

# **The Girls of Our Future: Gender Inequality in Pakistan and China**

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## ***Abstract***

*This article looks at gender inequality in China and Pakistan. Both countries have histories of having issues with gender inequality, some are similar in both countries, some are different across the two countries. This article reviews the progress made in China and Pakistan on the issues of a) women's education status, b) women's lack of access to health services, and c) women's place in the workplace. We show that China has largely eliminated its previous gender gap in education, Pakistan has made very little progress in terms of educational inequality. While China has a relative high rate of abortions, Pakistan has a high adolescent birth rate. Both countries continue to struggle with giving women equal opportunities in the work place.*

## **I. Introduction**

Of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) established by the United Nations in 2000, perhaps one of the most important and urgent goals is MDG-3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women. Women brought us into this world. It is unethical and unreasonable that there are distinctions in the way men and women are treated in developing countries. Promoting gender equality and allowing women equal rights would be beneficial to society as it would promote economic growth and reduce poverty.

According to Chaudhry and Rahman (2009, p. 164-165), in Pakistan, “[m]ale members of the family are given a better education and are equipped with skills to compete for resources in public arena, while female members are imparted domestic skills to be good mothers and wives. They are given limited opportunities to create choices for themselves in order to change the realities of their lives.” Nasrullah and Bhatti (2012, p. 273) state that “Pakistan is challenged with gender inequalities, and despite efforts, there is a wide gap between males and females in terms of employment opportunities, paid work, access to health services and health outcomes.” Pakistan is known for being one of the worst countries when it comes to women's inequality. These two quotes are just a glimpse into ways women are discriminated in Pakistan.

On the other hand, despite multiple claims and statements that China is also among the countries with many issues of gender inequality, a report by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (2006, p. 7) argues that “China has achieved a great deal through its efforts at implementing the

basic state policy of equality between men and women in social economy and political affairs.” However, Bauer et. al (2009, p. 334) challenge that statement by arguing that “[a]lthough the government has been quite successful at increasing women’s participation in the paid labor force, our research supports arguments that participation alone will not ensure equality between women and men nor will their participation necessarily upset the traditional sex-gender system.” There are mixed claims on China’s status regarding women’s inequality as a whole. As this article will show, while many indicators have improved significantly in China, there is still much to do in terms of eliminating gender inequality in China.

Following this introduction, this article provides a brief review of the literature. The third section provides some socio-economic background of the two countries. The fourth section examines three key aspects of gender discrimination: education, health, and employment. The article closes with some conclusions.

## **II. Literature Review**

There is a large amount of information and data on gender inequality in Pakistan and China. Chaudhry and Rahman (2009), Nasrullah and Bhatti (2012), the World Bank (2005), and Salik and Zhiyong (2014) focus on Pakistan, while Bauer, Feng, Riley, and Xiaohua (1992), Stockman (1994), Song and Bian (2014), and a joint World Bank and Asian Development Bank (2006) report focus on China. All these publications focus on gender practices and inequalities that the two countries have faced and possible ways to move forward to improve the situation.

- Bauer, Feng, Riley, and Xiaohua (1992) focus solely on gender inequality in urban China and the position that women hold in urban Chinese society. They examine a variety of different aspects of inequality and how it is present, such as in education and employment. They point out many of the improvements that China has made in these topics but also the hardships and negative aspects.
- Chaudhry and Rahman (2009) investigate the impact of gender inequality in education on rural poverty in Pakistan using Logit regression analysis on primary data sets. They conclude that gender inequality in education has adverse impact on rural poverty. They also come to the conclusion that household size and the female-male ratio have a strong positive association with the probability of poverty and that more education for girls would provide more employment opportunities for women and reduce poverty in Pakistan.
- Nasrullah and Bhatti (2012) focus more on the issues of gender inequality that make it difficult, or even impossible, for women to have health services in Pakistan. They write (on p. 273) that “male infants enjoy more family resources and care in terms of better nutrition and healthcare access than females of the same age” and that “female children are, therefore, susceptible to face more neglect and live in poor health compared to male children.” Furthermore, they explain how the poor health conditions/resources that women have affect their daily lives in many aspects.
- Salik and Zhiyong (2014) examine the reasons why there is discrimination toward women in higher education in Pakistan. They also explain the impact of that on women, and conclude by providing a declaration of prospects for the future.
- Song and Bian (2014) examine the inequality women face in China’s health care system. They explore whether gender differences exist in the use of health care by analyzing hospital admission, duration of hospitalization and medical expense of both genders in a Chinese hospital based on 156,887 patients, who were admitted for any reason to hospital in the Zhuhai Special Economic Zone between 2003 and 2009. While the average age and the duration of hospitalization were significantly greater among men, a larger proportion of hospitalized female underwent surgery

compared to male. The total medical expense per inpatient indicated important differences between genders, with higher expenditures observed among men. Furthermore, gender differences were observed in length of hospitalization and medical expense for five common conditions respectively and most differences favoring men were significant while differences favoring women were not significant. Among all the self-paid patients, men were also superior in all investigating variables compared with women. Based on these results, Song and Bian (2014) conclude that there are gender differences in the use of health care in China, which can partly be explained by social power relations. They therefore suggest that China should increase attention to gender and equity in health.

- Stockman (1994) proposes that there have been changes in gender inequality patterns in urban China in terms of the specific interrelationships of production and reproduction in Chinese work-units. After sketching out the historical background of the structural conditions for gender inequality in pre-revolutionary Chinese society, Stockman (1994) emphasizes the lack of institutional separation of household and enterprise, which has been conducive to the relatively greater gender equality achieved in communist China, while the more recent reforms introduce pressures to separate productive and reproductive functions, which are likely to erode the trends towards greater gender equality.
- A joint report by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (2006) examined women's inequality in China by focusing in on specific topics: population, health, education, employment, and governance. They provide lots of relevant information and scenarios and even explain how some of these things have improved for women.
- The World Bank (2005) examined the combination of social and cultural norms and the lack of opportunity for Pakistani women and how those things affect women's lives. The authors provide many key issues regarding the lack of opportunity they face and provide possible solutions as well.

### **III. Empirical Background**

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is a South Asian country with a population of about 198 million. The common religious practice is Islam, which – the way it is interpreted and practiced – places many restrictions on women regarding the type of education they can get, what type of job they can work, what they can wear, and even their access to contraceptives.<sup>1</sup>

The People's Republic of China is an East Asian country. It is the world's most populous country, with a population of around 1.4 billion. The language spoken is Chinese, and there is no primary religion that is widely practiced in China. The Chinese people have freedom of religion and there are therefore multiple different religions throughout.<sup>2</sup>

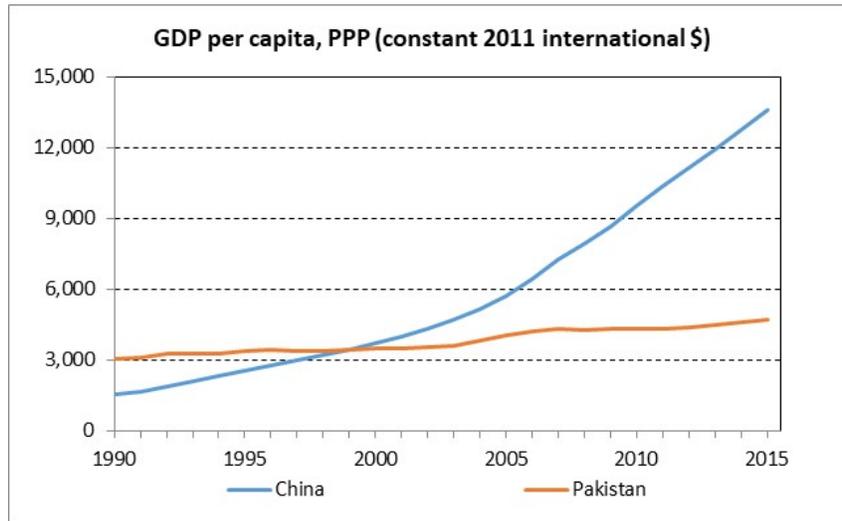
Figure 1 shows that China experienced a large and steady increase in its GDP per capita from \$1,526 in 1990 to \$13,572, which is a nearly ten-fold increase. On the other hand, Pakistan (which actually had a higher GDP per capita than China in 1990), experienced a very limited increase in its GDP per capita during most of the 1990s. Pakistan's income per capita increased slightly from 2001 to 2007, after it stagnated once again and only started to grow again since 2012. Overall, Pakistan's GDP per capita (PPP-adjusted) increased from \$3,057 in 1990 to \$4,706 in 2015. That is cumulative increase of 54 percent over 25 years, while China's increased by 789 percent during the same time period.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaudhry and Rahman (2009), p. 181.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank and Asian Development Bank (2006).

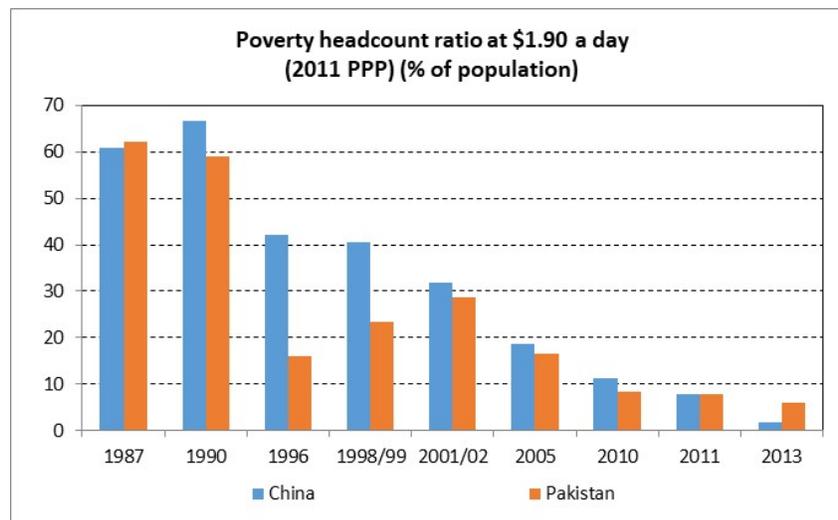
**Figure 1: China and Pakistan’s PPP-adjusted GDP per capita, 1990-2015**



Source: Created by author, based on World Bank (2017).

Given that we examine the two countries’ literacy rates in the next section, the next indicator we compare China and Pakistan on is the percentage of people living in poverty, measured by the poverty headcount ratio at \$1.90 a day (in constant 2011 PPP\$). As Figure 2 shows, the two countries had about the same percentage of their populations living in poverty in 1987: 61 percent in China and 62 percent in Pakistan. However, poverty evolved very differently over time in these two countries. While Pakistan had a very drastic reduction in poverty from 1987 to 1996 (when it was slightly below 16 percent), Pakistan’s poverty rate increased from 1996 to 2002, and only decreased moderately after that. China saw a slight increase in the percentage of its people living in poverty from 1987 to 1990, after which poverty decreased relatively steadily, falling to below two percent in 2013.

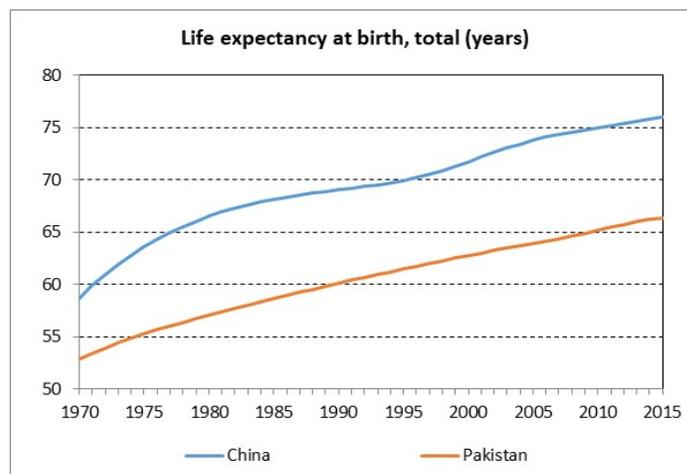
**Figure 2: Percentage of China’s and Pakistan’s Populations Living in Poverty**



Source: Created by author, based on World Bank (2017).

The third broad development indicator we examine to determine China's and Pakistan's progress is life expectancy. Life expectancy is determined by many factors, such as access to health care, access to food, etc. Hence, life expectancy is an informative indicator. As shown in Figure 3, despite the considerable differences in the evolution of GDP per capita, China's and Pakistan's life expectancy shows (despite a difference in levels) very similar trends over the last few decades. In 1970, the life expectancy in China was approximately 58 years, and it went up to approximately 76 years in 2015. Pakistan's life expectancy in 1970 was approximately 53 years, and that number went up to 66 years by 2015.

**Figure 3: Life Expectancy at Birth in China and Pakistan, 1970-2015**



Source: Created by author, based on World Bank (2017).

## IV. Discussion

Both countries continue to face considerable gender gaps. In the Global Gender Gap Report 2017 of the World Economic Forum (2017), which benchmarks national gender gaps on economic, education, health and political criteria, Pakistan was ranked 143<sup>rd</sup>, while China ranked 100<sup>th</sup> among a total of 144 nations. This section reviews the progress made in Pakistan and China on the issues of a) women's education status, b) women's lack of access to health services, and c) women's place in the workplace.

### IV.1. Women's Education Status

The most important asset one can carry with through life is knowledge. While many women in industrialized countries take education for granted, in both China and Pakistan women are having trouble receiving an education they deserve. Not attending school or receiving an education from a young age, typically has consequences for the rest of a woman's life. The World Bank (2005, p. 41) makes a short but strong point on the various positive aspects that an education can bring:

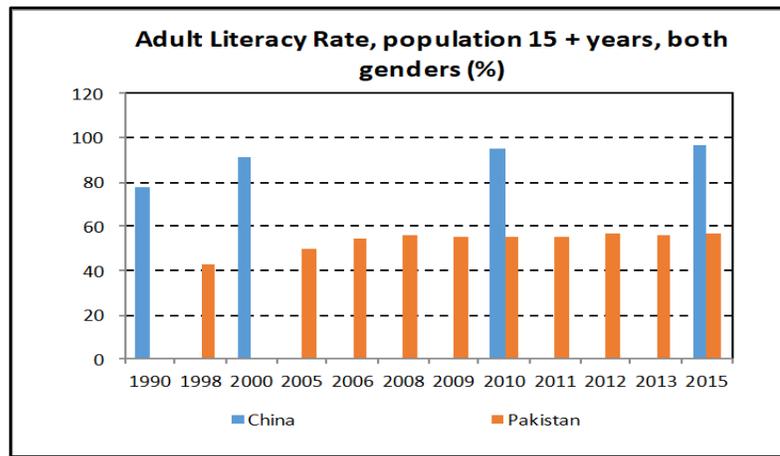
Education makes women more productive both inside and outside the household. An educated mother can plan the size of her family, ensure the well-being of her children, and make better use of community services. Outside the home, women's education is associated with higher productivity in wage employment and in agriculture. Educated women are also

more likely to participate in the political process; illiteracy is a major obstacle in accessing relevant information and dealing with electoral procedures and political issues.

Among 144 countries, China was ranked 102<sup>nd</sup>, while Pakistan was ranked 136<sup>th</sup> in the 2017 Global Gender Gap's sub-index on Educational Attainment, which is based on four indicators: the ratio of female to male literacy and the ratios of female to male school enrollment in primary, secondary and tertiary schools.<sup>3</sup>

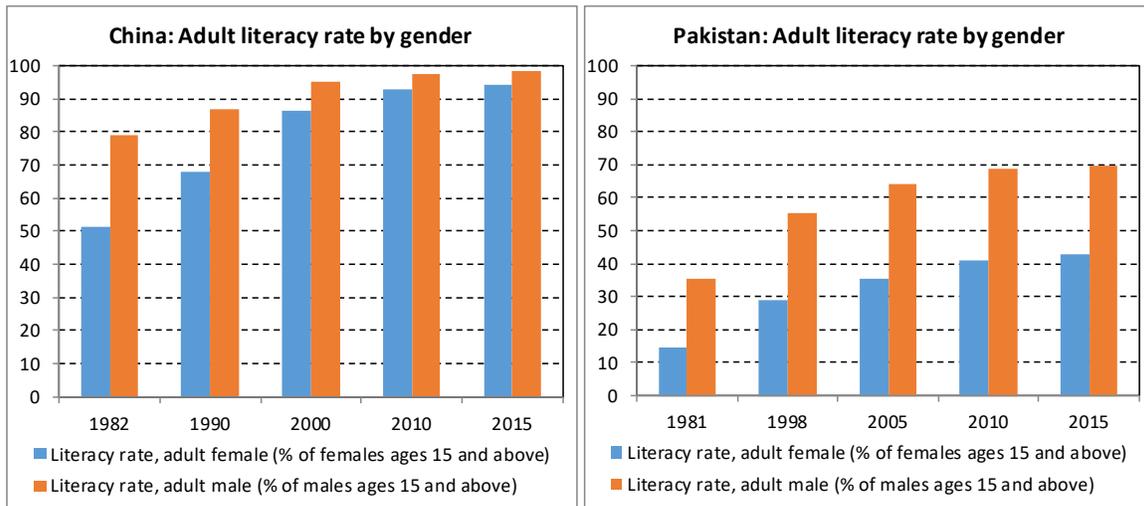
While Figure 4 shows the evolution of adult literacy for both genders, Figures 5 and 6 show the evolution of adult literacy rates for each country by gender. While the two countries vary greatly in terms of levels, one thing that was similar in the past is that in both countries, men had a significantly higher literacy rate than women. While China has mostly eliminated illiteracy for both women and men, there is still a huge gender gap in Pakistan.

**Figure 4: Adult Literacy Rate in China and Pakistan for all available years**



Source: Created by author, based on World Bank (2017).

**Figures 5 and 6: China's and Pakistan's Adult Literacy Rates by Gender**



<sup>3</sup> See World Economic Forum (2017).

Source: Created by author, based on World Bank (2017).

Though not a major concern in China, one common reason for Pakistani girls not getting an education is the distance from home to an educational institution. With Pakistan being mostly a rural country (as of 2015, 61 percent of Pakistan's population lived in rural areas),<sup>4</sup> families feel unsafe sending their children to schools.<sup>5</sup> Various reports have found that female teachers and students are often victims of assaults or threats in the rural areas.<sup>6</sup> Issues like these becoming consistent invoke fear in female students and teachers, and like anyone, when one feels fear they do not want to approach it. It is important to note as well that in many conservative rural societies, girls and women are not even allowed to travel on their own, making it a lot more complicated to just get to school.

The World Bank (2005) examines how girls in rural areas have particularly high drop-out rates. Because they lack the knowledge and resources, girls who drop out of school live more accelerated lives. As a result, many girls and their families decide to get married at a young age. Their society assumes that "good marriage is the most important way to secure a girl's well-being, security and respect."<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, early marriage doesn't always have positive effects. Nasrullah and Bhatti (2012) state that an estimated 42 percent of young girls in early marriages are getting pregnant prior to turning 20 years old.<sup>8</sup> Women getting married young are also at a higher risk for being victims of domestic violence and abuse from their husbands or other male figures in the family. Because women take on so many responsibilities as both a mother and wife, the men do not know how to handle it as they are used to being the ones with all of the power.

In China, many issues related to educational inequality are cultural. One of the issues which causes a divide in China between women and men regarding equal education opportunity is the investments that Chinese families place over sons than daughters. However, Bauer et. al (1992, p. 349) challenge the idea that "the difference between men and women in education has to be understood within the context of a deeply rooted gender stratification system in Chinese society." There is a belief that women will not do well or will not be successful in their careers, and hence, Chinese society does not want to invest in women's futures and women's education. Bauer et. al (1992) also argue that parents may feel more comfortable investing in their sons' futures as they will remain part of the family beyond marriage, instead of marrying off into another family as women do. Bauer et al. (1992, p. 349) state:

Because women are likely to find sex discrimination in the labor market after graduation, the return to the investment in a daughter's education might be lower than that for a son. In addition, sons continue to be more likely to support their parents in their old age than daughters, and if parents can only invest in one child, it is therefore more prudent to do so in sons, where they themselves will be able to benefit from the investments, than in daughters, who will marry into another family.

## **IV.2. Women's Lack of Access to Health Services**

The gender inequalities in Pakistan impact and affect women's access to health services in many ways. In order for women to be efficient and be able to take care of themselves and their children,

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<sup>4</sup> World Bank (2017).

<sup>5</sup> World Bank (2005), p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> Salic and Zhiyong (2014), p. 270.

<sup>7</sup> Salic and Zhiyong (2014), p. 270.

<sup>8</sup> Nasrullah and Bhatti (2012), p. 273.

they have to be well-informed and educated.<sup>9</sup> Just as mobility and transportation was an issue for Pakistani girls to get to school, mobility is also an issue for women to get proper health care. As quoted in World Bank (2005, p. 64), a study conducted in rural areas of Pakistan found that “[a]s many as 40 percent of respondents stated that the primary constraint to accessing health services was their mobility, and fewer (27 percent) stated that the primary constraint was proximity to the facility.”

The reason in which getting around town as a woman in this Pakistani society is difficult is because in the religion they practice, there are restrictions on women traveling alone. Not only can they not go places alone, but they also can’t make decisions on their own. Before women can go to any type of health facility, they must first get permission from their husband or any man of the house. As documented in World Bank (2005, p. 65), this can be problematic if a woman or child has an emergency in the sense that the men can delay their decision, which ultimately causes harm.

One of the biggest issue with gender inequalities in healthcare in China is women picking up infections and diseases and leaving them untreated. The World Bank and Asian Development Bank (2006, p. 23) explain that “if women fall ill, they usually delay seeking medical treatment (due to lack of money and time), and also because their health is ignored and not prioritized by the family.”

Lack of education and knowledge regarding how to practice good hygiene, and knowing when one must visit a doctor are issues that many women in these two countries face and end up affecting them negatively. In rural China, many women feel pressure and vulnerability due to their social status as a woman in society which leads them to making risky choices. The man’s societal role makes him feel empowered and makes the woman feel pressured. Many Chinese women feel pressured to have unsafe sex, leading them to contract sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV/AIDS.<sup>10</sup>

The lack of knowledge in China shows in another way with the high rate of increasing abortions among young women. A report by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (2006, p. 22) states that “women between 20 and 29 years old have the most abortions and the percentages of those who are unmarried vary from 23 to 65 percent depending on the region.” The report also explains that the fast-rising growth of abortions among young women could be due to lack of contraceptive knowledge, not enough counseling/service and unprotected premarital sex.

Ironically, as young women in China are having an increased amount of abortions, young women in Pakistan have an increased number of children at young ages, with an estimated 42 percent of girls getting pregnant before turning 20 years old.<sup>11</sup> Both of these things are happening due to a lack of education and knowledge. Women need to become more informed and get more rights related to their bodies and their health before we can see improvements.

### **IV.3. Women’s Place in the Workplace**

Probably the most relevant issue that women in China and Pakistan face regularly, and to which women in the United States can relate to, is inequality in the workplace. One issue that many women in Pakistan face is not having the knowledge or resources to obtain a higher-skilled and better paying job due to lack of a school education.<sup>12</sup> Comparing the orange lines in Figures 7 and

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<sup>9</sup> World Bank (2005), p. 64.

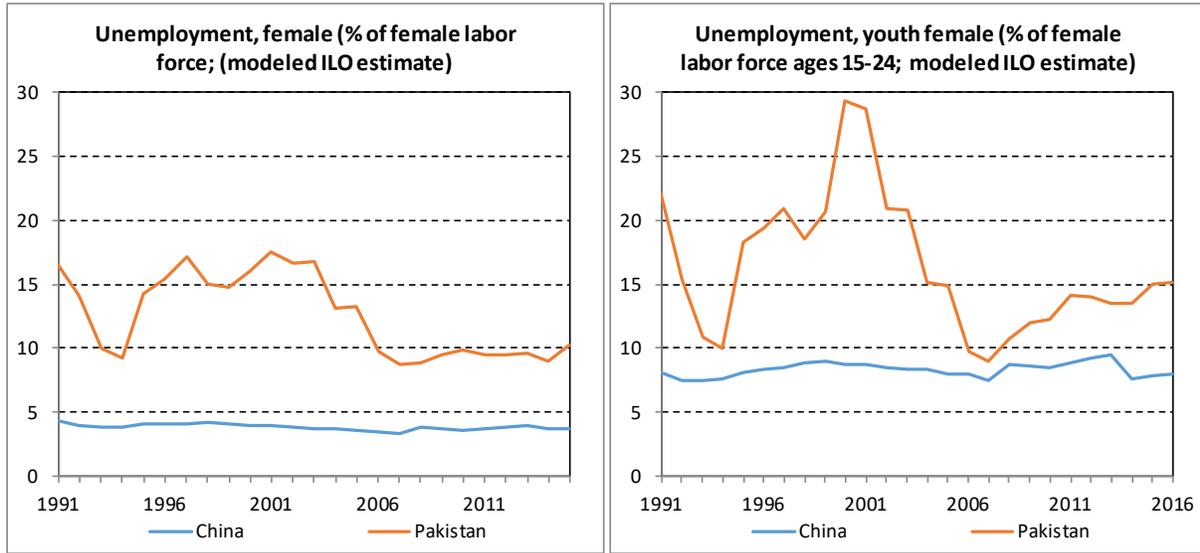
<sup>10</sup> World Bank and Asian Development Bank (2006), p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Nasrullah and Bhatti (2012), p. 273.

<sup>12</sup> World Bank (2005), p. 86.

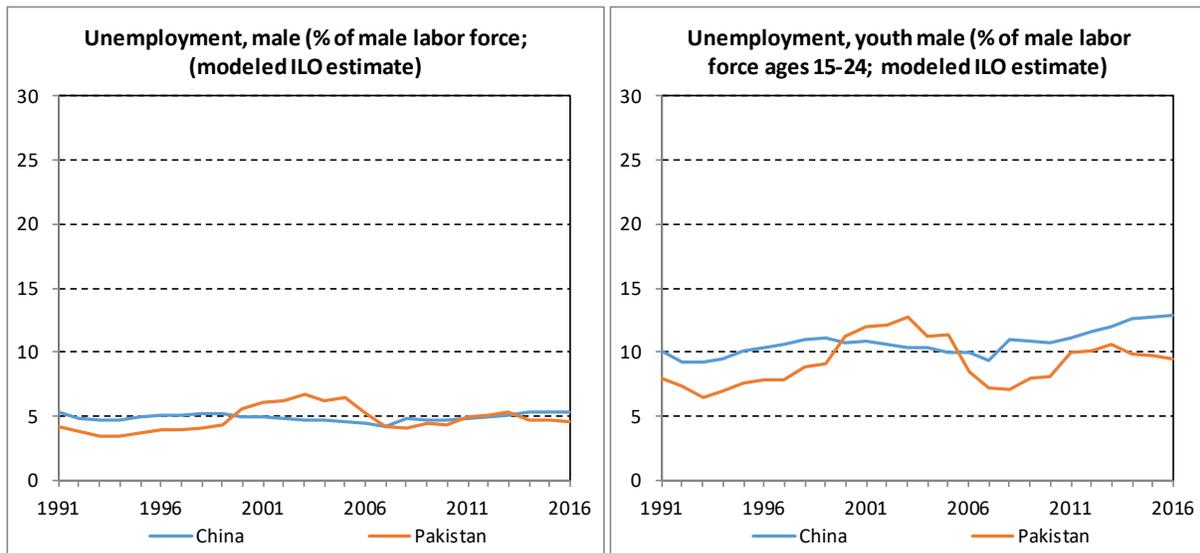
8 (female unemployment rates) with the orange lines of Figures 9 and 10 (male unemployment rates) clearly shows that Pakistani women have generally a much higher unemployment rate than Pakistani men. On the other hand, looking at the blue lines shows that Chinese men have a marginally higher unemployment rate than Chinese women.

**Figures 7 and 8: Women’s Unemployment Rates (total & youth), China and Pakistan**



Source: Created by author, based on World Bank (2017).

**Figures 9 and 10: Men’s Unemployment Rates (total & youth), China and Pakistan**



Source: Created by author, based on World Bank (2017).

In addition to overall discrimination against women, the labor participation rate for Pakistani women is very low. “According to the Pakistan Integrated Household Survey at the end of the 1990s, only one in four adult women (aged 10 and older) participated in the labor force, a far lower

rate than the nearly 70 percent participation for men.”<sup>13</sup> Many women (especially in China) also become discouraged when performing the same tasks as men for lower compensation and less benefits.

More efforts need to be made in both countries to reduce gender discrimination in the work place, and in Pakistan, specific actions have to be taken to lower women’s unemployment rate. On the supply side, women need to be motivated and provided more resources to get the proper education needed. On the other hand, more job opportunities also need to be provided for women who do not have the same level of education.

## V. Conclusion

Although it may seem unobtainable for the women who live through it, the lack of opportunity for women in these two societies needs to be dealt with and handled. Every woman deserves the right to an education, health, and a secure job. To be in the year 2018 and still have issues regarding male dominance and sexism is sad.

Regarding the inequalities in women’s education, more efforts need to be placed in order to make more institutions reachable for women who may live farther. If more women can be given the opportunity to get an education equal to that of a man’s, there would be more opportunities for higher-paying jobs and better lifestyles them and their children as well. Next, on the topic of health, it is urgent that young girls especially become informed and educated on all things sex, diseases, and hygiene. It is also important that they become aware of contraceptives and ways in which they can obtain them.

Finally, regarding inequality in the workplace. This topic may take longest until we see change, as it is a bit harder to do something about since it ties in so closely with societal roles. As stated by the World Bank (2005, p. 103), investing in female workers’ skills and promoting education and empowerment can be one big step into making a change. Gender inequality is common all throughout the world. If more people become aware, informed, and educated, perhaps one day we will be able to see a world in which a man and woman are treated the same.

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<sup>13</sup> World Bank (2005), p. 86-87.

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