FEMINIST POLICY BRIEF

Centering Marginalized Women in Peacebuilding and Governance

*Findings and Recommendations from the Jaari
Women Peacebuilder Fellowship Retreat*

October 2025 | Islamabad, Pakistan

Parindey Wellbeing & Development Foundation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief draws on findings from the Jaari Women Peacebuilder Fellowship retreat held in Islamabad in October 2025, which convened 19 women peacebuilders from across Pakistan with members of the Women Parliamentary Caucus (WPC), including Chairperson Dr. Shahida Rehmani. The dialogue revealed critical gaps in how peacebuilding and governance policies engage marginalized women, particularly those excluded based on gender identity, social class, and geographic location.

Key recommendations call for: (1) mandatory inclusion of marginalized women in policy dialogues at provincial and local levels; (2) investment in healing-centered, trauma-informed programs for adolescents and young women; (3) redistribution of decision-making power to provincial and community levels; (4) adoption of transformative justice frameworks that address root causes rather than symptoms of social inequity; (5) resourcing of collective care infrastructure for women peacebuilders; and (6) addressing statelessness and ensuring legal identity for all women, particularly those in undocumented and marginalized communities.

CONTEXT: THE JAARI WOMEN PEACEBUILDER FELLOWSHIP

The Jaari Women Peacebuilder Fellowship brings together grassroots women leaders working at the intersection of peacebuilding, gender justice, and community development across 16 cities in Pakistan. Through intensive capacity-building in systems thinking, feminist leadership, adaptive leadership in fragile contexts, and collective care practices, fellows develop skills to address complex social challenges while building sustainable movements for change.

The September 2024 retreat represented a critical milestone: direct dialogue between community-based women peacebuilders and parliamentary leaders to bridge the gap between grassroots realities and policy-making spaces.

FINDINGS

1. MARGINALIZED WOMEN REMAIN EXCLUDED FROM POLICY DIALOGUES

Despite progress in women's representation, policy dialogues continue to center educated, urban, economically privileged women while excluding:

- Women from working-class and rural communities
- Transgender women and gender non-conforming individuals
- Women from religious and ethnic minority backgrounds
- Adolescent girls and young women under 25

Fellows emphasized that without intentional inclusion mechanisms, existing power structures replicate themselves even within "women-focused" spaces, resulting in policies that fail to address the needs of those most affected by conflict, violence, and systemic inequality.

2. TOP-DOWN APPROACHES FAIL TO ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES

Current peacebuilding and development interventions often treat symptoms rather than transforming the systems that create conflict and inequity. Through systems thinking exercises, fellows identified how fragmented, short-term programs:

- Create dependency rather than building local capacity
- Ignore feedback loops that perpetuate violence and exclusion
- Miss leverage points for sustainable, systemic change
- Fail to engage adolescents during critical identity-formation years

One fellow reflected: "Solutions don't last if we only treat symptoms—we need to shift the systems that create them."

3. CENTRALIZED POWER STRUCTURES UNDERMINE LOCAL SOLUTIONS

Pakistan's governance architecture concentrates decision-making power at federal and provincial capitals, marginalizing local and community-level actors who possess intimate knowledge of context-specific challenges. This centralization:

- Delays response to urgent community needs
- Disconnects policy from ground realities
- Undermines local leadership and agency
- Creates barriers for women who cannot access urban policy spaces due to mobility constraints, care responsibilities, or security concerns

4. ABSENCE OF HEALING-CENTERED APPROACHES PERPETUATES TRAUMA

Women peacebuilders operate in contexts of ongoing violence, displacement, and systemic oppression. Without institutional support for emotional first aid, collective care, and trauma-informed practices:

- Activist burnout undermines movement sustainability
- Unprocessed trauma reproduces cycles of harm
- Community healing remains deprioritized in peacebuilding agendas
- Women leaders carry impossible burdens without structural support

5. STATELESSNESS AND GENDERED EXCLUSION

Integrating access to legal identity into gender-responsive peacebuilding is essential for dignity, inclusion, and sustainable peace. Without documentation, women remain invisible to systems meant to protect them and excluded from the very peace processes that claim to serve all communities.

Stateless women cannot register marriages, access maternal healthcare, enroll children in schools, or seek legal recourse when facing violence. They exist in a permanent state of precarity, unable to claim rights or participate in civic life. This exclusion perpetuates intergenerational cycles of marginalization and undermines any peacebuilding efforts that fail to recognize their existence.

Peacebuilding frameworks must address the realities of stateless and undocumented communities beyond ethnic or regional classifications. Women within these communities face compounded exclusion due to the absence of legal identity, limiting access to healthcare, education, justice, and civic participation. This invisibility heightens vulnerability to violence and exploitation.

CORE PRINCIPLES FOR FEMINIST PEACEBUILDING POLICY

Based on fellowship learnings, any effective peacebuilding and governance policy must be grounded in:

SYSTEMS THINKING: Looking beyond individual problems to understand interconnected patterns, root causes, and feedback loops that shape conflict and peace.

FEMINIST LEADERSHIP: Shifting from "power over" to "power with"—leadership grounded in equity, care, and justice that holds the door open for others.

TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE: Addressing harm by transforming conditions that created it, rather than punitive approaches that perpetuate cycles of violence.

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP: Building capacity to respond to complex, shifting challenges by mobilizing people and fostering collaboration without relying solely on positional authority.

COLLECTIVE CARE: Recognizing that self-care and community care are not luxuries but essential practices for sustainable movements and effective leadership.

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL: Understanding how personal narratives, identities, and everyday struggles connect to systems of power, policy, and social change.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: INSTITUTIONALIZE PARTICIPATORY MECHANISMS FOR MARGINALIZED WOMEN'S INCLUSION

Provincial and local governments must establish mandatory, resourced mechanisms ensuring marginalized women's meaningful participation in policy dialogues:

- Create reserved seats or quotas for women from working-class backgrounds, religious/ethnic minorities, transgender women, and adolescents in all peacebuilding and governance consultations
- Provide transportation stipends, childcare support, and accessibility accommodations to enable participation
- Schedule dialogues at the community level rather than requiring women to travel to provincial capitals

- Compensate community experts for their time and knowledge with fair honoraria
- Establish accountability measures tracking whose voices are heard and whose recommendations are implemented

RECOMMENDATION 2: INVEST IN ADOLESCENT-FOCUSED, HEALING-CENTERED PROGRAMMING

Policymakers must prioritize prevention by investing in programs that engage adolescents before patterns of violence, discrimination, and trauma become entrenched:

- Allocate dedicated budgets for trauma-informed, arts-based peacebuilding programs in schools and community spaces
- Integrate peace education, feminist dialogue, and conflict transformation skills into formal and non-formal education
- Train teachers, social workers, and community leaders in emotional first aid and holding space for young people
- Support youth-led initiatives rather than adult-designed programs claiming to serve youth
- Establish youth advisory councils with decision-making power (not merely consultative roles)

RECOMMENDATION 3: DECENTRALIZE DECISION-MAKING POWER TO PROVINCIAL AND COMMUNITY LEVELS

Effective peacebuilding requires shifting resources and authority closer to communities experiencing conflict:

- Devolve budgetary control for peacebuilding and social cohesion programs to district and tehsil levels
- Establish community peace committees with formal recognition and operational budgets
- Reduce bureaucratic barriers that prevent local organizations from accessing provincial and federal funding
- Create fast-track approval processes for community-led emergency response to conflict situations
- Mandate that provincial policies undergo community-level consultation before implementation

RECOMMENDATION 4: ADOPT TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE FRAMEWORKS

Move beyond punitive approaches to address the root causes of violence and conflict:

- Pilot restorative justice circles in communities experiencing sectarian or communal tensions
- Invest in economic justice initiatives addressing poverty and inequality as drivers of conflict
- Support community-based accountability mechanisms that center healing and repair over punishment
- Train law enforcement and judiciary in trauma-informed, gender-responsive conflict resolution
- Resource grassroots organizations working on prevention rather than only crisis response

RECOMMENDATION 5: RESOURCE COLLECTIVE CARE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS

Recognize that sustainable peacebuilding requires supporting those doing the work:

- Establish provincial-level support networks providing mental health services, legal aid, and security assistance for women human rights defenders and peacebuilders
- Fund peer support circles (like the Jaari Saheli Circle model) where women activists can share experiences and practice collective care
- Provide ongoing training in emotional first aid, burnout prevention, and trauma processing
- Create emergency response funds for activists facing threats or crises
- Recognize and financially support the invisible labor women peacebuilders perform
- Provide legal aid and advocacy support for women navigating citizenship and documentation processes
- Address root causes through legal reforms, preventing citizenship deprivation based on gender, ethnicity, or religion
- Include stateless women representatives in all peacebuilding policy dialogues and decision-making spaces
- Create protection mechanisms specifically for stateless women facing violence or exploitation
- Ensure healthcare, education, and justice services are accessible regardless of documentation status
- Establish fast-track legal identity documentation processes for stateless women and their children
- Conduct a comprehensive mapping of stateless and undocumented populations in collaboration with affected communities

Ensure that peacebuilding policies recognize and address the specific vulnerabilities of stateless and undocumented women:

RECOMMENDATION 6: ADDRESS STATELESSNESS AND ENSURE LEGAL IDENTITY FOR ALL WOMEN

Pakistan's National Security Policy (2022-2026) recognizes gender security as a key pillar, aiming to ensure integration of gender equity into national security narratives through full and meaningful participation of women in decision-making. However, significant implementation gaps remain (UN Women Pakistan, 2024). The International Crisis Group's 2022 report on Women and Peacebuilding in Pakistan's North West documents how women civil society activists face enormous security and economic challenges despite their frontline work in peacebuilding. Research shows that, particularly in conflict-affected areas, women from working-class and rural communities remain systematically excluded from policy spaces (USIP, 2025).

Marginalized Women's Exclusion from Peacebuilding

The recommendations in this policy brief are grounded in extensive research and evidence from multiple sources documenting the challenges and opportunities in Pakistan's peacebuilding landscape. The following findings support our core recommendations:

EVIDENCE BASE: SUPPORTING RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION

With 64% of Pakistan's population under 30, adolescent mental health represents a critical national priority. UNICEF assessments (2025) found that one in four Pakistani adolescents experiences symptoms of anxiety or depression. Research in Pakistan documented that over 53% of high school students aged 15-18 struggle with anxiety and depression, yet receive minimal support (Health Mosaic Pakistan, 2025). Young people have lived through terrorism, displacement, the 2022 floods, and repeated economic shocks, creating layered trauma. A 2024 Oxford Academic study on youth-led mental health promotion in Pakistan found that intergenerational trauma-sharing is a prerequisite for resilience-building, and

that peer-led programs incorporating stigma reduction, emotional literacy, and trauma understanding show significant promise. Pakistan has fewer than 500 trained psychiatrists for 240 million people, and most schools lack counselling services (Friday Times, 2025).

Adolescent Mental Health and Trauma-Informed Programming

Pakistan's Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) system serves as a de facto requirement for participation in civic life, required for voting, banking, healthcare, welfare, and even obtaining SIM cards. Approximately 700,000 individuals in Machar Colony, Karachi alone are estimated to be stateless or undocumented, with Bengali, Bihari, and Rohingya communities particularly affected (UNHCR Pakistan, 2020). Research from the Statelessness Encyclopedia Asia Pacific (2025) documents how the kinship-based digital identity system systematically excludes women and children who cannot meet verification criteria. The 2023 DAWN investigation found that stateless children face barriers to education as schools require B-forms for admission and matriculation exams, while CEDAW Committee (2020) expressed concern about extra conditions placed on Pakistani women conferring citizenship to foreign spouses compared to men, calling for legal reforms to ensure gender equality in nationality laws.

Statelessness and Legal Identity

This evidence base demonstrates that while Pakistan has made important policy commitments to women's participation in peacebuilding and security, significant gaps remain between policy and practice. The research consistently shows that marginalized women—including those from rural, working-class, stateless, and minority communities—possess critical knowledge and leadership capacity but face systemic exclusion from decision-making spaces. Addressing these gaps requires not only new policies but fundamental shifts in power, resources, and accountability mechanisms.

UN Women Pakistan's work, strengthening local women groups and civil society organizations, recognizes that women-led organizations are key contributors to lasting peace as they utilize local approaches to addressing conflict. USIP programming (2025) empowers women in peacebuilding through research, advocacy, and capacity building, noting that gender has been a major theme across Pakistan programming. However, the absence of systematic support for women peacebuilders' mental health and security needs undermines the sustainability of movements, particularly given that these activists operate in contexts of ongoing violence and displacement.

Supporting Women Peacebuilders

Research on integrating restorative justice into Pakistan's criminal justice system (2024) found strong support among stakeholders, including legal experts, correctional officers, religious scholars, and community development members, for its role in rehabilitation, reconciliation, and community healing. Studies document that Pakistan's traditional Muslahathi Committees and Jirga systems represent existing community-based deliberative justice mechanisms that, when properly reformed to ensure women's participation, can provide effective alternatives to punitive approaches (Braithwaite, 2015). Justice Project Pakistan advocates for transformative change that centers rehabilitation, dignity, and accountability over purely punitive responses, particularly for vulnerable populations, including juvenile offenders.

Transformative Justice and Community Accountability

UN Women's Gap Analysis of Pakistan's Security Protocols through a Gender Lens (2022) identified critical gaps in strategic instruments, noting the need to improve participation of marginalized communities, including women leaders and networks, in shaping security priorities. The 2018 constitutional amendment merged FATA and PATA into Khyber.

Pakhtunkhwa brought legal protections to women in tribal areas, yet follow-through on reforms remains inadequate, and centralized governance structures continue to marginalize local actors (International Crisis Group, 2022). UNDP Pakistan's work on building inclusive societies demonstrated that legal assistance enhanced access to justice for 2,149 women in marginalized areas of KPK through community-level engagement, highlighting the effectiveness of localized approaches

Decentralization and Community-Level Decision-Making

IMPLEMENTATION PATHWAY

SHORT-TERM (0-6 months)
- Women's Parliamentary Caucus convenes stakeholder consultations in each province with intentional outreach to marginalized communities
- Provincial governments conduct mapping of existing grassroots women-led peacebuilding initiatives
- Pilot participatory budgeting process in three districts, allowing communities to direct peacebuilding resources

MEDIUM-TERM (6-18 months)
- Establish provincial-level Women Peacebuilder Support Networks with dedicated budgets
- Launch adolescent peace education pilot programs in 20 schools across provinces
- Create community peace committees with operational budgets in conflict-affected districts
- Develop and disseminate guidelines for trauma-informed, gender-responsive program design

LONG-TERM (18+ months)
- Revise provincial governance structures to institutionalize decentralized decision-making
- Scale successful pilot programs nationally
- Establish monitoring and evaluation frameworks tracking marginalized women's inclusion and policy impact
- Create knowledge-sharing platforms connecting community peacebuilders with policymakers

CONCLUSION
The Jaari Women Peacebuilder Fellowship demonstrates what becomes possible when marginalized women are centered as experts and leaders. The 16 fellows gathered in Islamabad represent thousands of women across Pakistan who possess the knowledge, skills, and commitment to build peace, including stateless and undocumented women who exist in legal invisibility but who remain systematically excluded from the policy spaces where decisions about their communities are made.

This is not merely a matter of fairness. It is a matter of effectiveness. Peacebuilding policies designed without those most affected by conflict cannot address root causes, cannot build sustainable solutions, and cannot transform the systems that perpetuate violence and inequity.

As one fellow reflected: "Leadership is not just a role—it's a practice of holding the door open for others, even when it's heavy."

The Women's Parliamentary Caucus and provincial governments now have the opportunity to hold that door open. The question is whether they will.

ABOUT PARINDEY WELLBEING & DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION

Parindey is a youth- and women-led organization working at the intersection of mental health, peacebuilding, gender justice, and climate resilience through trauma-informed, arts-based programs. Since 2015, Parindey's signature initiatives—including Shehri Guftugu (civic dialogue), the Jaari Women Peacebuilders Fellowship, Awami Dastaan (participatory storytelling), and Floating Voices (river-based climate justice)—have reached over 15,000 people across Pakistan.

Founded by Sonal Dhanani, 2025 recipient of the Geneva Centre for Human Rights and Dialogue's Individual Award for Defending Freedom of Expression Online, Parindey centers grassroots leadership, indigenous wisdom, and collective healing in building movements for social transformation.

For more information: www.parindey.org.pk | info@parindey.org.pk

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ANNEX: FELLOWS' VOICES

"I learned that solutions don't last if we only treat symptoms—we need to shift the systems that create them."
— Fellow on Systems Thinking

"I realized leadership is not just a role—it's a practice of holding the door open for others, even when it's heavy."
— Fellow on Feminist Leadership

"In this circle, I felt truly seen and held—like I was part of something bigger than myself."
— Fellow on the Saheli Circle

"I learned that in fragile contexts, my role is not to solve everything—it's to help people adapt and find solutions together."
— Fellow on Adaptive Leadership in Fragile Contexts

"I understood that a movement is not built on loud voices alone—it's built on listening, trust, and shared vision."
— Fellow on Feminist Dialogue and Movement Building