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Name:

Registration No.:

Course Code: 880

Program: BS/MSc

Semester: Autumn 2026

ALLAMA IQBAL OPEN UNIVERSITY, ISLAMABAD

Course: Perspective of Women's Rights in Islam (9168/880) • Level: BS/MSc

Semester: Autumn 2026

Assignment No. 2 (Units 6–9)

Total Marks: 100 • Pass Marks: 50

SOLVED ASSIGNMENT GUIDE

(For Study & Reference)

Note: This guide is prepared for study and reference purposes. Students are advised to read the relevant units of the course book, understand the concepts, and write the assignment in their own words. Copying this guide word for word is not recommended.

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Question 1: Feminist Theology and Political Activism (20 Marks)

What is the relationship between feminist theology and political activism?

Introduction

Feminist theology is the critical study of religion from the standpoint of women's experience, undertaken with the aim of reforming religious belief and practice so that they no longer justify women's subordination. Political activism is organised action — campaigning, lobbying, protesting, litigating, educating and building institutions — aimed at changing laws, policies and social arrangements. The relationship between the two is close, reciprocal and, according to feminist theologians themselves, essential: feminist theology was born from activism, supplies activism with its deepest arguments about why change is a matter of justice and even of faithfulness to God, and is in turn corrected and kept honest by the experience of activists. A theology that only reinterpreted texts without touching women's real conditions would, in the classic feminist judgement, have failed its own test, because its founding claim is that ideas about God and ideas about women's place stand or fall together.

This answer traces the relationship in both directions. It first shows how feminist theology grew out of political movements; then how theological ideas — about God, scripture, sin, salvation

and the church or religious community — are translated into political programmes; then the forms the resulting activism takes; and finally the tensions within the relationship, including criticisms from secular feminists, from religious traditionalists and from women of the majority world. The South Asian and Pakistani setting, where women's organisations negotiate daily with religious language, is used as a running illustration.

Roots: A Theology Born from a Movement

Unlike most academic theologies, feminist theology did not begin in a university and then seek an application; it began in a movement and then sought a theory. The nineteenth-century women's movement produced religious argument from the start: abolitionist and suffrage campaigners such as Sarah Grimké answered the clergy who quoted scripture against women's public speaking by re-reading the same scriptures, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's 'The Woman's Bible' grew directly out of the suffrage struggle. In the twentieth century, the second-wave women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s produced consciousness-raising groups in which women — including churchwomen — compared the teaching they had received with the lives they were living, and the mismatch generated the questions that Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and others turned into systematic theology. Latin American liberation theology supplied the method: theology as critical reflection on practice, in a continuing circle of action, reflection and renewed action (praxis). Feminist theology adopted that circle deliberately: experience of oppression, critical analysis of its religious roots, re-reading of the tradition, and action to transform church and society.

The same pattern appears, in a different religious setting, in Muslim women's scholarship. Writers such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, and organisations such as Sisters in Islam in

Malaysia and Musawah internationally, begin from concrete campaigns — against discriminatory family laws, domestic violence and exclusion from mosques — and produce Qur'anic re-readings to support them, while their campaigns gain confidence and vocabulary from the scholarship. In Pakistan, organisations such as Aurat Foundation and Shirkat Gah have similarly combined legal and political work with engagement with religious argument, because in a society where opponents claim divine sanction, a purely secular vocabulary rarely wins the argument alone.

How Theology Feeds Activism

Feminist theology contributes at least four things to political activism. First, it supplies legitimacy within religious communities. A demand for equal inheritance, for protection from violence or for girls' schooling can be dismissed as Western and irreligious; when theologians show, from the community's own sources, that dignity and justice are religious obligations, the demand becomes an internal call to faithfulness, and ordinary believers, clergy and even legislators can support it without feeling they have abandoned their faith. Second, it supplies diagnosis. By analysing how doctrines of creation, fall, purity and obedience were formed and used, theology identifies exactly which ideas must change for practice to change, and prevents activism from winning a law while leaving untouched the beliefs that will quietly defeat the law. Third, it supplies motivation and endurance. Movements sustained only by anger burn out; congregations, women's fellowships, study circles and rituals of lament and hope — the infrastructure theology builds — carry campaigns across decades. Fourth, it supplies a vision: images of a community in which women and men share authority, ministry and care give activism a positive destination, not only a list of grievances.

These contributions translate into recognisably theological political programmes: campaigns for women's ordination and mosque access, where the argument is doctrinal before it is legal; campaigns against domestic violence framed as defence of a creation made in God's image; campaigns for family-law reform argued from the objectives of justice and mercy within the tradition; and campaigns on girls' education that quote the tradition's own commands to seek knowledge. In each case the theological claim and the policy demand are two sides of one argument.

How Activism Feeds and Corrects Theology

The traffic is not one-way. Activism constantly returns experience to theology and forces it to change. Campaigning among poor, rural, disabled and minority women taught largely middle-class academic theology that 'women's experience' is not one thing: womanist theologians in the United States insisted that racism and poverty shape Black women's faith as deeply as sex does; Latin American and Asian theologians insisted that land, debt, militarism and caste belong inside feminist theology; and disability theologians challenged images of wholeness and independence that activism itself had taken for granted. Practical politics also tests doctrine: a theology of marriage, divorce or reproductive health that cannot survive contact with a women's shelter, a family court or a hospital ward will be revised by the women who work there. Feminist theologians describe this as the discipline of accountability — theology must answer to the women in whose name it speaks, especially the poorest.

Activism also gives theology its institutions. Women's commissions of churches, gender desks of religious NGOs, women-led prayer and study networks, publishing houses and university programmes were nearly all created by organised pressure, and they in turn employ

theologians, train clergy and produce the books through which ideas spread to congregations. The relationship is therefore also sociological: theology and activism share people, money and meeting-places, which is why histories of one are unintelligible without the other.

Tensions and Criticisms in the Relationship

A critical answer must name the tensions. Secular feminists have sometimes charged that theological activism compromises: that by arguing inside a patriarchal tradition, feminists legitimate it, accept half-measures such as 'equal but complementary', and delay the clean break that equality requires. Religious traditionalists make the opposite charge: that feminist theology is politics in disguise, importing a secular programme and baptising it, so that scripture is judged by the movement instead of the movement by scripture. Both charges identify a real risk, and feminist theologians answer them in the same way: by insisting on the praxis circle, in which sources and experience interrogate each other, and neither is allowed simply to win. There are also strategic tensions inside movements — between reformers who work within institutions and radicals who build alternatives; between professionalised, donor-funded activism and grassroots organising; and between the priorities of Northern academia and Southern movements, a tension examined again in this assignment's discussion of NGOs. Managing these tensions, rather than abolishing them, is the normal condition of the relationship.

Conclusion

To conclude, feminist theology and political activism are related as reflection and action within a single movement. Activism gave feminist theology its questions, its method of starting from women's experience, and its institutions; theology gives activism internal religious legitimacy, a

diagnosis of the ideas that sustain subordination, sustaining communities and a vision of a transformed community. Each corrects the other's characteristic weakness — activism without theology can win statutes and lose the culture; theology without activism can win arguments and change nothing. Their relationship is therefore best described not as theory applied to practice, but as a continuing circle, in which the struggle for women's dignity in church and society continually re-reads the tradition, and the re-read tradition continually re-energises the struggle.

Question 2: The Impact of International Conventions and National Instruments on Women (20 Marks)

Describe the impact of international Human Rights conventions and various national Instruments affecting women?

Introduction

Over the past seventy-five years an extensive legal architecture for women's rights has been built at two levels: internationally, through United Nations conventions, declarations and conferences; and nationally, through constitutions, statutes, policies and institutions in individual states, including Pakistan. The question asked here is not what these instruments say — that is described in the answer to Question 5 — but what difference they have made: their impact. Impact must be judged at several levels at once, because a convention can change the language of politics without immediately changing a village. This answer therefore assesses impact under five heads: normative impact (new standards and vocabulary), legal impact (laws and court decisions), institutional impact (commissions, ministries and budgets), social impact

(education, health, work and representation as actually experienced), and the limits and backlash that qualify every claim of success.

A fair overall judgement, argued below, is that the impact has been real, cumulative and uneven: strongest in setting standards, opening political space and delivering measurable gains in girls' education, maternal health and women's political representation; weakest where implementation depends on local enforcement against entrenched custom, and where states ratified instruments with reservations or without budgets. The instruments work less like switches than like levers: they give women, lawyers, officials and movements something solid to push with, but someone must still push.

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Normative and Legal Impact

The deepest impact of the international instruments is normative. Before 1945, how a state treated its women was largely regarded as its own affair; after the Universal Declaration, CEDAW (1979) and the world conferences at Nairobi (1985), Vienna (1993), Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995), discrimination against women became a defined violation of international commitments, violence against women was named a human rights issue rather than a private misfortune, and governments accepted periodic public examination of their record by treaty bodies, special rapporteurs and other states. This changed the terms of argument everywhere: a Pakistani parliamentarian, a Kenyan judge or a Brazilian minister debating a women's bill now argues in a vocabulary — discrimination, due diligence, substantive equality, temporary special measures — created by the instruments, and opponents must answer in the same vocabulary rather than simply invoking tradition.

Legally, the impact is traceable in statute books. CEDAW's requirement of legal equality drove reforms of nationality laws (allowing mothers to pass citizenship to children), family laws (raising marriage ages, registering marriages, reforming custody and divorce), labour laws (equal pay provisions, maternity protection, harassment codes) and criminal laws (recognising marital rape in many jurisdictions, criminalising domestic violence and harmful practices). Courts have used the conventions directly: the Indian Supreme Court's Vishaka guidelines on workplace sexual harassment (1997) were built expressly on CEDAW in the absence of a statute, and Pakistani superior courts have repeatedly cited the Constitution's equality clauses together with Pakistan's international commitments when striking down discriminatory practices and jirga decisions. National instruments then carry the standard into administration: Pakistan's Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act, 2011, the honour-crimes reforms of 2016 and the provincial domestic-violence and child-marriage laws all stand in this line of descent from international standard to national instrument to (intended) local effect.

Table 1: Levels of impact of women's rights instruments

Level	What changed	Illustration
Normative	Discrimination and violence against women defined as rights violations, not private matters	Vienna 1993: 'women's rights are human rights'; CEDAW General Recommendations on violence
Legal	Constitutions and statutes rewritten; courts cite conventions	Harassment Act 2010 and Anti-Women Practices Act 2011 in Pakistan; Vishaka guidelines in India
Institutional	Machinery created to carry the agenda inside the state	National and provincial Commissions on the Status of Women; women's ministries; gender budgeting
Political	Women's presence in legislatures increased by quotas and reserved	Pakistan's 17% reserved seats in the National Assembly; local-

	seats	government quotas bringing women into councils
Social	Measurable gains, unevenly shared	Rising girls' enrolment and falling maternal mortality worldwide; persistent gaps in pay, assets and safety

Institutional, Political and Social Impact

Institutionally, the instruments obliged states to build machinery: ministries or departments for women, national and (in Pakistan) provincial Commissions on the Status of Women, ombudspersons for workplace harassment, women's police desks and stations, shelter homes, and statistical systems that now routinely count women separately, making gaps visible and therefore arguable. International reporting cycles — Pakistan's periodic reports to the CEDAW Committee, and the Committee's concluding observations in reply — create a recurring public audit in which domestic NGOs file shadow reports and newspapers report the findings; activists consistently describe this cycle as one of the instruments' most practical effects, because it manufactures occasions on which promises must be answered for.

Politically, the Beijing Platform's endorsement of special measures normalised quotas. Women's share of parliamentary seats worldwide has roughly doubled since 1995, and in Pakistan the reserved-seats system (sixty seats in the National Assembly, with corresponding provincial quotas, originally carried from the local-government reforms of 2001 that brought tens of thousands of women into union councils) created a generation of women legislators whose presence changed committee agendas — much of the protective legislation listed above was moved or championed by women members. Socially, the decades of the instruments coincide with large real gains: global girls' primary enrolment approaching parity, maternal

mortality falling substantially, women's literacy and life expectancy rising in Pakistan as elsewhere. Honest attribution shares this credit among economic growth, technology, national programmes and the instruments themselves, whose clearest contribution was to set the targets, supply the indicators and keep the issues on every government's desk.

Limits, Reservations and Backlash

The limits are as instructive as the successes. Many states entered reservations to CEDAW's core articles — especially on family law — that hollow out its force, and Pakistan's own accession in 1996 was accompanied by a general declaration subordinating it to the Constitution, a formula the CEDAW Committee has repeatedly asked Pakistan to withdraw or narrow. Implementation gaps dominate every treaty-body review: laws exist on harassment, honour crimes and anti-women practices, yet conviction rates remain low, police and medico-legal systems under-resourced, and rural women often unable to reach the forums created for them. Economic rights lag furthest: the gender pay gap, women's tiny share of land ownership and their concentration in informal, unprotected work have moved slowly everywhere, because they require redistribution and not only prohibition. Finally, the instruments have generated backlash: 'gender ideology' campaigns in several regions, resistance to child-marriage and domestic-violence laws as attacks on family and faith, and periodic attempts to shrink NGO and media space all show that impact provokes counter-impact. The balanced conclusion is that the conventions changed what can be said, what can be passed and what can be counted — the necessary first half of change — while the second half, enforcement in the police station, the land record and the home, remains incomplete in Pakistan and in most of the world.

Conclusion

To conclude, the impact of international human rights conventions and national instruments on women has been normative before it was practical, and practical before it was complete. They defined discrimination and violence as public wrongs, supplied the language and the audit cycles with which women hold states to account, produced constitutions, statutes, commissions, quotas and budgets that did not exist before, and accompanied measurable gains in education, health and representation. Their limits — reservations, weak enforcement, slow economic change and organised backlash — locate the unfinished work precisely: not in drafting new standards, but in funding, staffing and politically defending the machinery that turns standards into a woman's actual safety, schooling, property and voice.

Question 3: Political and Legal Reforms and Positive Social Change in Pakistani Women's Lives (20 Marks)

How can political and legal reforms bring Positive social change in Pakistani women's lives?

Introduction

Pakistan's women live under a double reality. The Constitution of 1973 promises them full equality: Article 25 declares all citizens equal before law and expressly permits special provisions for the protection of women and children; Article 34 directs the state to ensure women's full participation in all spheres of national life; and Pakistan has ratified CEDAW and repeatedly committed itself at Beijing and in the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet the everyday reality of millions of women — early marriage, denied inheritance, unpaid and unrecognised work, violence with little redress, and absence from the rooms where decisions are taken — falls far short of the promise. Political and legal reforms are the bridge proposed

between promise and reality: changes in who makes decisions, and changes in the rules that govern marriage, property, work, violence and public life. This answer explains how such reforms can bring positive social change, area by area, and then states the conditions without which reforms remain paper.

The argument proceeds on a simple theory of change. Law and political representation do not transform society by themselves, but they do three things nothing else does as well: they set the official standard against which conduct is judged and taught; they change incentives, rewarding some behaviour and punishing other behaviour; and they create rights that organised women can invoke, in courts, in offices and in public argument. Social change follows when reforms are joined to enforcement, economic opportunity and education — a qualification developed at the end of this answer.

Political Reforms: Representation That Changes Agendas

The first channel is representation. Reserved seats — 17 per cent for women in the National Assembly and provincial assemblies, and substantial quotas in local government since 2001 — have brought women into legislatures and councils in numbers that voluntary party selection never produced. Their effect is not merely numerical. Women legislators in Pakistan have disproportionately sponsored and championed legislation on harassment, domestic violence, child marriage, anti-women practices and women's commissions; women councillors at union level have carried water, health, girls' schooling and family disputes into local planning; and their visible presence normalises, for a watching generation of girls and for male colleagues, the idea of women exercising public authority. Political reform can deepen this channel: increasing the share of women elected on general seats through party ticket quotas under the Elections

Act, 2017 (which requires parties to field at least 5 per cent women candidates on general seats); strengthening women's wings and internal party democracy; training and mentoring first-time legislators; and ensuring women's membership of the powerful committees — finance, law, home affairs — and not only of 'women's' committees. A second political channel is the administration itself: women in the civil service, judiciary, police and prosecution change how the state meets a woman complainant, and quotas and targeted recruitment in these services are therefore reforms with daily social effects.

Political reform also includes the voter herself. Millions of Pakistani women historically lacked national identity cards and registration, and in some districts social pressure — in notorious cases, local agreements among male elders — kept women from polling stations altogether. Measures such as NADRA registration drives for women, the Elections Act provision allowing results to be questioned where women's turnout is extremely low, women's polling stations and female polling staff, and civic education convert a formal franchise into an exercised one; and an exercised vote changes how candidates, including conservative ones, address women's demands.

Legal Reforms: Marriage, Violence, Property and Work

- Family and personal-status reforms. Enforcing the minimum age of marriage (raised to 18 in Sindh in 2013, and the subject of continuing provincial and federal reform efforts), compulsory registration of nikah with trained, accountable nikah registrars, enforcing the woman's right to her dower (haq mehr) and to stipulate conditions in the nikah-nama, and accessible, timely dissolution and maintenance through reformed family courts all change the balance of power inside marriage itself. A woman who married as an adult, whose

marriage is registered, whose dower is real and who can leave a destructive marriage with maintenance and custody fairly decided is socially a different person from one denied all four.

- Protection from violence. The honour-crimes reforms of 2016 (removing pardon by compromise for offences in the name of honour), the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act, 2011 (criminalising swara, vani, marriage to the Qur'an and depriving women of inheritance), provincial domestic-violence acts (Sindh 2013, Balochistan 2014, Punjab's Protection of Women Against Violence Act 2016, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 2021), acid-crime legislation and rape-law reforms including the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021 can change social behaviour when they are actually applied: every well-publicised conviction teaches a community that 'honour' is no defence and that the state will act, which is how law performs its educative, norm-setting function.
- Property and inheritance. Because economic dependence underlies most other disabilities, reforms that deliver women's Qur'anic and constitutional shares — the criminalisation of dispossession in the 2011 Act, succession facilitation through NADRA succession certificates under the Letters of Administration and Succession Certificates Act, 2020, digitised land records that name female heirs, and enforcement ombudspersons for women's property rights in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa — translate directly into social change: a woman with land or a house in her own name can refuse a marriage, leave violence, educate her daughters and be consulted by her family.
- Work and economic life. The Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010 made continued employment realistically possible for millions of women by giving

harassment a name, a committee and a penalty; equal-pay and maternity provisions, recognition and protection of home-based workers (as in Sindh's Home-Based Workers Act, 2018), access to microfinance and bank accounts, and inheritance delivered in practice together raise women's earnings, and earnings reliably raise a woman's voice in household decisions, her children's schooling (especially daughters') and her safety.

- Education and health entitlements. Article 25-A's guarantee of free and compulsory education for children aged five to sixteen, enforced through enrolment drives, stipends for girls, female teachers and safe transport, and health reforms centred on lady health workers, maternal care and reproductive health services, are legal-political reforms whose social effects compound across generations.

How Reforms Become Social Change — and What Blocks Them

Reforms produce social change through identifiable mechanisms. They signal: the state declares, in its most solemn form, that a practice is wrong, which shifts what teachers teach, what media dramatise and what parents can be told by their own children. They deter and protect: a functioning protection system changes a violent man's calculation and a threatened woman's options on the same day. They empower organisation: rights on paper are the raw material of unions, bar associations, women's commissions, helplines and NGOs. And they redistribute: budgets follow mandates, so a domestic-violence act with funded shelters and protection officers changes more lives than a declaration without a rupee behind it.

The blocks are equally identifiable: laws passed without rules, staff or budgets; police, medico-legal and lower-judicial attitudes that reproduce the customs the law condemns; courts' delays that exhaust complainants into 'compromise'; parallel forums such as jirgas that recapture

cases; low legal literacy, which leaves most women unaware of the rights created for them; and periodic political backlash that portrays protective law as an attack on family and faith. The reform agenda that follows from this diagnosis is therefore as much administrative as legislative: implementation rules notified on time, gender-responsive budgeting, training and accountability of police and judges, legal aid and awareness delivered through schools, media and lady health workers, data collected and published, and alliances with religious scholars who can establish — as they demonstrably can for inheritance, consent in marriage and protection from harm — that the reforms fulfil, rather than fight, the society's own deepest commitments.

Conclusion

To conclude, political and legal reforms can bring positive social change in Pakistani women's lives because they change who decides, what is punished and praised, and what a woman can claim as of right: representation puts women's questions onto every agenda; family, criminal, property, labour and education reforms alter the real terms of marriage, safety, ownership, work and schooling; and enforcement converts text into new social fact, one conviction, one succession certificate, one protected employee and one enrolled girl at a time. The Pakistani record since 2001 — a substantial body of protective law and a visible class of women legislators, judges, officers and professionals — shows the mechanism working; the same record's implementation gaps show its condition. Reforms are necessary, powerful and insufficient alone: joined to enforcement, budgets, education and economic independence, they are the most reliable instrument a society possesses for closing the distance between the equality its constitution promises its women and the lives its women actually lead.

Question 4: The Critique of NGOs and Women's Discrimination (20 Marks)

What is the critique of NGOs in terms of their performance to assist women in overcoming discrimination against them?

Introduction

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been central actors in the struggle against discrimination against women, in Pakistan and worldwide, since the 1980s: running shelters, legal-aid clinics, literacy and health programmes, microcredit schemes and advocacy campaigns, and filing the shadow reports through which treaty bodies hear women's own accounts. Precisely because they occupy this trusted position — speaking for women who face discrimination — NGOs have attracted a substantial critique of their performance. This answer sets out that critique fairly and in full: the charges of donor dependence and distorted agendas, of professionalisation and distance from grassroots women, of weak accountability, of project-based work that produces reports rather than change, of urban and elite bias, of cultural and political vulnerability, and of limited measurable effect on discrimination itself. It then records the defence and the balanced assessment, because a one-sided account would misdescribe a debate in which many of the sharpest critics are themselves women's rights workers.

Two clarifications frame the discussion. First, 'NGOs' are not one thing: the category runs from a village women's group to international federations with thousands of staff, and most criticisms bite hardest on large, professionalised, donor-funded development NGOs. Second, a critique of performance is not a denial of achievement: the same literature that criticises NGOs credits them with much of the legal and institutional progress described elsewhere in this

assignment. The question is whether, measured against their own stated mission — helping women overcome discrimination — they perform as well as they claim.

Donor Dependence, Agendas and Accountability

The most frequently made criticism is donor dependence. Because most women's NGOs are financed by foreign governments, international agencies and large foundations, their agendas are said to follow funding fashions rather than local priorities: one decade's money is for microcredit, the next for governance, the next for countering extremism or for climate, and organisations reshape their programmes — critics use the phrase 'project chameleons' — to fit calls for proposals written in distant capitals. Closely connected is the accountability charge, sometimes summarised as 'accountable upward, not downward': an NGO reports meticulously to its donor, with log-frames, indicators and audits, while the women it serves have no vote in its governance, no access to its budgets and no mechanism to remove its leadership. Feminist scholars such as Andrea Cornwall and others have documented how the language of 'empowerment' and 'participation' can survive in proposals while the practice becomes delivery of pre-designed packages to 'beneficiaries' — a word the critique seizes on, because a beneficiary receives; she does not decide.

In Pakistan, donor dependence also creates political vulnerability. Because funding is foreign, opponents can brand women's NGOs as agents of a Western agenda, a charge used against campaigns on family law, honour crimes and reproductive health; governments have periodically tightened registration, foreign-funding and reporting requirements, and organisations spend significant energy on compliance and survival. Critics inside the movement add that dependence discourages confrontation: an NGO that needs its registration renewed

and its next tranche released will think carefully before leading a protest, so the sector drifts from movement politics toward service delivery and consultancy.

Professionalisation, Elite and Urban Bias, and Weak Roots

A second cluster of criticisms concerns who NGOs are. Development work professionalised: salaries, offices, vehicles, English-language reporting and careers replaced the volunteer activism of the early women's movement — a process critics call 'NGO-isation'. The charge is that a salaried, urban, English-speaking professional class now mediates between poor women and the state and donors, filters those women's demands into fundable language, and has its own interest in the continuation of the problems it administers. Geographically, offices, projects and media attention concentrate in capitals and large cities, while the districts where discrimination is harshest — rural Sindh, southern Punjab, Balochistan, merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa — receive short projects rather than permanent presence. Representation is also questioned within organisations: leadership drawn from educated, connected families; boards that reproduce themselves; and limited space for working-class, minority and disabled women in decision-making, even in organisations working in their name.

A third cluster concerns method and results. Project cycles of one to three years are too short to change norms formed over centuries, yet funding requires quick, countable outputs — trainings held, leaflets distributed, loans disbursed — so performance is measured in activities rather than in reduced discrimination. Evaluations are often commissioned by the implementer, rarely publish failure, and seldom follow women after the project closes. Microcredit, the flagship intervention of an earlier era, illustrates the critique in detail: studies found loans frequently controlled by male relatives, repayment pressure added to women's burdens, and

little reliable movement in asset ownership or decision-making — income without power. Similarly, one-off 'awareness' trainings for police, teachers or husbands show attitude shifts on the final-day questionnaire that field studies find faded within months. The cumulative charge is a performance gap: considerable money and activity, modest and poorly verified change in the structures of discrimination.

Cultural, Political and Structural Criticisms

Further criticisms operate at the level of the sector as a whole. NGOs are accused of fragmenting the women's movement: hundreds of organisations compete for the same funds, duplicate each other's work in the same accessible districts, guard their brands and data, and find coordination and a common political programme difficult. They are accused of depoliticising discrimination: treating as technical problems (training, credit, awareness) what are in fact conflicts over land, wages, family law and state power, which no workshop can settle and which require political parties, unions and legislatures. They are accused, in the Pakistani debate particularly, of cultural thinness: campaigning in imported vocabulary, neglecting religious argument that persuades the majority, and thereby handing opponents the 'foreign agenda' weapon. And they are accused of substitution: by providing shelters, clinics and legal aid that the state should provide, NGOs let the state escape its duty, while their own services reach only a fraction of need and vanish when funding ends. Each accusation has been made, notably, by feminists themselves — by Ayesha Jalal's generation of movement critics, by scholars of 'NGO-isation' in South Asia and Latin America, and by grassroots organisers contrasting membership-based organisations, answerable to their members, with project-based NGOs answerable to donors.

The Defence and a Balanced Assessment

The defence begins by insisting on the counterfactual: without NGOs, Pakistan would have no network of shelters and helplines, far less legal aid, no systematic documentation of violence (the annual data most often quoted in parliament and press is compiled by NGOs and rights groups), weaker shadow reporting to CEDAW, and fewer of the trained women who now staff commissions, media and legislatures. Organisations such as the Aurat Foundation, Shirkat Gah, War Against Rape, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and many provincial groups demonstrably shaped the legislative record of 2010–2021. Defenders add that donor funding, whatever its distortions, is often the only funding available for unpopular causes — no local market finances a shelter for women fleeing 'honour' violence — and that professional standards, audits and safeguarding, the very marks of 'NGO-isation', also protect clients and money. Finally, they argue that the performance critique proves too much: discrimination is produced by law, economy, custom and family together, and judging NGOs by whether discrimination has ended sets a standard no single actor, including the state with all its powers, has met.

The balanced assessment accepts the critique's core while rejecting its exaggeration. The structural charges — upward accountability, short project cycles, output-counting, urban concentration and agenda drift toward donors — are well evidenced and are acknowledged in the sector's own reform literature, which now prescribes longer core funding, community governance, membership models, published evaluations including failures, and alliances with parties, unions and religious scholars rather than substitution for them. Where NGOs have performed best against discrimination — sustained legal-aid and shelter work, documentation,

strategic litigation and legislative advocacy maintained over decades — the common features are exactly the ones the critique recommends: rootedness, patience, local leadership and accountability to organised women. The critique, properly read, is therefore less an obituary than a standard: NGOs assist women in overcoming discrimination to the extent that they are answerable to women, stay for the long term, and work politically as well as technically.

Conclusion

To conclude, the critique of NGOs' performance in assisting women against discrimination charges them with donor-driven agendas and upward-only accountability; with professionalisation that distances a salaried, urban elite from grassroots women; with short projects that count activities instead of changing structures; with fragmentation, depoliticisation and cultural vulnerability; and with substituting for a state whose duty it properly is. The record also shows indispensable contributions in services, documentation and law reform, and the fairest verdict joins the two: NGOs are necessary but insufficient instruments, strongest when rooted, member-accountable and politically engaged alongside movements and the state, and weakest when they become contractors delivering brief projects to beneficiaries. For students of women's rights, the critique matters because it applies the movement's own test — who decides, who benefits, and does power actually move? — to the movement's own organisations.

Question 5: International Human Rights and the Instruments Affecting Women (20 Marks)

Describe International Human Rights, and various Instruments affecting women?

Introduction

International human rights are the rights recognised by the international community as belonging to every person by virtue of humanity, expressed in treaties, declarations and institutions created since 1945, and binding on states through ratification, custom and political commitment. Within that general system, a set of instruments speaks specifically to women, because experience showed that general guarantees, without specific attention, left women's discrimination untouched. This answer first describes international human rights in outline — their sources, generations and machinery — and then describes, instrument by instrument, the various international and related national instruments affecting women. Where Question 2 of this assignment assessed the impact of these instruments, this answer's task is descriptive: what each instrument is, when it appeared, what it contains and what machinery it created.

International Human Rights: Sources and Machinery

The modern system begins with the Charter of the United Nations (1945), which committed member states to promoting respect for human rights without distinction as to sex, and created the framework — General Assembly, Economic and Social Council, and later the Human Rights Council (2006) — within which standards are made. Its first great statement is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted on 10 December 1948: thirty articles covering civil and political rights (life, liberty, freedom from torture and slavery, fair trial, expression, religion, political participation) and economic, social and cultural rights (work, education, health, social security, an adequate standard of living), all prefaced by the declaration that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, entitled to the Declaration's rights 'without distinction of any kind, such as … sex'. The UDHR is a declaration, not a treaty, but it is

the source from which binding treaties were drafted and is widely treated as expressing customary obligations.

The two Covenants of 1966 converted the Declaration into treaty law: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which adds a Human Rights Committee receiving state reports and, under its Optional Protocols, individual complaints and the abolition of the death penalty in states that accept it; and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), with its own committee and a standard of progressive realisation according to available resources. Together with the UDHR they form the 'International Bill of Human Rights'. Around them stand the specialised conventions — against racial discrimination (1965), against torture (1984), on the rights of the child (1989), on migrant workers (1990) and on disability (2006) — the Geneva Conventions' humanitarian law for armed conflict, the International Labour Organization's labour conventions, and regional systems in Europe, the Americas and Africa with their own courts and commissions. Enforcement throughout is mainly by reporting, examination, publicity and peer pressure rather than by an international police: states report periodically to treaty bodies, receive concluding observations, and may be visited by special rapporteurs and examined by other states in the Universal Periodic Review. It was within this system, and largely by pointing out that its general language coexisted with women's specific subordination, that the women's instruments were built.

Table 1: Principal international instruments affecting women

Instrument	Year	Core content for women
Universal Declaration of Human Rights	1948	Equal dignity and rights without distinction of sex; equal rights in marriage; equal pay; special care for motherhood

Convention on the Political Rights of Women	1952	Women's right to vote, to be elected and to hold public office on equal terms
Convention on the Nationality of Married Women	1957	A woman's nationality is not automatically changed or lost by marriage
ILO Equal Remuneration Convention (No. 100) and Discrimination Convention (No. 111)	1951 / 1958	Equal pay for work of equal value; no sex discrimination in employment
UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education	1960	Equal access to education for girls and women
ICCPR and ICESCR	1966	Equality before the law; equal enjoyment of all civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights; equal rights in marriage
CEDAW	1979	The comprehensive women's rights treaty: elimination of discrimination in law, politics, education, work, health, family and rural life
Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women	1993	Defines violence against women in public and private life; states must exercise due diligence
Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action	1995	Twelve critical areas of concern, from poverty and education to violence, power and decision-making
Security Council Resolution 1325 (Women, Peace and Security)	2000	Women's participation in peace processes; protection in conflict
CEDAW Optional Protocol	1999	Individual complaints and inquiries into grave or systematic violations

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CEDAW: The Central Women's Instrument

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted in 1979 and in force from 1981, is the centrepiece — often called the international bill of rights for women. Its thirty articles define discrimination against women (Article 1) as any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which impairs women's enjoyment of rights on

a basis of equality; oblige states to embody equality in constitutions and law and to modify social and cultural patterns of conduct based on ideas of the inferiority or superiority of either sex (Articles 2 and 5); permit temporary special measures such as quotas to accelerate real equality (Article 4); and then proceed through political and public life (Articles 7–8), nationality (9), education (10), employment (11), health (12), economic and social life including credit (13), rural women (14), equality before the law (15) and marriage and family relations — free choice of spouse, equal rights during marriage and at its dissolution, equal parental rights, and a minimum marriage age with compulsory registration (16). Pakistan ratified CEDAW in 1996, with a general declaration relating it to the Constitution, and reports periodically to the CEDAW Committee, the expert body of twenty-three members that examines states and issues General Recommendations which have authoritatively developed the Convention on violence against women (General Recommendation 19, updated by 35), women's health, political participation and other themes. The Optional Protocol of 1999 allows individual women to complain to the Committee after exhausting domestic remedies, and allows inquiries into grave or systematic violations, in states that accept it.

Declarations, Conferences and Sectoral Instruments

Around CEDAW stand the conference and declaration instruments that set global policy. The world conferences on women — Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and above all Beijing (1995), whose Declaration and Platform for Action remains the most complete policy blueprint, with twelve critical areas of concern and commitments by 189 governments — created the political programmes that treaties alone do not contain. The Vienna World Conference on Human Rights (1993) declared women's rights an inalienable part of universal

human rights; the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (1994) centred women's health and reproductive rights; the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) defined violence in family, community and state and imposed the due-diligence standard; Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and its successors built the women, peace and security agenda; and the Sustainable Development Goals (2015) made gender equality both a stand-alone goal (SDG 5) and a thread through all others. Sectoral treaties add precision: ILO Conventions Nos. 100, 111, 156 (workers with family responsibilities), 183 (maternity protection) and 190 (violence and harassment in the world of work, 2019); the Convention on the Rights of the Child, protecting girls from child marriage and discrimination; and regional instruments such as the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention (2011) on violence against women and the African Maputo Protocol (2003), which show the global standards being deepened regionally.

National Instruments in Pakistan

International instruments reach a woman's life through national ones, and Pakistan's include, at the constitutional level, Articles 25 (equality of citizens, with permission for special provisions for women and children), 25-A (free and compulsory education), 27 (no discrimination in services on the basis of sex, with provision for reserved posts), 34 (full participation of women in all spheres of national life) and 37–38 (promotion of social justice and welfare). At the statutory level stand the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961 (registration of marriage and regulation of polygamy and divorce procedure); the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010; the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act, 2011; the honour-crimes amendments of 2016; provincial domestic-violence and child-marriage restraint acts;

women's property-rights enforcement laws; and the Elections Act, 2017 provisions on women's candidacy and turnout. Institutionally, the National Commission on the Status of Women (established 2000) and its provincial counterparts, the federal and provincial women's development departments, harassment ombudspersons and women police and protection services form the machinery charged with carrying both the international commitments and the national law into practice, in coordination with Pakistan's reporting under CEDAW and the Universal Periodic Review.

Conclusion

To conclude, international human rights form a system of declared standards, binding treaties, expert committees and review procedures built since 1945 on the principle of equal dignity, and within that system the instruments affecting women move from the general to the specific: the UDHR's sex-blind promise, specialised conventions on political rights, nationality, pay and education, the comprehensive obligations of CEDAW with its Committee and Optional Protocol, and the policy blueprints of Vienna, Cairo, Beijing, Resolution 1325 and SDG 5. National instruments — in Pakistan, the equality articles of the Constitution, family, criminal, workplace and electoral statutes, and the commissions and ombudspersons that administer them — are the channel through which these international commitments become a woman's enforceable claim. Describing the instruments, as this answer has done, is the necessary first step; judging what they have changed, the task of Question 2, begins from the map drawn here.

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