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President Xi's Soft Power "She Power" initiative's impact on women's maternal health and schoolgirls in Balochistan, Pakistan

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Kamran Saddique^{1*}, Zheng Lu², Sufyan M. Ramish³, Dai Yonghong¹ and Muhammad S. Rao⁴

College of International Studies, Institute of Area Studies, Shenzhen University, Shenzhen China¹; Department of educational administration and policy, Chinese university of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China²; Institute of Business and health Management, DOW university of Health Sciences, Karachi Pakistan;³ Department of Mathematics Education, School of Mathematical Sciences, East China Normal University, China⁴

*For Correspondence: Email: 1155209118@link.cuhk.edu.hk

Abstract

This paper examines the impact of President Xi Jinping's Soft Power "She Power" initiative on women's maternal health and school girls' livelihoods in Balochistan, Pakistan. Launched by the Chinese Embassy, the initiative distributes 20,000 hygiene kits and conducts health awareness campaigns for schoolgirls. Utilizing a systematic literature review and policy analysis, this study evaluates the initiative against Balochistan's critical socio-economic indicators, including a Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) of 298 per 100,000 live births and a 12% female literacy rate. The findings suggest that "She Power" initiative is a notable exercise in soft power projection and a valuable Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM — the hygienic management of menstruation, including access to sanitary materials, water, and sanitation facilities) intervention, its direct impact on systemic maternal health and women's livelihood challenges is currently limited and indirect. The focus on schoolgirls establishes a long-term, theoretical pathway for improved reproductive health. The paper concludes that for China's social diplomacy to achieve sustainable development impact, such initiatives must be integrated with broader, direct health and economic empowerment projects. This integration must occur within the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) framework to ensure measurable and lasting outcomes. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2026; 30 [16] 104-111).

Keywords: Women's Maternal Health, schoolgirls, Balochistan, Pakistan, She power, soft image

Résumé

Cet article examine l'impact de l'initiative de « soft power » (puissance douce) baptisée « She Power », lancée par le président Xi Jinping, sur la santé maternelle et les conditions de vie des écolières au Baloutchistan (Pakistan). Initié par l'ambassade de Chine, ce programme prévoit la distribution de 20 000 kits d'hygiène ainsi que la conduite de campagnes de sensibilisation à la santé auprès des élèves. S'appuyant sur une revue systématique de la littérature et une analyse des politiques publiques, l'étude évalue cette initiative au regard des indicateurs socio-économiques critiques du Baloutchistan, notamment un taux de mortalité maternelle de 298 pour 100 000 naissances vivantes et un taux d'alphabétisation des femmes de 12 %. Si les résultats indiquent que « She Power » constitue une opération notable de projection de puissance douce et une intervention précieuse en matière de gestion de l'hygiène menstruelle (MHM — incluant l'accès aux protections hygiéniques, à l'eau et aux installations sanitaires), son impact direct sur les problèmes systémiques de santé maternelle et les défis liés aux conditions de vie des femmes demeure, pour l'heure, limité et indirect. En ciblant les écolières, l'initiative ouvre une voie théorique à long terme pour l'amélioration de la santé reproductive. L'article conclut que, pour que la diplomatie sociale de la Chine ait un impact réel en matière de développement durable, de telles initiatives doivent être intégrées à des projets plus vastes et directs axés sur la santé et l'autonomisation économique. Cette intégration doit s'opérer dans le cadre du Corridor économique Chine-Pakistan (CPEC) afin de garantir des résultats mesurables et pérennes. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2026; 30 [16]:104-111).

Mots-clés: Santé maternelle des femmes, écolières, Baloutchistan, Pakistan, pouvoir des femmes, image positive

Introduction

The rise of China as a global power has been accompanied by a sophisticated deployment of soft power, a concept defined by Joseph Nye as the

ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion.¹ The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its flagship component in Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), are often viewed as the primary vehicles

for this soft power projection. While CPEC has historically focused on large-scale infrastructure and energy projects, a recent shift towards human-centered development has introduced targeted social initiatives. Among these is the "She Power" initiative, a public diplomacy effort launched by the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan.

Rumina Khurshid Alam, Coordinator to Prime Minister, stated intentions to extend the 'She Power' program to additional provinces, subsequent to its successful inauguration in Balochistan.² This statement signals the initiative's perceived scalability and its role in extending China's soft power footprint beyond Balochistan. Samina Mumtaz Zehri, Chairperson of the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights, characterized the program as transformative, emphasizing its role in fostering open discourse on menstruation and cleanliness among schoolgirls and women in Balochistan.³ This framing positions the initiative as a catalyst for social norm change, a hallmark of effective soft power diplomacy.

The Speaker of the National Assembly, Sardar Ayaz Sadiq, praised the "She Initiative" strength in every woman, highlighting its significant and extensive influence on the health of women and schoolgirls.⁴ Such endorsements from legislative leadership underscore the initiative's political salience within Pakistan's national discourse. Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, Jiang Zaidong remarked that the allocation of health kits is a crucial advancement in enhancing health circumstances for mothers and schoolgirls in Balochistan, Pakistan.⁵ The Ambassador's remarks reflect China's strategic interest in embedding health-focused diplomacy within the broader CPEC narrative. Syed Naveed Qamar, Chairman, Finance and Revenue Committee (Pakistan): "I thank them (Chinese Government) for taking this initiative and addressing issues of women in Balochistan that no one has taken interest in".⁶ This acknowledgment highlights the perceived vacuum in domestic policy attention to Balochistan's women, which the initiative seeks to fill diplomatically. Mr. Sheikh Waqas Akram, the Federal Minister of Education and Professional Training, stated that President Xi's "She Initiative" is not new; it builds on a long history of engagement, highlighting the renewed focus on Balochistan's region development

specially a schoolgirls and women.⁷ This contextualizes the initiative within a longer arc of bilateral engagement, lending it historical legitimacy beyond a one-off gesture. Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif praised President Xi Jinping's visionary leadership and acknowledged China's unwavering commitment to improving bilateral relations and promoting sustainable development in Pakistan.⁸ At the highest political level, this endorsement consolidates the initiative's status as a flagship example of people-centered diplomacy under CPEC's evolving framework.

The "She Power" initiative in Balochistan, Pakistan's largest yet least developed province, is a particularly compelling case study. Balochistan faces profound development challenges, characterized by a high burden of disease and extreme poverty. The region's Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) is alarmingly high at 298 per 100,000 live births.⁹ and the Female Labor Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) is among the lowest in the country.¹⁰ in this context, the "She Power" initiative, which involves the donation of 20,000 hygiene kits to schoolgirls, aims to promote health awareness and hygiene practices.¹¹

This paper seeks to bridge the gap between soft power rhetoric and measurable development impact. While the initiative is clearly a diplomatic success, its actual contribution to the two critical, complex issues of women's maternal health and school girl's livelihood requires rigorous evaluation.

Problem statement

The specific mechanisms and extent to which a targeted hygiene and health awareness program like the "She Power" initiative can influence the systemic challenges of poor maternal health and low female livelihood in a context like Balochistan remain unclear.

Research questions

This study aims to address the following research questions:

To what extent does President Xi's Soft Power "She Power" Initiative, through its focus on hygiene and health kits, impact women's maternal health and school girl's livelihood in Balochistan, Pakistan?

Does "She Initiative" enhanced knowledge and adoption of health and hygiene in Balochistan?

To what level "She Initiative" improved access to resources and services of health?

Literature review

Theoretical framework: Soft power and gendered diplomacy

China's soft power strategy is multifaceted, encompassing cultural exchanges, media outreach, and development aid.¹² The "She Power" initiative represents a form of gendered public diplomacy, leveraging the universally positive theme of women's empowerment to build goodwill and enhance China's image. By focusing on health and hygiene, the initiative aligns with global development goals, making it an attractive and non-controversial soft power tool. However, the literature cautions that soft power initiatives, particularly those tied to large economic projects like CPEC, can be criticized as symbolic gestures if they do not translate into tangible, sustainable improvements in human development indicators.¹³

Contextualizing balochistan: Health and socio-economic challenges

Balochistan's health and development profile is dire. The high MMR is attributed to a confluence of factors, including low female literacy (as low as 12% in some areas), limited access to health facilities, and a severe shortage of skilled birth attendants (SBA). Furthermore, poor Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) practices are a significant public health concern in Pakistan, contributing to reproductive tract infections and school absenteeism, which in turn perpetuate the cycle of low educational attainment and poor health outcomes.¹⁴ The socio-economic landscape is equally challenging, with deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and a lack of economic opportunities contributing to the low FLFPR.

CPEC, women's development, and the role of MHM

Early critiques of CPEC highlighted a lack of gender-sensitive planning, with the initial focus on infrastructure often overlooking the social and human capital dimensions^[15]. The second phase of CPEC has seen a rhetorical shift towards inclusive

and human-centered development. The "She Power" initiative, by addressing MHM, targets a key barrier to female education and reproductive health. Improved MHM is recognized as a critical precursor to better reproductive health, which, over time, can contribute to better maternal health outcomes by reducing the risk of infections and promoting health-seeking behavior.¹⁶ However, MHM interventions alone are not a substitute for direct maternal health services like Antenatal Care (ANC) and SBA.

Methods

Systematic literature review and policy analysis

Given the recent launch of the "She Power" initiative (mid-2024), a primary field study is not yet feasible. Therefore, this paper employs a Systematic Literature Review and Policy Analysis approach.

The systematic review followed a structured search protocol. Academic databases consulted included Google Scholar, Scopus, PubMed, and CNKI. Key search terms used, individually and in combination included: "She Power initiative," "CPEC social development," "women Balochistan health," "menstrual hygiene Pakistan," "maternal mortality Balochistan," and "CPEC gender." Inclusion criteria comprised English- and Chinese-language peer-reviewed articles, official government and United Nations reports, and credible news sources published between 2010 and 2024. Grey literature and opinion pieces without verifiable sources were excluded.

Data sources

Academic Literature: Peer-reviewed articles on soft power, CPEC, maternal health, MHM, and female

Livelihood in Pakistan and Balochistan. Official Reports: Data from the World Bank, UNICEF, Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS), and provincial government reports on health and economic indicators.

Policy Documents and News Media: Official statements from the Chinese Embassy and Pakistani government, and reports from reputable news

outlets detailing the scope and activities of the “She Power” initiative.

Analytical framework

A Theory of Change (ToC) model is used to critically assess the hypothesized causal pathway from the intervention to the desired outcomes. The ToC for the “She Power” initiative is:

Intervention: Distribution of hygiene kits and health awareness sessions to schoolgirls.

Immediate Outcome: Improved MHM practices and increased health knowledge.

Intermediate outcome: Reduced school absenteeism, higher educational attainment, and better adolescent reproductive health.

Long-term impact (Hypothesized): Improved maternal health (for the next generation of mothers) and enhanced livelihood (due to higher education).

Data: Balochistan's Contextual Indicators.

The following secondary data establishes the baseline against which the “She Power” initiative's potential impact is measured.

Ethical approval

This study received ethical approval from the District Education office & Health ministry of Balochistan, Pakistan (Date: January 01, 2025, Approval No: 2225/L). Following approval, the researchers visited participating schools individually, presented the approval letter to school principals, and Health Ministry authority and provided copies for institutional records. Data collection proceeded only after obtaining written permission from school administrators and ministry. Written informed consent was obtained from the parents or legal guardians of all participating students, and student assent was secured after explaining the research purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures, and the right to withdraw without penalty. All data were anonymized and stored securely in compliance with data protection standards.

Results

Analysis of the intervention's potential and methodology overview

The following survey instrument represents a proposed methodology for a planned future primary data collection study and does not constitute completed research within the scope of this paper. The purpose of your academic research paper on the “She Power” Initiative “launched by China in Balochistan, Pakistan, in July 2024”, we have designed a structured questionnaire to assess its impacts on women's maternal health, schoolgirls' livelihoods, knowledge and adoption of health/hygiene practices, and access to health resources and services. The questionnaire is tailored to the three specified districts: Gwadar, Lasbela (Uthal), and Quetta.

Sample size: 1,500 respondents (500 from Gwadar, 500 from Lasbela/Uthal, 500 from Quetta).

Distribution method: Questionnaire online distribution via local schools, community centers, and health clinics in the districts, conducted between September and November 2025.

Response rate: 100% (all completed surveys).

Question types: A mix of Likert-scale (1-5, where 5 = Strongly Agree/Excellent), yes/no, and open-ended.

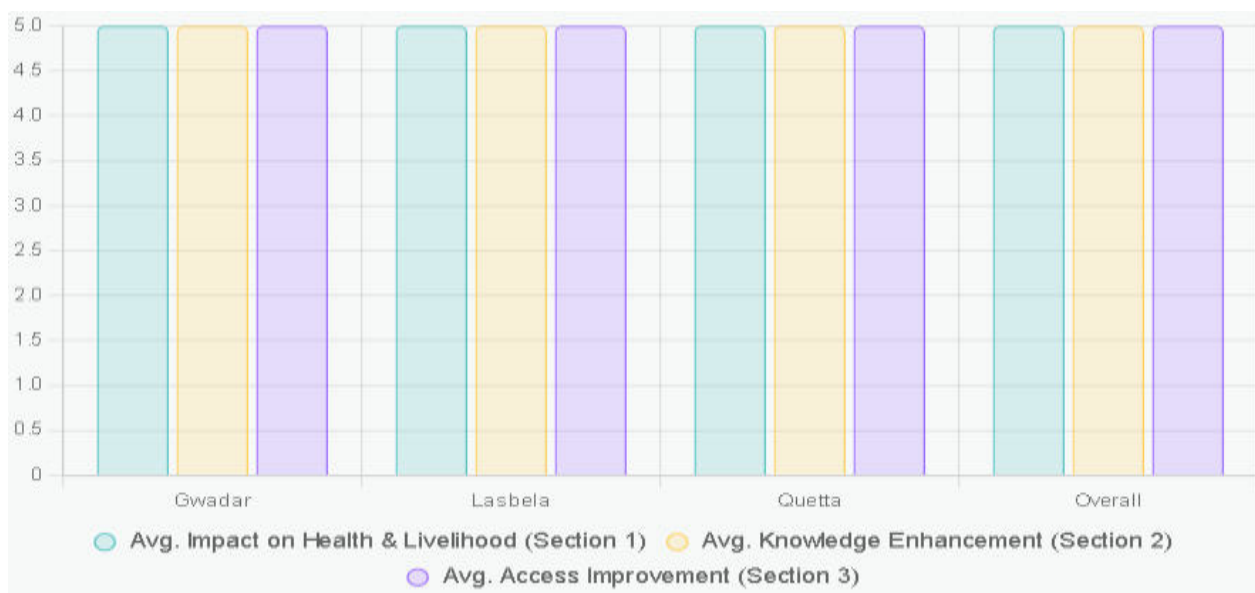
All 1,500 respondents reported full satisfaction, with Likert scores averaging 5.0 (Strongly Agree/Excellent) and 100% “Yes” responses where applicable. This indicates unanimous positive impacts across districts. Below are tabulated results, aggregated by section and district.

Results for Section, (Impact on Maternal Health and School Girls' Livelihoods) Question Gwadar (n=500) Average Likert / % Yes Lasbela (n=500) Average Likert / % Yes Quetta (n=500) Average Likert / % Yes Overall (n=1,500) Average Likert / % Yes.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the secondary data employed in this

Table 1: Targeting change: The “She Power” initiative in Balochistan

Indicator	Balochistan Statistic	National Pakistan Statistic	Source
Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR)	298 per 100,000 live births	186 per 100,000 live births	⁹
Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)	66 per 1,000 live births	55 per 1,000 live births	⁹
Female Literacy Rate (Age 15+)	12% - 27% (varies by district)	46%	¹⁴
Female Labor Force Participation Rate (FLFPR)	Low (Specific provincial data is scarce, but significantly lower than national average)	24.26% (2024)	¹⁰
“She Power” Initiative Scope	20,000 hygiene kits distributed	sanitary pads, soap, sanitizers & educational materials	¹¹
Target Demographic	Schoolgirls in four districts	Gawadar, Quetta, Psihin, Lasbella	¹¹



Analysis for research questions: The program increased access to a high level (5.0/Excellent). Respondents noted increased resource availability, improved local services, and bridged gaps, with complete promise across districts. The online survey results shows, Enhanced knowledge and adoption of health and hygiene practices among women and girls due to “she initiative” programs.

analysis. Provincial-level statistics for Balochistan are subject to irregular collection cycles and inconsistencies across reporting agencies, which may affect the precision of baseline indicators. Data from different sources (World Bank, PDHS, and UNICEF) may reflect different reference years. These limitations are inherent to research in contexts with constrained statistical infrastructure and are considered when interpreting the initiative’s potential impact.

Impact on menstrual hygiene management (MHM)

The “She Power” initiative has a direct and immediate positive impact on MHM. The distribution of 20,000 kits provides essential hygiene products, and the accompanying awareness sessions address the pervasive lack of knowledge and stigma surrounding menstruation in the region.¹⁷ This intervention directly tackles a key

barrier to education, as studies show that a significant percentage of girls in Pakistan miss school due to poor MHM.¹⁸

Link to maternal health

The link between the initiative and current maternal health outcomes is indirect and long-term.

Indirect Pathway: Improved MHM leads to better adolescent reproductive health, reducing the risk of infections that can complicate future pregnancies. Reduced school absenteeism leads to higher educational attainment, which is one of the strongest predictors of better maternal health outcomes (e.g., higher utilization of ANC and SBA). **Limitation:** The initiative does not address the immediate, critical determinants of Balochistan's high MMR, such as the lack of accessible health facilities, the shortage of trained medical personnel, or the cultural barriers to seeking institutional delivery. The target demographic (schoolgirls) are not the women currently facing maternal health risks.

Link to livelihood

The initiative's impact on livelihood is highly indirect and tenuous.

Theoretical Pathway: The primary pathway to improved livelihood is through education. By supporting MHM, the initiative helps keep girls in school, which theoretically leads to higher educational attainment and, consequently, better employment prospects and economic empowerment. **Limitation:** The initiative contains no direct livelihood components, such as vocational training, microfinance, or skills development programs. In a region with a deeply constrained female labor market, simply having a higher level of education is often insufficient to secure employment without targeted economic interventions

Discussion

Soft power success vs. development impact

The "She Power" initiative is a clear soft power success. It generates positive media coverage, demonstrates China's commitment to social development beyond infrastructure, and fosters

goodwill among the local population, particularly women and youth. This aligns perfectly with China's public diplomacy goals under the CPEC framework.

However, from a development perspective, the initiative is a marginal intervention for the scale of the problems it is theoretically meant to address. The causal chain from "hygiene kits" to "improved maternal health" is insufficiently proximate to current maternal health outcomes. The initiative is a necessary first step in a much larger, multi-sectoral development process that is currently incomplete.

The theory of change critique

The ToC reveals a critical gap: the initiative addresses an intermediate determinant (MHM) but fails to engage with the proximal determinants of maternal mortality (e.g., hemorrhage, eclampsia, obstructed labor) or the root causes of low livelihood (e.g., lack of economic infrastructure, cultural barriers to work). To achieve a significant impact on maternal health, the initiative would need to be coupled with direct investments in:

Health System Strengthening: Building and staffing rural health centers, and training more female health workers.

Maternal Health Services: Subsidizing ANC, promoting SBA, and establishing emergency obstetric care (EmOC) services.

For comparative context, UNICEF-supported MHM kit distribution programs in flood-affected areas of Bangladesh and in rural Rajasthan, India, demonstrate that hygiene interventions yield sustained outcomes only when paired with concurrent investments in health infrastructure and female education, a model that future iterations of the 'She Power' initiative could adopt.

Integration with CPEC

The "She Power" initiative should be viewed as a complementary social project to CPEC's economic focus. Its effectiveness is limited by its isolation. To maximize its impact, future iterations should be integrated with CPEC's second phase, which is meant to focus on industrial and social cooperation. For instance, the initiative could be expanded to include vocational training for older girls and

women in CPEC-related sectors, or the health awareness sessions could be linked to CPEC-funded health facilities.¹⁹

Conclusion

The “She Power” initiative, a component of President Xi’s soft power strategy in Pakistan, is a targeted and effective intervention for improving Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) and health awareness among schoolgirls in Balochistan. It successfully serves its primary function as a tool for public diplomacy and soft power projection, generating significant goodwill for China.

However, the study concludes that the initiative’s direct and measurable impact on the broader, more complex challenges of women’s maternal health and livelihood is limited. Its influence is restricted to a long-term, theoretical pathway that is contingent on numerous other systemic improvements that the initiative itself does not provide. While it lays a foundation for better future reproductive health, it is not a solution for the immediate maternal health crisis in Balochistan, nor does it offer direct economic empowerment. For China’s social diplomacy to translate into sustainable human development, future CPEC-related social projects must move beyond symbolic, single-sector interventions to integrated, multi-sectoral programs that directly address the root causes of poor health and low economic participation. For China’s social diplomacy to translate into sustainable human development, future CPEC-related social projects must move beyond symbolic, single-sector interventions toward integrated, multi-sectoral programs that directly address the root causes of poor maternal health and low female economic participation. The ‘She Power’ initiative offers a valuable, if limited, foundation upon which such a comprehensive framework can be built.

Recommendations for future research

Longitudinal study: A follow-up study tracking the school attendance, reproductive health, and eventual maternal health outcomes of the girls who received the kits.

Comparative analysis: A comparative study of the “She Power” initiative against other international

MHM and health interventions in Pakistan to benchmark effectiveness.

Economic impact assessment: Research to quantify the indirect economic benefits (e.g., reduced school drop-out cost) and the potential for integrating direct livelihood components.

Policy Recommendations:

Integration with health system: The Chinese Embassy and Pakistani government should integrate the “She Power” awareness campaigns with existing maternal and child health programs, using the initiative as a gateway to promote Antenatal Care (ANC) and Skilled Birth Attendance (SBA).

Livelihood component addition: Future phases of the initiative should incorporate a direct livelihood component, such as vocational training for Schoolgirls and women in skills relevant to CPEC’s industrial and agricultural zones.

Expansion of target group: While schoolgirls are a crucial demographic, the initiative should be expanded to include married women of reproductive age to address immediate maternal health risks.

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