



EMPOWERING PAKISTANI WOMEN THROUGH THE CPEC PROJECT: EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES AND ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a project linking China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative with Pakistan's economic development plans. The CPEC project is anticipated to revolutionize Pakistan's economy by boosting industrial growth, resolving energy challenges, enhancing regional connectivity, bridging the infrastructure gap, and improving societal dimensions. This study explores how this ambitious project represents a pivotal chance with transformative potential for empowering Pakistani women through enhanced economic prospects and social advancement. Women, who constitute 119 million in Pakistan, according to the Population Census 2023, can forge significant pathways for economic participation across various sectors such as manufacturing, services, and infrastructure development, capitalizing on opportunities facilitated by CPEC. Using the feminist theoretical framework, this research paper examines the potential impact of CPEC on the economic participation, skills development, entrepreneurship, and leadership roles of Pakistani women. Employing an explorative approach, the paper evaluates both the opportunities and challenges Pakistani women encounter in accessing and benefiting from the plans related to the CPEC. The findings underscore the importance of inclusive practices to maximize women's empowerment, advocate for gender-responsive policies, and ensure their equitable participation in Pakistan's socio-economic progress accelerated by CPEC. The study concludes with recommendations for policy and practice to achieve sustainable development outcomes and promote gender equality through the CPEC initiative.

Keywords: China, Economic Development, Pakistan, Regional Connectivity, Women Empowerment

Introduction

China's massive Belt and Road Initiative aims to develop infrastructure, strengthen trade networks,



and redefine the global production chain. As of now, this megaproject has engaged 150 countries and 30 international organizations, signaling its broad global influence (Rafi, 2023). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is considered one of the flagship projects of the BRI. As President Xi Jinping states, CPEC is located where the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and the Silk Road Economic Belt meet. This corridor will run about 2700 km from China to Pakistan, and its aim is to connect China's northwestern region of Xinjiang to the Gwadar Port of Pakistan ("China Pakistan Economic Corridor," n.d.). The corridor's connectivity with Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East will also help to shape the entire region. The projects under CPEC include the road networks, rails, and optical fiber connectivity; the development of Gwadar Port; Special Economic Zones (SEZs); and the energy corridor (Tahir & Wagan, 2022). This economic corridor has been positioned as a cornerstone for the economic revival of Pakistan. With promises of extensive energy projects, infrastructure development, trade connectivity, and industrial cooperation, this game-changing project is expected to redefine the socio-economic landscape of Pakistan. While the overarching benefits of this economic corridor are often highlighted in terms of infrastructure and economic growth, there is growing recognition of its impact on several social dimensions, including women's empowerment.

In Pakistan, women encounter a multitude of barriers to economic participation, including limited employment opportunities, socio-economic constraints, restricted access to education, insufficient vocational training, and cultural norms. These challenges significantly impact their social status and economic independence, contributing to a broader issue of gender inequality. The barriers are particularly pronounced in underdeveloped and rural areas, where economic constraints, infrastructural deficits, and traditional gender roles further limit women's participation in the labor market. The CPEC, a major economic initiative, has the potential to address these issues by introducing extensive development projects across the country. CPEC encompasses several components that could provide significant opportunities for women's economic empowerment through job creation, better access to educational resources, and enhanced vocational training programs.

Despite the broad promise of CPEC, there remains a critical need to understand its specific impact on women's empowerment and gender equality. Preliminary studies suggest that while CPEC could lead to improved access to educational resources and increased job opportunities, the extent to which these benefits reach women, particularly in marginalized communities, is uncertain. Moreover, there is a need to assess how CPEC's projects influence women's economic roles, including their skill development, employment prospects, and overall socio-economic status. The development of vocational and educational training facilities as part of CPEC could play a crucial role in equipping women with the skills necessary to take advantage of emerging economic opportunities. This could be training programs specifically tailored to women in sectors such as manufacturing, logistics, and services, which are central to CPEC's framework. Furthermore, understanding how CPEC projects impact women's access to resources and decision-making power within their households and communities is essential for assessing the overall effectiveness



of these initiatives in promoting gender equality.

This research aims to explore the multifaceted impact of CPEC on women's empowerment in Pakistan. It investigates how CPEC-related projects contribute to enhancing women's economic participation, identify the challenges faced by women in accessing the opportunities, and propose strategies for optimizing the benefits of CPEC to foster gender equality and sustainable development. By providing a detailed analysis of CPEC's effects on women's employment, education, and skill development, this study seeks to offer actionable insights for stakeholders and policymakers to ensure the benefits of CPEC are equitably distributed and contribute to the broader goal of gender parity in Pakistan's economic landscape.

Women's Participation in Various Sectors of Pakistan

According to the 2023 Census, Pakistan's population has reached approximately 241.49 million, with women continuing to make up 119 million, a significant portion ("Pakistan Bureau of Statistics," 2023). Women in Pakistan face substantial challenges in economic participation, with limited access to training, education, and employment opportunities. Despite these challenges, women actively participate in various sectors such as education, healthcare, agriculture and industry. As of the latest available data, nearly 22.5% of women in Pakistan are part of the labor force. This statistic highlights the significant gender gap in economic participation, as the overall labor force participation rate is much higher for men. Their representation in managerial and technical positions remains low, highlighting the need for more focused policies and initiatives to empower women and enhance their contribution to the country's economy.

In terms of economic participation, women are predominantly involved in informal sectors such as domestic work and agriculture. Where their contributions are often undervalued and unrecognized. Educational attainment among women has improved over the years, but disparities still exist, especially in rural areas where access to vocational training and quality education is limited. In Pakistan, women also face challenges related to legal rights, healthcare access, and societal norms that often restrict their mobility and decision-making power. Addressing these issues through targeted policies and initiatives is essential for enhancing women's roles in various sectors and contributing to the country's overall development.

CPEC: A Game Changer Project for Pakistan

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is a major development initiative that is part of China's broader Belt and Road Initiative. It is designed to facilitate trade and investment, not only between the two countries but also in the broader region. CPEC's primary objectives include the establishment of energy projects to address Pakistan's chronic energy shortages, the development of transportation infrastructure, and the creation of SEZs to promote industrial growth. A significant portion of CPEC's investment is directed towards energy projects, including hydro, coal, and renewable energy plants. These projects aim to generate over 17,000 megawatts of electricity, addressing Pakistan's energy crisis and providing a reliable power supply to households



and industries. This corridor involves the construction of highways, pipelines, and railways (Rashid, 2020; Haider, 2019). The most prominent infrastructure project is the development of Gwadar Port, which is strategically located at the mouth of the Persian Gulf and serves as a key node in the corridor. The port is expected to become a major hub for trade between the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. SEZs are being established along the corridor to attract investment in manufacturing and other industries. These zones are intended to promote technology transfer, stimulate industrial growth, and create jobs in Pakistan. The corridor is expected to boost Pakistan's economic growth, improve the country's infrastructure, and reduce unemployment.

CPEC is often referred to as a game-changer for Pakistan due to its potential to significantly transform the country's economy. The initiative is expected to create over 2.3 million jobs by 2030 and contribute to an estimated 2-2.5% annual increase in Pakistan's GDP. The development of infrastructure and energy projects under CPEC is also expected to reduce the cost of doing business in Pakistan, making the country more attractive to both foreign and domestic investors. While CPEC is projected to bring substantial economic benefits, it also raises several environmental and social concerns. The construction of large infrastructure projects has led to the displacement of local communities, particularly in the Gwadar region. There are also concerns about the environmental impact of coal-based energy projects, which could contribute to air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions (Ali, 2021). CPEC has significant geopolitical implications, as it strengthens the strategic partnership between Pakistan and China. It provides China with access to the Arabian Sea, reducing its dependence on the Strait of Malacca for energy imports. For Pakistan, CPEC is seen as a way to bolster its economy and enhance its regional influence. However, CPEC has also raised concern among other regional powers, particularly India, which views the corridor as a threat to its own strategic interests (Khan, 2021). The development of Gwadar Port, in particular, has heightened tensions in the region, as it is located near the Strait of Hormuz, a critical chokepoint for global oil shipments.

Research Questions

1. How can the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) create opportunities for Pakistani women in different sectors?
2. What barriers prevent Pakistani women from fully participating in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)-related initiatives?
3. How can the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) improve vocational and educational training for Pakistani women to enhance their economic empowerment?
4. What policies can be implemented within the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) framework to enhance Pakistani women's participation in different sectors?

Research Objectives

1. To identify design plans within the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) industrial zones that support Pakistani women's small businesses and entrepreneurship.



2. To assess how the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) can influence social norms that restrict Pakistani women's economic participation.
3. To explore how Pakistani local communities can ensure the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects benefits for women in different sectors.
4. To suggest measures within the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to safeguard the rights and safety of Pakistani women.

Literature Review

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is a mega project under China's One Belt One Road initiative, aimed at enhancing trade, infrastructure, and industrial and economic ties between Pakistan and China. While this economic project promises significant economic benefits, the CPEC's impacts on gender dynamics, particularly women's empowerment, remain underexplored. This literature review looks at existing studies on the challenges and potential opportunities CPEC presents for Pakistani women, focusing on social inclusion, gender equality, and economic empowerment.

In Pakistan, women are underserved in education, health care, and employment and face numerous challenges. Noshaba Aziza et al. (2023) highlight that infrastructure projects of CPEC are perceived to significantly enhance women's status by improving living standards and providing employment opportunities. A study focusing on women's perception in Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK) found that developmental activities induced by CPEC are expected to boost women's status and enable them to make substantial contributions to environmental improvement. This study also indicates that Pakistani women anticipate that CPEC-related developments will also enhance their self-confidence and decision-making power, thereby contributing to their empowerment. CPEC has significantly influenced the roles of women in Pakistan's agriculture sector.

Ahmad Saad, Mariah Ijaz, Muhammad Usman Asghar, & Liu Yamin (2020)'s study explores that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor helps China and Pakistan prosper economically. The former benefited from the development of internal infrastructure, which improved the overall quality of life in the community. Women in both urban and rural areas of Pakistan are also getting benefits from these policies. The benefits of this economic corridor are not isolated to any single region but are felt throughout Pakistan, particularly as a form of empowerment for women. This economic corridor effect on women in the agriculture sector. Komal Niazi et al. (2019)'s study investigates the effects of the Sahiwal Coal Power Plant project on women in agriculture in Qadirabad, Punjab. They explore that the power plant's construction on private agricultural land has shifted female labor from farming to tailoring and domestic service. This power project has helped to bring changes in women's occupation roles, lifestyles, and social dynamics. It also has created many economic opportunities for women and improved their social status.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has positively influenced the social and economic conditions of women in the underserved areas of Pakistan. Jai Kumar et al. (2022) describe that



the CPEC project has impacted women's empowerment in the Thar region of Pakistan. By analyzing data from 306 Thar residents, they explore that there is a significant improvement in women's quality of life due to increased educational facilities, employment opportunities, and skill enhancement programs. The findings suggest that there is a need for continued investment in education, skill development programs, and employment within the CPEC projects to sustain these benefits. The role of the trained women workforce in the CPEC has been a subject of growing interest, with studies highlighting the gender gap in labor market participation. Shamaila et al. (2018) examine the challenges faced by Pakistani women in accessing skill development opportunities despite the economic prospects created by CPEC. They emphasize that although CPEC introduces new avenues for women's employment, particularly in infrastructure projects, there remains a significant gap in training and technical education for women. This gap hinders their ability to fully benefit from the employment opportunities CPEC offers. The researchers argue for targeted policy interventions to provide women with the necessary vocational training, thereby empowering them to participate in the economic development fostered by CPEC. Addressing this gender disparity is essential for ensuring that women can actively contribute to Pakistan's growth through CPEC initiatives.

In her chapter titled "China-Pakistan Relations, Gender, and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," Eram Ashraf (2022) provides a critical view of gender dynamics with this economic corridor, highlighting the significant underrepresentation of women in Pakistan and China relations. By analyzing awards given to Pakistanis, she highlights a stark gender gap, with only 4 out of 99 CPEC-related awards going to Pakistani women. This study emphasizes the need for greater inclusivity in CPEC and calls attention to the importance of integrating gender-sensitive approaches in international development initiatives. While the CPEC project offers substantial benefits, including industrial cooperation, economic opportunities, and infrastructure development, it also presents some challenges for Pakistani women. Issues such as gender inequality and human trafficking highlight the darker side of these large-scale initiatives, revealing that despite their potential to empower women, particularly Pakistani women, they also exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and risks.

Madiha Afzal (2022), in her analysis of economic initiatives and human rights, explores how CPEC can exacerbate vulnerabilities. In 2019, Pakistani media revealed cases of women trafficked under the guise of marriage to Chinese men. Despite arrest, the issue was suppressed to preserve economic ties with China, highlighting both the broader implications of China's demographic imbalance and the systemic human rights violation faced by Pakistani women. In their study, Tahir & Wagan (2022) explore the potential of the CPEC to empower women and reduce gender disparities in Pakistan. They argue that CPEC offers many opportunities for women's economic inclusion, particularly through job creation and infrastructure projects. However, they also highlight structural challenges such as inadequate access to education, vocational training, and workplace opportunities, which hinder women's active participation. The study underscores the importance of policy reforms and targeted initiatives to bridge the gender gap and ensure equitable



benefits from CPEC projects.

Research Methodology

The research study “Empowering Pakistani Women through CPEC Project: Exploring Opportunities and Addressing Challenges” delves into the transformative impact of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on the socio-economic empowerment of women in Pakistan. An exploratory, qualitative approach has been adopted, utilizing secondary sources to investigate the impact of the CPEC on women’s empowerment in Pakistan. Through an in-depth analysis of existing literature, case studies, and policy documents, the research explores how CPEC projects have opened new avenues for women’s employment, skill development, and participation in the economy. The study highlights the potential of CPEC to transform gender dynamics in Pakistan by providing opportunities for women, particularly in underdeveloped regions, while also addressing the challenges posed by traditional societal norms and limited access to resources. The findings suggest that while CPEC offers significant potential for enhancing women’s roles in society, there is a need for targeted policies and interventions to ensure that these benefits are equitably distributed and that the unique challenges faced by women are effectively addressed.

Theoretical Framework

For the study of “Empowering Pakistani Women through the CPEC Project: Exploring Opportunities and Addressing Challenges,” Feminist theory is the most relevant theoretical framework. Feminist theory examines cultural values, social structures, and power dynamics from a gender perspective, focusing on how these relevant factors perpetuate gender inequalities. This theory emphasizes the need to understand the ways in which societal systems disadvantage women. Feminist theory provides a critical lens for exploring how the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) affects women by focusing on gender inequalities and power dynamics within development processes. This theory helps to assess whether the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor initiatives address existing gender disparities, evaluating how the project’s design and implementation impact women’s access to economic opportunities, resources, and decision-making power. Using this theoretical framework, one can analyze the effectiveness of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in promoting gender equality, identify structural barriers that limit the participation of women in various sectors, and ensure that women’s perspectives and needs are integrated into the project’s policies and outcomes.

Findings and Discussion

CPEC’s massive scope includes infrastructure projects, special economic zones, and energy production, which could fundamentally alter employment patterns and economic opportunities in Pakistan. Given that women in Pakistan face substantial barriers to economic participation, CPEC could offer both a challenge and an opportunity for enhancing their socio-economic status.

Employment and Economic Participation

CPEC has the potential to generate substantial employment opportunities across various sectors in



Pakistan, including manufacturing, energy, and infrastructure. These new job opportunities are particularly significant for women, who historically have faced barriers to economic participation. The influx of investments and development activities associated with CPEC is expected to create diverse job roles, which could help bridge the gender gap in the workforce. CPEC-related projects are anticipated to create new jobs for women in industry and construction, sectors traditionally dominated by men (Ashraf, 2022). The development of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) could provide women with opportunities to start and extend businesses, benefiting from improved infrastructure and market access (Ali & Rizvi, 2021).

The expansion of job opportunities through CPEC can lead to significant improvement in women's economic participation. However, the actual impact will depend on the inclusivity of the hiring practices and the accessibility of these jobs to women. For instance, while women may benefit from new employment opportunities, they may still face challenges related to workplace safety and mobility, which could limit their full participation (Mahmood & Jafri, 2022). Ensuring that women have equal access to these opportunities will require targeted policies and support systems.

Educational and Skills Development

CPEC's emphasis on industrial and infrastructural development includes investments in education and vocational training programs. These initiatives are crucial for enhancing women's skills and qualifications, thereby increasing their employability. Investment in vocational training can enhance women's skills, making them more competitive in emerging job markets (Ashraf, 2022). Increased funding for education, particularly for women, can help improve their educational attainment and career prospects (Khan, 2023). Education and skills development are essential for leveraging the opportunities created by CPEC; programs designed to enhance women's skills can help close the gender gap in various sectors. However, access to these programs must be equitable, with consideration for women's unique needs and challenges, such as balancing family and work responsibilities (Farooq, 2023). Ensuring that training and educational opportunities are accessible to all women, including those in underserved or remote areas, is crucial for minimizing the benefits of CPEC.

Social and Cultural Shifts

CPEC has the potential to influence social norms and cultural attitudes towards women's role in the economy. Increased visibility of women in the workforce and the potential for policy changes could foster a more supportive environment for gender equality. The high-profile nature of the CPEC project can challenge traditional gender norms and promote the visibility of women in professional roles (Ali & Rizvi, 2021). Economic development from CPEC might influence policy reforms that support women's rights (Shah, 2024). The cultural and social impact of CPEC could contribute to shifting perceptions of women's role in society. However, resistance to change and entrenched cultural norms may pose significant challenges (Mahmood & Jafri, 2022). Addressing these cultural barriers is essential for ensuring that the potential social benefits of CPEC are realized. Engaging stakeholders and community leaders in advocating for gender equality can



support a more inclusive environment.

Challenges to Accessing Opportunities

Despite the potential benefits, several challenges may hinder women's ability to fully engage with the opportunities presented by CPEC. These include cultural resistance, structural barriers, and economic disparities. Structural and intutional barriers may prevent women from accessing employment and training opportunities (Farooq, 2023). Traditional attitudes towards women working outside the home can impede their participation in new job markets (Shah, 2024). Economic inequalities may exacerbate existing disparities, leaving women in marginalized communities at a disadvantage (Khan, 2023). Overcoming these challenges will require comprehensive strategies that address both cultural and structural barriers. Policies that promote equal access to opportunities, support for women in balancing family and work, and efforts to challenge and change cultural norms will be essential for maximizing the benefits of CPEC for women. Collective efforts between the private, government sector, and civil society are needed to create an environment where women can thrive in the context of CPEC's development (Ashraf, 2022; Mahmood & Jafri, 2022).

Impact on Rural Women

CPEC's infrastructure projects often focus on underdeveloped and rural areas, which can have a direct impact on rural women, who typically face more pronounced social and economic challenges compared to their urban counterparts. Improved infrastructure in rural areas can enhance access to markets, healthcare, and education for women, potentially leading to better economic outcomes (Shah, 2024). Better transportation networks can increase rural women's mobility, facilitating their participation in economic activities and accessing services (Ali & Rizvi, 2021). The development of infrastructure in rural areas through CPEC could significantly improve the quality of life for rural women by reducing barriers to economic participation and essential services. However, it is important to address specific needs of rural women, including access to training programs and financial resources, to ensure that they can fully benefit from these improvements (Mahmood & Jafri, 2022). Targeted interventions that address the unique challenges faced by rural women will be crucial in maximizing the benefits of CPEC in these regions.

Gender-Sensitive Policy Implementation

Effective policy implementation is critical to ensuring that the benefits of CPEC are equitably distributed and that gender-specific issues are adequately addressed. Integrating gender-sensitive considerations into CPEC-related policies can help address disparities and promote women's empowerment (Farooq, 2023). Establishing mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the gender impacts of CPEC projects can ensure that women's needs are being met and that progress is being made towards gender equality (Shah, 2024). To ensure that CPEC benefits women equitably, it is essential to incorporate gender-sensitive policies into project planning and implementation. This includes setting clear objectives for gender equality, monitoring progress, and adjusting strategies as needed. Effective policy integration and robust monitoring frameworks will be critical in



identifying and addressing any gender-specific challenges that arise (Ali & Rizvi, 2021). Engaging women in the decision-making processes related to CPEC can also enhance the relevance and effectiveness of policies aimed at promoting gender equality.

Economic Independence and Financial Inclusion

CPEC has the potential to enhance economic independence for women through improved financial inclusion and access to resources. The development of financial institutions and services in areas impacted by CPEC can improve women's access to credit and other financial resources, which is crucial for entrepreneurship and economic independence (Khan, 2023). CPEC-related economic activities may include initiatives to support women-owned businesses, providing them with resources and networks to grow (Ashraf, 2022). Financial inclusion is a key factor in empowering women. The expansion of financial services and support for women entrepreneurs can help women leverage the opportunities created by CPEC. However, ensuring that these financial services are accessible and tailored to women's needs is crucial. Efforts to increase financial literacy and provide targeted support for women-owned businesses will be important in facilitating women's economic independence and success (Farooq, 2023).

Social and Health Implications

The socioeconomic changes brought about by CPEC can have broader social and health implications for women. Infrastructure improvements associated with CPEC can lead to better healthcare facilities and services, which can improve women's health outcomes (Shah, 2024). Increased economic activity may lead to the expansion of social welfare programs, potentially benefiting women and families (Ali & Rizvi, 2021). The potential improvements in healthcare and social services due to CPEC can have significant positive impacts on women's health and well-being. Ensuring that these benefits are equitably distributed and addressing any disparities will be important in maximizing the positive effects on women's lives. Additionally, integrating health and social welfare considerations into CPEC's planning and implementation phases can enhance the overall impact on women (Mahmood & Jafri, 2022).

Women's Participation in Decision-Making Processes

The involvement of women in decision-making processes related to CPEC projects is crucial for ensuring that their needs and perspectives are considered, leading to more inclusive and effective development outcomes. There is an emerging trend towards involving women in leadership roles within CPEC-related projects, though their representation remains limited (Ashraf, 2022). Effective stakeholder engagement, including the active participation of women, can lead to more gender-sensitive project designs and implementations (Khan, 2023). The participation of women in decision-making processes is vital for the success and inclusivity of CPEC projects. Women's unique insights and experiences can contribute to more holistic project planning and execution, particularly in addressing gender-specific challenges. However, increasing women's representation in leadership and decision-making roles remains a significant challenge. Efforts to enhance women's participation in these areas must be prioritized, with initiatives aimed at building



leadership skills, creating platforms for women's voices, and ensuring that their perspectives are integrated into all stages of CPEC projects (Farooq, 2023).

Environmental and Social Impact

The environmental and social impacts of CPEC, particularly on local communities, can have gender-specific consequences that need to be addressed to prevent adverse outcomes for women. CPEC's large-scale infrastructure projects may lead to environmental degradation, which disproportionately affects women, especially those in rural areas who rely on natural resources for their livelihoods (Mahmood & Jafri, 2022). Infrastructure development may lead to the displacement of communities, with women often bearing the brunt of social and economic disruptions (Shah, 2024). The environmental and social impacts of CPEC projects require careful consideration, particularly regarding their effects on women. Environmental degradation can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities for women, especially those who depend on agriculture and natural resources. Additionally, social displacement caused by infrastructure projects can disrupt women's lives, leading to loss of livelihoods, increased burdens in caregiving, and diminished access to essential services. Addressing these challenges requires the integration of gender-sensitive environmental and social safeguards into CPEC planning and execution, ensuring that the negative impacts on women are minimized and that they receive adequate support during transitions (Ali & Rizvi, 2021).

Conclusion

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor represents transformative initiatives with the potential to significantly impact Pakistan's socio-economic landscape. As this extensive development project unfolds, it carries the promise of not only boosting economic growth but also enhancing gender equality through targeted opportunities for women. This research highlights several key avenues through which CPEC could empower Pakistani women, including educational advancements, employment opportunities, and shifts in social norms. However, the realization of these opportunities is not without its challenges; structural barriers, economic disparities, and cultural resistances pose significant obstacles that must be addressed to ensure that the benefits of CPCE are equitably distributed. The potential for CPEC to drive gender equality is contingent upon the implementation of inclusive policies that address these challenges directly. To maximize the impact of CPEC on women's empowerment, it is crucial for stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society organizations, and private sector partners, to collaborate on developing and executing strategies that foster female participation in the workforce and educational programs. Moreover, targeted efforts to address social and cultural barriers will be essential in creating an environment where women can fully benefit from the economic opportunities provided by CPEC. In conclusion, while CPEC offers a significant opportunity for advancing gender equality in Pakistan, achieving this potential requires a concerted effort to overcome the challenges that women face. By leveraging CPEC as a catalyst for change, Pakistan can make meaningful strides towards a more inclusive and equitable society, where women can contribute to and benefit from the nation's economic growth.



Recommendations

- CPEC project planners and developers, in collaboration with business consultants and gender experts, should design the CPEC industrial zones with support services and dedicated resources to foster women's small businesses and entrepreneurship.
- CPEC project managers, community leaders, and local government authorities should engage local communities in planning and implementation to ensure the project effectively addresses the needs of women in underserved areas.
- Legal advisors, labor unions, and CPEC project managers should implement legal protections and robust safety protocols within the CPEC projects to safeguard the legal rights and safety of women workers.
- CPEC project administrations, business development agencies, and financial institutions should provide targeted financing and mentorship programs to support women-led businesses operating within the CPEC zones.
- CPEC stakeholders, educational institutions, and vocational training centers should arrange and offer vocational training programs for women to enhance their participation in the CPEC-related industries.
- Industry leaders, business mentors, and CPEC stakeholders should organize a series of workshops and networking events for women in the CPEC zones to build leadership capabilities, business skills, and industry connections.
- Business incubators, private investors, and government agencies should create public and private partnerships to offer advisory services and specialized funding for women entrepreneurs participating in the CPEC initiatives.
- CPEC architects, gender specialists, and urban planners should incorporate gender-focused infrastructure rudiments, such as business hubs and women-friendly facilities, into the design of the CPEC industrial zones.
- The government of Pakistan, along with CPEC IT teams and tech developers, should develop smart technology solutions within the CPEC zones, such as mobile platforms for women capitalists to access network opportunities and business resources.
- CPEC project leaders and advocacy organizations should initiate cross-sectoral partnerships to address intersectional barriers faced by women in Pakistan, such as those related to religion, ethnicity, or disability, within the CPEC's framework.
- Digital marketers and business development organizations should develop a platform to promote and showcase women-led businesses and innovations within the CPEC project's industrial zones.
- CPEC project leaders and advocacy organizations should initiate cross-sectoral partnerships to address intersectional barriers faced by women, such as those related to religion, ethnicity, or disability, within the CPEC's framework.
- CPEC project planners and facility managers should introduce flexible child facilities within the CPEC industrial zones to enable working mothers to participate fully in the workforce.



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