

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESS OF PAKISTAN: CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

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Received on 15th January 2021, Revised on 18th February 2021, Published on 4th March 2021

Abstract

Objectives: This study seeks to examine the specific challenges and barriers related to women's participation in politics and decision-making within the context of Pakistan.

Methodology: This study deploys literature review and historical analysis to understand the context and causes of women's underrepresentation. Furthermore, sociocultural analysis is used to assess the societal norms and cultural factors affecting women's participation in politics. Institutional analysis is used to evaluate the structural barriers and policies that hinder women's political involvement.

Findings: The outcomes of this study indicates that women in Pakistan face persistent obstacles to active participation in politics as well as these obstacles stem from historical, sociocultural, and institutional factors. Furthermore, the underrepresentation of women in political positions has adverse effects on Pakistan's democratic framework, including limited diversity and inclusivity. The study identifies the need for comprehensive measures to remove these barriers and promote a more equal and representative political landscape in Pakistan.

Applications of the study: Policymakers can use the findings to develop strategies and policies aimed at promoting women's political participation in Pakistan. In addition, civil society organizations can leverage the study's insights to advocate for gender-inclusive political reforms. Educational institutions can incorporate this research into their curriculum to raise awareness about gender disparities in politics. Furthermore, international organizations can support initiatives that address gender inequality in Pakistani politics based on the study's recommendations.

Novelty/Originality of the study: The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive examination of the obstacles hindering women's participation in politics in Pakistan, encompassing historical, sociocultural, and institutional aspects. Additionally, it emphasizes the practical implications of women's underrepresentation on the democratic framework of the country. This holistic approach provides a unique perspective on the issue and offers valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders aiming to address gender disparities in politics.

Keywords: *Democracy, Political Parties, Women Participation, Social, Cultural, Religious, Institution, Decision-Making.*

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan, a country located in South Asia at a crossroads, is a land of contrasts and complexities that are a reflection of its rich history, many cultures, and complex socio-political structure. Pakistan, a sovereign nation with its own identity, was created in 1947 as a result of the division of British India. Pakistan's identity is a synthesis of its Islamic past and contemporary aspirations. With a population of more than 215 million, Pakistan has a diverse range of cultures, languages, and topographies, from the busy streets of Karachi to the northern Himalayan peaks.

Pakistan has successfully navigated its way through many difficulties and accomplishments throughout the years, including political upheavals and economic changes. Indus Valley Civilization, the Mughal empires, and many local kingdoms all had an impact on its cultural legacy. Pakistan's identity is fundamentally shaped by Islam, which acts as a uniting factor and influences its social standards, legal structures, and cultural practices ([Akram, Azhar, Basit, 2020](#)).

Pakistan, a country with nuclear weapons, has a major geopolitical influence in the area, and its ties and contacts in the world arena have an impact on its domestic policies and global engagements. It has struggled with problems ranging from terrorism and security worries to initiatives meant to support economic development, healthcare, and education. Pakistan has a long history of overcoming hardship with tenacity and resolve while simultaneously working to build a society that is both inclusive and affluent ([Khan, 2020](#)). As Pakistan continues to develop, redefine its identity, and deal with the numerous obstacles that influence its future, it is on a journey that is complex and nuanced.

A complex interaction of cultural, social, legal, and economic elements characterizes Pakistan's relationship with women as dynamic and ever-evolving. Pakistan has seen considerable changes in attitudes and regulations surrounding women's roles, rights, and contributions as a country with a long history and a variety of cultures. This story has been influenced by a combination of religious traditions, historical legacies, and current initiatives to advance gender equality ([Ishaq, Ahmad, Aman, 2021](#)). This investigation goes at Pakistan's journey towards empowering women on many levels, from

the difficulties they have faced to the advancements they have made, eventually highlighting the continued search for a more equal and inclusive society. Women play a significant and complex role in Pakistan's development, and their active engagement and empowerment are critical to the country's advancement in the social, economic, and political sectors.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer that;

- What are the problems that have been faced by women to improve Pakistan's administration and society at large?
- What encourage women's political engagement to improve Pakistan's administration and society at large?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extensive research work has been done on women in Pakistan from many angles and aspects. There has been work done in literature from the perspective of the role of women in political parties, the role of women politicians, the participation of female candidates in elections, women's role in economic development, etc. This topic remained a hot topic in the past and present. Similarly, significant work has been done on the evolving role of women in Pakistani politics (Huma, 2013). As far as women are concerned, When it comes to covering female politicians, who receive less attention than male politicians, women have frequently complained in politics about the media's lack of seriousness (Khan, 1994). The Media coverage of these female's politicians are limited to the issues like child care and miscarriages, which represents the conventional role of women as mother rather a politician. Similarly, the status of women politician got ranked inferior by the limiting them to the sexist and limited picture who lack an opinion on crucial issues. Women are less likely to be re-elected as a result of the political agency they lack in the media's portrayal of them. It is also more difficult for them to draft legislation that complies with their demands because their male counterpart does not respect them (Scheidt, 2014).

Similarly, an ample amount of literature has been written on the role of media in the issues of women. Practically speaking, the researchers found that women are frequently mentioned in the media in terms of their personality traits and physical appearance rather than their abilities, policies, and political views. In comparison to substance and behavior, women are represented in the media with a larger emphasis on appearance. The main objective of this type of media exposure is to prevent voters from understanding that the candidates are possible contenders (Khan, 1994).

Another aspect in which research has been done on women is the rising number of seats in political parties and assemblies. This has been discussed in the later part of the paper as well. The article highlighted how the situation changed and the participation of women increased especially after the military coup of 1999.

Another connected aspect of women is the ever-increasing violence and owner-killing against women. Ample work has been done on this issue, many national, and international non-governmental organizations worked on this and published their reports. Much research has been conducted on this issue.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study paper is to investigate the facts surrounding Pakistani women's participation in politics and the decision-making process, including the difficulties they face. This study's methodology is based on a methodical approach to doing high-quality research. Enough details were found in secondary sources to complete this investigation. As a result, the author didn't feel the need to acquire data from primary sources. Scholarly books, research journals, periodicals, newspapers, online reports, and official reports were some of the secondary materials considered in this study.

Historical Analysis

The partition of British India led to Pakistan's independence from British colonial authority on August 14, 1947. The Two-Nation Theory, which claimed that Muslims and Hindus were separate nations deserving of separate states, served as the foundation for the establishment of Pakistan. Pakistan is a South Asian nation that dominates both the geographical and cultural landscape of the area. Pakistan is situated in South Asia and has borders with India to the east, Afghanistan, Iran, China, and the Arabian Sea to the west, south, and north, respectively. Its varied terrain includes plains, deserts, mountains (such as the Himalayas and the Karakoram Range), and a coastline along the Arabian Sea (Ishaq, Ahmad, Aman, 2021). In Pakistan, which is a federal parliamentary republic, the Prime Minister serves as the head of government and the President is the head of state. Political transitions, military rule, and democratic administration have all left their marks on the political landscape.

There are many different ethnic groups and languages in the nation, with Urdu serving as the official language and English being extensively used. A complex and multidimensional tale that spans centuries and reflects the changing socio-cultural, political, and economic aspects of the area is the history of women in Pakistan. The role and status of women in Pakistan have seen major changes, from the ancient civilizations of the Indus Valley to the contemporary difficulties and opportunities. (Kenoyer, 1991) The intricate mix of tradition, religion, colonial legacies, and socio-political changes in Pakistani women is what gives them their unique characteristics. While significant progress has been

made, more needs to be done to eliminate gender gaps, advance women's rights, and build a more welcoming and equitable society for women in Pakistan ([Ali & Ahmed, 2016](#)).

In Pakistan, there is a disparity between men and women in terms of the population ratio, school enrolment, literacy rate, access to primary healthcare facilities, and life expectancy, among other statistics. However, over the past 16 years, there have been significant improvements in women's political participation. The increase in women's political participation in legislative bodies is most significant. This change in political participation can be attributed to a number of factors, including Pakistan's legal obligations to the international community under the "Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women" (CEDAW), "the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (UDHR), as well as the "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights" (ICCPR). These commitments have had an effect on Pakistan during the 1995 Fourth International Conference on Women ([Women, U.N, 1995](#)).

In addition, the Pakistani Constitution of 1973 has had a significant impact on the political advancement of women. The National Assembly including Provincial Assemblies The allocation of Quota Seats for Women as well as Non-Muslims Rules of 2002, the Political Parties Order dated 2002, and the Election Commission (EC) Order of 2002 are additional factors that have helped to empower women and ensure their political participation in the political structure ([Ahmed & Shahab, 2002](#)).

Both the parliamentary and presidential systems have features in Pakistan's current political structure. Political structure changes in the past have led to changes in political systems ([Bano, 2009](#)). In the past, women's participation and representation in national and provincial assemblies varied depending on the type of political system in place. For instance, women obtained 3% of the total seats in the first legislative assembly of Pakistan (which met from August 10, 1947, to October 24, 1954; there were 30 total seats, and women won 2 of them) ([Merry, 2017](#)).

In the years 1947 to 1956, there was no president's office. The governor-general served as the head of state. Women had no representation in this second legislative assembly, which ran from May 2, 1955, to October 7, 1958 (there were 80 seats altogether, and women won 0 seats). Again, the political system transformed from 1956 to 1958. Iskander Mirza, the previous governor general, was appointed president after the role was eliminated. Following that, the military ruled the nation for the next 13 years, from 1958 till 1971 ([Bhave et al., 2010](#)). After the Zia era, which lasted from 1978 till 1988, a fresh political development once more had an impact on how women were depicted in politics.

The reason behind this effect could be traced from implemented of Islamic Law during Zia era in the 1980. Zia used that interpretation of Islam which support his ideology which seems to be inspired by Saudi Arabia Islamic principles that further enabled Zia to establish alliance with Saudi Arabia and USA during Afghan-Soviet War. This Jihadi policy of Zia further encourage the involvement of Jammāt e Islāmī and Jamā'at e Ulma Islām in the political sphere of Pakistani politics. [Ahmed \(1996\)](#) opines that they Islamist Movement support Zia regime because they considered the democratization of Pakistan the core reason that these Islamists were suffering from low political mandate. Thus Zia and these Ulema introduced an Islamic ideology where west is presented as an innate enemy of Muslims that resulted in demarcation of Muslim society in to feminist, secular and modernist groups. This demarcation between modernist and Islamist affect every sphere of Pakistani society but position of women in society became debatable. As Islamist considered the participation of women in every field generally and politics particularly the Western agenda. Zia regime took drastic action against women participation in public sector generally and to minimize their participation in politics that resulted in protest of feminist against Zia's Islamic Ideology. As these Islamist propagated the theory of inequality of gender and promoted the women's inferior status to limit her in domestic affair. One of the member of *majlis e shoora*, the ex-member of Jamat e Islami Dr Israr claimed that all the Women working public sector should quit their jobs by taking early retirement or should ne pensioned off to maintain the Islamic state Ideology where women are not allowed to work publically ([Ishaq & Ahmad, 2021](#))

The shift took place in political structure of Pakistan regarding women's participation in politics after Zia regime that lasted from 1977to 1988 ([Awan 2016](#)). By 1988, women had gained 22 seats in the National Assembly (21 were chosen to reserved seats, and 1 was elected directly), as well as 5% of the representatives in the provincial assemblies, up from the initial 3% assigned quota that had been in effect during the first legislative assembly. From 1990 to 1997, there were no reserved seats for women. As a result, in the elected legislatures in 1990, 1993, after 1997, there were no seats allocated for women at the provincial or federal levels ([Sattar, 2020](#)).

As a result, women were highly underrepresented; in 1990, for example, there were only 2 directly elected women out of 217 candidates. Women made up 1.8% of elected assemblies in 1993 (4 out of 217 total seats were won by women), 2.8% of seats won by women in the 1997 national assembly (6 out of 217 total seats were won by women ([Torlak & Kuzey, 2014](#)). For the first time under military rule, the proportion of women during local government jobs grew in 2000, rising to 33%. The three levels of local government whereby this quota was in place were the Union Council, Tehsil, and district. Similar to this, the percentage of women in national as well as provincial assemblies increased to 17% before the 2002 election (with 61 out of 342 members in the national assembly being women ([PILDAT, 2014](#)). A significant increase in the quota in the 2002 elections also increased women's overall political engagement. As a result, the majority of women have stood to and won general seats. In the 2002 election, 188 women stood for general office; 101 of them won party nominations, although 39 of their campaigns were successful in taking their seats. Only 56

women attempted to run for office in the 1997 election; of those, 39 received party nominations, and only 7 became successful. This ratio was thus around 1/3 less ([PILDAT, 2014](#)).

However, when contrasting the elections in 2008 and 2013, some moving trends may be discernible. Women gained 70 out of 342 seats, or more than 20.5%, in the lower house within the national legislature in the 2013 election. Women won 17 out of the 100 seats within the upper chamber, or 17% of all seats. When contrasted to the election in 2008, we can see whether there were a few more women electors in 2013. 34 women were nominated by political parties to run for seat in the 2008 election. For the 2013 election, 36 women got political party nominations. For the 272 National Assembly seats up for election at 2013, 108 women stood ([Kazmi., 2018](#)). There were 76 women who ran for office in the 2008 election, therefore this number is higher. In compared to the 2008 election, several political parties, including as the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) as well as the Mutahida Qaumi Movement, increased the number of women competing for office in 2013. However, compared to the 2008 election, there were fewer women in other major groups like the Pakistan People's Party and the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam ([Latif, 2013](#))

Similar actions have been taken to promote women's participation in politics and the public. The Elections Act of 2017 is a stunning illustration of this. This statute refers to women's political engagement in a number of parts, both as candidates and voters. If women are prevented from voting, the ECP has the authority to declare an election invalid under Section 9 (1) of the Act. The law further states that the ECP may assume that women were prevented from voting by a local agreement if the female voter turnout remained below ten per cent. According to Article 51 of the Constitution, reserved seats for women in the House of Representatives are discussed in Section 18(1). In Section 47, it is emphasized that special steps must be taken to increase the number of women registered to vote. The Act's section 206 makes it explicit that political parties must allocate 5% of general-seating tickets to women ([Kamray, 2020](#)).

The focus on women's political participation intensified in Pakistan in the months leading up to the 2018 general elections, and female voter turnout climbed across much of the nation. Out of the 171 women who ran for seats in the lower house in the 2018 general elections, eight won general seats in the National Assembly, according to information gathered by the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) from the Election Commission of Pakistan's (ECP) website ([The News, 2018](#)). The topic of women's political engagement in Pakistan is complex and constantly changing, covering a range of problems and difficulties. Progress and difficulties have been experienced in Pakistan concerning women's political engagement. Although women's involvement in politics and decision-making has improved over time, they still confront many challenges. Quotas, reserved seats, and electoral systems that take into account gender are just a few of the policies that many nations have put into place to boost the political representation of women. As a result, there are now steadily more women serving in legislatures. Women are increasingly taking up political leadership positions on a global scale, including those of presidents of state and governments. Women are being elected or appointed to the top political positions in many countries. Women's involvement in political and peacebuilding processes is gaining recognition as a critical element for long-term stability and development in post-conflict and fragile rules ([Kamray, 2020](#)). Here are some crucial details emphasizing the role women have played in Pakistan's development:

Human Capital Development: Women make up a sizeable section of the population in Pakistan, and their education and skills are essential for creating a workforce that is knowledgeable and skilled. The development of human capital as a whole can be facilitated by educated women helping to improve the health and educational outcomes of their families.

Economic Growth: Women's employment is essential for economic development. Women who are allowed to work and start businesses help to boost productivity and diversify the economy. This may result in a decline in poverty and improved living conditions for families and communities.

Entrepreneurship and creativity: In Pakistan, women entrepreneurs are becoming more and more significant forces behind economic growth and innovation. Their business endeavors support the growth of the market, the creation of new goods and services, and the creation of jobs.

Political Representation: For an inclusive and well-rounded governance system, women's active engagement in politics and decision-making processes is crucial. Their viewpoints aid in the development and application of more thorough policies.

Social Development: Women frequently take the lead in social development activities, such as community development, healthcare, and education. Women who are empowered can influence improvements in areas like access to basic amenities, sanitation, and maternal and child health.

Gender Equality and Social Justice: Supporting women's rights and gender equality goes beyond only protecting human rights; it also helps to create a society that is fairer and just. The destructive cultural norms and practices that support gender-based discrimination and violence can be challenged with the aid of empowered women ([Jenichen et al., 2017](#)).

Peace and Stability: Women's participation in attempts to resolve conflicts and build peace can help create a more enduring and durable peace. Their viewpoints and initiatives play a crucial role in resolving the underlying causes of conflicts and creating resilient communities.

Health and Education: Access to high-quality healthcare and education for women is crucial for their well-being as well as the advancement of society as a whole. Women who are educated and in good health are better able to make wise decisions and provide for their families and communities.

Role Models and Inspiration: For younger generations, successful women in numerous industries serve as role models and inspirations. Their successes show that pursuing one's goals should not be hampered by one's gender.

Despite these significant achievements, women in Pakistan continue to experience problems like gender-based violence, limited access to healthcare and education, and cultural norms that limit their prospects (Merry, 2003). To unlock the full potential of women in Pakistan and propel the nation's sustainable development, more must be done to solve these issues and advance gender equality.

In Pakistan, social barriers have complete it problematic for women to participate in politics and the decision-making process in accumulation to focusing on historical growth and the existing situation. Election to the legislative assembly remains only one aspect of political assignation. Additionally, it covers females' responsibilities as supporters, party members, and other facets of participation in the political system, structure, and process (Latif, 2013). Analysis along these lines can result in some useful suggestions for future wider political participation by women. Women in Pakistan have a number of difficulties and impediments that prevent them from fully and meaningfully participating in politics.

Women's Political Participation Challenges and Barriers

1. Patriarchy and ingrained cultural norms:

Women's participation in politics is frequently constrained by patriarchal views and ingrained cultural norms. Women should prioritize their household tasks, according to traditional gender roles, rather than taking an active position in politics.

In Pakistan, patriarchy and cultural norms are major obstacles that prevent women from making decisions and participating in politics. These strongly ingrained societal elements influence how people behave in terms of gender roles and expectations, which frequently restricts women's autonomy and leadership chances. Here is a swift of how patriarchy and cultural norms in Pakistan prevent women from making informed decisions:

- **Cultural Norms:**

- i. **Traditional Gender Roles:** In Pakistan's traditional culture, men and women are assigned different roles, with women being given only domestic and caring obligations. This reduces their visibility in public areas, such as meeting rooms for decision-making (Ali et al., 2020).
- ii. **Honor and Modesty Perceptions:** According to cultural norms, women who work in politics are frequently seen as being immodest or disrespecting their families' honor. As a result, women who want to get involved in politics could encounter opposition from their families or communities.
- iii. **Gender segregation and seclusion:** Gender segregation and seclusion practices in some tribes limit the interactions between women and men who are not related to them. This restricts their access to areas where politics are discussed and decisions are made in public (Ali et al., 2020).
- iv. **Limited Mobility:** Due to cultural norms and safety concerns, it might be challenging for women to attend political events like demonstrations and meetings.
- v. **Cultural Education Barriers:** In some places, cultural norms place a higher value on the education of boys than of girls, which restricts women's access to information and understanding of political processes.

- **Patriarchy:**

- i. **Male Dominance:** Patriarchal structures place a high value on the authority and decision-making of men, frequently barring women from influential social and political settings.
- ii. **Men's dominance over resources:** Men's dominance over resources, such as money and real estate, can prevent women from independently participating in politics or pursuing leadership positions (Latif, 2013).
- iii. **Misrepresentation and Stereotyping:** Patriarchal standards may give rise to stereotypes that undercut women's potential in positions of political leadership. Stereotyping and misrepresentation. These misconceptions are frequently reinforced by media and cultural portrayals.
- iv. **Lack of Representation:** Patriarchal standards might prevent women from being represented or holding leadership roles in political parties and institutions (Ali et al., 2020).
- v. **Brutality and harassment:** Patriarchal beliefs can contribute to gender-based violence and harassment against women who defy social norms by participating in politics.

Limited Access to Education

Many Pakistani women do not have access to high-quality education. Their lack of knowledge hinders their ability to communicate effectively, inhibits their comprehension of political processes, and lessens their awareness of their rights and obligations. In Pakistan, a major impediment to women's political engagement and decision-making is their limited access to education. To empower people, develop their talents, and increase their possibilities for leadership and involvement in public affairs, education is essential (Torlak & Kuzey, 2019). Here is an overview of how women's decision-making in Pakistan is hampered by their restricted access to education:

- **Inequalities in education:**

- i. **Gender Inequalities:** Discrimination based on a person's gender frequently prevents women and girls from having equal access to education. This may limit their access to information, critical thinking techniques, and decision-making abilities.
- ii. **Rural-Urban Divide:** In rural areas, where traditional attitudes towards women's education may be more prominent, educational options are frequently more limited (Torlak & Kuzey, 2019).
- iii. **High dropout rates for girls** can prevent them from finishing school. These factors include early marriage, cultural standards, and financial restraints.

- **Decision-Making Impact:**

- i. **Limited Knowledge:** Women's informed participation in decision-making may be hampered by women's lack of knowledge of political processes, policies, and current events.
- ii. **Reduced Self-Efficacy:** Women's self-confidence and faith in their capacity to effectively participate in political discussions can be negatively impacted by little education.
- iii. **Skills Gap:** Education gives people the critical thinking, negotiation, and communication abilities they need to make good decisions (Torlak & Kuzey, 2019). The skills gap for women may expand due to a lack of education.

- **Societal and Economic Consequences**

- i. **Vicious Cycle:** Women with low levels of education are more likely to experience poverty, limited possibilities, and fewer opportunities to participate in political processes, which perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage.
- ii. **Economic Dependence:** Women who lack education may continue to be economically reliant, which would restrict their participation in politics owing to financial limitations.
- iii. **Leadership challenges** include the need for a specific level of education for many leadership jobs. Women may be discouraged from pursuing leadership positions due to a lack of education (Jenichen & Anne, 2017).

2. Socio-economic Constraints:

Economic differences may prohibit women from pursuing political careers due to socioeconomic constraints. Many women have financial insecurity and financial limitations that make it challenging for them to participate in political activities.

Violence and Harassment:

Women in politics frequently experience violence, verbal and physical abuse, and harassment. They become less likely to engage in political activity as a result, and their safety and well-being may also be at risk. In Pakistan, violence and harassment pose serious obstacles to women's political involvement and decision-making (Ali et al., 2008). These instances of gender-based violence discourage women from participating in public affairs and pursuing leadership positions by fostering an atmosphere of fear, insecurity, and isolation. Here is a summary of how harassment and violence prevent women in Pakistan from making informed decisions:

- **Forms of Harassment and Violence**

- i. **Threats, physical assaults, and other violent acts** committed against women in political positions or those aspiring to enter politics can cause physical harm and psychological distress.
- ii. **Verbal Harassment and Threats:** To silence them and prevent them from taking part in political activities, women may experience verbal abuse, offensive language, and threats (Ali et al., 2008).
- iii. **Online harassment** can prevent women in politics from participating in online discourse. This harassment can take the form of trolling, cyberbullying, and other forms of hate speech.
- iv. **Stalking and intimidation:** These behaviors can foster a climate of fear that discourages women from engaging in politics.

- v. Cultural Backlash: Conservative segments of society may retaliate violently and harass women who challenge established gender roles by getting involved in politics ([Jenichen & Anne, 2017](#)).
- **Impact on Decision-Making:**
 - i. The psychological toll that violence and harassment take on women is significant, negatively affecting their self-worth, self-assurance, and mental health.
 - ii. Effect of Silencing: Women may self-regulate or refrain from speaking up out of concern for reprisal, which can result in their thoughts and voices not being heard during decision-making processes ([Ali et al., 20008](#)).
 - iii. Withdrawal from Politics: The prospect of violence and harassment might cause women to completely stop participating in politics, which reduces the variety of voices in government.
- **Structural and systemic factors:**
 - i. Lack of Legal Protections: Inadequate legal protections and lackluster enforcement of the law contribute to a culture where harassment and violence against women go unpunished.
 - ii. Patriarchal norms: Patriarchal views that uphold women's subordination and gender inequality can normalize harassment and violence against them in positions of power.

Lack of Representation in Leadership Positions:

Although there are designated seats for women in legislative bodies, many times they find it difficult to rise to the top of political parties. Their ability to influence party choices and policy is so limited.

Lack of Party Support:

Women candidates may not obtain sufficient party support from their political parties, including finance, mentorship, and campaign resources, which have an impact on their capacity to run successful campaigns.

Stereotyping and media bias:

Stereotyping and media bias may be perpetuated, which affects the public's impression of women in politics and their general legitimacy as political leaders. Due to the way they promote negative narratives, support gender disparities, and influence public perception in ways that limit women's chances, stereotyping and media bias are significant obstacles that prevent women in Pakistan from making decisions and participating in politics ([Jenichen & Anne, 2017](#)). Here is a summary of how prejudice in the media and stereotypes affect women's decision-making in Pakistan:

Stereotyping

- i. Traditional Roles and Expectations: Stereotypes frequently diminish women's ability for leadership and decision-making in the public realm by associating them with traditional roles as carers and homemakers.
- ii. Stereotypes that portray women as less capable or having weaker cognitive and decision-making skills than men might damage their credibility in political settings.
- iii. Rational vs. Emotional: Stereotypes may portray men as being analytical and logical decision-makers while portraying women as being emotional and impulsive. This may harm women's ability to be seen as capable leaders.
- iv. Beauty above Substance: Stereotypes that prioritize physical beauty above educational background or professional accomplishments might diminish the visibility of women as credible political rivals ([Torlak & Kuzey, 2019](#)).
- v. Limited Ambitions: Cultural conventions and prejudices may imply that women should prioritize their families over anything else, which restricts their desire to participate in politics.
- **Media Slant**
 - i. Underrepresentation: Women are frequently underrepresented in political coverage by the media, which makes them less visible and provides fewer role models for aspirant female leaders.
 - ii. Sensationalism and trivialization: Media bias may sensationalize the private life, outward appearances, or actions of female politicians, deflecting attention away from their political savvy.
 - iii. Limited Policy Coverage: Men's viewpoints and postures may receive greater attention in the media than women's thoughts on policy.
 - iv. Negative Framing: Compared to their male counterparts, female politicians may be framed negatively or subjected to more intense scrutiny, which affects both the public's impression of them and their credibility.

- v. Lack of Diverse Voices: Media outlets may not reflect a variety of viewpoints, particularly those of women from underrepresented groups, which further silences their voices.

3. Social stigma:

Women who actively engage in politics risk being judged and criticized by society. Social stigmatization like this might cause self-censorship and discourage women from assuming leadership positions.

Legal and institutional restrictions:

Despite legal restrictions, institutional restrictions may still prevent women from participating in politics. These may include red tape, the absence of gender-sensitive rules, and restricted information access.

Limited Networking Opportunities:

Building political networks and contacts is essential to developing one's political career. Due to conventional gender segregation and a lack of social places, women frequently have fewer possibilities to create these networks (Entman, 2006).

Lack of Role Models:

Young women's ambitions to enter politics may be hampered by the absence of prominent female role models in politics.

Lack of Training and Capacity Building:

Women's ability to improve their political abilities may be hampered by a lack of access to training initiatives and capacity-building programs that are suited to their requirements.

Challenges in the electoral process:

Female candidates may run into problems during elections, including voter intimidation, low female voter turnout, and potential vote-buying tactics that may favor female candidates more than male candidates.

Disincentives for Political Engagement:

Women may experience discouragement and disillusionment if their political engagement does not always yield the anticipated results. To address these issues, a multifaceted strategy is needed that includes societal mindset shifts, policy changes, specialized capacity-building initiatives, and work to provide a secure and welcoming political environment for women in Pakistan (Entman, 2006).

FINDINGS

Based on the secondary and primary data collected, the researchers reached the following findings. It is impossible to overestimate the significance of women's involvement in politics and decision-making in Pakistan. A more inclusive, equitable, and representative society can only be attained with the participation of women at all levels of governance and in the formation of policy. Pakistan has put more of its attention on measures aimed at expanding gender equality and enhancing women's contributions as a result of realizing how crucial women are for the development of society and Pakistan.

The quota that allots seats, notably to women, is the main reason why there are now more women elected for legislative bodies in Pakistan than in the past. More women are, however, vying for general seats to legislative bodies. Additionally, more women than ever before are exercising their right to vote. The nomination of these people by political parties is proof that they have also proven their value by actively participating the Pakistan's thirteenth out of thirteen fourteenth and fifteenth National Assemblies. In a comparable way, there were more women running for election in the elections of 2013 and 2018 than in the one of 2008.

Nevertheless, despite the enormous progress, statistics and trends pertaining to the existing political system as well as structure still do not indicate that women have as much political weight as one might expect. The considerable participation of women into legislative bodies is mostly the result of the quota system. Women who became involved in politics should be appreciative of the quota system because they are not selected by the electorate immediately instead being chosen by the party apparatus. While the fact that they are not directly required to run for office may speed their incorporation into the system of politics, it also suggests that they are not genuine representatives within the sociocultural demographic of Pakistan's largest number of women.

This is particularly true in light of the fact that most women who have been in elected positions ("such as the likes of Benazir Bhutto, Maryam Nawaz, Hina Rabbani Khar, Tehmina Daultana, Syeda Abdia Hussain, Fahmida Mirza", etc.) come from political families that were already prominent. A further indication that fewer people think women are capable of winning elections is the fact that fewer women than men get chosen by their parties for candidates for general seats. Additionally, the political party wings for women sometimes take on representational rather than executive

positions, which hinder their ability to influence decisions. This is simply one more significant example of how women are in fact underrepresented in political parties.

The inadequate political representation of women is a result of sociocultural norms and the women's financial dependence upon the male occupant of the household. Poor literacy rates as well as gender segregation in positions of power are two further obstacles to women's participation. Women's engagement cannot be successful without considerable societal change, and should be initiated by a bottom-up strategy. First, women need to be given more social and economic influence. Then and only then can women assume progressive and powerful positions inside the political system. Indicators of women's political empowerment now are solely the result of top-down strategies, like the quota, which are implemented through legislative measures.

However, structural discrimination that manifests itself in socio-cultural practices continues to constitute the normal set of behaviors within political parties. The distribution of roles, duties, and party nominations serves as a tangible example of these behaviors and attitudes. Therefore, changes in normative practices at the local level and in societal institutions (especially in the family and the economy) as well as the to improve actual empowerment, successful engagement of women, the roles and responsibilities of women in politics, and political structure, awareness-raising efforts must also be made.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The data under consideration demonstrate that during the past 22 years, women's involvement in decisions and politics in Pakistan has steadily improved. It is mostly brought on by the rise in the percentage of seats held exclusively by women in legislative bodies. A significant advancement in Pakistan's historically patriarchal society is the transmission of power from fathers to a daughter in some cases as opposed to a son. Women still hold less power than men in the political sphere. In Pakistan's patriarchal society, it is a positive development that the discrepancy is narrowing.

Continuous and significant efforts should be made to expand the presence of women in politics as well as their participation as elected officials in legislative bodies. In Pakistan, women with strong political backgrounds are more prominent, but it is still challenging for regular women to participate in politics. Even if the current situation is still far from perfect, it is still relatively good compared to the rest of the globe, particularly the Muslim world.

Instead of reserved seats, more women ought to be chosen directly. The success of women running for general seats will be crucial in the process of boosting their confidence. In Pakistan, women's involvement in both governance and politics has greatly improved over the past 22 years. The political background of Pakistan makes it evident that women currently participate more actively in the political activities and decision-making of the nation, but the government needs to take filling in the gaps more seriously. The Election Commission of Pakistan has developed commendable policies.

However, it is past time to advance a political culture that supports women's political engagement. Political parties are essential in influencing a nation's political culture. In Pakistan, political parties should take action to promote women's involvement in politics and increase their representation in legislative bodies.

SUGGESTIONS

Here are some suggestions to address the challenges and barriers faced by women in Pakistan.

• Taking Down the Walls by Education:

- i. Education and Awareness: Women's rights and gender stereotypes can be questioned by promoting women's education and spreading awareness of their capabilities.
- ii. Women's Empowerment Program: Empowerment programs that offer leadership development, skill-building, and training can boost women's self-assurance and ability to make decisions.
- iii. Reforms to the law: Adopting and enforcing gender-sensitive laws and regulations can help stop discriminatory behaviour and increase women's participation.
- iv. Positive media efforts can dispel myths and draw attention to the value of women's leadership in political decision-making.
- v. Community Engagement: Discussing gender equality and women's political engagement with community leaders, religious figures, and males might assist in changing perceptions.

A comprehensive strategy encompassing policy changes, social awareness initiatives, and community engagement efforts is needed to remove the obstacles caused by cultural norms and patriarchy. Promoting gender equality and empowering women is crucial for creating a diverse and representative political environment in Pakistan.

Taking Down the Walls by Media:

- i. Media literacy is a key component in breaking down barriers because it encourages people to recognize and object to biased representations of women in the media.

- ii. Media organizations should work to provide fair and impartial coverage of women politicians, highlighting their credentials, positions, and accomplishments.
- iii. Women's Voices: By giving women a forum to share their opinions, experiences, and perspectives, we can reduce gender bias in the media.
- iv. Media practitioners should be trained in gender-sensitive reporting to prevent the spread of prejudice and stereotypes.
- v. Policy Advocacy: Promoting gender-sensitive media policies and standards helps nudge media organizations toward fair reporting.
- vi. Social Media Engagement: Women in politics can use social media to sidestep the biases of the mainstream media and interact directly with their supporters.
- vii. Media Diversity: Supporting media organizations in hiring more female reporters and editors will help ensure more inclusive reporting.

Collaboration between media organizations, government, civic society, and women leaders themselves is necessary to overcome the obstacles caused by stereotyping and media bias. It is possible to foster an atmosphere where women's political engagement is acknowledged, rewarded, and promoted by confronting these biases, encouraging truthful depiction, and altering the narrative.

Taking Down the Walls:

- i. Promoting Girls' Education: Advocacy campaigns and community engagement initiatives can increase public understanding of the value of girls' education and challenge social conventions that stand in the way of it.
- ii. Addressing Financial Barriers: Girls' access to education can be facilitated by providing scholarships, financial incentives, and other forms of support.
- iii. Construction and infrastructure improvements, particularly in rural regions, can boost access to education for girls.
- iv. Community Engagement: Working together to emphasize the value of education for girls will assist in overcoming resistance. Local communities, religious leaders, and parents can be involved.
- v. Early Childhood Education: A good foundation for girls' learning and future academic aspirations can be built by investing in early childhood education.
- vi. Flexible Learning Models: Women who may have other responsibilities can be accommodated by offering flexible learning options, such as non-formal education or distance learning.
- vii. Women's Education Centers: Creating facilities that provide women with adult education and skill development can enable them to take a more active role in decision-making.

Government, public society, communities, and international organizations must work together to overcome the barrier to limited access to education. Pakistan may foster an atmosphere where women have the knowledge and abilities to contribute successfully to decision-making processes by placing a high priority on education for girls and women.

Taking Down the Walls of Harassment and Violation:

- i. Legal Reforms and Enforcement: It is essential to strengthen current laws and policies to address violence and harassment against women in politics and to make sure that these laws and policies are effectively enforced.
- ii. Raising awareness of the negative effects of violence and harassment on women's political engagement can put pressure on society to stop tolerating such behaviour.
- iii. Support Services: Giving women who endure abuse or harassment support services, such as counselling and legal aid, can help them cope and seek redress.
- iv. Leadership Development: Programmed that teach women how to deal with and overcome harassment and abuse can give them the confidence they need to keep taking part in politics.
- v. Collective Action: Creating networks and alliances among female politicians and activists can foster camaraderie and offer security against harassment and violence.
- vi. Engaging Men: Men can assist in changing cultural attitudes by taking a position against violence and harassment and joining forces to support women's involvement.

To remove the barrier of violence and harassment, a thorough strategy involving societal, legal, and cultural reform is needed. Pakistan may promote women's active participation in political decision-making processes and create a more inclusive and representative democracy by fostering a safe and encouraging atmosphere for them.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

This study has cover several broad aspect of Women's Participation in Politics and Decision-making Process of Pakistan: Challenges and Barriers, however few limitations are associated with the current study;

- Data Availability: Limited access to accurate and up-to-date data on women's participation.
- Sample Size: Potential issues with a small or non-representative sample as deployed in this study.
- Cultural Complexity: Challenges in fully capturing the cultural and social nuances of Pakistan.
- Regional Variation: Inadequate representation of diverse regional and ethnic dynamics.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest that may cause problems in the future. This study is aimed at academics and the public.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We need to thank those who directly helped so that this study can be carried out.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

The authors have worked together in drafting the script. Dr. Kishwar Naheed has a role as the development of concepts and assumptions and final review, Dr Nosheen Zaheer has a share in the method specification, and review of the article and adding intext citations and references, Dr Masooda Shah for carrying the research and Asiya Durrani performed the conclusions formulation for the remaining contribution.

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