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Women empowerment and gender gap reduction Under China Pakistan Economic Corridor

China Pakistan Economic Corridor Framework and Women Participation

Globalization has taken massive variations in the universal economy and has focused the development on borderless growth. This peculiarity has meaningfully augmented the nautical trade from *"2.37 billion tons of freight to 5.88 billion tons of freight"* moving through oceanic routes. China takes the central role and aspires to be leading global trade and alter the entire world into a single economy through the Built and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI aims at connecting the Asian, European, and African countries and their adjacent seas to build and strengthen trade partnerships¹. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with more than 60 billion dollar projects is nowadays measured as the *"forerunner"* project among six pilot projects of BRI. The CPEC is a bilateral project for infrastructure development and trade between Pakistan and China. It was formally launched in 2015 when 51 Memorandum of Understandings between the two countries were signed².

The projects under CPEC include the development of Gwadar Port, road networks, rail, and optical fiber connectivity, energy corridor, and Special Economic Zones. These projects aim at building a framework of mutual assistance to conquer comprehensive development and regional synchronization.

Before the commencement of the CPEC, the development of Pakistan was abridged by two foremost bottlenecks; severe energy crisis and feeble local and provincial connectivity infrastructures. That is why the first phase of CPEC was more focused on the completion of energy, infrastructure, and connectivity projects³.

The first phase initiatives of CPEC have contributed positively to managing the energy crisis and resolving the connectivity issues, which will contribute to the economic development of the country in near future. However, sustainable and inclusive economic growth requires the equal contribution of all stockholders. Connected to this, women's contributions to the success and development of the nation can become a decisive factor in obtaining a sustainable economy in the long run.

Women's self-efficacy is sometimes referred to as "women development," therefore purposeful action is needed to empower women. It also applies to Pakistan. It has been shown that gender equality and women's engagement are important economic drivers. According to the 2021 Gender Gap Report from the World Economic Forum⁴, it is a well-known fact that women would effectively use the human resources of the country if they are given power and responsibility. Similar to this, reducing the gender gap boosts economic development and production. Thus, a society's level of financial progress and the empowerment of women are strongly correlated.

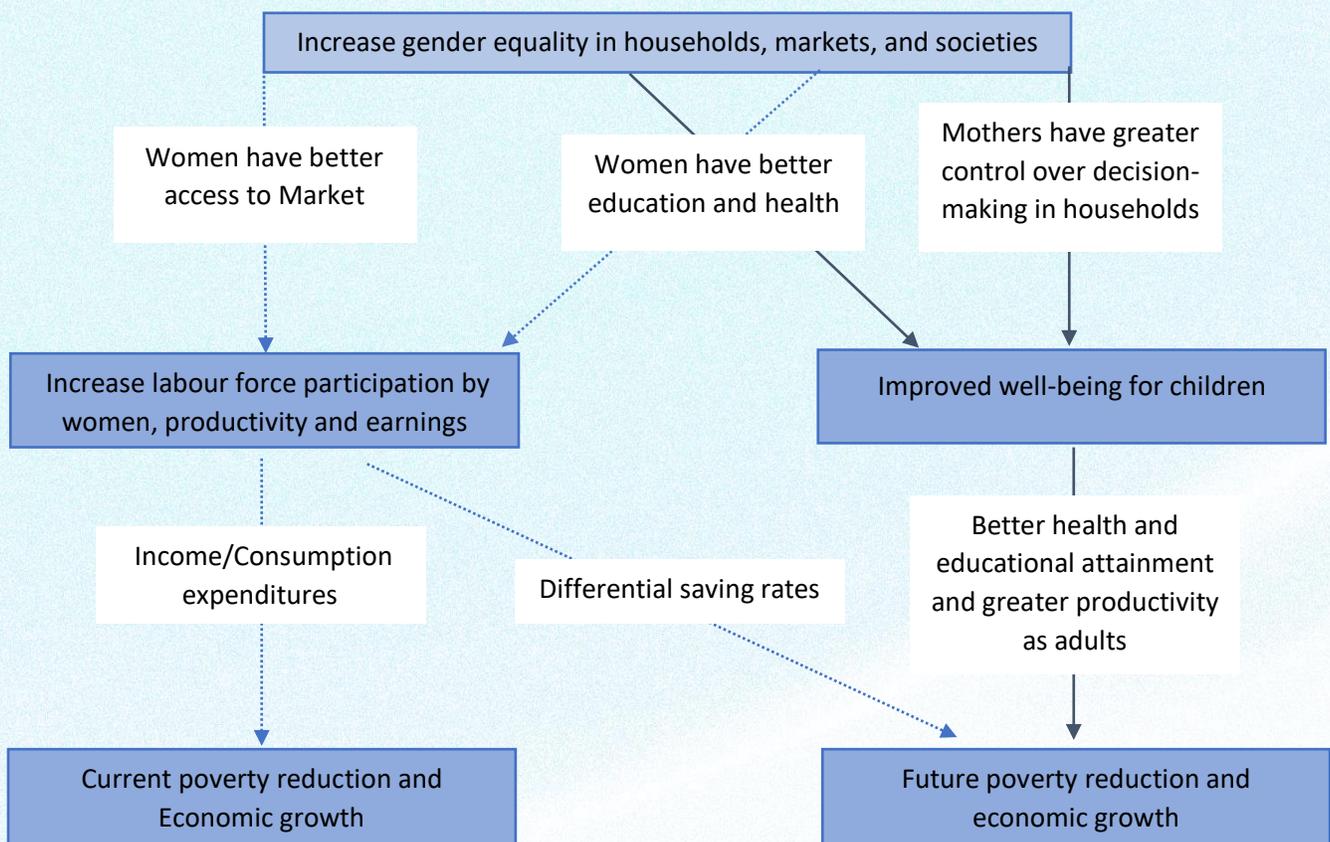
Women's engagement benefits the economy and government. There is a need to understand that to make use of the chances provided by CPEC, we must play the game intelligently; in this

manner, our youth, who are currently living in a sense of uncertainty due to depressing economic conditions, will have plenty of employment prospects.

CPEC is a comprehensive initiative with a multifaceted reach. The employment prospects include many fields such as education, infrastructure development, industrial zones, clusters of industries, going beyond fishing and transportation, etc. Ali, (2018)⁵. Dripped irrigation innovation, agricultural techniques, animal husbandry, tree planting, the nutrition industry, maritime industrial fields, extensive agricultural production, farmland water conservation, physiological breeding, the production, preparation, and disposal of goods and materials, pharmaceuticals industry, the use of water and management, the production and construction of reservoirs, post-harvest handling, and the augmentation of green space in the desert are some examples of the areas that can be covered. CPEC can become a game changer for Pakistan if all the stakeholders including women are provided with equal opportunities (Farooq, 2019)⁶.

Gender equality can help in the reduction of poverty and attaining economic growth as shown in the following figure.

Figure 1: Women in tourism as participants of CPEC



Source: Landry (2021)⁷

Figure 1, depicts the participation of women as leading potential participants of CPEC in areas of the digital market, education, and health sector. The participation of women will improve productivity and earnings and will become a source of poverty reduction.

Based on the scope of the CPEC projects and their associated potential opportunities, the following policy intervention areas are identified for women's participation (which may reduce the gender gap and help in achieving inclusive economic growth).

Policy Intervention Areas

- Pakistan is a third-world country that is dealing with serious problems, including a lack of a trained workforce as women labor, brain drains of competent experts, a lack of practical education, and wage stagnation especially the adequate participation of women in mentioned areas.
- CPEC is a contentious topic of discussion; generally believed to be connected to roads, energy, and connectivity initiatives. Beyond this specific meaning, CPEC is preparing the nation to accept large numbers of Chinese investments as well as visitors. This requires capacity building of the women workforce as well in different disciplines including cultural studies.
- The existing situation for skilled labor in the context of CPEC poses a significant challenge unless Pakistan has capable and diverse human resources across several industries. The absence of educated and competent women in the workforce makes this problem even worse.
- There is a need for a comprehensive human resource development policy for women at the government level in light of economic globalization, which is demonstrated by CPEC.
- The policy paper comes up with women's participation in small and medium enterprises that are inextricably linked to CPEC, such as logistical issues, services, food production, and collaborative partnerships in the arts and internet, media, as well as training opportunities for women in the higher education sector.

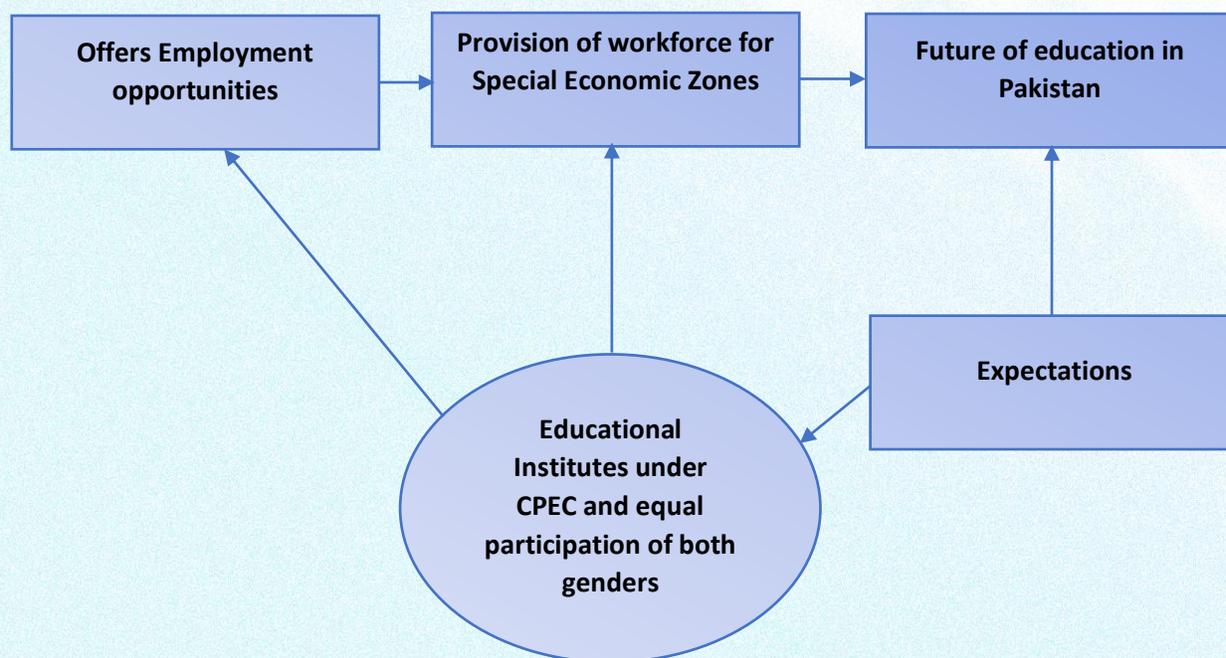
Policy Recommendations

By giving women access to economic possibilities, a high quality of life, and educational resources, CPEC may positively impact women's empowerment. Following are a few policy recommendations related to women's participation in selected areas, which may help achieve the notion of '*CPEC as a Game Changer*' for Pakistan's economy.

1. Educational Institutes

Women are almost limited to the educational sector of rural areas; they are not as educated as the women of urban areas. There is a need to provide diploma courses to women and hire them to serve the community. One of the primary issues facing today's youth is unemployment. CPEC is hoped and generally considered to alleviate all problems as mentioned in figure 2.

Figure 2: Diagrammatic representation of educational institutes as a source of employment opportunities



Source: Authors' consideration

2. Women's participation in paid jobs

It is assumed that women's involvement in businesses, paid jobs, and other revenue-generating activities will lessen their dependency on the economy. Additionally, it boosts their influence over resources and involvement in decision-making. Participation in the labor force by women increases women's roles in the home and in society, which is a good feature of this trend. Planners must thus devise strategies to improve women's employment status by creating a supportive atmosphere.

The use of management, e-banking, and financial leasing might benefit the two nations. Smooth financial transactions, honest finances, the expansion of the mutual finance industry, the creation of financial institutions, and the promotion of financial servicing will be productive. Women can play a significant role in all mentioned sectors as equal participants.

3. Women's participation in farming

The contribution of women farmers' families plays a significant role in the social and economic uplift of society. Women are believed to play a vital part in preserving the stability and well-being of families. Women also influence their families' economic and social standing by working outside the home to produce profitable goods. In Pakistan, agriculture is the backbone of the rural economy (Hussain, 2021)⁸. Women have always worked alongside their male peers and family members in agriculture to earn a living.

There are a significant number of female farmers working on rural grounds. The social and economic position of women is influenced by the land. Being a proxy for home status in the family and rural social circles, women's social status is crucial. Village women's position and roles are constantly impacted by industrialization, which also modifies how society is organized generally. Taking an example from the CPEC project, the Sahiwal Coal Power Plant was constructed on agricultural land without considering the effects on the local population. Energy production rose as a result of the power plant's building, but the population that had previously resided in the area has also been completely displaced (Sultan et al., 2017)⁹. The end effect has been the exodus of the people and the dissolution of families as males moved to metropolitan regions in search of employment while women sought domestic labor or tailoring jobs in the same urban environs.

Therefore, a comprehensive agriculture and farming framework in light of its significance to the economy must be formulated. The framework should consider the tradeoffs and importance of each sector. The agriculture policy in line with CPEC objectives must also be inclusive of women's participation.

To conclude, the CPEC, which consists of several small, medium, and long-term projects, is a game changer for Pakistan's economy. However, its success depends on inclusive policy-making for each sector and all workforce including women. The pace of progress may be accelerated if almost half of the population of the country (i.e., women) are empowered and contribute to the production activities of the country's economy.

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