignment toward more standardised and equitable procedures.

However, this does not necessarily imply the absence of gendered dynamics. As Raewyn Connell (2005) argues, organisational authority is still shaped by hegemonic masculinity, which can operate subtly through informal norms even when formal rules appear neutral. Similarly, research in developing country contexts has shown that formal equality often coexists with informal hierarchies that shape access to opportunities (Anne Marie Goetz, 1997; Shirin M. Rai, 2011). In this study, while participants emphasized fairness in promotion processes, the possibility of subtle, informal biases cannot be fully dismissed.

Importantly, the findings suggest that Pakistan's civil services should not be understood as static institutions but rather as evolving organizational systems shaped by broader socio-political and cultural transformations. Increased female participation, expanding educational opportunities, and policy reforms have contributed to reshaping institutional expectations and redefining professional legitimacy. These changes reflect what feminist institutionalists describe as gradual institutional change, where norms evolve through cumulative shifts in behavior and practice rather than through formal redesign alone (Mackay et al., 2010).

Moreover, the study contributes to a growing body of literature that emphasizes agency and lived experience in understanding gender and bureaucracy. Rather than positioning women solely as passive subjects of structural inequality, the findings highlight how women civil servants actively interpret, negotiate, and participate in reshaping institutional environments. This aligns with contemporary feminist scholarship that calls for more nuanced analyses of gendered institutions in the

Global South, moving beyond deficit-based frameworks toward more process-oriented understandings of change (Bari, 2000; Shaheed, 2010).

In theoretical terms, the study advances feminist institutionalism by demonstrating how institutional transformation is perceived from within by actors embedded in bureaucratic systems. It shows that change is not only structural but also experiential, reflected in how individuals perceive fairness, opportunity, and inclusion in their everyday professional lives. This contributes to bridging the gap between macro-level institutional analysis and micro-level lived experience.

Overall, the discussion suggests that while gendered inequalities have historically shaped bureaucratic institutions, Pakistan's civil services are increasingly characterized by processes of adaptation and partial transformation. These findings call for a more nuanced analytical approach that recognizes both continuity and change in gendered institutions.

### **Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

This study examined gender inclusion within Pakistan's civil services by focusing on the lived experiences of women officers across different ranks, service groups, and career stages. Contrary to dominant narratives that emphasize persistent exclusion and structural marginalization, the findings suggest that the bureaucratic environment is undergoing gradual yet meaningful transformation. Participants described an evolving institutional culture characterized by increasing gender parity, more transparent and merit-based evaluation systems, and expanding opportunities for professional autonomy.

The study demonstrates that Pakistan's civil services cannot be understood as static or uniformly exclusionary institutions. Instead, they reflect dynamic organisational spaces where formal rules of meritocracy increasingly intersect with changing informal norms and social expectations. While gendered hierarchies have historically shaped bureaucratic structures, the evidence from this research indicates that these structures are being incrementally reshaped through everyday practices, institutional learning, and the growing presence of women in decision-making roles.

Theoretically, the study contributes to feminist institutionalism and gendered organisation theory by illustrating how institutional change is experienced from within. It highlights that transformation is not necessarily linear or complete but occurs through gradual shifts in norms, perceptions, and organisational practices. Women civil servants are not merely passive recipients of institutional structures; rather, they actively interpret, negotiate, and help reshape bureaucratic culture.

At the same time, the study acknowledges that this transformation is uneven and incomplete. While many participants reported experiences of inclusion and fairness, subtle gendered dynamics may still persist within informal networks and organisational interactions. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of institutional adaptation rather than full gender equality.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Based on the findings, several policy implications emerge for strengthening gender inclusion in Pakistan's civil services. First, institutional mechanisms that promote merit-based recruitment and promotion should be further strengthened through greater transparency and accountability. This will help consolidate perceptions of fairness and reduce the potential influence of informal biases.

Second, targeted gender sensitisation programs should be implemented across all levels of the bureaucracy to ensure that evolving norms of inclusion are sustained and deepened. Such training can help address subtle cultural biases that may persist despite formal equality.

Third, mentorship and leadership development programs for women officers should be institutionalised to support career progression and enhance representation in senior decision-making roles. Strengthening professional networks can further facilitate long-term inclusion.

Finally, continuous monitoring and gender-disaggregated evaluation of institutional practices should be integrated into public sector reform strategies. This would ensure that gender inclusion is not only a policy objective but also a measurable and accountable institutional outcome.

In conclusion, this study highlights that gender inclusion in Pakistan's civil services is best understood as an ongoing process of institutional transformation rather than a fixed or fully achieved condition. Recognising and supporting this evolving trajectory is essential for advancing equitable governance and strengthening the effectiveness of public institutions in Pakistan.

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