

# Inclusion Innovation



Inclusion remains a largely overlooked aspect of youth development. The youth of Pakistan are diverse, both in their capabilities and their needs. However, certain deep rooted social and cultural biases, and stigma and discrimination associated with marginalized groups often create exclusionary structures for these groups, and the youths of these groups by extension. Ideas such as differently abled persons are a liability, or that women need to be controlled because they are incapable of deciding, or that certain groups (such as minorities) do not belong; these create an active removal of agency of individuals, and push them to the periphery of social, political and economic structures.

The invisibility of marginalized youths in mainstream development narratives, such as differently abled youths, minorities, or refugees, is at the root of youth exclusion in Pakistan. The absence of their voices means that all such narratives are largely non-inclusive, and even exploitative in terms of the erasure of these voices. A key example of this erasure is that the Supreme Court had to order Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) to include disabled persons in the latest census,

while PBS cited various excuses for not counting them. Reservations regarding the statistics presented in the 2017 census remain present; in 1998, 2.54 percent of the population was recorded as being differently abled, while the 2017 census reports 3,286,630 people, which is only 1.58 percent of the total population.<sup>1</sup> However, external sources estimate that the number of people living with disabilities in Pakistan could be around 27 million.<sup>2</sup> This blatant oversight is problematic, and reflects a structural blindness towards the need for inclusion.

According to recent statistics, Pakistan's Youth Social Participation Rate<sup>3</sup> is 5.9 percent. This lack of voice and visibility leads to an unresponsive policy and programming eco-system; one that neither acknowledges nor addresses the agency and needs of these young people. Issues such as inability to access services, programmatic interventions only addressing cosmetic reforms, unavailability of youth specific data to inform policy-making, and a larger social structure that exacerbates exclusion are all cause and effect of this unresponsive eco-system.

1 Statistics sourced from 5th (1998) and 6th (2017) Population Census of Pakistan

2 British Council. (2014). Moving from the margins, mainstreaming persons with disabilities in Pakistan

3 Youth Social Participation Rate is the percentage of youth with membership of any social organization and participation in the activities of that group at least once in a month. See UNDP HDR Report 2017

But perhaps most worrying is the structural barriers that marginalized youths face in accessing basic rights such as education. Inclusion-insensitive spending and planning in the education sector impacts the education of the vulnerable youth groups. In 2014, British Council concluded that disproportionate planning and spending went into government-run special education schools across the country, where the demand did not match the level of investment. This skewed investment is apparent in cases where the number of schools do not match the demand of students; Islamabad had 5 special education schools with 1,371 pupils enrolled, Punjab had 239 schools with 27,606 pupils enrolled, Sindh has 48 schools with no pupils enrolled, and KP had 38 schools with 2,400 pupils enrolled.

Social inclusion is crucial to fulfill Pakistan's obligations towards its population. Well-designed social inclusion programmes can yield quick results and provide progress to many; whether in terms of gender equality, inclusion of people with disabilities, prevention of hate speech or for protection of minorities.

### **Political Participation**

For any society to be inclusive, participatory, and just in its working, it has to ensure that every individual within that society is seen, heard, and accounted for. In Pakistan, political participation, and voter disenfranchisement is largely gendered. Antedated gender roles perpetuated under the guise of tradition and norm purport a binary between women and men, whereby women are

seen as private citizens, as opposed to political subjects. The internalization of this gendered construct not only inhibits women from being politically active, it also enables a hostile environment for them, should they choose to voice their concerns or opinions. Women's exclusion from the political arena is often also institutionalized, as is the case with the two million missing women; some estimates suggest that at least 2 million women in KP do not possess a Computerized National Identity card (CNIC). In Pakistan, individuals cannot vote, own assets or property, or even open a bank account, without a CNIC.

Multiple factors feed into this phenomenon of missing women. The concept of women belonging in the house, leading to their exclusion from public spheres, institutionalizes women's dependence on men. Their mobility is restricted, which further removes them from accessing their right to a CNIC. This perpetuates a cyclical exclusion of women from the political sphere; women are seen as a-political, leading to political structures becoming largely male-centric, which further hinders women's ability to access their rights. For example, in the 2018 elections, 11 million less women than men voted; only 40 percent of women participated. Apart from structural issues of women not having CNICs, it was reported that cultural norms such as men (who often act as gatekeepers for women) believing that it was inappropriate for women of their households to vote, or that it was acceptable to stop women from voting if they had differing opinions.<sup>4</sup>

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4 <https://www.usip.org/blog/2019/07/pakistans-participation-puzzle-look-voting-gender-gap>

was acceptable to stop women from voting if they had differing opinions. The issue of excluding women from political spaces also extends to the decision-making arena. Only 20 percent of parliamentarians are women, and 10.7 percent of ministerial positions are filled by women.<sup>5</sup>

Recent years have seen a change in the status quo, with more and more women coming out to raise their voices and demand their rights. State safety nets such as the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP), requires CNICs of women in eligible households to extend the benefits of the program. The incentive of income support from BISP has led women from poor households to start approaching NADRA for NICs. Similarly, the possession of NICs as a pre-requisite for claiming relief and compensation packages by Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from conflict affected regions including erstwhile FATA also created incentive for women to get their CNICs made. However, the momentum in women's demand for NICs is not enough to overcome institutional barriers of inaccessibility.

There is also merit in mentioning that there is a consistent and considerable shrinkage of civil society in Pakistan. This is apparent, not just from attitudes towards dissenting voices, which are often silenced, but also from a larger structural hostility towards voicing opinions.<sup>6</sup>

The need of the hour, then, is to strengthen civil society in a participatory and inclusive manner, and create space for dialogue and dissent, to allow for social cohesion and unity.

## **Peace and Security**

The youth of this country largely grew up at a time when bombings, risk ratings, and security threats were a normalized part of their daily lives. The instability of that time still resonates in the economic sluggishness, social insecurity, and overall atmosphere of vulnerability.

The Global Peace Index ranks Pakistan 150 out of 163 countries.<sup>5</sup> The experience of violence in high.<sup>6</sup> Pakistan is ranked 153rd out of 156 countries on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report 2021. UNWOMEN statistics extrapolated from national databases reveal that more than 24 percent of ever married women above the age of 15 years have faced intimate partner violence in Pakistan; more than 14 percent of these have faced it in the last 12 months. It is safe to assume that the actual figure is much higher owing to lack of actual reporting of domestic violence in Pakistan.

The COVID-19 situation has also created new challenges for the youth in the country. COVID-19 has detached the youth from tangible social networks, shifting their focus from healthy social interactions (such as education or sports) to an increased usage of the internet. The negative impacts of this social isolation will take time to show. And in Pakistan, where multiple factors feed into a general neglect of mental health issues, this can create vulnerability in the youth. Part of the problem of being vulnerable, without adequate support, is that vulnerability also increases the chances of exploitation (especially by criminal or anti-social elements). This exploitation often employs

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<sup>5</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace. (2021). Global Peace Index

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

rhetorical and/or emotional devices to mobilize the vulnerable, and remains difficult to identify proactively. For Pakistan and its youth, focusing on peace and security, and rule of law, remains of critical importance.

There is also no formal or institutionalized platforms to channel the youth in a constructive manner can undo their social disconnect. Educational institutes may provide platforms, but access to these avenues are restricted, and often limited. A similar situation is reflected in terms of young people's contributions to policy and legislative debates on issues that directly affect them. It is crucial to create avenues for young people's inputs in the domain of security to create lasting peace focusing on the prevention of crime and violence against young women and men in the country.

In addition to social challenges, the legal framework of the country is also ineffectual. While multiple laws and policies do exist, that guarantee the right to safety for multiple marginalized or vulnerable groups, implementation of these laws and policies is largely regulated by individualist value systems that are often regressive.

The key driver for change is envisaged as a combination of empowering the youth to feel motivated in terms of taking ownership over the wellbeing of their own selves, and of their communities. In targeting the youth as active members of society, and giving them a chance at being included, there can be a move

towards creating agency in the youth.

## **Digital access**

Digital technologies are transforming the way people live, work, communicate and participate in everyday life. However, internet penetration is only at 35 percent Pakistan is limited.<sup>7</sup> Pakistan also struggles with a gender divide in digital access; women represent only 14 percent of the IT workforce.<sup>8</sup> Additionally women in general have lesser access to mobile phones or the internet.<sup>9</sup> Only 50 percent of women report ownership of a mobile (as compared to 81 percent of men), and women are 49 percent less likely to use mobile internet services than men.<sup>10</sup>

The world digitization index places Pakistan at the 135th position, which shows the absence of basic digital infrastructure.<sup>11</sup> 18 percent of Pakistan's population are not covered by a mobile broadband network, hampering their participation in society and limiting contribution to the economy. This divide is also visible along the rural-urban paradigm; while ownership of mobile phone is 64 percent in urban areas, it is only 26 percent in rural areas. Internet usage shows 21 percent of the urban population using internet, while only 13 percent of the rural population uses internet.<sup>12</sup>

The digital divide is exacerbated by constraints on affordability of technology devices and internet. People from marginalized communities or lower-income families are cannot afford to buy and maintain these devices.

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7 GSMA Pakistan Report, 2020

8 Pakistan Software Houses Association, 2012

9 PDHS, 2017.

10 GSMA (2021). Addressing the Mobile Gender Gap in Pakistan

11 GSMA Pakistan Report, 2020

12 UNDP (2020). Pakistan National Human Development Report 2020. The three P's of inequality; Power, People, and Policy

While affordability, lack of access to mobile devices, connectivity and domestic responsibilities continue to create hurdles in women's use of technology at home, socio-cultural factors create additional barriers to the digitization of women. Conservative social norms and the 'digital purdah' imposed upon women creates a digital gender divide. Fears of security and harassment, including the belief that social media is unsafe or that the use of social media may expose women to outsiders, also prevents women from enjoying the benefits of technology.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the digital skills that are taught at educational institutes now may be irrelevant by the time these students enter the workforce. This lack of skill is furthered for marginalized and vulnerable groups, who might not know how to operate computers, smartphones or use the internet.

In order to convert the current digital barrier into enablers, critical points within the larger digitization paradigm can be leveraged to create quick returns for the youth of the country, such as creating enabling legal paradigms, ensuring consumer protection, and capacitating the youth with job-relevant digital skills.

### **Sports Engagement**

Pakistan stepped into the 2021 Olympics Games Tokyo, with a group of 10 athletes playing six different sports; athletics, badminton, judo, shooting, swimming, and weightlifting. Unfortunately, Pakistan failed to qualify for Hockey this year; hockey being a regular entry point for Pakistan, and also the sport that has given Pakistan visibility in the Olympics, while the country remains absent in other sports. Competing against other countries that may have

trained for years on end, with expert technical advisers, Pakistan could not perform at par with other global Olympians.

Sports remain a key aspect of the lives of the youth. Pakistani youth do show an interest in sports and gaming, but a structural incompetency to train and nurture any talent has created an absence of sports players in the country.

While recent years have seen an increase in various sporting events and activities in Pakistan, such as Pakistan's national cricket league, various local polo events, a tenpin bowling championship, the Sultan Azlan Shah Cup championship for hockey, and a national track cycling championship, there are limited formal structures that can identify and hone individuals.

Additionally, Pakistan's overall sports environment heavily focuses on one particular sport, instead of creating an opportunity for young people to identify what they would want to be trained in. There is also an aspect of gender blindness, and general exclusion. Social messaging across multiple mediums such as textbooks, media, and cultural norms, often attach sports to able-bodied men, while actively excluding other groups.

At this point, it is critical to capitalize on the momentum that recent sporting events have created. Young people across all groups have repeatedly shown their passion and willingness to pursue sports as a formal life path, and this life path can also be provided to the youth of Pakistan, if they are provided with access to proper training facilities.



If this passion is channelized through an accessible sporting institution, not only will the Pakistani youth have a credible platform to pursue their passion, they will also have an opportunity to participate. Youth sports participation has a direct link on the overall wellbeing (physical and

mental) of individuals; from providing people a platform to channel their energies, sports can also help foster critical social skills such team-work, healthy competition, trust, and above all, looking out for each other.<sup>13</sup>