

Political Participation of Women in Pakistan

Historical and Political Dynamics Shaping the Structure of Politics for Women

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to understand the political participation of women in Pakistan from the perspective of the country's history. Along with focusing on the historical development and contemporary situation, the article highlights social hurdles that have presented challenges for women to participate in the political system. Political participation rests not only on being able to get elected to the legislative assembly. It also encompasses women's roles as voters, as members of a political party, and other aspects of participation in the political process, structure, and system. Analysis along these dimensions can produce some fruitful recommendations for the fuller political participation of women in the future.¹

Historical development of the representation of women in the political structure

Various indicators like population ratio, school enrollment, literacy rate, access to basic health services, and life expectancy have suggested a disparity between men and women in Pakistan.² However, in the domain of politics, the last 16 years have witnessed significant developments in terms of women's participation. Most significantly, the political participation of women has increased in legislative bodies. This change in political participation can be attributed to a number of factors, such as Pakistan's legal commitments to the international community which include: the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). These commitments have impacted Pakistan following the 4th World Conference on Women in 1995. In addition to this, the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan also played a vital role in the political development of women. Furthermore, the Election Commission (EC) Order of 2002, the Political Parties Order of 2002, the National Assembly and Provincial Assemblies Allocation of Reserved Seats for Women and Non-Muslims Rules of 2002, are forces that have contributed to empow-

ering women and ensuring their political participation in the political structure.³

The current political system of Pakistan has elements of the presidential as well as parliamentary systems. The shift in political systems is the result of past changes in political structure.⁴ Historically, under different political systems, women's participation and the shares of the seats in national and provincial assemblies were different. In the first Pakistani legislative assembly (Aug. 10, 1947 to Oct. 24, 1954), for example, women acquired 3% of the total seats (the number of total seats was 30, and women acquired 2 of these).⁵ During the period of 1947 to 1956, there was no office of the president. The head of state was the governor general. During this second legislative assembly (lasting from May 02, 1955 to Oct. 07, 1958) women had 0% representation (the total number of seats was 80 and women acquired 0 seats). For the period of 1956 to 1958, the political structure changed once again. Iskander Mirza, who was the governor general, assumed office as the president, since the post of governor general was abolished.⁶ Subsequently, the military ruled country for the next 13 years, from 1958 to 1971.

After the Zia era that lasted from 1978 to 1988, another shift in political structure once again brought changes in the representation of women in politics. By 1988, the 3% assigned quota that existed since the first legislative assembly rose to 10%, and women attained 22 National Assembly seats (the number of women elected to reserved seats was 21, and 1 woman was elected directly) along with 5% of the seats in the provincial assemblies. However, from 1990 to 1997, the provision of reserved seats

¹ United Nations Development Programme Pakistan (2005): Political and Legislative Participation of Women in Pakistan. Issues and Perspectives. Research Report, Islamabad, <http://www.mumkinalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/POL-legislative-OF-Women-UN-Report.pdf>, accessed on 22.10.2016.

² Ibid.

³ FAFEN (2013a): Women and the 2013 General Elections. April 22, http://electionpakistan.org/assets/images/featured/pdf_articles/FAFEN%20-%20Women%20and%20the%202013%20General%20Elections%20-%2022%20April%202013.pdf, accessed on 01.08.2016; Rai, Shirin M.; Shah, Nafisa; Ayaz, Aazar (2007): Achieving Gender Equality in Public Offices in Pakistan. Research and Review Report Islamabad UNDP, https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/people/rai/outreach/undp_report.pdf, accessed on 22.10.2016; European Union Election Observation Mission to Pakistan (2013): Islamic Republic of Pakistan, General Elections 11 May 2013. Field Report.

⁴ CIDOB International Year Book (2012): Political System and State Structure of Pakistan, http://www.cidob.org/en/content/download/32418/526985/file/ANEXO_SISTEMA+POLITICO+Y+ESTRUCTURA+DE+PAKISTAN_ANG.pdf, accessed on 08.07.2016.

⁵ In the first legislative assembly from 1947 to 1954.

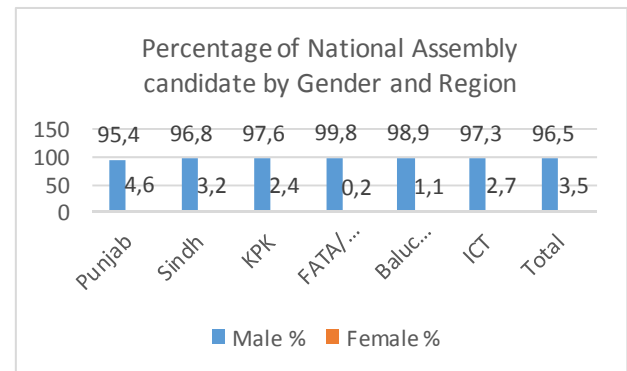
⁶ CIDOB International Year Book (2012).

for women was lapsed. Therefore, no seats were allocated for women in the 1990, 1993, and in 1997 elected assemblies, at neither the provincial nor the national level.⁷ As a result, women's representation was minimal – in 1990, for example, it was 0.9% (the number of directly elected women was 2 out of 217). In 1993, women's representation was 1.8% (the number of directly elected women was 4 out of 217), and for the 1997 national assembly, the percentage of women in elected assemblies slightly increased to 2.8% (the number of directly elected women was 6 out of 217).⁸

For the first time and under military rule, in 2000, the quota for women's political participation was raised to 33% at the local government level. This quota was effective at three levels of the local government, namely the union council, the *tehsil*⁹, and the district level. Similarly, before the 2002 election, the number of women was increased to 17% in both the national and provincial assemblies (with 61 out of 342 members in the national assembly being women).¹⁰ A significant increase in the quota also increased women's overall participation in the political system for the election of 2002. As a result, the largest ever number of women contested and won general seats. In the election of 2002, 188 women in total contested general seats, and of these 188, 101 were nominated by political parties, and 39 among them won their respective seats. To compare this to the 1997 election, this ratio was almost one-third: only 56 women contested the election at that time, among them 39 were nominated by political parties, and only 7 managed to win.¹¹

However, when we look at the elections of 2008 and 2013 we can observe some fluctuating trends. In the 2013 election, women acquired 70 out of 342 seats in the lower house of the national legislature, almost 20.5% of the total number of seats. In the upper house, women were elected to 17 out of 100 seats, 17% of the total number of seats. When this is compared to the 2008 election, we see that a slightly higher proportion of women participated in 2013. In the 2008 election, 34 women were nominated by political parties to stand for election. In the 2013 election, 36 women acquired nominations by political parties. Similarly, 108 women were contesting the 272 National Assembly

seats in 2013. This number is again higher than in the 2008 election, when 76 women in total ran for office. Since the 2013 election, some of the political parties, like the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) and Mutahida Qaumi Movement, increased women's participation on the party ticket compared to the 2008 election. Other political parties, however, like the Pakistan People Party and Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam, saw a decrease in women's representation for the 2013 election compared to the 2008 election.¹²



Current trends in women's participation in the political process

In order to assess the current trends in women's political participation, we may focus on three key questions: 1) How many women were awarded the party ticket for the contestation of an election? 2) What was the total representation of women in provincial and national assemblies?, and 3) Of those women who won seats in these assemblies, how many were elected to general seats, and how many were elected due to reserved seats? The available literature indicates that although women actively participated in the 13th National Assembly,¹³ they were not given due credit in the form of nominations from the respective political parties. While a total of 3.5% of women candidates was nominated by the political parties, 96.5% of the candidates were men.¹⁴ In this context, Yusuf (2013) has stated that the low level of representation of women in the election

⁷ National Commission on the Status of Women (2010): Gender Review of Political Framework for Women Political Participation. Review Report, Islamabad, <http://www.ncsw.gov.pk/previewpublication/13>, accessed on 22.10.2016.

⁸ Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency – PILDAT (2004): Women Representation in Pakistan's Parliament. Lahore, <http://www.pildat.org/Publications/publication/Women/WomenRepresentationInPakistanParliament.pdf>, accessed on 22.10.2016.

⁹ Tehsil is an administrative division in some of the South Asian countries like Pakistan and India roughly corresponding to a sub-district.

¹⁰ UNDP Pakistan (2005).

¹¹ Ibid; PILDAT (2004).

¹² "The Awami National Party and Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf have awarded party tickets to two and five female candidates out of totals of 45 and 241, respectively, for general National Assembly seats." (Yusuf, Huma (2013): The evolving role of women in Pakistani politics. Noref Expert Analysis, The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, If., <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/164192/c832356e4ede2cff568363e27bb152b0.pdf>, accessed on 22.10.2016.)

¹³ "Female legislators contributed to the oversight of the executive branch of government by putting forward 51% of all questions during Question Hours (8,138 out of 16,056 questions). These questions were put forward by 55 female legislators, for an average of 148 questions per woman, whereas 161 male legislators put forward the other 7,918 questions, for an average of 49 questions per man. On average, for every one question to the executive asked by a male parliamentarian, a woman parliamentarian asked three questions. Similarly, female MNAs, either independently or jointly with other female or male Members, submitted 444 CANs out of 543 in total." (FAFEN (2013a), 2.)

¹⁴ FAFEN (2013a).

indicates low confidence on the part of political parties towards them, which contrasts starkly with the level of political activism seen among women.¹⁵

Similarly, the UNDP (2005) stated that the proportion of women who have been occupying decision-making positions in the political parties has decreased. Women have been considered as a passive vote bank, and political parties tend to use them mostly for representative functions at public gatherings, meetings, and campaigns.¹⁶ And although political parties have women's wings, these tend to fulfill largely representative functions, and have not influenced the decision-making process within political parties.¹⁷ So, structural discrimination in party organizations has influenced women's representation when it comes to the contestation of elections. Still, it is an important development that women stood in larger numbers for national assembly general seats in the 2013 election compared to the 2008 election. Moreover, the participation of women in elections from diverse areas like FATA¹⁸ and Dir¹⁹ was also a positive sign of an increase in women's political participation. Some women from low-caste groups and from economically deprived areas of Sindh also participated in the election of 2013. These women from marginalised and economically underprivileged groups sought to make their voices heard in the mainstream political system to draw attention to those issues being neglected by male politicians, such as education, health, and women's rights.²⁰ This lack of attention to issues affecting women in particular indicates a low level of commitment from political parties to empower women politically. And yet, at the same time, social activism among women for greater political participation is on the rise. Mainly this is because of international treaties and human rights conventions, which Pakistan has signed. Therefore, various international organisations like United Nations Women (UN Women), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), National Democratic Institute (NDI), and some others, have been working jointly with the national and local level organisations

¹⁵ Yusuf (2013).

¹⁶ UNDP Pakistan (2005); Zakar, Muhammad Zakria (n.d.): Strengthening Women's Political Participation and Leadership for Effective Democratic Governance. A baseline research study. Research report, Search for Common Ground.

¹⁷ Bano, Saira (2009): Women in Parliament in Pakistan: Problems and Potential Solutions, in: *Women's Studies Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 19-35.

¹⁸ FATA (Federally Administrative Tribal Area). It is in the North West of Pakistan, bordered by Afghanistan and known as a highly conservative area, dominated by a Pashtun population. This area is also famous for militant Jihadist activity. In this area women have restricted mobility and fewer chances to participate in the political process.

¹⁹ Dir is a district adjacent to the district of Swat. It is also located in KPK (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and dominated by a Pashtun population.

²⁰ Yusuf (2013).

to promote effective participation of women in the field of politics.

Despite this rather mixed track record on the promotion of women's political empowerment, particularly with regard to women's roles in political parties, Pakistan has been a trend-setter for other Muslim countries when it comes to providing a positive example for women's political participation. Benazir Bhutto, for instance, was the first ever woman prime minister of a Muslim country in 1988. Similarly, Fahmida Mirza was the first woman speaker of a national assembly in the Muslim world. In addition to this, around 100 women members entered into the upper and lower houses of the Pakistani national legislative assemblies in 2013.²¹

After the election of 2008 the Pakistan People Party (PPP)-led coalition also brought women into the cabinet. Several women worked as ministers in key posts like social welfare, and the special education ministry was led by Samina Khalid Ghurki. Similarly, Sherry Rehman, Ashiq Firdous Awan, and Hina Rabbani Khar served as ministers for Information and Broadcasting, Health, and Foreign Affairs respectively. Some of these women politicians subsequently switched to other ministries as well.²²

However, the current cabinet has fewer women ministers with only two women serving in this capacity. One is Anusha Rehman Ahmed Khan, who leads the Ministry of Information and Technology, while, Saira Afzal Tarar is State Minister for National Health Services. But, their visibility in terms of performance and decision-making is not prominent compared to their male counterparts.²³

Although discriminatory practices on the basis of gender are hurdles to accelerating the pace of women's empowerment in the domains of politics, the statistical representation of women in legislative bodies has shown progressive trends. It shows that almost 20% of the total members of legislative bodies are women (see Table 1). However, this level of representation of women in legislative bodies includes the effects of the women's quota, which came into effect during 2002.

²¹ Repila, Jacky (2013): *The Politics of Our Lives. The Raising Her Voice in Pakistan Experience*. Oxford, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/er-politics-lives-raising-her-voice-pakistan-010713-en.pdf>, accessed on 22.10.2016.

²² Saeed, Abrar (2008): "28 new ministers to join Cabinet", in: *The Nation*, 03.11.2008, <http://www.nation.com.pk/politics/03-Nov-2008/28-new-ministers-to-join-Cabinet>, accessed on 07.07.2016; Ghauri, Irfan (2011): "New cabinet ministers take oath", in: *The Express Tribune*, 11.02.2011, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/117326/cabinet-dissolution-zardari-accepts-resignations/>, accessed on 07.07.2016.

²³ Ali, Shafqat (2015): "Female poorly represented in cabinet", in: *The Nation*, 01.06.2015, <http://nation.com.pk/editors-picks/01-Jun-2015/females-poorly-represented-in-cabinet>, accessed on 07.07.2015.

Legislature (Assemblies and senate)	Women elected on reserved seats		Women elected on general seats		Women on minorities seat		Women representation out of total	Percentage of women's representation
	No. of total	% of total	No. of total	% of total	No. of total	% of total		
National	60/342	17.5	9/272	3.3	1/10	10	70/342	20.5
Senate	17/100	17					17/100	17
Punjab	66/371	17.8	9/295	3.0	1/8	12.5	76/371	20.5
Sindh	29/168	17.3	2/130	1.5	0/9	0	31/168	18.5
KPK ²⁵	22/124	17.7	0/90	0	0/3	0	22/124	17.7
Baluchistan	11/65	16.9	1/51	2.0	0/3	0	12/65	18.5
OVERALL	205/1170	17.5	21/847	2.5	2/33	6.0	228/1170	19.5

Region/ Province	Male Voters	Female Voters	Total Voters	Female %	Male%	Female%
Baluchistan	1,915,388	1,421,271	3,336,659	42.6%	56.03%	48.79%
FATA	1,142,234	596,079	1,738,313	34.3%		
ICT	337,900	288,064	625,964	46.0%		
KPK	7,008,533	5,257,624	12,266,157	42.9%		
Punjab	27,697,701	21,561,633	49,259,334	43.8%		
Sindh	10,490,631	8,472,744	18,963,375	44.7%		
Total	48,592,387	37,597,415	86,189,802	43.6%		

So, the quota for women's political participation has played a vital role in bringing women into decision-making positions at the local, provincial, and national levels. However, at the same time, those women who have entered politics thanks to the quota and the allocation of reserved seats come from influential political families.²⁴ So those women who are entering politics via reserved seats are not from the same or similar socio-economic and political background as the majority of Pakistani women, a limitation of true representation that needs to be taken seriously. Therefore, one has to conclude as True et al (2014) have stated that "quotas for women will not achieve the desired results."²⁵

Furthermore, women's population, women's voter registration, and the voter turnout among women also must be considered in order to understand the challenges that women's empowerment has been facing. Yusuf (2013) has stated that women in Pakistan make up almost half of the population, while for the 2013 election, almost 37.6 million women were registered to vote, versus the almost 48.6 million registered male voters. This indicates a gap of almost 11 million women voters who were not registered.²⁶ The table above (Table 2) presents more statistics indicative of the gender discrepancy in voter registration. The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Baluchistan, and Khyber Pakhtunwa (KPK) show the lowest rates of voter registration among women, while Islamabad and

Sindh have a relatively less gender discrepancy in comparison to other areas.

In the past, data for the voter turnout on the basis of gender was not recorded.²⁷ However, for the election of 2013, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) planned to collect data on gender-based voter turnout.²⁸ In this regard, "Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) assessment of 264 Statements of the Count from 26 constituencies, the Presiding Officers at as many as two-thirds of polling stations did not fill out the specific sections of the form correctly, raising concern that ECP may not be able to provide accurate sex-segregated turnout."²⁹ The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) also reported that counting on the basis of sex segregation did not in fact take place.³⁰ Moreover, FAFEN preliminary data analysis, which was based on a sample of 3,070 polling stations in 92 National Assembly constituencies, illustrated that male voter turnout remained 56.03% at male polling stations, while female voter turnout remained at 48.79% of female polling stations. This female voter turnout actually represented an increase compared to the 2008 election in the same category, i.e. female polling station.³¹ The EU EOM (2013) suggested some factors that can be considered as reasons for lower voter turnout for women, like the distance of the polling station from the area of residence, lack

²⁴ True, Jacqui; Nicole, George; Niner, Sara, and Parashar, Swati (2014): Women's Political Participation in Asia and the Pacific, in: *Social Science Research Council*, Working Papers on Women in Politics No. 3 (SSRC Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum), 1-70.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Yusuf (2013).

²⁷ FAFEN (2013b): Observation of General Election 2013: Key Findings and Recommendations. Field Observation Report, Islamabad, [http://electionpakistan.org/assets/publication/bb90e-FAFEN-Election-Observation-Report---Key-Findings-and-Recommendations-\(22-May-2013\).pdf](http://electionpakistan.org/assets/publication/bb90e-FAFEN-Election-Observation-Report---Key-Findings-and-Recommendations-(22-May-2013).pdf), accessed on 22.10.2016.

²⁸ European Union Election Observation Mission to Pakistan (2013).

²⁹ FAFEN (2013b), 2.

³⁰ European Union Election Observation Mission to Pakistan (2013).

³¹ FAFEN (2013b).

of or inadequate toilet facilities at the polling stations, and the lack of separate male and female polling stations in areas where the socio-cultural segregation of gender is rigid. Such factors may have influenced female voter turnout in the 2013 election.³²

Socio-cultural hurdles for women's empowerment

In addition to this, the reasons behind the lack of representative participation of women in legislative bodies, particularly with regard to general seats and party nomination, is that the idea that "a woman's place is still in the home and political life is for men is still held by many" in Pakistan.³³ However, with the exception of those women "who come from political families, women are usually discouraged from public life and political roles."³⁴ At the same time, the representation of women via reserved seats works against the spirit and commitment towards the empowerment of women.³⁵ In this regard Bano (2009) has stated that the political participation of women in the political structure is not stimulated through economic empowerment of women. So, such representation of women in the political system is not truly indigenous representation.³⁶ Because the common perception is that women's primary duty and task is to work in the home, there is a strongly held belief that women should be working in the home rather than be active in politics.³⁷

There are other socio-cultural and economic barriers as well that restrict women's participation in the political system. A case in point is one of the studies conducted in the Pashtun areas of KPK, which has indicated that women face the challenges of sex segregation, illiteracy, and lack of awareness of their political rights. Moreover, socio-cultural values in that area accord women a socially inferior position. These factors work to hinder the political empowerment of women.³⁸ In addition to this, generally in South Asia, politics is based on financial resources along with power and political networks. In this regard, women generally have less opportunity to be part of a strong political network and have more limited access to economic resources, unless they descend from a politically active family. Therefore, constraints on economic empowerment, and the lack of political networks are other factors which

are considered as hurdles for women's participation in the political system.³⁹

Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Compared to the past, in Pakistan, there has been an increase in the proportion of women to have been elected to legislative bodies, mainly because of the quota that allocates seats specifically to women. But, a higher proportion of women are contesting election for legislative bodies to general seats as well. Moreover, women are using their right to vote more actively than they have in the past. They have also proven themselves through their active participation in the 13th and 14th National Assembly of Pakistan, which is indicated by their nomination by political parties. Similarly, more women contested seats in the 2013 election as compare to the election of 2008.

Yet despite the significant progress, women are not as empowered as the current statistics and trends related to the political system and structure would seem to indicate. The noteworthy representation of women in legislative bodies is mainly due to the quota system. Women who have entered in politics should be thankful to the quota system, as they are not elected directly by the people, but rather are allocated their seats by the party apparatus. Although, not having to stand for direct election might expedite their inclusion in the political system, not being directly elected by voters also means they are not true representatives of the socio-cultural class of the majority women of Pakistan. This is all the more so since most of the women who have served in legislative bodies have come from already influential political families (Benazir Bhutto, Maryam Nawaz, Hina Rabbani Khar, Tehmina Daultana, Syeda Abdia Hussain, Fahmida Mirza, etc.). Moreover, the proportion of party nominations for women to compete for general seats is still less than it is for men, which indicates less trust with regard to women's abilities to win elections. Also, within political parties, women's wings have a less effective role in the decision-making process, tending to fulfill representative functions rather than executive ones. This is another significant indication for the de-facto lack of women's empowerment in political parties.

The reasons behind the limited political empowerment of women have to do with socio-cultural practices and the economic dependency of women on the male counterpart of their household. Along with this, low rates of literacy and gender segregation in social roles are other factors that hinder women's participation. Women's participation cannot be effective unless there is progressive socio-cultural change, which should be initiated through a bottom-up approach. This means firstly women must be em-

³² European Union Election Observation Mission to Pakistan (2013).

³³ "This paper examines current patterns of women's political participation in the four sub regions (Eastern Asia, South-Eastern Asia, South Asia and the Pacific Islands) of the Asia-Pacific region" (True, et al. (2014)).

³⁴ True, et al. (2014).

³⁵ Bano (2009).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Naz, Arab; Ibrahim, and Ahmad, Waqar (2012): Socio-Cultural Impediments to Women Political Empowerment in Pakhtun Society, in: *Academic Research International*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 163-173.

³⁹ True, et al. (2014).

powered socially and economically. Only then can women play progressive and authoritative roles in the political system. Currently, political indicators of women's political empowerment are due entirely to top-down approaches, like the quota, which are effected through the legislative measures. However, the structural discrimination embodied in socio-cultural practices still constitutes the normative set of practices within political parties. The distribution of roles, responsibilities, and party nominations are the concrete examples of such behaviours and attitudes. So, true empowerment, effective participation of women, women's roles in the political system, and political structure must also be enhanced through changes in normative practices at the local level and in societal institutions (particularly in the family and the economy) and through the promotion of awareness.

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