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The Role of Women in Pakistan's Political Landscape: Progress and Challenges

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Abstract

The role of women in Pakistan's political landscape has evolved significantly over the years, marked by both notable progress and enduring challenges. Historically, women's political participation was limited, but gradual steps toward inclusion have seen the establishment of laws and policies aimed at empowering women. Today, women in Pakistan actively engage in various political spheres, ranging from voting and holding political office to participation in activism and advocacy for gender equality. Despite these advances, women face numerous obstacles, such as gender-based discrimination, violence, and social and cultural barriers, which continue to hinder their full participation in politics. This paper explores the journey of women in Pakistan's political scene, analyzing key milestones, current developments, and the ongoing struggles for equal representation. It emphasizes the dual narrative of progress and persistent challenges, shedding light on how women navigate the complexities of a patriarchal political system while striving for equality and representation. The study highlights the need for stronger policies, social reforms, and the active support of male allies to ensure a more inclusive political environment for women in Pakistan. The qualitative research methodology will be applied on this research work, and data will be collected through secondary sources. The data will be collected from books, magazines, journals, newspapers and internet websites etc. The institutional approach will be applied in this research paper to analyse the role and barriers in the way of women political participation in Pakistan. The women participation in politics laid down positive impacts in improving women's lot in Pakistan by doing legislation to safeguard against multiple social evils. It has opened the gate for other women to participate in political sphere.

Keywords: Women In Politics, Gender Equality, Political Participation, Women's Empowerment, Pakistan

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Introduction:

The role of women in Pakistan's political landscape has undergone significant transformation over the past few decades. Women in Pakistan have made notable strides in seeking political representation and empowerment. Although women gained the right to vote in 1947, their participation in political processes was often limited by social, cultural, and institutional barriers. However, the 21st century has witnessed an increased involvement of women in both elected and appointed positions, as well as an increase in political activism advocating for women's rights and gender equality. Patriarchal norms, gender-based violence, and a lack of equal opportunities for women in many parts of Pakistan continue to hinder their progress. Women's representation in political offices is still low, and many women face significant obstacles in securing leadership positions due to traditional biases, discrimination, and the underrepresentation of women in key decision-making bodies.

Objectives:

1. To assess the current level of women's political representation and participation in Pakistan.
2. To identify the key socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers in the way of political participation in Pakistan.
3. To analyse the positive impacts of women political participation in Pakistan.
4. To provide recommendations for enhancing women's role in the political domain of Pakistan.

Research Questions :

1. Why political participation of women is necessary to strengthen democracy in Pakistan ?
2. What are the main challenges in the women's political participation in Pakistan ?
3. What impact have prominent female political leaders had on Pakistan's political system and on encouraging women's participation?
4. What strategies can be implemented to strengthen and expand the role of women in Pakistan's political institutions and decision-making processes?

Research Methodology :

Qualitative approach will be applied in this research work. There will be thematic analysis of qualitative data. The key themes will be barriers, progress and strategies etc. The secondary sources will be academic literature, government reports, political party manifestos, media articles and news reports and Reports from NGOs and international organizations (e.g., UN Women, Aurat Foundation). The empowerment theory will be applied in this research work. Through this theory the social, economic and political structures will be analysed that empower or disempower women in Pakistan. It Can

evaluate the impact of quotas, training programs, or NGO support on women's ability to engage in politics.

Literature Review:

Historical and Constitutional Context

"The political participation of women in Pakistan has evolved gradually since the country's inception in 1947. The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees equal rights to women and includes provisions for reserved seats in legislative bodies. As highlighted by Bari (2010), these constitutional guarantees, particularly the reservation of seats in the National and Provincial Assemblies, have increased women's numerical presence in politics. However, she argues that numerical representation has not necessarily translated into effective participation or influence in policymaking."(1)

Structural and Institutional Barriers

"Research points to several institutional hurdles that limit women's political empowerment. The patriarchal structure often restrict women's access to decision-making positions. Political parties tend to nominate women to reserved seats rather than general ones, which reinforces their marginalization and reduces their accountability to the electorate."(2)

"Further studies (Krook & O'Brien, 2012) emphasize the role of electoral systems and party dynamics in shaping women's political agency. In Pakistan, the centralized nature of political parties and male-dominated leadership creates an environment where women are often sidelined in policy debates and strategic decision-making."(3)

Socio-Cultural Constraints

"Cultural norms and gender stereotypes significantly hinder women's political engagement. Numerous scholars, including Mumtaz (2005), have examined the influence of traditional gender roles, religious interpretations, and societal expectations, which often confine women to the private sphere. These norms discourage women from participating in public and political life, particularly in rural and conservative regions."(4)

"Media portrayal also plays a critical role in shaping public perception. Studies by Rehman and Javed (2019) indicate that women politicians are frequently subjected to gendered narratives in media coverage, focusing more on personal appearance and family life than on their political contributions."(5)

Role of Civil Society and International Actors

"Non-governmental organizations and international agencies have played an instrumental role in advocating for women's political participation. Campaigns promoting women's voting rights, capacity-building workshops, and gender-sensitization initiatives have contributed to a more favorable environment for women in politics (Naz, 2016). Nonetheless, the sustainability of such initiatives remains a concern, especially in the face of political instability and shifting donor priorities."(6)

Main Body:

Historical Evolution and Representation

In the pre-independence era, women in the Indian subcontinent, including the regions that would become Pakistan, actively participated in the struggle against British colonial rule. Prominent among them was Fatima Jinnah, sister of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who emerged as a key political figure and symbol of women's empowerment. Women from various backgrounds contributed to the All India Muslim League's political mobilization, particularly during the Pakistan Movement in the 1940s. Organizations like the All-India Muslim Women's Conference provided platforms for political discussion and advocacy. Despite the cultural and social constraints of the time, these women organized rallies, delivered speeches, and participated in civil disobedience, asserting their political agency and laying the groundwork for women's roles in the post-independence political landscape of Pakistan. The notable women like Begum Rana Liaquat Ali Khan , Begum Salma Tassudiq Hussain , Begum Qazi Essa , Begum Shaista Ikram-ullah , Begum Abdullah Haroon and Bi –Ama participated in various events in Pakistan movement .

Post-1947 Developments: Evolution of women's political participation in different political regimes (civilian and military).

Benazir Bhutto's election as Prime Minister of Pakistan in 1988 was a historic milestone. She became the first woman to lead a Muslim-majority country, breaking significant political and cultural barriers not just in Pakistan, but across the Islamic world.

Her leadership symbolized a powerful shift in gender dynamics within global politics, especially in traditionally patriarchal societies. Despite facing immense political challenges and personal risks, her rise to power also inspired women across the Muslim world to pursue leadership roles in public life.

Challenges In The Way Of Women Political Empowerment: Not Inclusion In Decision Making :

Many women are appointed on reserved seats and often have limited influence. Lack of meaningful inclusion in decision-making roles and key ministries. The political parties are reluctant to give tickets to female candidates. The major allocation of funds is provided to male candidates and female parliamentarian get minimum share in funds regarding developmental activities .

Socio-Cultural Barriers:

Pakistan's social system is patriarchal in nature .The deep- rooted patriarchy restricts women's visibility and participation in politics .The cultural norms restricts the women to contest elections .They think that politics is a challenging game and it is only man, s job .The female responsibility is to take care of children and home .The woman can not bear the hardship of politics .The honour –based restrictions ,social stigmas and family resistance are major hurdles in the way of women's participation in politics .

Weaker Implementation Of Democratic Rules :

There is a weak implementation of laws regarding female participation in politics . Political parties often nominate women in unelectable constituencies or keep them out of leadership roles. Local-level female politicians often lack training, funding, and independence. Often sidelined by male counterparts and not taken seriously. The political parties do not give party ticket to those women who are not influential .

Intersectionality: Class, Region, and Ethnicity:

The factors of socio-economic inequality ,tribal systems and feudal influence further marginalize women in political sphere . Urban, educated women have more opportunities than rural or minority women. There are also regional disparities exists in various provinces of Pakistan .

Violence and Intimidation:

Security threats and violence are major hurdles for Pakistani women in the political sphere. Despite constitutional guarantees and quota systems aimed at increasing women's participation in politics, the reality on the ground remains harsh and often dangerous. Here's a focused breakdown on how these factors affect Pakistani women in politics. Women entering politics often faces threats to their safety .The religious extremism debar the women participation in politics ,that female leadership is unislamic .The political opponents use the tactics of harassment and violence to discourage female candidates . It includes threat of acid attacks ,abduction and even assassination .

Economic Constraints:

Economic constraints are a significant barrier to women's political representation in Pakistan. These constraints manifest at multiple levels and limit women's ability to participate in politics effectively. Running for political office requires substantial financial investment. Most women lack access to personal or family wealth, which is often essential for financing campaigns, organizing events, and accessing media. Women, especially in rural areas, face difficulty in obtaining loans or financial support due to patriarchal control over property and finances, restricting their political ambitions.

Legal and Political Hurdles:

Political representation in Pakistan faces a number of political and legal hurdles that have historically undermined democratic processes and marginalized various groups. These challenges arise from constitutional ambiguities, military influence, judicial activism, flawed electoral practices, and systemic exclusion of minorities and women.

Legal and Institutional Framework

Fundamental rights and gender equality under the Constitution of Pakistan.

The 1973 constitution of Pakistan includes provisions that address gender equality ,but like many constitutional documents ,its impact has often depended on interpretation and implementation .”The article 25 fully ensures that all citizens are equal

before the law and are entitled to equal protection of law . There shall be no discrimination based on color ,creed and gender before the law .“(8)

“The article 27 is related to safeguard against discrimination in service ,that no citizen otherwise qualified for the appointment in the service of Pakistan shall be discriminated against in respect of any such appointment on the ground of race ,religion ,caste ,sex residence or place of birth .“(9)

The article 34 relates to full participation of women in national life ,”the state shall ensure the full participation of women in all spheres of national life .”(10)

The article 37 relates to the promotion of social justice ,”the state shall make provision for securing just and humane conditions of work ,ensuring that women and children are not employed in vocations unsuited to their age or sex .”(11)

“The article 38 relates to the promotion of social and economic well –being of citizens ,that the state shall secure the well –being of the people ,irrespective of sex ,caste ,creed or race etc .“(12)

Gaps In The Implementation Of Constitution:

There are various gaps in the implementation of 1973 constitutions clauses in Pakistan . There is an inconsistent implementation of laws related to women,s protection .The low representation of women in politics and senior roles ,though this has improved through reserved seats and affirmative action .However ,the gap between constitutional guarantees and practical implementation remains a key issue .

The 1973 constitution of Pakistan provides a strong legal foundation for gender equality, especially through article 25 and article 34. However ,effective implementation is required to get positive results in Pakistan.

Women in Parliament and Local Government:

Reserved seats for women in national and provincial assemblies.

The quota system for women in politics in Pakistan is a mechanism designed to increase women,s political participation and ensure their representation in legislative bodies . Many women have been elected on the quota seats at provincial and national level .They are representative of 15 billion population and safeguarded women,s rights through legislation in Pakistan . The democracy is incomplete without participation of women in politics . In national assembly there are 60 seats(17%) reserved for women in Pakistan . There is no formal gender quota in the senate in Pakistan . However ,political parties are encouraged to nominate women ,and women do get elected ,but their representation remains low . In Local government women,s representation varies by province .Local government laws mandate 33% or more seats for women in many local bodies ,often with direct elections or special nominations .

Pakistan has one of the higher percentages of women in national legislature in South Asia due to these quotas .In this way thousands of women have entered politics ,especially at local level .

Reserved seats for women in Pakistan's national and provincial **assemblies** were introduced as a constitutional measure to enhance **women's political representation** and participation in governance. This move aims to address the historical underrepresentation of women in politics and promote gender equality in decision-making. The system of reserved seats was formally strengthened under the Legal Framework Order 2002, issued during General Pervez Musharraf's government. 17% of seats in the National Assembly and provincial assemblies were reserved for women, later increased to about 20%. These seats are not directly elected by the public. Instead, they are allocated to political parties based on their proportional representation in the general election. There are 60 reserved seats for women in the National Assembly, and a similar proportion exists in each provincial assembly.

Qualitative Participation:

Nature of their contributions (e.g., bills proposed, debates led).

The contribution of women parliamentarians to women-focused legislation in Pakistan has been significant, particularly in advocating for gender equality, protection of women's rights, and addressing gender-based violence. While they remain underrepresented in the overall political system, women lawmakers have played a vital role in pushing forward critical legislative reforms.

Legislative Achievements

Women parliamentarians have been at the forefront of drafting, introducing, and supporting progressive laws related to women's rights, including:

Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010)

The women parliamentarian did legislation to control harassment against women at workplace for the redressal of complaints lodged by women . The women parliamentarian wanted to safeguard against harassment issues at office .The culprit will be awarded severe punishment and monetary penalty .

Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act:

Domestic violence is pervasive issue prevalent in Pakistan .Almost 99 % female suffer domestic violence especially from their husbands .This issue goes mostly unnoticed in Pakistan . It is considered as a personal affair of the family .The Sindh assembly passed this bill in 2013,and Punjab in 2016 and Balochistan in 2014 to safeguard women against domestic violence .

Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Bill (2011)

The acid throwing is heinous issue to disfigure girl by taking revenge from her .Due to this crime multiple girl isolated themselves from society or committed suicide .The acid-throwing bill was passed to put ban on the acid sale and punish perpetrator who ruin women's life .

Anti-Rape and Anti-Honor Killing Laws (2016)

Women lawmakers from across parties advocated for stricter punishments and closing legal loopholes in crimes like honor killings and rape. The honor –killing is considered equivalent to murder .The culprit will be awarded death penalty .

The Women Representation In Local Government In Pakistan

The representation of women in local government in **Pakistan** is a critical issue tied to broader questions of gender equality, political participation, and democratic governance. Pakistan introduced gender quotas at various levels of government to enhance women's representation. **In 2000**, under General Pervez Musharraf's devolution plan, a **33% quota** was mandated for women in local governments (district, tehsil, and union councils. Women's representation in **local government** is primarily **through reserved seats** (usually 33%) for women across all tiers: **Union Councils, Tehsil Councils, and District Councils**. Women can also contest general seats, though very few do due to social and political constraints.

Representation Across Provinces

Each province has adapted the local government structure differently, especially after the 18th Amendment (2010), which devolved powers to provinces:

Punjab

Reserved seats for women continue, but delays in holding local government elections have disrupted continuity. The Punjab Local Government Act includes 33% women's representation on reserved seats.

Sindh

Women's representation in Sindh has also followed the 33% reserved seats model. Urban-rural political divides affect the actual empowerment of elected women representatives.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)

Conservative social norms pose additional challenges. In some areas, women are barred from voting or contesting despite legal rights.

Balochistan

Sparse population and tribal structures make women's participation particularly low, though legal quotas exist.

Impacts of women's political participation in Pakistan :

Women's representation:

There are lot of positive impacts on politics due to participation of women in political process .The constitutional guarantee has been given to women that they also have political rights to be elected from their respective constituency. A lot of women have become politically visible on the scene at local ,provincial and national level .Women from marginalized communities have begun to gain representation (e.g., minority women in local councils).

Role Of Civil Society :

When the initiative is taken by the government to involve women in politics. The civil society NGOs had launched the campaign like “Women in Politics” and it created a positive visibility of women in politics. Social media is emerging as a space for women engage politically. Awareness campaigns and civil society efforts are challenging stereotypes. More female candidates are contesting general seats, especially in urban areas. NGOs and advocacy groups play a vital role in training, awareness, and support for female politicians. Media shapes public perception of women in politics.

Grassroots and Local Governance

Women have shown significant impact in local governance, particularly after the devolution reforms. Local councils have enabled thousands of women to enter politics for the first time. Increased visibility and service delivery at the community level.

Legal and Institutional Framework

Legal provisions like reserved seats and the Elections Act 2017 promote women's political participation. Establishment of bodies like the National Commission on the Status of Women. Election Commission of Pakistan requires parties to give at least 5% of tickets to women on general seats.

Future Prospects and Policy Recommendations

Promoting women's political participation in Pakistan requires a multi-pronged strategy involving legal reforms, institutional support, capacity building, and shifts in societal attitudes. Below are policy recommendations followed by pragmatic steps to enhance women's engagement in politics:

Policy Recommendations

1. Electoral Reforms

- **Ensure reserved seats:** Maintain and strengthen the quota of reserved seats for women at all levels—national, provincial, and local.
- **Mandate party quotas:** Require political parties to allocate a certain percentage (e.g., 30%) of general election tickets to women candidates.
- **Reform campaign financing laws:** Provide public funding or subsidies for women candidates to reduce financial barriers.

2. Legal and Constitutional Protections

- **Strengthen legal protections:** Enforce laws against harassment and violence targeting women politicians.
- **Simplify nomination processes:** Streamline registration and nomination procedures for women, especially from rural areas.

3. Institutional Support

- **Gender desks in election commissions:** Establish dedicated offices in the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to oversee women's participation.
- **Women's wings in political parties:** Formalize and empower these to influence policy platforms and candidate selection.

4. Education and Capacity Building

- **Civic and political education:** Introduce gender-sensitive political education in schools and universities.

- **Leadership training:** Institutionalize training programs for aspiring women leaders in collaboration with NGOs and universities.

5. Media and Public Discourse

- **Promote positive media portrayal:** Encourage media campaigns that normalize and celebrate women in leadership roles.
- **Combat stereotypes:** Penalize media outlets that perpetuate misogynistic narratives or discredit female politicians unfairly.

6. Local Governance Empowerment

- **Empower local councils:** Strengthen the role of women in local government by giving real decision-making powers to local bodies.
- **Incentivize female participation:** Offer financial and logistical incentives to women participating in local governance.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the role of women in Pakistan's political landscape has evolved significantly over the years, marked by both notable progress and persistent challenges. From Fatima Jinnah and Benazir Bhutto to the increasing presence of women in parliamentary roles through reserved seats, Pakistani women have made important strides toward political empowerment. Legislative reforms, active participation in civil society, and the rise of women in local government bodies reflect a growing recognition of their potential and contributions.

However, structural barriers continue to hinder full gender equality in politics. These include deep-rooted patriarchal norms, limited access to political networks, socio-economic constraints, and threats of violence and harassment. While legal frameworks exist to support women's inclusion, implementation often falls short, and meaningful representation—beyond tokenism—remains a work in progress.

Moving forward, sustained efforts are required to create an enabling environment for women's political participation. This includes legal reforms, education and awareness programs, support for female leadership development, and a shift in societal attitudes. Only through genuine commitment at all levels can Pakistan achieve a truly inclusive political system where women are equal stakeholders in shaping the nation's future.

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