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## INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY CELEBRATION

### REPORT ON PANEL DISCUSSION

HESSA PMU/Pakistan, NUST  
March 8, 2022

**Discussion Topic:** Women and Higher Education in Pakistan – Agents of Change

**UN Theme:** Gender Equality Today for a Sustainable Tomorrow | #BreaktheBias

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## **PREAMBLE**

The Higher Education System Strengthening Activity (HESSA) organized a panel discussion on 'Women and Higher Education in Pakistan – Agents of Change' to commemorate International Women's Day. The objective of the themes event was to highlight women's current and future roles in higher education in Pakistan, with a focus on recognizing their important contributions as decision-makers, stakeholders, experts, and educators across all levels. The discussion also highlighted the critical role of diversity in the workforce to prevent a myopic view of the way sustainability objectives are identified, prioritized, and implemented. Moreover, the need to identify and fill gaps to inform more robust gender-responsive higher education policymaking, planning, and implementation also constituted an important aspect of the discussion.

## CHAIR & PANELISTS



The panel was diversely represented by leaders from the academia, as well as policymakers, regulators, entrepreneurs and change agents. Ms. Zill e Huma, Member, National Assembly, and Member, Special Parliamentary Committee on People with Disabilities chaired the event. The panelists included Dr. Shahana Arooj Kazmi, Vice Chancellor, Women University Swabi; Ms. Maria Qadri, Director Advancement Office, National University of Science and Technology (NUST); Dr. Nasir M Khan, Registrar, Pakistan Engineering Council (PEC); Ms. Abia Akram, CEO, National Forum of Women with Disabilities; Dr. Samreen Hussain, Deputy Chief of Party, HESSA; and Gul Zeba, CEO, Red Market Systems.

## DISCOURSE BRIEFS

Speaking on the occasion, Ms. Zill e Huma called for integration of cultural and traditional teaching, values, and socio-economic context to strive for gender equality and women's empowerment. She informed that the government is working on policies and interventions in support of a conducive environment. This includes the launch of a comprehensive and inclusive (disability-friendly and gender-sensitive) 'National Gender Policy Framework' which has been developed with due consideration to the minor and major issues that constrain women's participation and contribution in the domestic and public spheres. The Chair also mentioned raising these concerns at the Commonwealth Parliamentarians Forum. "We all need to begin from our homes at the individual level, and progress towards institutional change to secure promotion of gender equality and inclusive sustainable development," she mentioned. Women are ambassadors of our country and society; they can help create a better environment and foster behavioral and attitudinal changes to make inclusive and equitable societies. Similarly, workplace harassment is another area where collective efforts are required to promote safer and supportive environments for women.

Dr. Shahana reflected on women in academia, with a focus on their leadership roles, contributions, and struggles. Gradual progress has been made in transforming mindsets to create gender-responsive workplaces, as women have proved their mettle in all fields and at all levels. Women faculty and administrative staff have proved to be resilient and resourceful academic leaders and have set examples for other women. Considering the diversity in terms of literacy, culture, ethnic and other provincial dynamics, she called for increasing access to and opportunities for girls to take higher education. She also recommended having more women leaders in universities, and one such practice can be to establish additional women's universities offering all kinds of specialized degrees in the rural or marginalized areas.

Dr. Nasir highlighted the importance of economic revival of girls/women through policy interventions. Family support and mentoring of parents was also identified as an essential prerequisite to secure higher education opportunities for girls; to utilize their skills and degrees by enabling them to enter the workforce upon completion of education; and to encourage them to pursue home-based businesses for their socio-economic uplift. As such, taking small, focused, culturally aligned, and context-specific steps can bring big changes for women. A wide range of issues at the domestic and public domains, coupled with social and personal barriers, make it essential to include and mobilize the support of men vis-à-vis women's education, awareness, skill building, advocacy through networks/NGOs. PEC is focusing on integrated professions and is encouraging women to attain different soft and hard skills of various engineering fields so that they can learn and effectively contribute to the work



force. We also need to improve women’s access to bank loans and overcome other structural barriers for girls/women.

Ms. Abia invited attention to challenges facing women with special needs while also underlining the importance of diversity and inclusion vis-à-vis gender equality. The lack of empathy and respect, and the absence of a supportive and enabling environment for people with disabilities further compounds their dilemma. Between 10-15% of Pakistan’s population comprises persons with disabilities; those living in the rural areas are struggling with basic services of healthcare, education, livelihood, and employment, all of which have been exacerbated due to COVID. The country’s laws, policies, practices, and systems need to be aligned at the HEC and government levels, and special efforts should also be made to make universities, work and public places more accessible, inclusive, and supportive. Girls/women with disabilities already have limited choices and access. Moreover, lack of research and data on their needs and gaps stand in way of informed policy decisions that can effectively address their problems.

Ms. Maria acknowledged that women in Pakistan have created spaces from themselves in the past and should continue to contribute for future generations. She shared examples of rural girls studying at NUST and excelling in their programs. Increasing women’s access to higher education is gradually changing the complexion of the job market and work force. However, dedicated efforts are needed to make household and public places and spaces more inclusive and supportive. She also highlighted the need to create incentives (such as quotas) for girls to get education and skills, women leaders’ representation and participation at the institutional level and in boards and decision-making positions and forums. The accreditation policy should make it mandatory to have women quotas and specific percentages in institutions.



Dr. Samreen talked about the challenges that women face in getting and staying in leadership positions. She spoke from personal experience as she became Vice Chancellor at a young age and was also a founding member of the Women’s University in Sindh. She recited her poetry and eloquently captured the role, struggle, and contributions of women. She stressed that women/girls should make their own choices about education and choice of profession and should not allow gender disparities to limit or hinder their choices and decision making. Having the freedom and support to make choices in our lives is what equality is all about, she remarked before moving on to emphasize the importance of open competition and merit-based fair processes for both women and men, as women can compete and achieve.

Ms. Gul Zeba's message was that in our context, earning empowerment, respect, and freedom is difficult for women as they deal with societal norms and practices, as well as personal barriers. Women can create and promote support groups and an environment that empowers them through collective efforts. They need to have the right education, skills, and confidence to be able to make substantive contributions wherever they are working, representing, raising their voice, or contributing in any manner. She called for mutual efforts to achieve gender parity and emphasized that a woman can compete on merit and prove her substance at the right forums.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Abia suggested that the policy (Disability Rights Act 2020, Special Committee on Rights of Person with Disability) should be inclusive and must truly be implemented in universities, workspaces, and public places, with proper financial and human resources. There is a need to give space to women leaders with disabilities as they can bring about real change by contributing at the decision-making and implementation levels.

Maria emphasized the need to create and broaden spaces for women, and to provide them with a level playing field. There should be at least 30% women representation in boards/organizational bodies/decision making committees. The HEC and accreditation bodies need to enforce such policies at the national level in the domain of higher education. Enabling workplace timings, childcare facilities for women staff, medical leave, and other friendly HR policies for women working in educational institutions (and workplaces in general) must be practiced to create a safe, friendly, and supportive workplace.

Dr. Shahana recommended that due heed should be paid to gender mainstreaming and sensitization in formulating and implementing policies and programs to make the workplace balanced and cohesive. She suggested that academic institutions should promote and practice counseling, career advisories, and mentoring and guidance sessions, specifically for girls/women so that they can make informed decisions on academic choices and career paths. Sixty-five percent of our youth has to be steered in the right direction to be able to positively utilize their energy for socio-economic development.

Dr. Nasir recommended supporting pathways for girls/women to get higher education and join the labor force. For this, he underlined that the financial constraints should be addressed, access to education should be improved, both by advocating with parents/families and by establishing women's public sector universities in rural divisions. Girls graduating from engineering and medical fields need to contribute to the workforce, become entrepreneurs, or undertake consultancies, or part time or small-scale work. Universities can also introduce skillsets that are aligned with the local context so that during their degrees, students can learn skills and later utilize the same in their work.

Gul urged the government, public and private sectors, civil society, and media to make collective efforts to empower women. The industry-academia linkages need to be more targeted, inclusive, and conducive for women to grow and work in that environment. Right policies and programs need to be aligned and practiced at all levels. There is a need to modify the academic assessment system for the benefit of both faculty and students; it should be more skills-oriented rather than focusing on mere rote learning.



Dr. Samreen termed financial autonomy of women a better strategy to achieve inclusive socio-economic development. There is a need to challenge and reform the gender-biased perceptions and practices in our society. Women can get their space through their own worth and work.

The event concluded with shields presented to the panelists by the Chair, Ms. Zill e Huma, while Dr. Aslam Chaudhry presented the shield to the Chair as a gesture of HESSA hospitality.

