Dreams Deferred:

The Hidden Cost of Missing Essential Services and Infrastructure in Women's Lives

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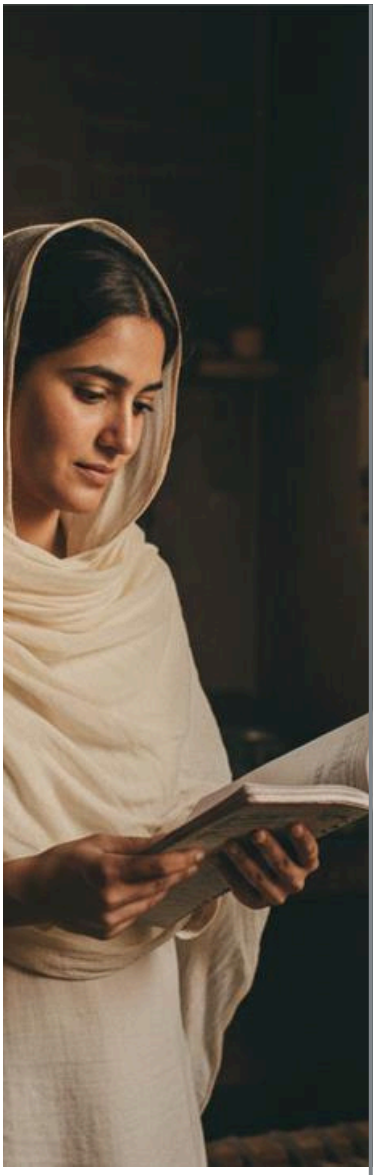
Saba's childhood dream was precise. She imagined a school with blue-lined chairs, light-wood desks, and a sign that read Islamia School for Girls. At eight, the future, she imagined, was one of learning, freedom, and joy. By sixteen, that future had narrowed. She was out of school and doing endless household chores. By nineteen, married, pregnant with her first child, it had completely vanished.

This is not a story about individual failure. It is about how rigid social norms and missing infrastructure loudly reshapes women's lives in Pakistan, compressing time, breaking ambition, and robbing dreams.
Infrastructure is usually understood as roads, pipes, clinics, and schools. In settlements like Dhoke Hassu, women and men serve as the invisible cost of missing essential services and, alternatively, as infrastructure. Costly transport delay care seeking, schools without toilets result in soaring dropout rates amongst girls, and when younger siblings need caregivers, the elder sister steps in, with the constant thought that she doesn't need the education she's missing out on. And the list goes on. This labor is not incidental; it is structural. The absence of reliable services does not produce visible collapse because women absorb the shock. Scarcity is managed, illness contained, households stabilized.

That compensation has a cost. Lives altered, dreams changed, hopes limited to the immediate survival rather than thriving communities and prosperity.

Dreams postponed, not destroyed

For poor urban women, ambition is not forbidden; it is conditional.



Education is encouraged for men on the basis that they might earn more for the family. Women's paid work is acceptable if it fits around care and household chores. Any aspirations must justify themselves through continuous sacrifice of the self because society does not recognize women's ambitions as necessary for economic and social progress.

Once Saba had completed her matriculation and hoped to train as a teacher. But marriage intervened as a given expectation. "First manage the home," her mother had advised. Infrastructure gaps made that advice practical. Without childcare, reliable water, safe transport, or nearby health services, the household required constant management. And Saba's dreams were postponed indefinitely.

This is how imagination shrinks through constant exhaustion of the seemingly unchangeable.

A regional pattern, not a Pakistani anomaly

Pakistan is not alone in this dynamic. In India's urban informal settlements, women face similar trade-offs. Research from Ahmedabad and Delhi shows women spending three to five hours daily on home, water, and waste management tasks in unserved areas. Yet where services improve, outcomes shift. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) demonstrated that combining basic services—water access, childcare centers, and health insurance—with livelihood support increased women's workforce participation and income stability. Infrastructure was not an add-on; it was the enabler.

Bangladesh offers another instructive contrast. In Dhaka's low-income settlements, NGOs such as BRAC linked community health outreach, sanitation upgrades, and women's micro-enterprises. Evaluations consistently show that when health shocks decline, and water access improves, women's economic activity increases—not because motivation changes, but because time and risk decrease. Infrastructure reduces vulnerability; agency follows.

These cases expose a hard truth: women's "resilience" often masks public services' systemic neglect. When infrastructure improves, resilience is no longer required as a survival strategy.

Back in Dhoke Hassu, Saba's story bends, but does not break. When she's older, having just had her third child, a part-time teaching opportunity opens a door. Online courses follow. Eventually, she secures an administrative role at a local school. It is not her childhood dream, but it is movement.

Yet her progress depends on fragile alignments: supportive family members, flexible hours, proximity to work. It survives despite infrastructure, not because of it. Most women never receive these alignments. Their endurance becomes an expectation.

Urban policy often celebrates women's coping strategies, such as informal childcare networks, home-based enterprises, and community caregiving. But coping is not by choice. When cities rely on women to hold systems together, care becomes an unpaid subsidy for failure.

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If Pakistan is serious about women's economic participation and urban productivity, we need to see infrastructure in urban settlements as critical and through a gender-friendly lens. The deficits are gendered, and so must be the solutions.

First, count women's time as an economic cost. Urban planning and PC-1s should quantify hours lost to water collection, health access, and unsafe mobility. What is not measured remains invisible.

Second, bundle services where women live. Primary health care, childcare, water points, and women's enterprise spaces should be co-located in informal settlements. Fragmented services multiply time burdens.

Third, invest in care infrastructure. Community childcare, elder care, and safe transport are economic infrastructure. India's Anganwadi model and Bangladesh's community health hubs offer scalable templates.

Fourth, link infrastructure upgrades to livelihoods. Slum upgrading should integrate women's employment—maintenance contracts, sanitation enterprises, community health work—so services reduce poverty while creating income.

Finally, formalize women as urban stakeholders. Women from informal settlements must sit on municipal advisory boards, water committees, and health planning forums. Not as beneficiaries, but as decision-makers.

The communities and households function so precariously because women like Saba refuse to give in despite their exhaustion and delayed creams. Can we reach them in time?

Follow along for more.