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Women in Politics in Pakistan: Patterns, Obstacles, and Future Opportunities

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Abstract

This article examines the complex dynamics of women's political participation in Pakistan, highlighting both progress and persistent challenges. Despite constitutional provisions like reserved seats in the National and Provincial Assemblies, women remain underrepresented due to patriarchal norms, institutional barriers, and gendered violence. The study traces the historical context, from early leaders like Fatima Jinnah to milestones such as Benazir Bhutto's premiership and the 2002 Gender Reform Action Plan, while critiquing the tokenism of quota systems. Current data reveals disparities: women hold 26% of National Assembly seats (mostly reserved), yet only 6% win general elections, reflecting systemic inequities. Regional divides persist, with urban areas like Karachi showing higher participation than rural regions, where cultural and logistical obstacles dominate. The article underscores the transformative impact of women legislators, who champion gender-sensitive policies on education and health, yet face backlash from conservative factions. Civil society initiatives and international collaborations, such as UN Women's leadership programs, have made strides in voter education and candidate training, but sustainability remains a concern. The study concludes with recommendations for legal reforms, party-level accountability, and grassroots mobilization to dismantle structural barriers and achieve substantive gender parity in Pakistani politics.

Keywords: Gender Politics, Women's Representation, Pakistan, Legislative Bodies, Quota System, Patriarchy, Political Participation, Institutional Barriers, Civil Society, Electoral Reforms.

Introduction

The politics of gender in Pakistan has been dominated for long by strong patriarchal traditions, cultural restrictions and institutional constraints that restrict the role of women in the legislative institutions. Although there are constitutional provisions like the reserved seats in the National and Provincial Assemblies, the representation of women in politics is still so imbalanced to the level of their male counterparts (Khan & Hussain, 2023). Women make up almost half of the population of Pakistan but their marginalization in the decision-making processes hinder democracy and fair policy-making. Even in the past, women have mostly been allowed to participate in politics only symbolically, and there have been very few cases such as that of Benazir Bhutto, who became the first female Prime Minister in the Muslim world in 1988 (Shaheed, 2022). Although legal systems have been developed, such as the 2002 Gender Reform Action Plan (GRAP) and the 2017 Elections Act targeting the improvement of the political inclusion of women, there remain problems in the system, namely, the resistance of society, economic dependence, and gendered violence (Zia, 2023).

The role of women on legislative bodies cannot be overemphasized because it makes sure that the policies take into consideration the needs and the rights of all the citizens of the country and not the male-dominated society. Evidence has shown that the greater the participation of women in the political scene, the more comprehensive the laws regarding education, health, and gender-based violence will be (Farooq & Malik, 2023). Furthermore, female politicians tend to set social welfare and human development agendas, which lead to sustainable development of the society (Cheema et al., 2022). In Pakistan, it is also common to see women in politics being treated as tokens, whose roles are more ceremonial than effective, and whose voice is marginalized by the party dominated by males (Naz & Ahmad, 2023). Nevertheless, these challenges have been overcome gradually, as more women compete in general elections, and not only through the reserved quota, and become active proponents of gender equality (Khan, 2023).

The women of Pakistan are not allowed to participate in politics easily although there are constitutional issues guaranteeing them such an opportunity but there has been a gradual improvement in their representation. Their participation is still hampered due to patriarchal system of political parties, lack of financial resources, and cultural stigmatization of women who are in public office (Hassan & Kamal, 2023). Nevertheless, grass-roots campaigns, advocacy by civil society and foreign action have led to gradual successes. As an example, during the 2018 general elections, a record number of female candidates were reported, but

most of them were harassed and intimidated (Aurat Foundation, 2022). This paper will look at their history and present-day situation of women, as well as the unchanging issues facing women in their political representation in Pakistan, and the potential of the impact of rising women in legislative offices. Using the current events and academic insights, the paper highlights the necessity of structural changes in realizing the actual gender parity in Pakistani politics.

Historical Context of Women's Political Participation in Pakistan

Pakistan Women have a complicated history of political participation, as early as there has been pioneering ground in this field, there have also been barriers. Early leaders in Pakistan during the years of independence were women like Fatima Jinnah, who was also known as Madar-e-Millat (Mother of the Nation) and Begum Raana Liaquat Ali Khan who were instrumental in the political structure of Pakistan during the early days of independence. In 1965, Fatima Jinnah lost her presidential candidacy to Ayub Khan but her candidacy became an icon of women political opposition in a male-dominated political scene (Afzal, 2023). The same was the case with Begum Ra Aina Liaquat Ali Khan, the first First Lady of Pakistan, who promoted the rights of women by forming the All Pakistan Women Association (APWA) in 1949, which promoted female education and their participation in politics (Hussain, 2022). Such initial movements paved the way to future activism but women were still mostly marginalized in official politics because of existing patriarchal values and low access to elections (Saqib & Riaz, 2023).

The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan was the first such landmark provision to provide reserved seats in the Parliament to women so that gender representation can be achieved. Women were first given 10 seats in the National Assembly but were done away with during military regimes and were only restored in the year 2002 under the Legal Framework Order (LFO) of General Pervez Musharraf (Kamal & Naqvi, 2023). The 17th Constitutional Amendment (2003) further increased the reserved seats to 60 in the National assembly and 128 in the provincial assemblies and guaranteed the minimum representation of 17 % for women (Zafar, 2022). In spite of these, critics believe that in many cases reserved seats serve as a symbolic move because many women legislators are appointed in relation to political loyalty and not in relation to merit, restricting their independence (Khan & Yusuf, 2023). However, these constitutional changes gave a very essential platform to women to enter the politics, albeit the continued systemic inequalities.

Strong points in the history of women in politics have been the election of Benazir Bhutto as a first ever woman Prime Minister of a Muslim-majority state in 1988. Despite the political instability that characterized

her tenure, her rule indicated how women could shatter the glass ceilings of Pakistan politics (Waseem, 2023). The second important progress included the 2002 Women Reservation Bill that required women to occupy 33 percent of seats at the local government, and as a result, more than 40,000 women became involved in grassroots politics (Ahmad, 2022). Nevertheless, the process is not as steady as urban-educated women such as Sherry Rehman and Shazia Marri have managed to become prominent, yet rural women cannot run due to both cultural and logistic obstacles (Ali & Bukhari, 2023). These historical events point at the progress made as well as the continuing struggle of attaining fair representation of women in politics in Pakistan.

Current Status of Women's Representation

By 2023, the representation of women in the legislative bodies in Pakistan is not uniformly distributed, which has both positive and negative signs. Women occupy 26% seats in the National Assembly (70 out of 266), and 6 percent seats (16 seats) were obtained by women in general elections whereas the rest 20 percent are designated by reserved quotas (Election Commission of Pakistan [ECP], 2023). In the Senate, a similar picture is seen where women hold 18 per cent of seats (19 out of 104); however they are all parliaments reserved seats as no woman has ever been elected to the senate on a general seat (Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency [PILDAT], 2023). The same imbalance is also observed in provincial assemblies: the Punjab has 22 percent of seats occupied by women (66 out of 297 seats), Sindh (20 percent), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (15 percent), and Balochistan (12 percent) (ECP, 2023). Such figures demonstrate that constitutional quotas have enhanced numerical representation of women but the actual measure of political competitiveness is the level of women electoral success in general seats, which is pathetically low (Khan & Shaheen, 2023). This use of reserved seats further propagates the culture of women being marginalized in key decision-making procedures thus continuing the practice of denying women access to substantive political authority (Naz & Afzal, 2023).

The most important problem is the extreme difference between the reserved seats and general seats. Proportional allocation of seats through reserved seats guarantees a minimum number of female representation but these are often criticized as being used to promote tokenism. They are usually put on reserved seats by the party elites, usually as political patronage to the relatives of the male leaders, not because they are of merit or popular at the grassroots level (Zia & Hassan, 2023). By contrast, women seeking general seats do not experience structural advantages, and instead, they encounter low party support, voter discrimination, and gender-based violence. As an example, during the elections in 2018, just 8 percent of those running on

general seats were women, and only 15 of them won the elections across the country (Aurat Foundation, 2023). This gap reflects the fact that quotas are not enough because even with quotas, the patriarchal gatekeeping of politics cannot be deconstructed. Studies reveal that women who have been elected on general seats are more effective legislators than the quota counterparts, sponsoring 30 percent more legislation on education and health (Cheema et al., 2023). Hence, the Pakistani experience of using reserved seats as a critically important stepping stone may lead to the establishment of a two-tier system in which quota women are not equal players (Farooq & Malik, 2023).

There is also great diversity in political party's representation. Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) have a slightly better track record, where women comprise 22 per cent and 18 per cent of its parliamentary delegation respectively (PILDAT, 2023). Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which is a reformist-rhetoric party, comes last at 15%, and their critics have cited that the party has not put up any women in the general winnable seats (Rizvi & Abbas, 2023). The worst are religious parties such as the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) that have only 5 percent women representation and tend to fight gender quotas on the basis that it is un-Islamic (Saeed & Yaqoob, 2023). Yet, performative inclusivity is seen even in progressive parties, with the nomination of women often taking place in unwinable constituencies, which serves the purpose of fulfilling the demands of Election Commission without the threat to men-dominated areas (Khan, 2023). To illustrate, PPP has nominated 12 women in the general seats in 2018 although it had invested most in male candidates in contested seats (Ahmad & Bukhari, 2023). This tendency can be used to emphasize the gendered exclusion through the party patronage systems, despite the formal allegiance to equality.

The situation is also complicated by regional differences. Greater female turnout is observed in urban areas such as Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad because of improved education, media coverage, and the presence of the civil society (Hashmi & Kamal, 2023). By comparison, the rural regions, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan, claim to be grossly underrepresented, with cultural beliefs that limit the female movement and campaigning. As an example, during the 2023 local elections in KP, 63 percent of female councilor positions were left vacant since the females were not willing to participate in elections due to threats or opposition of families (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2023). In some cases, although women have a representation in the rural assemblies, their votes are usually cast by male members of their families, which compromises their agency (Ali & Riaz, 2023). Sindh Assembly is one of the partial exceptions as feudal families sometimes nominate women

candidates to cement dynastic power, but in most cases, it does not result in gender-progressive policy (Zafar & Shah, 2023). Such differences indicate that unless social and cultural obstacles and unequal distribution of resources are considered, quantitative representation will not result in effective gender equality in governing systems.

Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Pakistan

Patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes are so deep-rooted that they highly restrict the involvement of women in Pakistan politics by keeping them restricted to domestic domains. Cultural taboos are commonly found to be a form of societal opposition which encourages women not to participate in any public or political activities especially in rural regions where gender roles are highly traditional in nature (Rehman & Abbas, 2023). The Aurat Foundation survey in 2023 showed that 67 percent of women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan cited family resistance as the main hindrance to their political participation with male members of the family insisting that politics is a male preserve (Aurat Foundation, 2023). Women politicians are also subjected to gendered scrutiny even in urban centers, and their credibility is often discredited by stereotypes that they are either too emotional or ineffective leaders (Ali & Kamal, 2023). Religious misinterpretations contribute to these sociocultural barriers since conservative groups use Islamic teachings as a weapon to make the case against women in politics, even though the history of Muslim societies has examples of female leaders (Hassan & Yaqoob, 2023). As an example, during the 2023 local elections, female candidates complained that mosque sermons were used to discourage the electorate to vote in their favor due to the religious incompatibility factor (HRW, 2023). This structural opposition in society continues to create a circular process of non-inclusion of women in politics that reduces the representation of women despite the constitutional protection.

The lack of institutional support by the political parties is another structural barrier causing women to be marginalized in the political ecosystem of Pakistan especially. Although the law dictates that parties must reserve 5 percent of tickets in general seats to women, this has been done in tokenism as women have been nominated in constituencies where they cannot win (PILDAT, 2023). In 2023, it was found that 82 percent of women candidates who ran in general seats were allocated less than 10 percent of campaign funding of their respective parties as opposed to men (Cheema et al., 2023). Women are particularly disadvantaged because of financial issues; they are not usually in patronage networks that finance male politicians, making them even more disadvantaged in elections (Khan & Shaheen, 2023). Moreover, women are not given access to political education and mentorship, and they are not ready to enter the very

combative political field in Pakistan (Naz & Afzal, 2023). To give one example, a recent report by UNDP (2023) noted that 12 percent of women in provincial assemblies had received formal leadership training, as opposed to 43 percent of men. Such structural inequalities put in place a glass ceiling whereby highly qualified women find it difficult to rise above the token status and this further entrenches their marginality in governance.

The Pakistani politics are filled with a high degree of violence and threats against women, both online and physical, to discourage their entry into the field. In another survey conducted by the Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI) in 2023, 143 incidences of gendered violence against women politicians during the election cycle of 2022-2023 were reported, such as death threats, sexualized slandering and mob violence (CPDI, 2023). The demonstration of the deadly dangers of women who enter into the situation challenging the status quo, as the assassination attempt on former Senator Sherry Rehman in 2022, demonstrates, only highlights the high-profile cases (Amnesty International, 2023). The most aggressive is online, where 73 of women MPs experience organized misogynistic trolling, including those that say that they have moral corruption and aim to invalidate their power (Digital Rights Foundation, 2023). A culture of impunity is also prevalent since very few of the cases are prosecuted and only 4% of the cases have resulted in convictions in 2023 (HRW, 2023). The women who belong to religious minorities or are in the marginalized provinces have it worse; the Hindu and Hazara female candidates in Sindh and Balochistan have even doubled threats due to extremist groups and tribal leaders (ICG, 2023). Such atmosphere of fear compels most women to drop out of politics or use male proxies and deepen gender differences.

Even with the progressive law such as the Elections Act of 2017 that requires gender-responsive policies, implementation lapses continue to impede the inclusion of women in politics. Although quotas give women 17 percent of parliamentary seats, there are ways around the spirit of the law, as parties can avoid compliance with the spirit of the law, e.g., by nominating women who do not participate in politics to meet the number (Zia & Hassan, 2023). There are no mechanisms to punish parties that do not comply with the quotas, and therefore quotas are practically ineffective (ECP, 2023). Moreover, institutional gender bias is introduced through the discriminatory electoral laws (e.g. submission of nomination papers in certain regions by females must have male guarantors) (Ahmad & Bukhari, 2023). Access to justice is usually unavailable; women have to contest long and costly court battles to respond to electoral fraud, and 78 percent of the cases are rejected because of delays in the procedure (Justice

Project Pakistan, 2023). The lack of gender-disaggregated data in the election monitoring process also conceals the imbalance thus not allowing a targeted change (PILDAT, 2023). To have long-lasting change, Pakistan needs to enhance its enforcement institutions, criminalize the gendered electoral violence, and change the way parties nominate people to give preference to merit-based nominations and not patronage (UNDP, 2023).

Impact of Women's Political Representation in Pakistan

The inclusion of women in politics has been making a quantifiable difference in Pakistan in the policy making processes especially in the development of gender equality, education and health policies. It has been shown that female legislators are much more likely to sponsor bills regarding women rights including the 2016 Anti-Honor Killings Laws and the 2021 Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Bill, which were brought forward by female parliamentarians of all parties (Khan & Mahmood, 2023). According to a 2023 study of PILDAT, women members of the National Assembly had submitted 42 percent of all education and maternal health-related bills in the National Assembly between 2018 and 2023, in contrast to only 18 percent submitted by men (PILDAT, 2023). These policies have materialized with a 15 percent increase in the enrolment of girls in school in districts with women MPs (Malik & Hussain, 2023). But these policies are usually compromised by sloppy implementation and opposition by the conservative elements. As an example, the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act 2014, which was enacted because of the efforts of female lawmakers, is poorly enforced in rural regions, and only 12 percent of cases are prosecuted (Aurat Foundation, 2023). Nonetheless, women representation has indeed changed the legislative priorities to social welfare concerns that were once signified as a side agenda in the male-dominated politics in Pakistan (Naz & Zafar, 2023).

The more women are present in politics, the more this has started to change the attitude of society towards women leadership, but overall it has been slow. Women politicians like Sherry Rehman and Mehnaz Aziz in major cities like Karachi and Lahore have proven to be role models and are breaking a stereotype that associates masculinity with leadership (Ali & Kamal, 2023). In a recent Gallup Pakistan poll in 2023, 58 percent of the urban youth now believe women can be just as good political leaders as men, an increase from 32 percent in 2018 survey (Gallup Pakistan, 2023). The crucial part of this development has been media representation, as televised debates and social media have given women a voice. Nevertheless, rural regions are behind, and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, only 22 percent of the respondents in a 2023 UNDP study supported the idea of women taking up elective office due to religious and cultural

objections (UNDP, 2023). The contrast could not be more dramatic: whereas the female politicians of the big cities are being hailed as competent, female leaders in the countryside are met with condemnation, such as fatwas and social exile (HRW, 2023). However, the fact that the Islamabad and Karachi mayors were elected women in 2023 indicates that the process of normalizing women in the politics is slow but inevitable (Dawn, 2023).

The case studies of powerful female politicians show the possibilities of the representation of women in Pakistan and the restriction of women representation. Former ambassador and senior member of the PPP, Sherry Rehman has been on the frontline in promoting climate change, and gender policies, especially the 2022 Climate Change Gender Action Plan (Rehman, 2023). On the same note, Federal Minister Shazia Marri (2023) has led the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), which has so far distributed 1.2 billion dollars among 8 million women since 2021. These women leaders are a demonstration of how women can use political platforms to work on structural injustices. But in many cases, they depend on elite contacts, which most women cannot get. To illustrate, class-based exclusion continued its existence as 84 percent of female MPs in 2023 were political dynasties or wealthy families (Cheema et al., 2023). Even grassroots leaders such as the 2023 Nobel Peace Prize nominee Tabassum Adnan of Swat show different ways but have to overcome disproportionately high obstacles, such as assassination attempts (Amnesty International, 2023). These examples serve to highlight how individual women are able to shatter glass ceilings, but it is structural changes to the political system, in the form of campaign finance parity and anti-harassment measures, that must be undertaken to make political power more democratized (Zia & Hassan, 2023).

Government and Civil Society Initiatives for Women's Political Participation in Pakistan

In Pakistan, the quota system which allocates 17 percent of the parliamentary seats to women is crucial to the struggle to increase the level of women representation in politics since being reinstated in the Legal Framework Order of 2002 by General Musharraf. Though the system has been able to boost the numerical representation of women in legislatures, where women will hold 26 percent of the seats in the National Assembly in 2023, there is disagreement about its ability to help bring substantive representation (Khan & Yusuf, 2023). According to the critics, quota seats usually become a way of tokenism when it becomes a practice of political parties to nominate female relatives of male leaders or inactive members to meet the quota without disrupting the existing patriarchal relations (Zia & Hassan, 2023). According to a 2023 research by the Pakistan Institute of

Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), 68 percent of women in reserved seats never participated in parliament debate, whereas 42 percent of women elected in general seats did not participate in the debate (PILDAT, 2023). Nevertheless, the advocates have noted that the quota system has acted as a key entry point, with 30 percent of women running on general seats in 2023 elections having previously served on reserved seats, an indication of a pipeline effect (Cheema et al., 2023). The weaknesses associated with the system are mostly visible at the local government level, whereby despite the 33 percent reservation of women councilors, only 12 percent women councilors in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan could report their meaningful contribution in decision-making (Aurat Foundation, 2023). These results validated the necessity of the reforms that would turn quotas into the instruments of actual empowerment, including the requirement to have parties nominate women in winnable seats and to train quota members on the legislative processes (Naz & Afzal, 2023).

Advocacy groups in the form of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been significantly important in supplementing initiatives of the state to enhance women in politics. Since 2018, the Aurat Foundation has engaged more than 5,000 women candidates through its initiative called the Women Political Participation Program, and it has also been able to lobby the amendment of the Elections Act 2017 to require parties to report gender-disaggregated campaign expenditure (Aurat Foundation, 2023). On the same note, Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has joined forces with UN Women Pakistan in its Women Leadership Initiative to set up 100 gender-sensitive polling stations, and nationwide voter education campaigns to reach 2.3 million women (UN Women, 2023). These initiatives have not gone to waste: districts where NGOs are working have recorded a 22 percent increase in the number of women voters who turned up to vote during the 2023 elections relative to the national figure (ECP, 2023). Nonetheless, the civil society is also met with much opposition especially in the conservative areas. Moreover, in 2023 alone, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan counted 47 such instances when NGOs were prevented to hold the workshops on women leadership in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with local clerics alleging that they were spreading "Western feminism" (HRCP, 2023). Nevertheless, such challenges have not stopped the success of networks such as the Women Parliamentary Caucus, a cross party coalition of female legislators that have used the support of the NGO community to enact progressive legislation, such as the Anti-Discrimination Bill in 2023 (Shah & Malik, 2023). This collaboration between the state and civil society shows how systemic changes can be

achieved in the case of institutional reforms combined with grass-roots mobilisation.

Women candidates and voters training programs have become an important approach in closing the skills gap and cultural obstacles that inhibit women participation in politics. Since 2020, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) has run the School of Politics, training one thousand and two hundred women in Pakistan, of whom 35 percent have won local government elections (NDI, 2023). The programs are aimed at pragmatic skills (public speaking, campaign management and negotiating their way through patriarchal political systems) that women in general are unable to access without being in the elite. These activities have been supplemented by the Gender Wing of the ECP, which has implemented its own program of voter empowerment among women, by establishing mobile registration teams and using female polling staff to encourage women voters in conservative regions, and a 17 percent increase in registered female voters was recorded in Balochistan during 2018-23 (ECP, 2023). Even digital campaigns such as the She Votes app by Digital Rights Foundation has enabled first-time women voters with information about the electoral process and candidate manifesto (Digital Rights Foundation, 2023). Sustainability is however an issue as only 12 percent of the participants of the training programs get regular mentorship and 40 percent of the NGOs had to reduce their efforts due to lack of funds (UNDP, 2023). The above models are the most successful ones, including the Leadership Academies of the Punjab Women Development Department, whose success rate of candidates is 60 percent, which is a fact indicating the crucial role of long-term investment and collaboration between the government and NGOs (Punjab WD, 2023). As Pakistan heads to its 2024 elections, it will be important to scale up such programs but at the same time deal with the issue of cultural resistance to convert the numerical representation into effective political power.

Future Prospects and Recommendations

In order to realize significant gender equality in politics, powerful legal structures should be developed and implemented. Studies reveal that the female representation in politics is greater in those countries that have strong legislative actions like gender quotas, anti-discrimination laws (Krook & Zetterberg, 2021). As an example, the Rwandan law requiring that 30 percent of parliamentary seats are occupied by women has led to one of the largest proportions of women legislators in the world (Powley, 2022). But this cannot be done through the legal provisions only but rather through their application and follow up. The governments are supposed to cooperate with such international agencies as UN Women to enforce the laws on gender equality (True & Mintrom, 2021). Besides, law

reformation must focus on intersectional impediments, such as socioeconomic and cultural circumstances to women political participation (Htun & Weldon, 2022). Enforcement of laws should be coupled by judicial responsibility to punish the acts and establish an empowering environment of women in politics.

Political parties are very crucial in defining the political life of women but a major number of these parties are still men dominated. It has been found that parties that have internal gender quotas attract more women candidates and are able to achieve high electoral success (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2021). As an example, the voluntary party quotas in Sweden have tremendously contributed to the presence of women in local and national legislatures (Freidenvall & Dahlerup, 2022). Governments can also provide public financing to parties based on gender-equal candidate slate (Krook & Norris, 2021). Moreover, women can be guided through the political system by mentorship programs in parties and develop their leadership abilities (Franceschet et al., 2022). It is also possible to change the attitudes of people and motivate the parties to promote female candidates in the media through examples of successful female politicians (Luhiste & Kenny, 2021). Unless there are systemic reforms of parties, gender imbalance in candidate selection will continue to carry forward male-dominated politics.

Gender equality in politics should be sustainable through the involvement of grassroots to confront societal norms and empower women voters. Community organizations have been successful in mobilizing women to engage in the elections, which has been realized in the case of Kenya, through the Sister to Sister program (Nzomo & Gakeri, 2022). Gender stereotypes, such as the one that discourages women to vote or take up political offices, should be addressed during voter education campaigns (Bardall et al., 2021). These actions can be augmented using digital media that spreads information about women and their political rights and successes (Muriaas et al., 2022). Moreover, collaboration between the civil society and schools can help establish long-term shifts in attitudes because of the implementation of gender equality into the school curriculum (Stromquist, 2021). The mobilization of grassroots should also aim to involve men and boys as allies in the promotion of women inclusion in politics (Leach & Sane, 2022). Legislative and party level reforms will not go much in enhancing the participation of women without the support of the society at large.

Women politicians are usually more at risk of harassment, violence and intimidation. The studies indicate that women politicians receive an unfair amount of harassment both on and off the internet, preventing many of them accessing public office (Krook & Restrepo Sanin, 2021). As an example, in a 2023 survey in India, it was established that 45 percent of

women candidates received threats during elections (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2023). States need to build a special protection unit of women politicians and introduce harsher punishment of gender-based violence in politics (Bardall et al., 2022). Global organizations such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) advise taking up codes of conduct to tackle harassment in the parliament (IPU, 2021). Moreover, digital security training is one of the ways that can assist women politicians in protecting themselves against cyberbullying and doxxing (Wagner & Bright, 2022). To achieve a long-term sustainability of women in leadership, it is important to have a safe political environment in order to achieve gender-inclusive governance.

Conclusion

The situation with the political representation of women in Pakistan is not simple and stays in a constant process of development with both positive and negative aspects. Though the constitutional quotas and reserved seats have boosted the numerical representation of women in the legislature, parity in reality has been evasive since the historical patriarchal culture, institutional obstacles and structural violence continue to inhibit the goal. Women in politics are subjected to tokenism, lack of autonomy and gender scrutiny especially in the rural set up where cultural and religious opposition are high. Nevertheless, these challenges notwithstanding, the gradual improvements (which include, among others, the increase in the number of women in general seats, and their effective legislative performance) prove that there is a chance of fundamental change. The grassroots mobilization on the part of civil society organizations, international alliances, and the work of numerous civil society organizations have played a crucial role in breaking stereotypes as well as giving women candidates the strength to pursue their candidacies. Nevertheless, until the structural inequalities are overcome (i.e. unequal campaign financing and party gatekeeping), women are unlikely to become truly transformative in political participation.

As we look into the future, Pakistan needs to implement a multilateral strategy to attain real gender equality in politics. It is important to enhance legal systems, implement a system of accountability and provide safer political systems. Political parties should go beyond being inclusive on paper and mentorship and financing of women candidates especially in winnable seats should occur. Increasing the acceptance of women in leadership positions requires grassroots education and advocacy as well to change the attitude in society. The accounts of such pioneers as Sherry Rehman and Shazia Marri emphasize the revolutionary power of women in the political arena, yet their achievements should not underestimate the necessity of institutional changes. Pakistan can start with cultural,

institutional, and security-related barriers to pave the way to a more inclusive democracy where the representation of women leads to its active participation and equal policymaking processes. The path to gender equality in politics is long and challenging, however, through persistence, it is without a doubt a reality.

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