DEI Practices for Professional Events and Conferences in Pakistan

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WomenInTechPK

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About WomenInTechPK

The tech sector in Pakistan has been growing at a rate of more than 15% every year for the past few years, according to Nasheed Malik, ICT analyst at Topline Securities [1]. However, the participation of women in the industry is barely 14%, according to a recent report published by the Pakistan Software Export Board (PSEB) [2].

The statistics call for urgent measures from all directions and on every level. We cannot wait for policymakers to implement nationwide policies against discrimination or to promote DEI. This country needs its tech leaders to take matters into their own hands and take intentional measures to implement diversity, equity, and inclusivity.

Upon realizing the gravity of the situation and identifying the need to encourage women to pursue their careers in tech, Faiza Yousuf laid down the foundation for WomenInTechPK. This was the first step towards a long journey to bring a much-needed revolutionary change in the tech industry in Pakistan.

Initially, WomenInTechPK – a nonprofit initiative – started with only one mission: connecting early professionals and technology students with role models and mentors. Over the years, the community became stronger and brought forth the initiatives and collaborations that left a lasting impact on the Pakistani tech sector. The community has evolved not just into a portfolio of projects, programs, and collaborations but also as the leading voice to create awareness for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the local tech ecosystem.

Today, it is the largest women-only tech community, offering personal as well as communal support to women. This community provides a safe space for women to discuss career paths, seek advice, explore possibilities, learn about new avenues, build strong networks, find mentors, and receive the relevant support they need to grow.

WomenInTechPK also connects its members with national and international conference organizers, helps members write their speaking proposals, and negotiates subsidized conference tickets to various onsite and virtual conferences around the world.

WomenInTechPK has played a major role in bridging the gender gap and started conversations about the need for equal opportunities for all. The ultimate goal of this initiative is to help enrich Pakistan's tech ecosystem by being more inclusive and offering equal opportunities and a safe space for everyone.

The change is already underway. All of us need to come together to make a move NOW.

Founder's Message

WomeInTechPK envisions Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity to be an integral part of the technology industry across the country. We strive to enrich Pakistan's technology ecosystem by encouraging more women to participate and introducing more opportunities for them to grow.

This framework is another effort to ensure that the organizations have the right resources to be inclusive. We have created this framework to guide the readers about the topic and provide an easy-to-follow checklist for conference organizers from all industries to add more diversity to their events.

I offer my sincere gratitude to AnitaB.org Systers Pass It On Awards 2022 for making it possible for me to create and launch this framework. I would also like to thank Anum Fatima for her fantastic work on this project, and to all the incredible women working in tech, thank you for being persistent and becoming role models for countless women who aspire to work in the local and global technology sector.

Upwards and Onwards!

Faiza Yousuf

Founder - WomenInTechPK | Cofounder - CodeGirls
Cofounder - CaterpillHERs | Cofounder - koi.work

Who is this Framework for?

Diversity is a fact, but inclusion is a choice we make every day. As leaders, we have to put out the message that we embrace and not just tolerate diversity. ~ **Nellie Borrero**

Notwithstanding the existing biases, evidence has shown time and again that diversity of thought makes companies, events, and ideas more successful, and it is about time that leaders take intentional measures to promote diversity in all professional scenarios. As we know, every positive action we take today will lead to a revolutionary change in the country's technology space.

This framework has been fashioned as an easy-to-follow checklist to help implement Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity (DEI) practices primarily in tech conferences in Pakistan. However, this framework can be employed by conference organizers and event managers from any industry.

The purpose is to lend support to leaders and organizations in arranging all kinds of professional events, such as conferences, seminars, meetups, workshops, hackathons, et cetera, and make them inclusive.

It is a playbook and a conversation starter – a guideline to ensure everyone is given an equal opportunity and to include as well as facilitate people from all races, genders, religions, and abilities in professional events. We aim to share it with all of our collaborating partners to be used in their conferences and provide feedback for further improvements.

Importance of DEI in Conferences

Have you been to conferences where every panelist shares the exact same ideas or comes from similar backgrounds and age groups? Such events are a flush of repetitive ideas without opposing or challenging views.

It is common to see such panels where people from the same background are invited to speak. Women, people from minorities, and the differently-abled are often conveniently left out.

A research paper published in 2017 showed that gender-diverse collaborations are more creative, innovative, and effective at problem-solving [3]. The world, including Pakistan, is a diverse place unless we acknowledge and include people from all backgrounds, real and sustainable progress cannot be made.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity (DEI) is an initiative to offer equal opportunities to people from all backgrounds, races, religions, ages, genders, and abilities. It is about letting go of biases and accepting people based on their talents. We need to understand the importance of diversity and inclusivity and bring equity into the frame to make the first two possible.

Inclusivity has been an underestimated concept. It is not only beneficial to the underrepresented communities; it is also beneficial for professional gatherings (read: conferences and events) and, ultimately, the entire tech ecosystem. A study in 2015 demonstrated that papers from diverse ethnicities, institutions, and locations are more likely to be accepted by high-impact journals and cited more often [4].

Representation in professional events can work as a catalyst by encouraging individuals from all backgrounds to contribute.

In professional events, DEI culture helps:

- Bring new perspectives to the table from diverse minds.
- Encourage innovation by having a group of people from different backgrounds, making the discussions creative with varying opinions and solutions.
- Promote equality among speakers as well as attendees.
- Allow for psychological safety, resulting in more productive and revolutionary ideas.
- Promote better and fairer decision-making processes – when the leadership is diverse.

As the CEO of Google and Alphabet, Sundar Pichai, aptly points out,

"A diverse mix of voices leads to better discussions, decisions, and outcomes for every person."

Diversity Stats in Pakistan

All across the world, we observe conscious or unconscious biases against various groups. Regardless of the industry, discrimination against women, nonbinary folks, and differently-abled minorities is evident. The prejudice is observed in hiring processes, wages, appraisals, and even in the nature of the job.

Despite significant growth in the past few years in the tech sector, there exists a need to make deliberate efforts to offer equal opportunities to underrepresented and underserved groups and communities.

We have compiled a few statistics that underscore the gravity of the situation, especially in Pakistan. The shocking numbers call for urgent measures.

We have identified three areas that need immediate attention:

1.

Gender

Regardless of the industry, Pakistan observes a wide gender gap concerning employment opportunities and leadership roles for women and nonbinary genders.

A report published in Dawn in 2022 highlighted that, in Pakistan, only 10% of women work as non-agricultural workers in the formal private sectors [5].

And, if we look at the wage gap, it is twice as wide as in other countries, that is, 34% [6].

10%
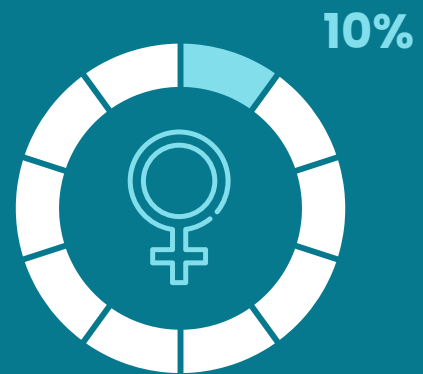
It is not only small businesses; gender bias against women is evident in large-scale corporations, too. According to a discussion paper by ACCA Pakistan on Gender Diversity on Boards in Pakistan, published in 2010, only 31% of the companies had any number of women on their boards of directors [7].

To address this concern, the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP) in 2019 necessitated listed companies to have at least one woman on the company's board. SECP also made it a requirement for the companies in the above notification to conduct gender pay gap analyses, create policies to help develop in-demand skills and provide necessary facilities [8].

The situation, however, has not improved much. On the World Economic Forum 2022 Global Gender Gap Index, Pakistan ranks 145th out of 146 countries [9]. The picture gets even more disappointing when we look at transgenders and nonbinary individuals. We have observed an almost negligible number of nonbinary and trans individuals in the tech sector or leadership positions in any industry across the country, and certainly, no authentic data is available in the Pakistani context.

In several countries, although there are laws to protect nonbinary individuals, prejudices against them still exist. A research paper published in 2021 demonstrated that more than 45% of the people with unconventional gender identities in the U.S. reported "unfair treatment at work, including being fired, not hired, or harassed" [10].

These numbers emphasize the need for urgent actions to set the changes in motion.

2 Disabilities

6.2% of Pakistan's population – about 14 million people – suffer from disabilities of one kind or another. The news article that mentions these figures states that these are reported numbers; the actual count is much higher than this [11].

According to a World Bank report, **71% of the differently-abled individuals in Pakistan are unemployed and dependent on their families** [12].

The government sector has 2% and 3% employment quotas for the differently-abled across the country [13]. However, ironically, various audits have reported that the hiring process for these quotas discriminates against the very individuals.

71%
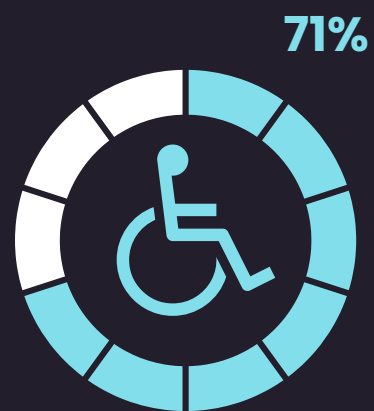
To add to the dire straits is the fact that although in 2006, an accessibility code was developed by the government of Pakistan, neither offices nor educational institutions were built to facilitate people with special needs. Most surprisingly, even the hospitals do not follow the accessibility code to support individuals with limitations.

Surveys by ASER Pakistan from 2019 reported that only about 2% of schools have ramps for children with walking disabilities, while only 3.9% and 7% of the government and private schools, respectively, have disability-friendly toilets [14]. Inaccessibility to schools and school toilets discourages children from pursuing education and polishing their skills while lowering their self-esteem at a tender age.

Discrimination against disabilities is common in several parts of the world. This discrimination is not only unfair to these citizens with special needs but also creates a burden on the economy. According to data, the exclusion of persons with disabilities results in a loss of the country's GDP by 3 to 7% [15].

Neglecting a large population is equivalent to dismissing thousands – if not millions – of new ideas, perspectives, and talents. It is about time we start taking appropriate measures to include these persons with disabilities in our diverse pool of talents.

3 Religious Minorities

To negate religious intolerance and discrimination against minorities, we need to be inclusive, open, and unbiased. Overall, in Pakistan, religious minorities have lower literacy rates than Muslims.

Researchers believe one of the main factors is the curriculum being "biased against them, and that textbooks contain content (that promotes) intolerance and violence against them in (the) society.

Religious minorities are harassed in the education sector of the country" [16][17]; another research showed that 11.4% are denied admission to schools due to their faith [18].

Even some well-educated individuals report biases against them due to their faith.

It is astounding to observe that the country, with a population of 180 million, has only about 9% of the workforce belonging to religious minorities [19].

9%
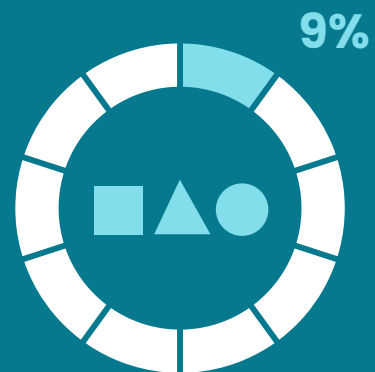
Such biases are unethical, to state the obvious. They also promote hatred and intolerance among citizens and are detrimental to the economic prospects of Pakistan.

Diversity in Workforce: The Way to Innovation and Profit

Negating the biases in education and the workforce is moral and ethical on all levels. But, beyond that, it is crucial for the economic and cultural progress of the country.

Diverse cultures are innovative cultures. People from all backgrounds contribute their unique perspectives, fostering the emergence of creative problem-solving solutions.

When there is diverse representation in organizations and people are hired without any bias, psychological safety is evident. When everyone feels valued for their contributions and feels safe in the environment, they are more open to being creative and productive.

Psychologically safe organizations have happier and healthier cultures.

Employee retention from the underrepresented as well as adequately represented groups is shown to be better in companies that do not have biased cultures.

Biased companies may not realize this, but they are leaving solid profits on the table. It might be surprising, but a report by McKinsey observed that organizations with gender-diverse leadership teams are "21% more likely to be profitable and 27% better at creating value."[20] Another report suggests that diverse teams outperform non-diverse teams by 35% [21].

As more companies lean towards diversity and innovation, the country's economy witnesses a boost.

For example, a report by McKinsey Global Institute published in 2015 studied 95 countries and found that if they reached full gender equality in 2015, global GDP would increase by $12 trillion by 2025 [22].

Understanding Our Biases

Biases can either be conscious or unconscious. We need to be mindful of conscious biases and understand unconscious ones to be fully inclusive and make better decisions.

Automatic and often operating in the spur of the moment, unconscious biases can influence decision-making. A common type of unconscious bias is generalizing and stereotyping a group's behavior. Scientifically speaking, your brain is bombarded with millions of pieces of information at any given moment. To make things easier, it prioritizes data and dismisses some of it. It makes the decision-making process less demanding.

For example, a small business owner is looking to hire an accountant. They get hundreds of applications, and sorting them is a massive task for them. They may consider applicants from a specific educational institution to be more talented and give preference to them, unconsciously dismissing the rest. The business owners in this scenario made things easier for themselves without realizing the bias. There are statistics and studies to prove the existence of these biases.

A report published in 2018 suggested that, worldwide, 48% of women in tech report discrimination in the hiring process [23]. In a study by Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, hiring managers were asked to employ a participant to solve a mathematical problem based on their appearance. The managers, both males and females, hired men twice as often as women [24].

It is common to see some jobs or some leadership roles open only to men or not considering people with disabilities or from minorities. For example, jobs such as school teachers, nurses, and PR specialists are considered suitable for females, and engineering, stock trading, and construction are more open for men – without analyzing their individual potential [25].

A research study published in American Sociological Review found that professions that are considered to be a "man's job" are deemed more crucial and credible than those labeled as a "woman's job." [26]

In Pakistan, we observe biases based on genders, races, religions, abilities, fluency in the English language, geographical locations, and educational institutions, to list a few. These may be unconscious biases. But, as leaders, we need to be more conscious while making decisions that are right for the company as well as society at large. Google and Meta, the two tech giants, are among the first to stamp out unconscious biases.

Here are checklists by Google to help companies incorporate unbiasing cultures:

- **Unbiasing Hiring Checklist**
- **Unbiasing Performance Review Checklist**

DEI Framework for Conferences & Events

Keeping in mind the need of the hour and the interest of industry leaders in organizing inclusive events, WomenInTechPK has developed this extensive checklist.

On-Site and Virtual Conferences

Reaching Out to Speakers

☐ Decide on the method for selecting speakers: Would they be chosen by the organizing team, or will you call for papers?

If you are calling for papers, make sure

☐ Use inclusive language when advertising your call for papers.

☐ To anonymize the submissions (names, pronouns, and all other details must be hidden).

☐ The program committee has been trained to grade each paper/proposal on the basis of a well-thought-out rubric.

☐ A team of diverse members constitute the program committee.

☐ Each paper is reviewed by more than one committee member.

In case you are reaching out to the speakers, be sure to:

☐ Reach out to speakers of different age groups, making sure to not neglect younger voices.

☐ Reach out to the right organizations, groups, platforms, or communities, such as

☐ LinkedIn and Prowomen.pk (a project of P@SHA powered by CodeGirls), to find speakers.

☐ Select a diverse lineup of speakers with relevant expertise.

☐ Encourage speakers to nominate other speakers.

☐ Use sensitive, appropriate language when approaching potential speakers.

Code of Conduct

☐ Create and publish a code of conduct for your event (Here is a resource to help develop a code of conduct for your events).

☐ Ensure that your organizing team is well-trained and has embraced DEI.

☐ Write your code of conduct in simple words, preferably in a list format, for those who scan documents.

☐ In case it will be distributed across various ethnic groups, share it in multiple languages.

☐ Share the code of conduct in writing as well as in audio formats.

☐ Add it to your registration process to be signed and agreed upon by all participants.

☐ Make sure it is signed and agreed by exhibitors, speakers, and others who will not be filling out the registration forms.

Sponsors

☐ Choose sponsors whose values align with yours.

☐ None of the sponsors should be supportive of intolerance, extremism, and/or bigotry.

Marketing Campaigns

☐ Use inclusive imagery on promotional materials.

☐ Use appropriate and inclusive language.

Registrations

☐ Ask questions related to their preferred pronouns and names, dietary restrictions, and disabilities in the registration form.

☐ Keep in mind the varying socio-economic statuses while setting fees or offering scholarships for students or low-income groups.

☐ Consider offering various payment methods for fee payment.

☐ Provide content warnings on the form in case there are triggering or sensitive discussions to be expected.

☐ Encourage student attendance by offering exclusive discounts.

DEI Framework For Conferences & Events

Invitations

☐ Add a link to the map, QR code, or detailed address to the venue.
☐ Clearly mention the dates, days, and timings.

Program

☐ Ensure the content is thoughtfully crafted and does not contain offensive language.
☐ Language must be inclusive throughout the event.

Moderation

☐ Appoint a trained moderator to keep the discussion and the agenda on track.
☐ All speakers must be given equal opportunities to share their opinions.
☐ Ensure that one speaker speaks at a time to allow everyone a chance to share their opinion and make it easy for those hard of hearing.

Networking

☐ Encourage networking to foster inclusivity and teamwork.
☐ Choose neutral icebreakers.
☐ Plan inclusive networking sessions.

Anti-Harassment Policy

☐ Educate the organizing team on anti-harassment policy. (Refer to this document: Code of Conduct).
☐ Share the policy with attendees, speakers, sponsors, and stakeholders.
☐ Explicitly share the members of the organizing team who can be reached out to in case of any violation of the policy.
☐ Develop a safe and discreet reporting system.
☐ Include clear guidance on safe and discreet reporting in the anti-harassment policy.
☐ Ensure the participants understand the consequences of violation of the policy.

Handling Conflict

☐ Provide detailed instructions to the organizing team for handling conflict professionally and discreetly.

Sharing Reference Conference Material

☐ Compile and send out conference materials for reference in various formats (audio, visual, transcripts).

Feedback and Improvements

☐ Distribute/send out online survey forms to the participants to get feedback.
☐ Get feedback from the organizing committee.
☐ Document the feedback for future improvements.

Evaluation

☐ Analyze the program agenda to check for the diversity of speakers, attendees, and organizing staff.
☐ Identify areas of improvement in all aspects of the event/conference, including program, venue, etc.
☐ Share diversity metrics, initiatives, and challenges with participants and stakeholders.
☐ Consider having Net Promoter Score (NPS) as a criterion for evaluation, including questions such as
    • How likely are you to attend this event next year? (scale of 1 to 10)
    • How likely are you to recommend this event to a friend or colleague? (scale of 1 to 10)

For On-site Conferences

Selecting/Preparing the Venue

☐ Select an accessible, easy-to-find, and secure location.
☐ Display clear instructions on evacuation through the venue for emergencies.
☐ Display emergency contact information throughout the venue.
☐ Perform safety demonstrations, ideally before the program begins.

In addition to the above, select venues that offer:

☐ Separate prayer rooms for men and women.
☐ Separate restrooms for men, women, and nonbinary people and with facilities for persons with disabilities.
☐ Comfortable lactation rooms.
☐ Quiet areas for reflection, especially for those with social anxiety and ADHD.
☐ Braille or audio signs.
☐ Ample security personnel and CCTV cameras.
☐ Ensure well-lit rooms, halls, and entrances.
☐ Limit the use of fluorescent lights and loud noises.
☐ Availability of pre-installed ramps or provision for temporary installation.
☐ Ample parking spaces and designated parking spots for pregnant people or people who use wheelchairs.

Program

☐ Choose hours that are conducive to those with caregiving responsibilities or visual impairment to allow for maximum participation.
☐ Include pronouns with names on badges.
☐ Hire a sign language interpreter for the participants who are hard of hearing.

Privacy

☐ Add a disclaimer in the registration form regarding photography and videography at the event and about publishing the content on platforms after the event.
☐ Provide stickers to attendees who do not wish to be photographed/videographed.
☐ Instruct photographers and videographers to be careful not to capture the candidates who are not comfortable.

Meals

☐ Offer vegetarian, vegan, and non-vegetarian options.
☐ Label the meals to highlight allergens.

For Virtual Conferences

Platform Selection

Choose a platform that:

☐ Allows captions to help participants with hearing impairment.
☐ Is available on all Operating Systems.
☐ Runs smoothly on low bandwidth.

Access Control

☐ Include registration link to the invitations.
☐ Screen the participants during the registration process to prevent unauthorized access.
☐ Record the event for quality control.
☐ Offer recorded session on-demand if registered participants are unable to attend.

Tech Support

☐ Offer tech support to help participants navigate the platform.
☐ Do a tech check with speakers to avoid issues during the event.

Organizing Committee
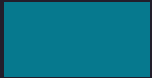
Training

☐ Train the organizing committee on diversity, equity, and inclusivity.
☐ Train the staff to use appropriate language while addressing participants Inclusive leadership.

Inclusive Leadership

☐ Keep the committee leadership inclusive to allow for improved decision-making.
☐ Ensure that all leaders are treated fairly.

Diverse Team

☐ A diverse organizing team should be employed.
☐ The induction process must be unbiased by keeping applications anonymous; that is, names, pronouns, and other details are kept hidden.
☐ Make sure multiple managers are responsible for hiring to reduce the chances of discrimination.
☐ Arrange training sessions regarding unbiased hiring for the hiring team to ensure diversity in the long run.

Ongoing Evaluation

☐ Evaluate the team's diversity, productivity, and efficacy regularly.
☐ Employ third-party evaluators and implement their feedback.

Support

☐ Offer training and support to the team to help them improve.

Conclusion

Diversity and inclusivity are significant for the growth and development of the tech ecosystem in Pakistan. Diversity can be the core strength of any industry, leading it to remarkable progress.

This framework is to help all the industry leaders and conference organizers, particularly from the technology sector, to get one step closer to the sky-high ambitions of a prosperous, tolerant, and inclusive environment across the country.

We encourage people from diverse backgrounds to be a part of the tech industry and help it become Pakistan's largest, fastest-growing, and most profitable industry. We are also committed to promoting a culture of tolerance and inclusion throughout the country.

To a more inclusive future for all of us!

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