



Challenges in the Progress of Women, s Political Participation in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The challenges and Progress of the political participation of women in Pakistan, a nation with a complicated sociopolitical environment, are examined in this study. Even though women have made great progress in recent decades, a number of obstacles still prevent them from fully participating in politics. The report draws attention to structural, cultural, and financial barriers include patriarchal norms, gender-based violence, low educational attainment, and the under-representation of women in important positions of political decision-making. The study evaluates the effects of these advancements on women's empowerment, voting behavior, and policymaking through qualitative data analysis. The article's conclusion makes suggestions for enhancing women's political participation in Pakistan going forward, highlighting the necessity of ongoing reforms, raising the awareness of the public, and establishing an atmosphere that encourages women to actively participate in politics.

Keywords: Women, Political Participation, Financial Barriers, Patriarchal Norms, Awareness.

Introduction

Women's rights and freedom to follow their interests, vote, and take part in elections are referred to as women's participation in politics. Women can participate in politics in a variety of ways, including by joining political parties, advocating for causes, becoming activists, and even putting themselves up as candidates. The cornerstones of political participation include the right to free speech, the ability to assemble and associate, the ability to engage in public affairs, the capacity to run for office and win elections. Global norms state that everyone has the fundamental right to fully participate in the political and electoral process, regardless of gender. In reality, though, women typically struggle more to actually implement this. Above all, women's participation in politics seems to be an important step in the direction of female empowerment. Consequently, essential elements of women's political empowerment include their capacity and autonomy to exercise their right to vote, make decisions, run for office, and engage in political demonstrations. More female representation in politics is thought to lead to a greater emphasis on the difficulties faced by women in the state. Women's participation in politics is seen as an essential prerequisite for basic democracy and gender equality (Afridi, 2023).

Worldwide recognition has been accorded to the importance of equal political involvement by men and women, as well as opportunities for women to hold leadership positions at all levels of decision-making, in fostering stable and prosperous societies. There has been progress despite obstacles and sporadic failures: presently, a greater number of women than ever before occupy public office and participate in electoral processes as employees, voters, candidates, or campaigners. Encouraging women to take part in politics and make

decisions globally is crucial for growth and democracy. Women have the right to equal participation in public decision-making and are entitled to engage in decision-making processes in government institutions at all levels and sectors (Strengthening women's political participation, 2023).

Around the world, women encounter barriers to political engagement. Current organizational and socioeconomic conditions are regarded as obstacles to their progress. Globally, the percentage of women in leadership positions was 17.7% in 2008. This little representation demonstrates the great distance women must travel to achieve ideal parity in politics. Encouraging gender-neutral governance requires full and equal engagement of women in the policymaking process. Gender quotas and other legal measures are being implemented at a remarkable rate globally in an effort to improve the participation of women (Bano, 2009).

Over the past years, there have been notable advancements in women's engagement in politics. Most notably, there has been a rise in women's political engagement in legislative bodies. Numerous factors, including Pakistan's legal obligations to the international community—such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)—can be blamed for this shift in political participation. Pakistan has been affected by these agreements since the 4th World Conference on Women in 1995. Furthermore, the Pakistani Constitution of 1973 also had a significant impact on women's political advancement (Awan, 2016).

In all democratic nations across the globe, women's involvement in politics and administration is becoming increasingly important. Nearly 95% of nations worldwide have granted women the freedom to vote and run for office in the twenty-first century. Around the world, efforts have been made to promote women's participation in politics and the election process through the introduction of legislative and constitutional reforms. The obstacles and issues that prevented women from entering the political sphere can differ between nations because of the cultural, religious, socioeconomic, and social standards that are unique to each of them (Robina Sharif, 2018).

Women still do not have the same chances or treatment as males, even in countries where society has made enormous advancements. One of the main causes of poverty and the fundamental denial of women's rights is gender inequality. In comparison to men, women frequently possess fewer resources, less authority, and less sway over decisions. Aside from experiencing further injustice, they are subjected to different forms of abuse and exploitation due to their ethnicity, age, race, class, marital status, sexual orientation, or handicap. Pakistan is ranked 151st out of 153 nations in the Global Gender Gap Index 2020, making it the third worst country in the world for gender equality. Poverty and gender inequality are closely related because deeply ingrained discriminatory customs uphold the low status that is granted to women and other marginalized groups. Women's rights groups have fought for many years to remove obstacles to gender inequality in the nation and to effect constructive change. Legislation passed by governments has also helped close the gender gap, but there are still a number of political, social, cultural, economic, and religious obstacles that keep women from advancing in society (Strengthening Women's Political participation in Pakistan, 2020).

In Pakistan, women have historically been under-represented in positions of leadership in the public and political spheres, but things are gradually changing. In accordance with Beijing Platform of Action and Article 7 of CEDAW, the government has implemented a number of initiatives to increase women's political and electoral involvement. A female speaker of the National Assembly (2008–2013) and a female prime minister (1988–1990 and 1993–1995) are two notable examples of the significant advancements in women's political participation. Women's rights to vote, run for office, and participate actively in politics are protected under the Elections Act of 2017 and its implementing regulations. In 2002, women's representation in parliament increased to 17%, above the world average of about 15% of that time, which was a quantum leap that brought forth many opportunities to enhance women's participation, leadership, and voice. At the local level, provincial governments provide up to 33% of seats for women through a combination of direct and indirect elections (NATIONAL REPORT ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN PAKISTAN, 2023).

Analysis and Discussion:

Gender Inequality:

According to this research, the major city in each of Pakistan's four provinces performed significantly worse than the other constituencies in each province when it came to gender inequality in voter turnout in the 2018 general election. The Punjab province exhibits the greatest disparity, with the gender turnout gap in the capital of Lahore (12.5%) being twice as large as the gender gap in the country as a whole (6.3%). On the other hand, the difference in voter registration between the largest city and the provincial average in the remaining three provinces is significantly less for women. Pakistan's major cities must close their large turnout disparity in order to establish a democratic society that is inclusive of both genders. The report argues that without acknowledging that gender inequality in big city participation is a result of a complex dynamic between women, social attitudes in households, and the gendered nature of political space and political engagement, it would be impossible to forge an effective agenda of action to address it (Ali Cheema, 2019).

A significant percentage of Pakistani women are impacted by gender discrimination, which is one of the country's human rights concerns. Almost half of Pakistani women do not have a basic education. Pakistani women also have poorer dietary and health status. In addition, the majority of women are confined to their houses with little to no authority to make decisions that directly impact their living circumstances and other family facets. In Pakistani society, on the other hand, men are viewed as domineering. Women's many life stages are negatively impacted by this subjugation. Gender inequality is a common problem for Pakistani women. Women are viewed as sexual objects who cannot make decisions for themselves or their families. Nonetheless, the male is regarded as a representation of authority. Women in Pakistan are subservient to men, their rights are disregarded, and their individuality is lost as a result of male ownership and the patriarchal social framework. Nine of the twenty studies found that women are incapable of making decisions for themselves; instead, someone else makes them for them, usually the father before marriage, followed by the husband and son (Tazeen Saeed Ali, 2022).

Challenges to Women's Political Participation:

Patriarchal Society:

A patriarchal social structure is one in which the male head of the household is the head of the family. This phrase is typically used to describe a system in which women are maintained in subordination in a variety of ways, as well as to allude to male dominance and authority over women. Because of the region's ingrained patriarchal structure, which oppresses women and advances the interests of men, women typically do not

inherit property. The patriarchal system is led by a male member of society. As a result, women's rights are diminished in practically every profession. Male members frequently denote women's inferior status. It is typical for women to be denied the ability to inherit, especially when it comes to real estate. The family's means of subsistence and other essential productive resources are controlled by male members (Munazza Mubarak, 2020).

One of the guiding concepts of Pakistani society is gender. The social significance of gender is predetermined by patriarchal values ingrained in regional customs and culture. The concept of sexual division of labor has produced an artificial division between production and reproduction, placing men in a productive position as breadwinners in the public sphere and women in reproductive roles as mothers and wives in the private sphere of the home. As a result, the State and families have invested very little on women's resources. Consequently, there is a lack of investment in women's human capital, which is exacerbated by the idea of purdah (literally, "veiled"), unfavorable societal biases, and cultural practices; additionally, women's mobility is restricted; and women internalize patriarchy (WOMEN IN PAKISTAN, 2000). Pakistan's patriarchal structure prevents women from demanding their rights to inheritance, preventing them from meeting and working with other members of society. Sexual harassment is another prevalent issue that women in this system must deal with. Women's status in the area is weakened by their reliance on men. The "bottom rung of poverty, illiteracy, and landlessness" is where women are located. 50% of male respondents to a poll conducted by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) claimed that customary law prevented women from claiming land, followed by familial responsibilities (32.4%) and legal illiteracy (29%). The female respondents attributed their lack of rights to tradition or culture (Munazza Mubarak, 2020).

There are a number of obstacles linked to Pakistan's low political support for women. All of these obstacles, meanwhile, fall into the categories of social and household. As is the case with female legislators from political families, it has also been discovered that effective female involvement at all levels of government, from the lowest to the highest, is a political action that is intrinsically related to the legacy of predecessors. Furthermore, since it does not promote real political empowerment and the democratic contribution of women while eliminating all obstacles to political empowerment, raising female political involvement is only a band-aid solution to achieving gender equality. The absence of female party support has been cited as a barrier to female involvement in Pakistan's present political system, according to Morobane's study. However, women are subject to some innate limitations, such as a patriarchal system or a culture controlled by men, where men are viewed as the head of the household and have the power to make all decisions (Begum, 2023).

Religious Misinterpretation:

Islamic research has long focused heavily on women's political engagement, a topic that has been hotly contested throughout Islamic history. Religiously motivated excuses have been used to deny women their rights and to continue to victimize them in their social and political circles. Women's standing is deteriorating in many emerging nations with multi-cultural and multi-sectarian religious approaches and traditional and religiously based governance. Islam had a significant influence on Pakistan's political identity since it was the impetus for the creation of Pakistan as an independent state for Muslims in India and the unification of Muslims throughout the Subcontinent. Different ideological stances were developed during the early stages of constitution-making as a result of the primary identity issue of whether Pakistan was an Islamic state or merely a state for the

Muslims of the Sub-Continent. Since the beginning, the ulema have been fighting for and working towards their political and social vision, which has had a significant impact on how women are viewed in public life. In Pakistan, women's political engagement has also been negatively impacted by patriarchal and conventional views on their public roles. However, during General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization Program from 1977 to 1988, gender discriminatory laws were enacted and maintained on the legal and political platform, complementing such gender biases based on religious and cultural traditions (Ishaq Ahmad, 2021).

Misinterpretation of Islamic Laws, particularly, related to the term "Sharia Law" is a great challenge. Religious parties and individuals create significant barriers for women, while religious extremist actively hinder women's leadership process. Islam, in a true sense, promotes equality, certain individuals impose limitations to the achievement of this equality. Qur'an and Sunnah prohibit the gender base inequality. Islam emphasizes that woman and man are treated equally without any expectation. In patriarchal society of Pakistan, where most of the interpretations are conducted by male scholars, allow the discrimination against women and are biased and only favor man (Zermeen Azam, 2024).

In Pakistan, orthodox religious scholars are held accountable for the ideological harm done to women, which causes them to suffer. Using a range of theological references as a weapon against women in any capacity in contemporary society, these religious experts have engendered misogyny in our culture. By claiming that women shouldn't be permitted to engage in public life, they have denied women a more prominent position. Thus, the pursuit of gender equality is based on the core principles of social justice and equitable economic opportunity distribution, which are found to be at the lowest end of the spectrum (31.6%), and the World Economic Forum reports that the average woman's income is less than 16% of the average man's (Razzaq, 2022).

Financial Constraints:

There are numerous hidden obstacles that prevent women from rising to the highest positions in the workforce. In addition to hindering the economy, the lack of women's influence in the workplace also impedes Pakistan's advancement as a nation. It goes without saying that women must make the most of their abilities in order to contribute more to the advancement of their families, communities, and nations. By removing the disparities that currently exist in society, their abilities might be used for financial benefit (Rauf, 2022). sBecause they are reliant on men, women in politics have significant challenges in the area of finance. Women cannot run for office without their families' approval because the great majority of them are financially dependent on their men. The majority of Lahore voters claimed that in order for women to run for office, their families—father, spouse, or brothers—must provide them with financial support. Women can make significant contributions to politics, but their primary obstacle is their reliance on men. They can take charge of decisions once they are financially independent (Arfan Latif, 2015).

Women's voices are strengthened and they are discouraged from entering politics by the prevalent unwritten customary regulations. Women are restricted to the home, and it is severely discouraged for them to participate in public life, particularly in politics. Because of society's patriarchal framework, women are portrayed as being unable to fully participate in politics. Numerous studies have also revealed that while some families support their women's political participation, their illiteracy prevents them from playing a full and active part in local government. Although the women's quota has been raised to the highest possible percentage (33%), they are nevertheless subject to the decision of a male family

member to enter politics. The concept of the public and private spheres is well-defined in patriarchal societies, where women belong in the private sphere and men belong in the public realm. Even once they are represented in the council, one of the main obstacles preventing women from participating in politics is thought to be illiteracy. Women in the study region have been socialized from an early age to conduct household chores inside the four walls in order to nurse and care for their children (Hussain Ali, 2021).

Electoral Participation Challenges:

For many facets of civic engagement, women in families frequently rely on the male family members. Women find it difficult to register for a National Identity Card (NIC) if a male family member is not helpful during the application procedure. If they are allowed to vote, they frequently give up their power to make decisions to the head of the household. There have been cases documented where male relatives have taken control of female relatives' NICs and voted on their behalf. An further noteworthy concern is that the majority of women work in factories or as housekeepers. Their employment status makes it difficult for them to take time off to vote because they place a higher priority on taking care of their families. The general election turnout of Pakistani women can be used to measure their level of political participation. In contrast to male voter turnout nationwide and in all assemblies, female voter turnout in the 2018 General Elections (GE) was quite low. In contrast to 56.07 percent of registered male voters, roughly 46.89 percent of registered women voters cast ballots for National Assembly seats (Jatoi, 2023).

Conclusion:

The study highlights the persistent challenges hindering women's political participation in Pakistan despite significant progress in recent decades. Patriarchal norms, religious misinterpretations, financial constraints, and electoral barriers continue to limit women's active involvement in politics. While constitutional reforms and international commitments like CEDAW and the Beijing Platform have improved women's representation, structural inequalities remain deeply entrenched. The analysis reveals that women in urban centers face greater disparities in voter turnout, and cultural attitudes often restrict their political agency. Without addressing these systemic issues, achieving gender parity in Pakistan's political landscape will remain elusive. Moreover, the study underscores that token measures like reserved seats are insufficient for genuine empowerment. Women from politically influential families dominate these spaces, while ordinary women struggle to break through socio-economic and cultural barriers. The patriarchal mindset, reinforced by misinterpreted religious doctrines, perpetuates gender inequality in decision-making roles. Financial dependency further restricts women's autonomy, making political participation a privilege rather than a right. These challenges call for a holistic approach to transform societal attitudes and institutional frameworks to foster inclusive political participation.

Recommendations

To enhance women's political participation, Pakistan must implement comprehensive legal and educational reforms. First, the government should enforce stricter penalties for gender-based discrimination in politics and introduce mandatory gender-sensitivity training for political parties and electoral officials. Public awareness campaigns, led by civil society and media, can challenge patriarchal stereotypes and highlight the importance of women's political roles. Additionally, financial support mechanisms, such as campaign funds for female candidates and microloans for aspiring politicians, can reduce economic barriers. These steps must be coupled with grassroots mobilization to encourage women's voter registration and turnout, particularly in rural areas.

Second, religious scholars and institutions must be engaged to promote accurate interpretations of Islamic teachings on gender equality. Collaborative efforts with ulema can counter misogynistic narratives and emphasize Islam's endorsement of women's rights in public life. Political parties should adopt transparent internal quotas to ensure women's meaningful representation beyond symbolic roles. Finally, integrating gender studies into school curricula can foster generational change in attitudes. International organizations and donors should support local initiatives that empower women through skill-building and leadership programs. Only through sustained multi-stakeholder action can Pakistan achieve equitable political participation for women.

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