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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
street-level bureaucracy, PRISMA,	This systematic review examines the operational dynamics, problems and systemic factors of street-level bureaucracy and frontline policy implementation in Pakistan. SLB refers to law enforcement officials and police officers, as well as educators, public prosecutors, medical practitioners, social workers, and other public servants. They can access various laws and administer public services. The front-line workers are the first point of contact between the Pakistani state and its people such as public-school teachers, lady health workers (LHWs), police constables and local revenue officers (<i>Patwari</i>) etc. They operate within a system of governance where administrative centralization is entrenched, resources are scarce, there is significant political interference and socio-cultural hierarchies are complex and use informal discretion to maneuver between an idealized policy and the reality on the ground. Based on the PRISMA guidelines, the literature from empirical studies published from 2000 to 2026 is synthesized to analyze the impact of institutional constraints on frontline behavior, public service delivery, and state legitimacy. The findings indicate that front line workers in Pakistan may function as “state agents” and “citizen agents”, and use coping strategies like rationing, stereotyping, and favoritism to deal with excessive workloads. The review ends with a detailed agenda for institutional reform aimed at improved accountability, digital tools, gender-sensitive institutional changes and established discretionary limits to improve the equity and effectiveness of public services.
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Introduction

Public policies are only effective if they are implemented at the frontlines. The policy process takes place at the macro level in the sanitized rooms of ministries and planning agencies, while the implementation of state agenda is at the heart of public servants and citizens. Michael Lipsky (1980) provided a conceptualization of those frontline actors as "street-level bureaucrats" public service workers that have direct contact with citizens in the course of their work and have considerable discretion in how they perform that work. Street level bureaucrats (SLBs) are "public service employees who interact directly with citizens in their work and have significant discretion about how to perform their functions" (Lipsky, 2010).

SLBs are both policy implementers and makers when significant discretion is present. They can sometimes violate existing rules, as they act with extreme discretion (Hadna et al., 2022). Whereas in the developing world such as Pakistan, these street-level officials—primary school teachers, lady health workers, police constables, local tax, or land registration officials—do not have only a neutral implementation role. They can, in a very real sense, be said to be the makers of policy-as-it-affects-the-people (Siyal, 2023). Pakistan's administration inherited a very centralized colonial bureaucratic system that was mainly used to collect revenue and maintain public order and security, and not to distribute welfare.

Over the decades and decades, a structural underpinning has been covered by political patronage, fiscal instability, and socio-cultural stratification (Mumtaz, 2026). The result, when nation or provincial governments embark on ambitious social sector reforms from a universal health system to a primary education push, is an underfunded, undertrained, and underrepresented frontline workforce. It is essential to understand how these actors at the front lines read, rewrite and/or defy policy to help identify the consistent policy implementation deficits that haunt Pakistani governance. However, the numerous efforts by the governments of Pakistan and international donors to reform the public sector have not yielded the desired results in education, health, law enforcement and rural development. In most cases, the failures have been blamed on the political instability in Pakistan, grand corruption, or inadequate macro-level policy design. But this diagnostic approach from top to bottom ignores the implementation dynamics at a micro-level (Hasnain et al., 2026).

The situation of the frontline workers in Pakistan is highly constrained, with structural isolation and severe competing demands from institutional hierarchies, local political elites, and the desperate citizens. Under these pressures, street-level bureaucrats learn to have informal coping strategies, subjectively judge moral values, and take advantage of institutional loopholes (Farwa & Henman, 2025); Naqvi et al., 2024). By doing so they shape policy outcomes in a manner that can insure inequalities based on gender, class, ethnicity, and kinship (Biradari). If a proper synthesis is not done of the working of the street-level bureaucracy among various sectors in Pakistan, the current administrative reforms will continue to misdiagnose the implementation failures as individual misbehavior of the bureaucracy (Ismail, Iqbal, & Hussain, 2025).

The objectives of this systematic review are to:

- To identify the empirical literature on the issue of street level bureaucracy and frontline policy implementation in varying public sectors in Pakistan in a systematic manner.
- To examine the structural, institutional, political, and socio-cultural determinants of discretionary behavior of the frontline workers in Pakistan.
- To evaluate the coping strategies used by street-level bureaucracy when facing the need for rationing and the competing institutional requirements.
- To create a synthesis of the effects of frontline discretionary practices on equity, accessibility, and quality of public service delivery.
- To develop an evidence-based, actionable set of recommendations for institutional, technological, and behavioral reforms to close the policy-implementation gap in Pakistan.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Lipsky's Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory

This study is based on Michael Lipsky's (1980) theory on street-level bureaucracy. Lipsky suggests that policy is really being created by public service workers who are directly involved with citizens and have the discretion in distributing sanctions or benefits to them (Cohen, 2023; Hassan et al., 2024). This is because of two structural features: a constant presence with the public and a natural lack of direct management supervision in the face-to-face interaction process. But Lipsky suggests that these workers are stuck in a "perpetual paradox". They have a duty to serve each citizen as an individual with various needs, but they get a resource which is structurally ill-equipped to serve total needs. Street-level bureaucrats come up with coping mechanisms, simplifications, and routines to defuse this tension (Jalonen, Laasanen, & Salminen, 2026). They are restricting the demand, gaining more control over the client, and changing the perception of the service recipients. This results in the execution of policy as scarcity management instead of institutional mandates.

A Dichotomy between State Agent and Citizen Agent

Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) presented the "State Agent versus Citizen Agent" model of public administration as a framework to illustrate Lipsky's theory in the context of contemporary public administration (Lavee, 2022).

State Agents: Frontline workers in this model see themselves as responsible directly to formal law, administrative rules, and organizational structures. They have as their main mission the compliance, procedure, and preservation of state resources (Møller & Cecchini, 2025).

Citizen Agents: In contrast, the model says that frontline workers see themselves as responsible for the clients before them, having to serve the unique and human needs of the client first. They tend to be moralistic, pragmatic, and situational, and sometimes violate or break formal rules to get the "right" or "good" result (McGann, O'Sullivan, & Considine, 2022). This conflict is particularly intense in Pakistan.

The formal accountability mechanisms require this “State Agent” model to be very bureaucratic as discussed in the next points. However, the collapse of institutional public services makes front line workers “Citizen Agents” to maintain public services. This results in a differential, and individual allocation of public resources.

Post-Colonial Administrative Substructure

Post-colonial state theory needs to be combined with western theories to comprehend the street level bureaucracy in Pakistan. Pakistan’s bureaucracy was deliberately constructed on the colonial lines of an over-developed system which was meant to be used by the British Raj to govern people who were subjugated (Chaudhry, 2023). This institutional tradition emphasizes the authority of the state official over the public, isolation from scrutiny, and a strong disparity between the power of the official and that of the public (Okoye et al., 2025). When used in the context of frontline staff, it is a clear behavioral pattern. Lower-level civil servants are subjected to strong disciplinary measures from their administrative bosses but have great arbitrary power over citizens who have no formal remedy. This structural reality changes the nature of frontline discretion in Pakistan from being used flexibly for problem-solving to a mechanism for enforcing social hierarchies and self-preservation.

Search Strategy and Information Sources

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement guidelines were followed when conducting this systematic review. Systematic electronic searches were conducted in six major databases to ensure a complete coverage of the empirical literature namely Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar, the Pakistan Research Repository (maintained by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan) and the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS). The search architecture used controlled vocabulary (MeSH terms where applicable) and Boolean operators to connect all geographic identifiers and administrative concepts with terms pertaining to each sector. The basic search term was:

Table 1: Terms Categorization Table

Category/Area of Search Strategy	Basic Search Terms	Rationale to Choose Terms
Actor/ Role	• Frontline Implementer • Frontline Worker • Street-level Bureaucrat • Patwari	Core actors for public policy at grass-roots level.
Behavioral and Discretion	• Administrative Discretion • Bureaucratic Discretion • Discretionary Behavior • Coping Mechanism	Agents' decisions and psychological/operational adjustments associated with actions taken.

Geography (National-Level)	Area	• Pakistan	Macro-level national framework
Geography Area (Provincial-Level)		• Balochistan	The administrative hierarchy of Pakistan is a multi-level system.
		• Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK)	
		• Punjab	
		• Sindh	
Policy and Services Delivery		• Policy implementation	Widespread administrative processes and results
		• Public Service Delivery	
Functional and Sectoral Context		• Education	Specific departments in the public service were studied.
		• Health	
		• Police	
		• Revenue	

The time for the search is January 2000 to May 2026 to reflect recent events, such as institutional assessments and changes in administration after the pandemic. To minimize the chances of missing literature, hand search of reference list from retrieved articles, relevant book chapters, and from policy reports of various institutions such as World Bank, Asian Development Bank and Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), were also done.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were used, and the eligibility thresholds were clearly applied to maintain analytical integrity:

Inclusion Criteria

- Empirical Focus: Journal articles, doctoral dissertations, and high impact institutional working papers that provide empirical information (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods) that are new and original.
- Geographic Scope: Studies which are clearly located in the geographical framework of Pakistan including provincial and sub-provincial comparative studies.
- Conceptual Alignment: Studies that focus on the behavior, discretion, coping strategies, accountability or performance of frontline public sector staff who engage directly with citizens.
- Language: Publications that are all in English.

Exclusion Criteria

- Non-Empirical Literature: Theoretical literature, newspaper editorials, opinion, speculations, and policy briefs that do not have a clear empirical methodology.

- Macro-focused research: Policy analyses that were based on macro-level policy design, budgetary allocation, or ministerial politics rather than on frontline implementation dynamics.
- Incomplete Data: Abstract only publications or conference proceedings where full text could not be obtained.

Studies Selection and Extraction of Data

In the first search, a total of 1142 records were retrieved. Following the automated and manual deduplication step, 726 unique citations were left. Titles and abstracts were reviewed by two independent reviewers, who excluded 548 records as irrelevant in terms of geographical and conceptual focus. Of the remaining 178 full-text articles, only those were thoroughly reviewed. In this step, 131 articles were removed as they did not focus on the empirical study of lower-level administrative discretion or consider implementation to be a one-way process from top to bottom. After the screening for structural criteria, the final qualitative synthesis included 47 peer-reviewed studies that met the criteria. Furthermore, the data were extracted using a standard matrix that aimed to collect information on author, year of publication, geographic setting, sector focus, target frontline population, methodological design, primary theoretical framework, observed discretionary behaviors, institutional constraints, and coping mechanisms.

Quality Assessment

The methodological quality of the studies included in this study was evaluated using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist for qualitative research and the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) for quantitative and mixed methods designs. The three dimensions of research design appropriateness, data collection transparencies, reflexivity, ethical clarity, and data analysis rigor were assessed. No studies were discarded based on quality scores per se but the strengths and limitations of the studies in the appraised papers were considered in the narrative synthesis weighting.

Discussion

Institutional and Structural Determinants of Frontline Discretion

Colonial Administrative Legacies and Centralization

The colonial heritage is a crucial aspect of the institutional context of the street level bureaucracy in Pakistan. The Civil Service of Pakistan maintained the basic framework of the British Raj, which was based on a rigid hierarchical structure, centralization of decision-making authority, and institutionalized inequalities between the elite cadres and the lower levels of the Civil Service (Chandio, Muhammad, & Ahmed, 2025). The base of this administrative pyramid is the front-line workers. Moreover, the previous literature validates this level of centralization and establishes an administrative context (Hinterleitner & Wittwer, 2023; Livingstone, 2023). Hinterleitner and Wittwer (2023) further stated that frontline workers are not involved in the policy design process

and are responsible for failures to implement the policies. The focus of this top-down management is to create formal rules as instruments of administrative defense. Proponents of the practice of malicious compliance or hyper-formalism will try to do exactly what is written in the guidelines, even if it is not what the policy was meant to be. When working at the frontline, it is common for people to engage in “malicious compliance” or “hyper-formalism” (doing exactly what the guidelines say regardless of what is their intent). This shift from “discretion” as a means of meeting the needs of service to a means of self-protection.

Severe Resource Scarcity and Chronic Underfunding

One of the main challenges to the implementation of frontline policies in Pakistan is the shortage of resources. The failure of the state to provide the basic infrastructure, tools, and operational budgets to achieve policy goals is common across education, health, and law enforcement.

Table 2: Severe Resource Scarcity and Chronic Underfunding

Sector	Primary Frontline Actors	Key Structural Constraints & Resource Deficits	Observed Coping Mechanisms & Discretionary Behaviors
Public Health	Lady Health Workers (LHWs), Vaccinators, Community Midwives	Delayed salaries, non-functional cold chains, stockouts of essential medicines, lack of secure transport.	Rationing: Prioritizing accessible households over remote or marginalized communities. Informal Charging: Charging micro-fees to cover basic travel costs.
Primary Education	Primary Teachers, School Headmasters	Absentee infrastructure (electricity, clean water), high student-to-teacher ratios, non-functional school management councils.	Curriculum Compaction: Skipping complex topics to meet institutional timelines. Client Sorting: Focusing attention on high-performing students to maximize metrics.
Law Enforcement	Police Constables, Assistant Sub-Inspectors (ASIs)	Lack of operational fuel, stationary, and forensic kits; inadequate housing; excessive working hours (14–16-hour shifts).	Informal Commercialization: Requiring citizens to pay out-of-pocket for investigation supplies. Gatekeeping: Refusing to file formal complaints (FIRs).

Land Revenue	Local Revenue Officials (Patwaris)	Lack of modernized physical offices, un-digitized land records, overlapping legal frameworks.	Rent Extraction: Exploiting information asymmetries for informal service fees. Strategic Delays: Postponing record verifications to maintain market leverage.
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The assumptions in formal policy requirements are therefore invalidated in this ubiquitous shortage. If a public policy requires that everybody receive a service, but provides only 30% of materials, then at the street level it is up to the bureaucrat to decide who gets the service and who doesn't. This need moves the front-line worker from service delivery to rationing.

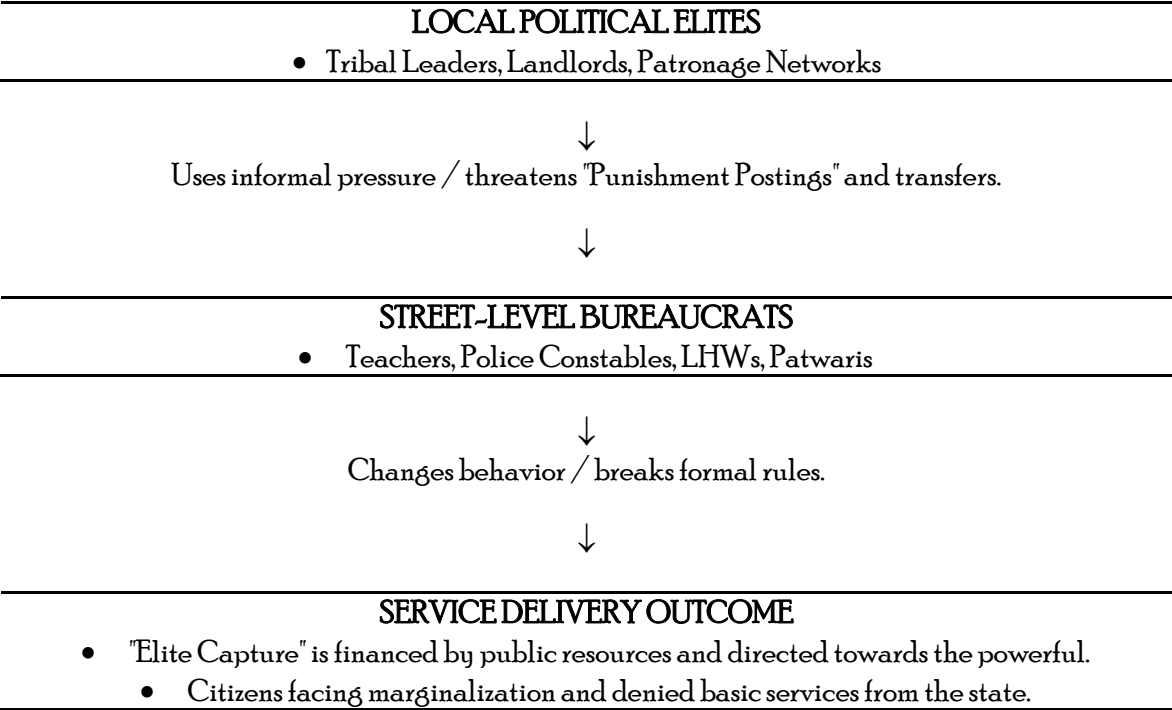
Clashing Policy Demands and Regulatory Shards

The regulatory environment in Pakistan is complex, and the rules and regulations are contradictory, with frequent changes in regulations due to political considerations (Sultan et al., 2025). There is a tendency for frontline workers to be required to manage multiple policy agendas across multiple agencies at the same time. Primary school teachers for example, are often diverted from their core roles and responsibilities to help with the process of National census, Anti polio campaigns, Electoral Registration and VIP protocol tasks (Ahmad et al., 2013; Rizvi, 2023). This administrative subdivision overburdens their capability. Where formal institutional structures require teachers to produce conflicting outcomes (Ali, 2024), e.g. to perform well on a literacy test and simultaneously to neglect months of classroom lessons to complete administrative paperwork, teachers make the choice about which of these demands to prioritize. Typically, they select tasks that are most likely to attract immediate sanctions from their superiors, thus reducing their primary service delivery objectives.

Contextual Mediating Factors—Politics, Culture and Society

The Political Patronage Networks and the Phenomenon of Elite Capture

The implementation of the policies happens at the frontline in the presence of pervasive political patronage networks in Pakistan (Naseer, Shakoor, & Khalid, 2026). Local state apparatuses are under the control of local political elites, who in rural/peri-urban areas are frequently landowners, industrialists, or powerful tribal chiefs. The phenomenon changes the usual accountability system of the street-level bureaucrats. Further, the prior literature demonstrates how politically weak lower-level public officials are, especially Patwaris, police constables and others, because of weaponization of administrative transfers and postings (Ahmed, 2026; Khan, Ali, & Khan, 2023). In practice, an elite refusing a frontline worker's demands can be sent to a far away, poorly staffed area, a practice commonly referred to as 'punishment posting' (Redman & Fletcher, 2022).



As a result, formal bureaucratic rules are often circumvented with informal deals that are struck with local power players. This capture of the elite serves to shift public goods (e.g., agricultural support, clean water systems, police security) away from the poor and toward the rich and ultimately marginalizes the poor further.

Socio Cultural Hierarchies and Kinship (Biradari) Systems

Street level bureaucracy in Pakistan is tightly linked to social systems of kinship (Biradari/Zaat) (Farwa & Henman, 2025). The moral weight and social obligations of kinship relationships are of major importance and in competition with the impersonal, meritocratic Weberianism of the bureaucracy (Althaus, 2022). If, as in the case of a street-level bureaucrat, he must distribute public goods, his interest is strong in giving those to the members of his own Biradari. This is done in several ways:

- Land documentation is worked out by patwaris first.
- Municipal inspectors are lax about enforcing regulations.
- A policy of selective distribution welfare support.

Withholding such courtesies will cause the worker to be socially isolated within his community. The structural fact forces the bureaucrat to always weigh their formal responsibilities as state agent against their cultural responsibilities in a kinship network. This changes institutional fairness to a system of mutual aid.

Gender Dynamics at the Frontline

The gender dynamics in Pakistan have a significant influence on the experiences and discretionary space of frontline workers, especially in health and education (Aftab et al., 2024). Muhammad et al., 2025 stated that the Lady Health Worker (LHW) programme provides an insight into these challenges. LHWs are responsible for delivering reproductive healthcare, contraceptive access and immunization drive directly to citizens' homes. Their operating context, however, is bound up in the patriarchal social system. However, the previous literature reveals a striking paradox that LHWs are important state actors for measuring key public health indicators, but must negotiate their mobility, safety, and moral position in conservative, male-dominated communities on an on-going basis (Ahmed, 2021; Chaudhry, 2019; Amjad, 2019). These usually face criticism from community elders or religious leaders who distrust any state-sponsored health programme, particularly family planning. To avoid social repercussions, LHWs use good judgment to address these challenges (Ahmed et al., 2022). They adjust the message of the policy, make distributions of contraceptive supplies appear as part of general health care, and establish alliances with the matriarchs in the household. This raises the importance of adapting policy implementation to the gender realities of the frontline workers' communities to be effective.

Frontline Behavior and Coping Mechanisms

Client Creaming and Selective Service Allocation

Street level bureaucrats are faced with so many clients and few resources to serve them all, that they often resort to client creaming (Mikkelsen, Madsen, & Baekgaard, 2024). According to Davidovitz and Cohen (2022), coping involves giving service to the clients who can articulate or possess social capital and who are compliant; less time and effort will be invested in them by the bureaucrat. Further, healthcare workers in public hospitals often pay more attention to middle-class patients who are knowledgeable with medical language and how it works in a bureaucratic system (Sarkar, 2022). On the other hand, the non-literate or poorer patients are treated with little or no communication, or through some deceptive delay to private, external providers (Prall, Scelza, & Davis, 2024). This practice enables frontline staff to achieve institutional objectives of processing. It systematically marginalizes and excludes those who are most reliant on the public welfare system.

Unauthorized Fee Leases and Informal Commercialization

To address low wages, delayed operating revenue and lack of institutional resources, frontline workers resort to informal financial arrangements (Narula, 2020). This leads to unofficial charges being made for publicly provided services and the devolution of services into informal economic activities. This, in turn leads to the informal sale of public services, that is, a payment is required for access to public services, but it is not a statutory payment. It is very evident in the local land administration (Patwarkhanas) and at the bottom of the legal hierarchy. For example, when police constables and investigation officers want to begin an investigation, they regularly ask complainants to pay for basic operational needs like stationery used to write statements or fuel used for patrol cars.

This behavior may be due to predatory corruption, but literature suggests it may also be an informal survival strategy. Frontline workers employ it as a means of reconciling unfunded administrative requirements and the stuff of their jobs (Verdezoto et al., 2021).

Bureaucratic Absenteeism and Psychological Detachment

As the structure of the job discrepancy between institutional demands and frontline capacity reaches the breaking point, many street-level bureaucrats engage in withdrawal actions. This is evidenced by chronic absenteeism, taking part in authorized second jobs and/or disengagement in citizen interactions (Sälzer, Ricking, & Feldhaus, 2024). It is a problem that is especially acute in rural primary schools and basic health units (BHUs). Missed reporting to the station by the teacher and medical officer is common, often due to running a private tutoring school or clinic to earn a living. Frontline workers cover these gaps with their relationship with a monitoring inspector or with weak physical monitoring systems (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2022). This results in understaffed and mostly non-functional critical public institutions for the population of the local region.

Sectoral Analyses: Comparative Case Studies

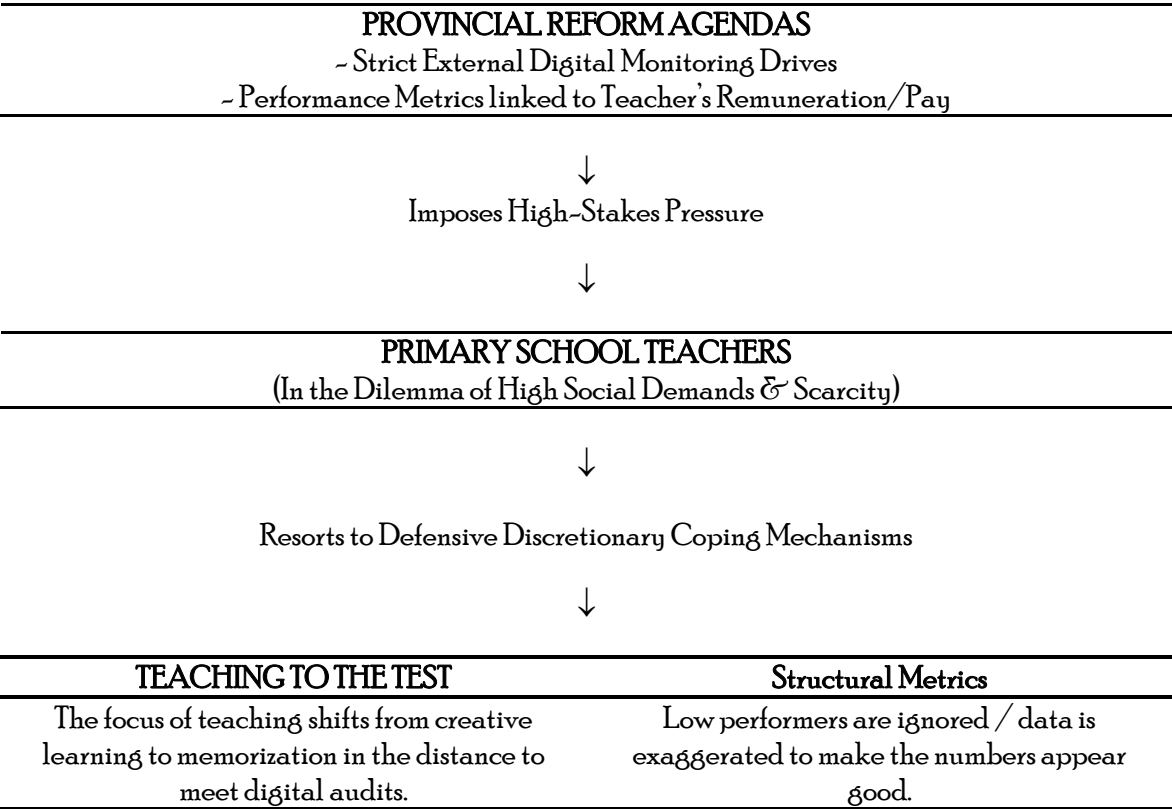
Healthcare: Lady Health Workers and Vaccinators

Community based actors, mainly Lady Health Workers (LHWs) and Mobile Vaccinators are key front-line agents of public health delivery in Pakistan (Chaudhry, 2019). These actors are held under a microscope, since they are directly accountable for important national indicators such as the polio eradication program and the maternal-child mortality indicators. The previous evidence showed that these workers have a fragile status in the state hierarchy. They are subjected to delayed payment of salaries, unsafe working conditions on the fields, and not having any formal security infrastructure and protection measures. However, they are under close watch using digital tools and geofenced attendance monitoring. As a result of this pressure LHWs and vaccinators make "discretionary decisions" on their service areas. Workers frequently target areas with known risks of crime or personal danger or falsely record tracking information for hard-to-reach households to achieve the digital tracking goals. However, in insecure or conservative neighborhoods, it can be difficult to achieve the digital tracking goals without running risks and workers often focus their efforts on safer neighborhoods or falsely log tracking data for households that are hard-to-reach. This is a clear disconnect from the digital surveillance tools and systems used to enforce adherence to the rules and regulations can encourage frontline workers to shift their data to survive a flawed system.

Education: Primary School Teachers

The lessons learned from Pakistan's primary education system provide a fascinating glimpse of the problems facing street-level bureaucrats. Teachers are expected to be expert teachers, office clerks, community liaison, and state emergency workers all in one (Ali, 2018). Recent provincial reform plans have placed strong emphasis on teacher accountability and measurement of productivity,

including student attendance and standardized test performance, which are tracked through outside oversight teams (Ehren, Paterson, & Baxter, 2020).



Teachers rely on defensive discretionary tactics in the face of high-stakes performance reviews and structural problems such as a deteriorating school environment or turnover of students. They focus their efforts on whether students will pass formal exams rather than on broad learning and prioritize their efforts around students who will pass. In addition, teachers may develop informal contacts with local monitoring officials, giving them an early warning of inspection. This undermines top-down accountability systems and encourages a compliance culture.

Law Enforcement comprised of Assistant Sub-Inspectors and Police Constables

Constables, Head Constables and Assistant Sub-Inspectors (ASIs) are the first victims of the citizens seeking justice and security in Pakistan. These actors work in an institutional context that involves extended workdays, limited operating funds and significant political manipulation by local power players. According to Mumtaz et al. (2024), gatekeeping capabilities of frontline police officers are enormous in terms of their authority to register or refuse First Information Reports (FIRs). Citizens are often dissuaded from filing formal complaints through officers' use of informal mediation, strategic delays or intimidation, because an elevated crime registry reflects poorly on local leaders and can

also be a burden on investigation resources. Frontline police officers are generally adversarial when dealing with low-income members of society who do not have political connections (Sifarish) and may rely on their discretionary power to reinforce socially entrenched inequalities. On the other hand, they can behave differently when they are in the presence of elite citizens and demonstrate how structural power differences directly influence the actions of the frontline. This is an interesting book, even if it is flawed in some respects. A good book with some deficiencies.

Land Administration and the Patwari System

In Pakistan a local revenue official, or patwari, is a powerful form of street-level bureaucracy (Ali, 2020). The patwari is entrusted with the responsibility of keeping land registers, verifying land transfers and determining land taxes for farmers and is therefore afforded a significant discretionary power over the rural populace, where land ownership is linked to economic survival and social status. Salik, Mustafa, and Ali (2025) stated that the traditional patwari system is still influential despite modernization and attempts of digitalization of land records, such as Land Records Management and Information Systems (LRMIS). The past literature (i.e., Rahman, 2022) revealed that Patwaris have actively challenged the complete digitalization of historical paper records (Roznamcha) and taken advantage of the loopholes between the digital system and the paper records. Patwaris preserve information asymmetries by controlling the verification of ambiguous land boundaries and historical successions. They do this to capture economic rents and to benefit powerful local landlords over smallholders and illustrate how powerful local actors can influence and water-down technological reform projects that threaten their discretionary power.

QUANTITATIVE SYNTHESIS AND META-TRENDS

Distribution of Empirical Literature by Sector

A study on the 47 empirical studies included for full synthesis indicates that research on the various dimensions of frontline policy implementation is not evenly distributed across the sectors of the policy in Pakistan.

Table 3: Distribution of Empirical Literature by Sector

Sector	No. of Studies (n)	Percentage (%)
Healthcare	16	34
Education	14	30
Law Enforcement	9	19
Land Revenue	8	17

The emphasis on healthcare and education is driven by the priorities of international donor support and provincial reform agendas during the last 20 years. On the other hand, although law enforcement and land administration are important for citizen perceptions of the legitimacy of the state, they are under-researched.

Regional Distribution of Focused Research

There is considerable geographical imbalance in the empirical literature, with most studies focusing on the most ambitious administrative reforms in place in provinces.

Table 4: Regional Distribution of Focused Research

Province	No. of Studies (n)	Percentage (%)
Punjab	22	47
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	13	28
Law Enforcement	8	17
Balochistan	4	8

This distribution is useful to note as an important deficiency in the literature. Extensive empirical studies have been conducted on Punjab due to its sizeable academic infrastructure and convenient public registries, nearly half of all empirical studies concentrate on Punjab. The day-to-day experiences of Balochistan and Sindh, with their different tribal dynamics, institutional capacities and geographical challenges, have largely been neglected in the field of public administration scholarship today.

Prevalence of Coping Mechanisms

The frequency rates of the use of specific coping mechanisms in each of the synthesized studies clearly indicate the coping strategies adopted by the street level bureaucrats of Pakistan.

Table 5: Prevalence of Coping Mechanisms

Specific Frontline Coping Mechanisms	No. of Respondents (n)	Frequency (f)
Informal Gatekeeping / Rationing	39	83
Elite Accommodation / Sifarish	34	72
Informal Financial Levies	28	60
Data Manipulation / Gaming Metrics	21	45

The frequency of each coping strategy in the synthesized studies indicates the most frequently used coping strategies among the street-level bureaucrats in Pakistan. Most of the studies include informal gatekeeping/rationing (83%) and elite accommodation/Sifarish (72%) and the remaining studies include informal financial levies (60%) and data manipulation (45%). That such practices are found in many independent studies means they are not isolated phenomena, but rather the system of practices that are part of the front-line work in Pakistan.

Pakistani Frontline Synthesis: A Discussion

The "Lipskian Paradox" in the Post-Colonial State

The prior findings have been synthesized to support the fact that Michael Lipsky's framework can be directly used in Pakistan with an additional complication being the administrative framework in Pakistan which is inherited from the colonial era. In Pakistan, the traditional Lipskian dilemma of unlimited demand for services coupled with structurally limited and inadequate resources is compounded by severe socio-economic disparities and the erosion of formal accountability mechanisms (Shah, 2024). Furthermore, in the western world, street level bureaucrats usually have formalized legal protections and institutionalized labor unions to act within. There is virtually no structural protection for frontline workers in Pakistan against arbitrary punitive measures by their administrative bosses or political system (Hassan et al., 2025). As a result, they tend to be defensive in their discretion use. The 'front-line' operation is not so much about efficiencies given constraints, but about the immediate politics of risk and the personal survival in the administrative hierarchy.

The Co-optation of Accountability: Bureaucratic vs. Political vs. Social

This review uncovers a complicated and conflicting accountability web playing out on the Pakistan frontline:

<u>FORMAL BUREAUCRATIC</u>	
~ Hierarchical Audits ~ Digital Biometric Tracking ~ Quantitative Performance Logs	
<u>INFORMAL POLITICAL</u>	<u>SOCIO-CULTURAL</u>
~ Elite Patronage Networks ~ Transfer / Posting Meddling ~ Sifarish Access Channels	~ Biradari Commitments ~ Gender-Norm Negotiations ~ Communal Status Expectations

- (i) Formal Bureaucratic Accountability: The formal accountability from an authority above, especially with the help of digital monitoring systems (biometric attendance, reporting apps etc.).
- (ii) Informal Political Accountability: Imposed by local powerbrokers who have a control over administrative appointments, transfers, and promotions.
- (iii) Socio Cultural Accountability: Based on responsibilities towards the Biradari network, religious group and local hierarchy.

If these accountability systems clash, the formal bureaucratic directives often are undermined (Lee, 2022). Formal political and social pressures are more diffuse and therefore less obvious than informal political and social pressures, for which the risk of punishment is greater and more immediate, like punitive transfers or social isolation (Akram et al., 2025). Consequently, policy implementation on the ground is individual and often subject to wide variations depending on who is seeking services and what social capital and politics they possess.

Digital Governance Reform and Metric Gaming

In Pakistan, in the last decade, the federal and provincial governments have been spending heavily on digital governance tools that enable monitoring of the frontline workers (Munir & Hamid, 2026). These involve the use of smart phones for monitoring health vaccinators, digital monitoring of school attendance, and automated land record systems. The changes are designed to put a stop to frontline discretion, absenteeism and compliance in action with data-based checks. But the real world suggests that these online tools are frequently associated with unexpected adaptations in behavior, what is known as “metric gaming.” Rather than enhancing service quality, frontline staff invest a lot of effort in meeting digital measures. For example; vaccinators can record geofenced coordinates without full home visits. Moreover, automated attendance records may be made by teachers to prevent automatic salary deductions (Pastory & Ndunguru, 2023). These results demonstrate that technological solutions can't be a magic bullet to address deeply entrenched institutional issues. Digital monitoring is frequently implemented in contexts of constrained resources and political context and has the effect of shifting coping practices on the front lines from the surface to the digital realm without strengthening the core of public service delivery (Hedling, 2026).

Conclusion

This systematic review has examined the challenges of street level bureaucracy and frontline policy implementation in the health, education, law enforcement and land administration sectors in Pakistan. This study draws evidence from the past literature between the year 2000 and 2026; it finds that the frontline public servants are not a mere compliance unit, but an active policy reframer. Operational staff are caught between a visionary, yet policy-driven set of objectives and a resource constrained and politically bedeviled set of methods, engaging in informal discretionary practice to deal with the scarcity of resources and the competing demands of institutions. The results suggested that the general use of coping strategies (including client creaming, gatekeeping, informal charging, and metric gaming) is a predictable reaction to structural issues that is not an individual ethical failure. Further, the post-colonial administrative culture in Pakistan with its hierarchical decision-making processes and static support for the lower-level workers fosters an adversarial and compliance-based approach to problem-solving.

Most of the political patronage networks (Sifarish) and the kinship network (Biradari) do not only obscure the formal meritocratic intentions but also skew the distribution of public services towards those who are well connected in the political arena while marginalizing vulnerable groups. Finally, this review highlights the importance of a top down, technology-based monitoring reform, being

grounded in the frontline constraints of the monitoring environment. Pakistan needs to change its punitive surveillance model to an effective administrative system in order to create a more equitable and effective public service delivery model, which includes ensuring workers receive sufficient resources, rationalizing workloads, ensuring that workers are protected from politics, and ensuring that discretion is structured and transparent. There is only one way in which the Pakistani state can achieve long-term institutional legitimacy and provide meaningful public services to its citizens; that is by bridging the gap between what is happening at the frontline and what is being designed at the macro level.

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