Women's Political Participation and Representation in Pakistan: Critical Analysis

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Abstract:

Worldwide it is observed that the existence of a true democratic rule has not been possibly implemented without bringing women into mainstream politics and providing them due representation at the decision making and administrative level. In Pakistan, women have constituted more than half of the population, therefore, equal participation of women in political life has a fundamental function at larger developmental stages for the progression of women and society as well. The underline study discussed secondary data that was critically analyzed by using percentage of women representation in national and provincial assemblies of Pakistan and various challenges and obstacles that women have been facing to get their equal participation. A thought provoking process of interconnecting women's numerical strength in the Parliament introduced tremendous developments and its positive consequences on women's political participation. The analysis, on the basis of collective facts, showed the importance of women role, empowerment, and performance in mainstream politics that has been somehow suppressed in the process of political participation.

Key Words: Pakistan, decision making, political participation, democratic rule, challenges, women empowerment

INTRODUCTION

The role and performance in the power, politics and decision making processes is vital for developing stable & democratic societies with recognition of human rights, domestic and international peace and protection, which may increase vibrant market economics. It also helps to

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resolve health and learning challenges, and guarantee sustainable development. Moreover, the utilization of half of the country's population is the essence to develop our country.

Women's participation in all socio-political activities are documented globally as an imperative step to promote women in developing and developed countries equally. Thus, the contribution of women in politics and decision-making has gained noteworthy consideration in the whole world. Though, women are kept critically less represented in the decision-making administrative designations. The objective of the study was to evaluate the hindrances and challenges in the way of Pakistani women to perform their role in politics.

This study aims to critically analyze and discuss the barriers in political participation of women in the history of Pakistan's parliament, their representation in political mainstreaming and associated challenges. To discuss the political strategies and measures taken by the political parties to enhance political participation of women.

The positive and encouraging trends of party politics are important to shape and upgrade women's mainstreaming in Pakistan. The present study made a critical analysis about political representation of women in Pakistani history, which could not be improved without changing and bringing reforms in the Political institutions on the basis of equity and culture of politics, which somehow are unfair, biased, and discriminatory to women throughout the political history. The overview presented in the present study is based on analysis that associates the Pakistani political scenario with international agendas and strategies to improve the number of women's political participation in the light of party politics and Parliament in Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women constitute 51percent of Pakistan's population, being unutilized in the national development due to their low skill, less education and less empowerment in the realm of politics. The Pakistani patriarchal system and social stereotypes have always dismissed their capabilities and created persistent hurdles in women's way of empowerment.

Political participation of women in Pakistani society has always been challenging for their place and position in mainstream political development. Since partition of Pakistan in 1947, the presence of women in politics was minimal. They had participated in the political struggle for Independence of Pakistan side by side with men. Even in the first Constituent Assembly there were only two women.

There were remarkable women personalities in Pakistani political history, e.g. Fatima Jinnah, Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan, and Begum Jahan Ara Shahnawaz and a few other women, who belonged to famous political families, while many political members stayed at low levels. The fact could not be denied that women as half percent of the world's population can play their role effectively as they have less right to enter in the political decision making as compared to men at government level. Consequently, to ensure integrity or democratic system, women's equivalent participation in the decision-making and politics is necessary. However, an essential prerequisite for apprehensions of women should be taken under consideration (Kassa, 2015).

Women's active political involvement in any developing or developed country may provide a strong message internationally, not only in provisions of equal opportunities and self-determination of emancipation, but also the basis of provision of space for women in the autonomous structure of

electoral government. Pakistan as an Islamic and welfare state provides constitutional and political safeguard to women with complete honor and self-esteem. There are various societal values in patriarchal setups that have always depicted women as subordinate and submissive than men. They were educated to be subservient at all times. The imbalanced allocation of resources among women made them submissive, as they do not have sufficient possessions, whether financial, material or as a human being. Political participation allows political programs to be developed by women for their involvement in politics throughout multiple activities in prescribed and informal ways i.e. political discussion, budget debate, lobbying and activism. It was found that the major impediment that has always hampered women's representation and involvement in politics is patriarchal structure (Chaudhry, 2018).

Hence, a key issue in limiting women political participation has been found in the patriarchal mind-set. According to the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) it was reported that women have not been proved as active despite their engagement in politics. Moreover, without making any efforts to transform the patriarchal nature and culture of institutions, women were brought into political institutions (National Commission on the Status of Women [NCSW], 2010).

The women's strength in parliamentary political parties was not a marker of excellence though their significance and competence differentiated them among others. Usually, in Pakistan due to socio-cultural background, there are divisions among the roles and duties for men and women. Therefore, mobility of women is restricted and limited to domestic affairs. In Pakistani social set up, usually men are privileged to gain more prospects and are facilitated in socio economic and political fields. Political domain has been assumed as male dominated arena. Therefore, it is imperative for women to raise their demands and concerns at every political forum to consolidate their position within the Parliament and political parties in Pakistan. Constitutionally, women have been granted safeguards for their socio-economic and political rights in Pakistan.

Women's participation was found to be disappointing and insufficient in the political parties as well as in the administrative configuration at all levels i.e. local, provincial and national due to religious enlightening and structural barriers. The number of reserved seats for women at the national and provincial level was increased in 2002 elections of parliament in Pakistan.

Besides the increase in reserved women seats in the Assemblies from 2 to 20percent women now also constitute 33percent of the Union, Tehsil and District Councils. A good initiative was taken by the Government of Pakistan by introducing the National Policy of Development and Empowerment in 2002, which aimed to empower women socially, politically and economically in Pakistan. The outcomes of these policies were increased number of seats for women in the National and Provincial assemblies and Senate in Pakistan. So far, women are not encouraged to make decisions about their lives even after policy making. Therefore, there is a strong requirement to strengthen women in the political field by supporting their parties (NPDP, 2002).

Political participation is a major path to women empowerment in the political decision-making process. It has been challenging for women to enlarge their participation in the political sphere so they could be able to acquire position, grasp the situation, and become a dynamic part of gender mainstreaming (Zaheer, 2014).

The considerable numbers of women's seats were not witnessed in the election of 1956. Fatima Jinnah took the decision to contest the presidential election against Ayub Khan who was the most crucial although consequently defeated. The number of women parliamentarians had been only 8 out of 156 parliamentarians during 1962 and 1965, meanwhile, these numbers were further lessened to 6 from 1965-1969. The most significant developments in terms of women's representation in politics had been seen in the era of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. In the general election held in 1970, nine women participated in the contest. By the time, the number of female politicians contesting and winning had been gradually increased in national assembly seats from the year 1977, consequently it was reached to highest in numbers during 2008 (Latif, Ahmed & Abdullah, 2020).

The act which bound all parties to give at least 5percent of their party tickets to female candidates, was an enormously positive measure to promote women political participation in the country (Azhar & Basit, 2020). The Election Commission of Pakistan under its act 2017 has now been empowered to declare results invalid in constituencies where female voters turn out less than 10percent. This is an important measure to enhance women's role in the political system. As a result of this act, the election of Pakistan has canceled the by-election in 2018 in lower Dir in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on account of zero levels of female voter turnout. Re-election was held and the females cast over 1000 votes. This is a significant beginning that would result in more positive outcomes (Dawn Editorial, 2020).

WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN PAKISTAN

Three main areas can be highlighted in current trends of women's political participation: firstly, party ticket should be awarded to women to contest an election, secondly, in provincial and national legislatures the identification of total representation of women, and thirdly, have a look at successful women candidates in the provincial and national assembly. Besides this, the present study highlighted the number of elected women to general seats to discuss their representation and obstacles due to sociocultural barriers. Despite active participation, women could not get active participation in the general election as they were not given due representation from their own political parties. For example, in the general election 2008, the total number of women candidates nominated by political parties stood at 3.5percent, as compared to men that was around 96.5percent of the candidates. Low confidence has been depicted by political parties by introducing such a low level of women's representation in the election therefore the proportion was declined in term of women's decision-making positions (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2005).

Glass Ceiling Faced by Female Political Participation

Social, economic, religious, and cultural factors are obstacles to the political empowerment of women in Pakistan. The restriction of women's roles in the political domain are due to gender discrimination. The influential culture of patriarchy has been discouraging women's role in politics in Pakistan (Bari, 2000). Women are subjected to numerous issues based on spiritual, racial, ideological, social, and economic agendas. The socio-cultural obstacles have been affecting women's political participation in Pakistani society. Pakistan is one of the Asian countries, where the gender gap has been prevalent in all spheres of life. Women in Pakistan have been struggling to get equal opportunities and rights in the country. The women in rural areas of the country has been barred

from using their political rights because of barbarism that exist in the form of rape and honor killing, which is still a gloomy picture of women in Pakistani society (Kayser, 2013).

The present study discussed the significance of women in Pakistani politics and inclusion of women into political legislation and its significance in different political parties during the 12th and 13th National Assemblies. The women's wings of the mainstream political parties have visualized a new role and more efficient mode for women in their parties to assert themselves and influence party decisions. The study also sheds light on the importance of political participation of women in the political decision making. Generally, political parties are transforming their party manifestos to bring women in the mainstream politics.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data was collected from secondary sources i.e. printed journal articles, books and government reports and non-government organizations.

The analysis revealed that socio economic and religious-cultural factors minimize the role of women in politics and reduced their political participation in the party politics and parliament as well. The study further exposed that political participation permits women to deal with their critical problems and desires in the society and guarantee the ingenuousness, authentic struggle against rent-seeking, answerability, political obligation, political leadership, and political receptiveness of the existing political levels.

Table 1 Constitution of National Assembly

Province/area	General seats	Seats reserved for women	Seats
KPK	39	9	48
FATA	12	-	12
Federal Capital	3	-	3
Punjab	141	33	174
Sindh	61	14	75
Balochistan	16	4	20
Total	272	60	332

According to Article 51(3) of the Constitution, the National Assembly consists of 332 seats. Breakdown of seats in 2018 General Elections is mentioned in table 1. In addition to the above, 10 seats are reserved for non-Muslims which makes total number of members 342.

Table 2 Results of Provincial Assemblies of Pakistan in 2018

Province/area	General seats	Reserved for women	Reserved for non-Muslims
Punjab	297	66	8
Sindh	130	29	9
KPK	99	22	3
Balochistan	51	11	3
Total	557	128	23

The Provincial Assemblies of Pakistan in 2018 showed more women reservation for seats in Punjab as compared to other provinces.

Table 3 Results of National Assembly of Pakistan 2013

Area	General Seats	Women	Non-Muslim	Total
Federal area	**2**	**-**	**10**	2
Fata	**12**	**-**	**-**	12
Balochistan	**14**	**3**	**-**	17
KP	**35**	**8**	**-**	43
Sindh	**61**	**14**	**-**	75
Punjab	**148**	**35**	**-**	183

The above table shows there was minimum representation of women and non-Muslims in 2013 that needed to be improved for gender mainstreaming in political participation and decision making.

When the researcher explored overall women's representation in parliament after the formation of Pakistan till 1954, during that period women were restricted at home and only 2percent of women were representative of their party as shown in figure 1(a). Women's representation in Post-Independence National Assembly from 1955 to 1997 is shown in figure below 1(b) i.e. 1955-58 (0%), 1962-65 (7%), 1965-69 (7%), 1972 (7%), March-July, 1977 (12%), 1985-88 (25%), 1988-90 (28%), 1990-93 (2%), 1993-96 (5%), 1997 (7%).
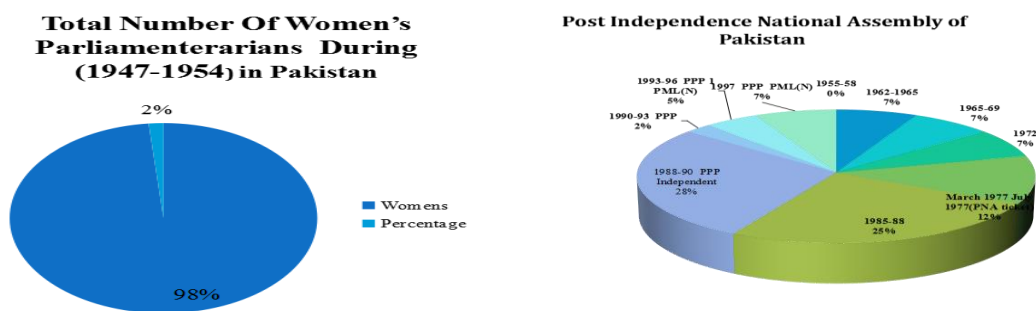

Figure 1 (a & b) Representation of Women from 1947-1977 in National Assembly of Pakistan

Table 4 Women in the 12th National Assembly of Pakistan

	Punjab	Sindh	KPK	Balochistan
General	148	61	35	14
Women	35	14	8	3
Non-Muslims	--	--	--	--
Total	183	75	43	17

In the 12th National Assembly of Pakistan, an improvement in political participation of women in Punjab province is shown to be higher as compared to other provinces.
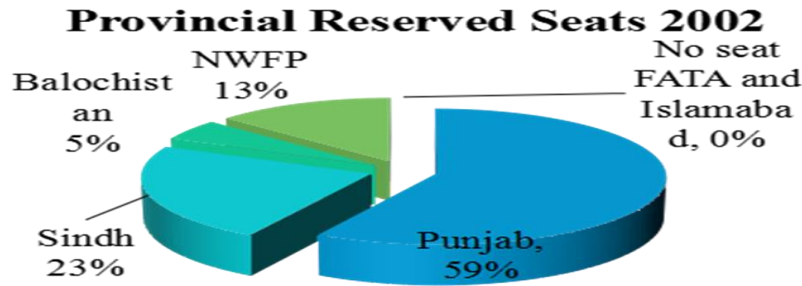
Figure 2 Women in 12th National and Provincial Assemblies (2002-2008)

Figure 2 showed women political participation on reserved seat in the Provincial Assemblies of Pakistan during 2002-2008 i.e. NWFP (13%), Balochistan (5%), Sindh (23%), Punjab (59%), and FATA & Islamabad (0%).
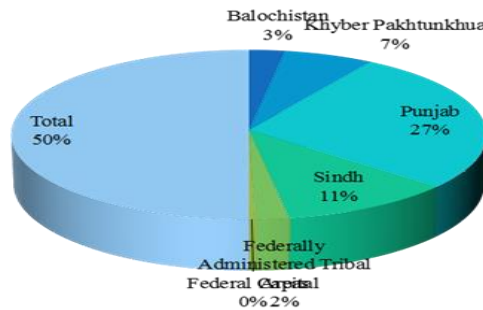

Figure 3 Women Representation in the 13th National Assembly of Pakistan

Figure 3 showed women political participation on general seats in the National Assembly of Pakistan during 2002-2008 i.e. NWFP (7%), Balochistan (3%), Sindh (11%), Punjab (27%), and FATA & Federal Capital (0% & 2%).

DISCUSSION

Obstacles to Women's Participation in the Decision Making Process

In the Millennium Development Goals, it was observed that women's equivalent participation with men in power and decision making is a part of their elementary right to contribute in political life at the core of gender equal opportunity and women's empowerment so women become active participants in formative development agendas. In this regard, even women are not a perceptible and objective group, it was significant to the substance institution of purdah whether female Members of Parliament (MPs) have demonstrated a distinguishing political performance or dissimilar representations, and either quotas generated or emphasized such a differentiation. According to Preeti Sharma (2014), impartial gender participation in the decision making process is an essential precondition of democratic state and constructive measures for providing a sound base of society. However, if only men control the political process, then temporary laws which influence

society on the whole would not be effective because decisions might not be supportive for the wellbeing of the male and female populations equally.

In Pakistan, a problem has been predominantly applicable, as the provision of quotas for women consists of reserve seats which are allocated on the foundation of party lists and the percentage of votes the respective party could win, whereas the other Members of National Assembly (MNAs) are elected via competition in their territorial constituencies. In the upper chamber of Parliament, the Senate, all MPs are indirectly elected. In both cases, consequently female MPs elected on the basis of reserved seats do not have a territorial constituency that prevents them from establishing the patron/client relationship which has generally been considered as the core of Pakistani electoral politics (Dutoya, 2013).

Despite predominating positions and activities of women at the grassroots level or contribution in male party leadership, women hold only a limited number of leadership and decision-making positions in political parties. Positions of power in political parties can only be achieved informally, by following centralized ways and supported by well-established relationships and networks of influence that are inaccessible for new arrivals particularly women. Women could be left behind in political participation as compared to men, if they do not have access to the institutional knowledge and embedded memory, networking, limited resources, few role models and mentors, and sometimes even limited family and community support. Greater internal democracy and transparency can only be led by implementation of strategies to promote women's empowerment in political parties. Through those developed strategies regarding women mainstreaming, more formal participation of party members in decision-making is expected i.e. elections for leadership positions and candidate recruitment for upcoming elections. To enhance the role of other marginalized and under-represented groups, many parties have also been headed. Legal reform can also be employed to make strategies more effective for increasing women's participation e.g. the adoption of legislated candidate quotas, for voluntary internal reforms i.e. formalizing a women's wing as part of the party structure or guaranteeing women's presence in decision-making structures (Ballington et. al., 2012).

While women do not have a role in the formulation of macroeconomic and social policies, they have borne the brunt of such policies. Women's exclusion from decision-making bodies at the local, provincial, and national levels does not provide them any opportunity to voice their concerns or promote their perspective on governance. The male-dominated governance structure has been creating and recreating gender inequalities. It is critical that women claim their share of power to make decisions that affect their lives. The synergy of women's strong political representation and reduction in female poverty has been increasingly recognized all over the world (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2010).

Women Role in Politics and Gender Equality

Women's existence in politics has also been recognized to be imperative in the preparations and implementation of policies on socio political and economic development, consistent peace, and enactment of good governance in the state. Several researches and studies have revealed that provision of opportunities to women could play a decisive role in the developing consequential gender mainstreaming strategies, which may successfully guarantee the spotlight of gender

impartiality in all the processes of policy making that would be helpful in fulfilling the requirements to make them good leaders.

Hence, all the researches related to gender equality and right of holding equal rights in all professions have shown that if there are no ensured significant strategy and policy makers ready and enthusiastic to characterize gender mainstreaming as a way to accomplish gender egalitarianism, mainstreaming efforts will not unavoidably improve women's rights. Worldwide, women's guiding principle machineries, women's groups and individual actors work mutually to open opportunities for creating successfully detailed gender mainstreaming policies. With the same context, by gathering women and women's welfare groups, women's policy actors extended coalitions for dealings of governmental affairs. For insurance of the formulation and implementation of meaningful policies on gender equality, various analysts have recognized the perspective of a Triangle of Women's Empowerment (TOWE), in which women with political positions, both "elected and appointed", work with nationalized machineries for the progression of women and the women's movement. This highly potential collaboration has found to contribute to the democratization process in struggling democracies to make it a more stable democracy. The above pie graphs showed that women getting leadership roles and working equally with men is a difficult task in Politics of Pakistan.

Factors Hindering the Way of Women

Despite their lack of involvement in the formulation of macroeconomic and social policies, women have disproportionately suffered the consequences of such policies. The absence of women in decision-making bodies at the local, provincial, and national levels deprives them of any opportunity to express their concerns or advocate for their perspectives on governance. This prevailing male-dominated governance structure perpetuates gender inequalities and reinforces them over time. It is of utmost importance for women to assert their right to power and actively participate in decision-making processes that directly impact their lives. Recognizing the potential benefits, there is a growing global recognition of the positive correlation between women's strong political representation and a reduction in the incidence of female poverty.

Generally, women have been facing ignorance in the decision making and policy making by their party leadership. If party leadership show their interest and concern to bring women equal to men in the main political field, then there are chances to sustain and gain their desired goals. Due to socially constructed perception, usually men assume themselves more genius than women in political decision making. Women are assumed to be less or having low decision making power regarding their involvement in the political discussions.

Lack of Involvement and Participation in the Parties

The women MNAs and MPAs from different political parties have shown their different opinions and concerns related to their party leadership and other male member's attitude towards them. Some of them have mentioned their reservations for the unfair and biased attitude of their party leadership towards them. Though, many of them have tried to justify their party leadership to equally treat women in their parties.

Lack of involvement and insignificant participation of women led to sideline and marginalized women in mainstream politics. Somehow, men having patriarchal mindset in Pakistani society as well in politics usually have been predominant in politics of Pakistan. Some women have been complaining for favoritism and an influential support system for promotion of women or gaining important seats and positions in government or within their parties.

To bring about a transformation in the party system, one effective approach is to boost women's membership in political parties and actively involve them in the functioning and administration of these parties. According to several women Members of Provincial Assembly (MPAs), political parties already possess adequate mechanisms to facilitate and encourage women participation. They have encouraged that party leadership should review and make implementable party manifestos to be women friendly. Party leadership is responsible and authorized to have positive and encouraging thinking to support and bring women in the forefronts of party mainstream politics. Without bringing women into limelight, political structure would not be workable properly. Women have potential to present the demands and rights of the general women population at the political platforms.

Stymies in the Way of Women

Empowering women to assert their rightful share of power in decision-making process is of utmost importance. This empowerment not only benefits women but also contributes to the reduction of female poverty, as the positive correlation between women's strong political representation and poverty alleviation is increasingly acknowledged worldwide.

Regrettably, the level of women's representation in formal political bodies in Pakistan remains exceedingly low, as highlighted in the ADB's country report for Pakistan - 2010 (ADB, 2010). In the broader context, all political parties have consistently overlooked their women workers, including those in leadership roles, when formulating their party manifestos. The 2008 elections were closely monitored by various civil society groups and organizations, some of which specifically assessed the manifestos of political parties concerning their commitment to women's empowerment. The primary focus of this review was on addressing women's concerns and issues.

Unfortunately, the gender critique of manifestos from seven major political parties revealed a striking absence of clear policies or plans for women's political empowerment. While these manifestos may appear promising on paper, they often lack adequate implementation in practice. When it comes to preparing manifestos, women are seldom included in the decision-making committees, resulting in their perspectives and voices being excluded from the process.

Furthermore, women's involvement in decision-making within party affairs has been consistently disregarded in the majority of cases, as highlighted by the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW, 2010). This persistent neglect of women's voices and interests in political parties perpetuates gender inequalities and prevents the development of more inclusive and representative governance. To bring about meaningful change, it is crucial for political parties to actively engage women workers and ensure their active participation in the formulation of policies and decision-making processes. This way, women's empowerment can be realized, and the overall effectiveness and inclusivity of political manifestos and party affairs can be significantly enhanced.

Women in Balochistan have been actively raising issues of accountability and persistently following up on various concerns. Despite the limitations imposed by the local government system, women councilors have managed to make a positive impact on their constituents' lives in smaller contests. They have demonstrated their dedication by addressing problems through various means.

These women councilors have taken issues to the authorities to seek solutions, even though they faced challenges in the process. They have approached the bureaucracy, albeit in smaller numbers, to resolve matters affecting their communities. Taking an active role, they have engaged with local leaders, the Nazims, to address pressing issues such as drainage problems and water shortages. Furthermore, they have contributed to maintaining the safety of girls' schools by clearing passages and addressing concerns related to male stalkers.

In their roles as counselors, these women have taken up immediate and everyday problems that typically fall within their jurisdiction, successfully resolving many of them. Their dedication and efforts have shown that women's participation in local government can bring about positive changes and improvements in the lives of their constituents. The United Nations Development Programme recognized the valuable contributions of these women in (Rai, Shah, & Ayaz, 2007).

Women Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) and Members of Provincial Assembly (MPAs) have advocated for manifestoes to be more women-friendly, expressing that party positions may appear liberal in public but lack concrete and committed actions. The representation of women in decision-making bodies like the Central Executive Committee is minimal, and there are no clear criteria for including women in such positions.

In some regions like NWFP, women on quotas have felt that party control over their work can be stringent, leading them to resist such restrictions. They have also pointed out lack of guidance and a culture of dialogue within political parties. To address the issue of women's underrepresentation, some political parties have established women's wings. However, the effectiveness of these wings has been met with mixed responses. While some view them as crucial spaces for women's political participation, others perceive them as confining spaces or ghettos.

For instance, in NWFP, the women's wing was not established until recently in the ANP party, as the party believed in the equality of women and men, hence avoiding the need for a separate wing (UNDP, 2007). The challenges and differing perceptions surrounding women's wings highlight the complexities of increasing women's participation and representation within political parties.

In this discourse, politically excluded women are often seen as having minimal responsibility for the current state of affairs in Pakistan. Despite the presence of a female Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, in recent history, many women in political power are perceived to have little interest in challenging the existing "feudal" mechanisms that persist in the system. However, this argument can be countered by the fact that women MPs may have class-based interests in maintaining the status quo, as many of them are connected to or aligned with the men who have historically ruled the country.

Despite these affiliations, women politicians often use their gender identity to align themselves with the marginalized groups in society, often referred to as "downtrodden." This approach is common among women from various political parties and backgrounds and contributes to a

general set of behaviors and representations displayed by female MPs. Consequently, female parliamentarians are seen as offering a new representation of politics that is explicitly gendered, as it involves politics made by women, acting for women, and advocating for the "other downtrodden" segments of society.

This new approach to politics is characterized by a focus on national issues and the nation as a whole, rather than what is often viewed as "constituency politics," seen as a localized and election-driven form of politics. Women in politics seem to prioritize broader national concerns and the welfare of marginalized groups over narrow constituency interests. This shift in approach reflects the emergence of a distinct gendered political representation that aims to address the needs and rights of women and other marginalized populations in the country.

Biases against women are significant factors that contribute to and sustain their lower economic status and relative poverty worldwide. These biases act as major barriers, making women's political participation extremely challenging at any stage of the electoral cycle. One of the primary obstacles is the lack of control over resources, which hinders women from financing their own campaigns for nominations or elections. Additionally, women have limited access to external funding, knowledge products, influential networks, role models, and experienced mentors to support their political endeavors.

These biases are evident within political parties as well, as women are often underrepresented in leadership and decision-making positions. Instead, they are more commonly found in roles that support male party leaders or work at the grassroots level. Power positions in political parties are frequently informal, centralized, and based on established relationships and networks of influence that may be inaccessible to newcomers, particularly women. The absence of access to such institutional knowledge and networks, coupled with limited resources, role models, mentors, and family/community support, explains why women's participation in political parties lags behind that of men.

To address the numerous challenges faced by women aspiring to enter politics and join political parties, a diverse range of measures is needed at various levels. These measures should aim to promote gender equality, enhance access to resources and opportunities, establish supportive networks and mentorship, and foster an inclusive and empowering political environment. By implementing such measures, it is possible to create a more conducive and equitable landscape that encourages and supports women's meaningful participation in politics (Ballington et. al., 2012).

Most political parties establish women's wings with the aim of mobilizing women voters during elections. However, the effectiveness of these women wings in increasing women's active involvement in party politics is questionable. In some cases, women's wings can inadvertently "ghettoize" women and women's issues within the party, limiting their influence on broader political matters.

Interestingly, parties like the Awami National Party (ANP) and Tehrik-e-Insaaf, which do not have women's wings, have shown a relatively quicker inclination to nominate women for general seats, suggesting that the presence of women's wings may not always lead to increased female representation in political positions.

The underrepresentation of women in the upper echelons of political parties is a significant concern. According to the Report of the Special Inquiry for Women, within the central executive committees of major parties like the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League (N) (PML-N), women hold only a small number of decision-making posts. For instance, out of 21 decision-making positions in the central executive committee of the PPP, only three are occupied by women. Similarly, in the PML-N, women hold only five out of 47 posts on the equivalent committee.

These statistics highlighted the stark gender disparity in leadership positions within political parties, which can hinder the full and equal participation of women in shaping party policies and agendas. Efforts are needed to address these disparities and create a more inclusive and representative political landscape that enables women to play a more active and meaningful role in the decision-making processes of political parties (Amrita, 2005).

Women's political activism has proven to be a valuable source of energy for political parties. Their closer connections with civil society and grassroots groups have provided essential resources for organizing and mobilizing during electoral campaigns. However, it is often observed that political parties view women's involvement instrumentally, primarily as a means to gain political support for their own agendas. While gender equality may find its way into the rhetoric of some political parties, active commitment to achieving it often lacks.

Gender equality might be promoted in the manifestos and programs of certain political parties, but the recognition of women's true political potential is frequently absent in their leadership and decision-making structures. Despite the energy and contributions women bring to the political arena, their roles within parties tend to be confined to raising support during elections without receiving commensurate acknowledgment and representation at higher levels of party leadership.

The nature of political parties' relationship with women appears self-interested, as evidenced by how they handle female candidatures. It is essential to address this issue and move beyond tokenistic gestures towards genuine gender equality within political parties. Recognizing and empowering women's leadership and decision-making abilities will lead to more inclusive and representative political parties that can effectively address the diverse needs and interests of all members of society (United Nations, 2005).

In the 2002 elections, a significant milestone was achieved in Pakistan's history as women were elected on general seats for the first time. Thirteen women were elected to the National Assembly, six to the Punjab Assembly, four to the Sindh Assembly, and one each to the assemblies in NWFP and Balochistan. While women's representation on reserved seats in the national and provincial assemblies may seem positive, examining the technical aspects of the reserved seats reveals certain challenges.

In general, political parties have consistently overlooked their women workers, even those in leadership positions, when drafting party manifestos. During the 2008 elections, various civil society groups and organizations closely monitored the process, and some specifically assessed political parties' manifestos regarding their commitment to women's empowerment. The assessment primarily concentrated on women's concerns.

The gender critique of the manifestos of seven major political parties revealed a concerning lack of clear policies or plans for women's political empowerment. While these manifestos may appear promising on paper, they often fail to be effectively implemented in reality. In practice, women are rarely included in the committees responsible for preparing manifestos, resulting in their perspectives and voices being excluded from the process. Moreover, women's participation in decision-making within party affairs has been consistently disregarded in majority of cases.

The system of indirect nomination for reserved seats means that women do not have their own geographical electorate region, which can limit their direct connection with voters. Women party workers' experiences in this context are crucial as they often face difficulties in securing nomination tickets. In some cases, political party leaders favor their own family members or long-time party workers, neglecting the legitimate contributions of other female party members. Furthermore, many parties do not engage women workers in the process of formulating election manifestos, undermining their voices and perspectives.

Women in political positions often find themselves taking initiatives independently, lacking the necessary support and encouragement from party leaders. Consultations with female politicians revealed that they are often treated as inferior by their male colleagues, and their opinions and rights are not respected. Their funds are mostly spent based on the recommendations of male party leaders, further limiting their influence and decision-making power.

Women parliamentarians, especially those elected on reserved seats, have limited interaction with communities and their own party workers. Instead, their focus may primarily be on securing re-election in the next period. Women's meetings within political parties lack sufficient frequency, defined agendas, and follow-up actions.

Overall, political parties tend to discourage women from taking independent initiatives, even when aligned with party policies. The National Commission on the Status of Women highlighting the need for greater support and recognition of women's contributions and involvement in political processes (NCSW, 2010).

As a result of the barriers and biases faced by women, they often find themselves excluded from the decision-making process within political parties. Party's women wings are primarily utilized for mobilizing women to participate in demonstrations, protests, or as voters during elections. However, they are not given significant roles in shaping party policies and decision-making.

The obstacles faced by potential women voters, such as lack of inclusion in electoral lists, persist due to discriminatory practices and laws that are still present in the statute books. Despite some laws being documented to promote gender equality, their implementation remains ineffective.

The emphasis on mainstreaming women in politics is lacking, and the focus seems to be on privileging a selected group of women rather than promoting gender equality across the board. These issues were highlighted in a research paper, drawing attention to the systemic challenges that continue to hinder women's meaningful participation in politics and decision-making in Pakistan (Mumtaz, 2005).

During a meeting with political parties' leaders, it was observed that these parties are hesitant to support the idea of quotas for women on general seats. This resistance is often driven by politics

centered on money and power. While there is some recognition that women, particularly female political party workers, are overlooked in the decision-making process, the current system of reserved seats is deemed inadequate for genuinely empowering women political workers. The privileged treatment of certain women often leads to the exclusion of authentic and deserving women from the political process.

To ensure equal representation and agency for women in the parliament, a more effective approach could involve implementing quotas for women on general seats and conducting direct elections. This would create a level playing field for all women, based on merit, without favoring specific individuals. Such a structure would foster a more inclusive and representative political system, allowing women to have an equal voice and participation in decision-making processes. By promoting genuine women's political empowerment, political parties can take significant strides towards achieving greater gender equality and strengthening democratic principles in the country.

By adopting this gendered approach, women in politics aim to bring attention to the unique challenges and experiences faced by women and marginalized groups. They seek to be advocates for these communities, working towards greater inclusivity and social justice. This new representation of politics provides a platform for women to raise their voices and push for meaningful change at the national level. In doing so, female parliamentarians play a crucial role in advancing gender equality and addressing the concerns of the marginalized in Pakistan's political landscape.

The biases and inequalities women face in various aspects of life significantly hinder their political participation at any stage of the electoral cycle. These biases contribute to and perpetuate women's lower economic status and relative poverty worldwide. Women typically have limited control over resources, making it difficult for them to finance their own campaigns for nominations or elections. Furthermore, they have fewer opportunities to access external funding, knowledge products, influential networks, role models, and experienced mentors to support their political endeavors compared to men.

Within political parties, these biases are evident in the limited representation of women in leadership and decision-making positions. Instead, women tend to be overrepresented in roles that support male party leadership or activities at the grassroots level. Positions of power within political parties often rely on informal networks of influence and established relationships, which can be inaccessible to new arrivals, particularly women. The lack of access to institutional knowledge and resources, combined with limited role models and mentors, as well as minimal family and community support, further compounds the challenges faced by women seeking to enter politics and join political parties.

Addressing the multitude of challenges confronting women in politics requires a diverse range of measures at various levels. Indeed, political parties often establish women's wings to mobilize women during elections. However, whether this increased participation of women translates into enhanced representation within party politics or parliamentary committees is another matter. The existence of women's wings can inadvertently "ghettoize" women and their issues within the party, limiting their influence on broader political matters.

It is interesting to note that some parties, such as the Awami National Party (ANP) and Tehrik-e-Insaf, do not even have women's wings, yet they have shown a relatively greater inclination to nominate women for general seats. This suggests that the presence of women's wings may not necessarily result in increased women's representation in key decision-making positions.

The report by Farida Shaheed sheds light on the limited representation of women in the upper echelons of political parties. For example, the Special Inquiry for Women highlighted that in the central executive committee of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), women hold only three out of 21 decision-making posts. Similarly, in the Pakistan Muslim League (N) (PML-N), women hold only five out of 47 posts on the equivalent committee.

The figures underscored the significant gender disparities in leadership positions within political parties, indicating the need for greater efforts to promote gender equality and inclusivity in political decision-making processes. By providing more opportunities for women to hold leadership roles and participate in decision-making, political parties can create a more representative and inclusive political landscape.

In the book, Begum Syeda Abida Hussain highlighted the contrasting political cultures between the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Muslim League. According to her observations, the political atmosphere within the PPP was distinct from that of the Muslim League. When sitting in the parliamentary boards of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q), she noticed that candidates were generally polite and deferential to the leadership, even when they had competing interests.

In contrast, the PPP's political culture was described as more "rough and tumble." Despite the challenges and competing interests within the party, Benazir Bhutto, the leader of the PPP, showed great patience and maintained friendly relations, especially with her long-standing party workers. This suggests that within PPP, there was a more dynamic and vibrant political environment where the leader interacted closely with the party's grassroots workers, forging strong connections with them.

These insights shed light on different dynamics and interpersonal relationships within two prominent political parties in Pakistan. The contrasting cultures may have influenced how decisions were made, how internal conflicts were managed, and how party members interacted with the leadership. It also emphasizes the importance of understanding the unique political cultures within different parties to gain a comprehensive view of the country's political landscape.

Women's political activism has indeed been a valuable source of energy for political parties. Their closer connections with civil society and grassroots groups have proven to be important resources for organizing and mobilizing support, especially during electoral times. However, despite their significant contributions, women's role within political parties is often viewed instrumentally, primarily as a means to raise political support for the parties.

While some political parties may express rhetoric in favor of gender equality in their manifestos and programs, but often lack genuine commitment to achieving it. Women's political potential is rarely recognized and fully utilized within party leadership and decision-making structures. As a

result, women are often underrepresented in key leadership positions, and their voices may not hold the same weight as those of their male counterparts.

To address these issues, political parties need to move beyond tokenistic gestures and actively support women's empowerment and leadership. Recognizing and valuing women's contributions within political parties can lead to more inclusive and representative political structures, where women can play a more meaningful and impactful role in shaping policies and agendas. By promoting genuine gender equality, political parties can better serve the interests of all members of society and strengthen democratic principles.

CONCLUSION

Empowering women is essential to optimizing their participation, contributions, and engagement in all aspects of life. When women feel empowered, they hold the potential to uplift and steer Pakistan towards progress. Empowering women is not only about re-establishing society but also ensuring a brighter future for generations to come. By guaranteeing women's rights and opportunities, we can inspire future generations to believe in themselves and pursue their aspirations without limitations.

Women's political representation is not only a matter of gender equality but a strategic imperative for the advancement and success of Pakistan as a whole. It is time to unleash the power of women and embrace the transformative impact they can have on shaping a better future for everyone. When women empower themselves, they become catalysts for positive change in their communities and beyond. Through their knowledge, abilities, and determination, women can challenge the status quo, break barriers, and create a more inclusive and equitable world.

Women's presence in decision-making positions has proven to be crucial in formulating policies on development, sustainable peace, and good governance. Research has shown that women in such positions play a pivotal role in developing effective gender mainstreaming strategies that prioritize gender equality in all policy areas. Gender mainstreaming efforts are most impactful when key decision-makers and policy actors actively champion and define gender mainstreaming as a means to achieve gender equality.

Women's policy machineries, women's groups, and individual actors collaborate in various national, international, and transnational contexts to make gender mainstreaming and specific gender equality policies more effective. By working together, these women's policy actors form alliance that bring women's voices and interests into government affairs.

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Date of Publication	June 15, 2023