



Historical Review of Women Participation in Pakistan's Parliament: A Case of Socio-Political Empowerment

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Abstract

This paper is developed to explore the historical trajectory of women political empowerment through their participation in Pakistan's parliament, focusing on the period from 2008 to 2018. Study explores socio-political empowerment of Pakistani women by focusing on evolving role and influence in legislation through participation in parliament. Research is based on mix method, consulting secondary data and collection of primary data from women parliamentarians (2008-2018). Role of women parliamentarian in legislation, barriers in legislation process and enforcement of laws, key challenges for women parliamentarian and enabling factors for women in discussed. Quality suggestions for effective and efficient implementation of women related laws are also presented. Issues faced by women parliamentarian at domestic, community and upper level are explored and suggestion for each law related to women are described in detail. In historical perspective of women participation in politics and their role for socio-political empowerment for Pakistani women is known through secondary data that reveals that women efforts and participation in politics remained less acknowledged and rewarded. 212 women parliamentarians from current and former governments from 2008 to 2018 from all political parties were interviewed through a semi-structured questionnaire. Findings revealed that women politician faced challenges at domestic and community level based on social values, culture and taboos. Party and country level challenges are considering women unable to perform well and take decision at a key place. Legislation made for women is not an easy task and implementation on these laws is a real challenge as there is need of integration among departments and organization and allocation of physical and human resources. There should be women participation in politics and their awareness on socio-political empowerment at grass root level, so genuine issues of women may be presented for legislation. Local government system may be one of the best ways to promote women socio-political empowerment in Pakistan. Ultimately, this research offers a valuable insight for policymakers, activists, and scholars seeking to advance gender equality and foster inclusive governance in Pakistan and beyond.

Keywords: Women empowerment, participation, challenges, opportunities, legislation, parliament etc.

Background

Since the Pakistan independence it was tried to grant women equal rights to participate in politics. Before 1973 an interim constitution was developed and in 1956 there was right to vote for all the citizens. But in Pakistan theory was not same to the practical, the right written and give provision in constitution was not exercised in actual. As a result, women voting turnover was not same men turn over. Female participation in political activities is restricted in certain areas of the country. In Pakistan there is difference of almost 6 to 7 million as statistic of women and registered women voters. As role of women in legislative bodies is concerned, we can see role of women members in legislative bodies the reserved seats provision matters a lot in constitution history of Pakistan from 1956 to 1973. In 1956 only 3% seats were reserved for women, it was increased to 5% in 1973 in National as well as Provincial assemblies. It was increased to 10% in 1984, but only for National Assembly as a result it provided a chance to 20 women to be elected indirectly. 22 women were members of National Assembly in 1985; from 1988 to 1990 4 women competed for general seats with 20 reserved seats. This was the era when first women Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto were elected. But unfortunately, in 1988, there were only 2 women in the national and 3 women in the provincial assemblies as reserved seats for women were lapsed and for minorities' one additional seat were reserved. 4 women were there in 1995 each in National and Provincial Assemblies (Rasul, 2014)

From 2008 to 2018, Pakistan's parliamentary landscape witnessed a significant influx of women, marking a pivotal era in the country's socio-political evolution. During this period, women parliamentarians seized unprecedented opportunities to participate actively in shaping legislative agendas and policies. However, their journey was fraught with multifaceted challenges and hindrances, reflecting the enduring struggle for gender equality in Pakistan's patriarchal society. Despite legislative measures promoting gender inclusion, women faced systemic barriers such as entrenched cultural norms, limited access to resources, and societal prejudices. Moreover, structural impediments within political parties, including tokenism and marginalization, undermined the full realization of women's potential as political leaders. Nonetheless, their resilience and determination paved the way for incremental advancements in women's socio-

political empowerment, inspiring future generations to continue the fight for equitable representation and participation in Pakistan's parliament.

In Pakistan women participation and representation in parliament can be seen in two eras. These two eras may be considered to identify and compare the changes in politics and laws. The first period was from independence of Pakistan to completion of the century (1947-2000). This period is also considered as ignorance of women participation in political activities and legislation. Laws were made based on discrimination, and women rights were not ensured as per international guidelines. The second era is considered from 2000 to date, in this timeline women participation in political activities and legislation was increased. As a result women vote turnover percentage, women participation in political activities and laws with opinion of women was increased. It also caused laws presentation for women protection and minimizing gender discrimination. More political forums were developed and political parties include women candidate, also quota was fixed for women. Law making process was more smooth as women participation contributed to identify and rectify real problems and give an honest opinion for law making. Seven acts for women protection from violence were passed by the parliament so it would become law. After such quality initiatives there is need to provide suitable legislative environment for gender mainstreaming in all the fields (Syed, 2013).

Research Objectives

This study is conducted to find out factors that affect women participation in politics and legislation. Another purpose is to find out effects of lack of participation of women in politics and legislation on their lives. This study also spots light on Government's efforts to promote women participation in legislation and which laws are there for women protection and empowerment. This study highlights women efforts in legislation from 2008 to 2020, how effectively they raise women genuine voice and how they defend it successfully. On the base of data reviewed and analysis of primary data, this study has finding about key role of women in Pakistan politics and their real challenges proved as barriers for their social and political growth and suggestion about measures to be taken for promotion of women social and political empowerment in Pakistan and their vital role in country's prosperity.

Literature review

While there is valuable data availability for literature review on women's empowerment, the literature on women's challenges in legislation and suggestions for improvement women socio-political empowerment is not available based on first hand analyzed data. This study demonstrates that institutional, cultural, religious, historical, and patriarchal challenges have directly or indirectly affected women participation in parliament and their socio-political empowerment.

The Parliament is an inclusive institution. It represents all segments of the society. It is a central place for law-making and policy formulation (Costa, 2012). It determines the direction of the state and society. An inclusive parliament makes better laws and policies. A society is democratic and balanced when men and women have the same opportunities for representation and progress. Free and Fair Election Network report suggests "The best form of democracy is when men and women have equal opportunities in life and gender equality acts as a litmus test to judge the level of inclusivity in a political system" (SHAH, 2018).

In Pakistan, 20% women are members of federal parliament with a 17% reserved quota (Free and Fair Election Network 2018). Women constitute almost half of Pakistan's population, but remain in the minority when it comes to political participation (Mahmood 2018). Pakistan ranked at 3rd position as far as representation of women in Parliament is concerned just behind Afghanistan and Bangladesh (Free and Fair Election Network 2018). While women in general seats faced serious challenges that hindered their access to General Election 2018, as a result, fewer women were elected from in Pakistan. Keeping the above discussion in view, this research addresses the challenges of women in General Election 2018 and its implication for their socio-political and political empowerment. Ashraf et al, 2021

Although there is an inordinate amount of literature on women's issues, challenges and political participation, but it chiefly does not cover the lacuna which is being addressed in this research. The extensive literature is dominated by many other factors of women issues such as the influence of female leadership in the political decision (Duflo C. a., 2004), the problem of

harassment of women both in society and at workplace and the challenges of women to guarantee inheritance rights. (Eatzaz Ahmad, 2012). The crime against women has properly been reported but our focus is only to review literature on the participation of women in politics mainly in local bodies. Therefore, in the next section we briefly review the available literature on the political participation of women in Pakistan.

There are relevant studies discussed in the proceeding paragraphs, the subject of these studies focuses mainly on women's political empowerment, political participation in parliament, women's efforts to guarantee their rights while in parliament, men's perception of women's political roles and women's obstacles in the way they perform their political functions. What is lacking in these studies are the political roles of women at the micro level: problems and challenges of women politicians in the elections of local bodies and their consequences.

A close watcher of women issues, Rubina Saigol investigates the political, economic and social empowerment of women. She argues that the Pakistani government has taken many initiatives to ensure the empowerment of women, but the process is slow and will take a long time to fully implement. Although she correctly emphasizes the issue of women's empowerment, she clearly does not identify the challenges women face, particularly during the elections and more specifically during the LBE 2015. (Saigol, 2011).

Another study by Ayesha Khan and Sana Naqvi provides an excellent description of the political struggle of women in Pakistan from the earliest times. Their inspection describes the political struggle through which women have secured their political rights (quotas/seats reserved in parliament) mainly during military regimes. They conclude that although women have less power than their male counterparts' women appear to be more active in the parliament mainly because women participate in the progressive development of laws to safeguard their rights. (Khan, 2018)

Another analysis in the context of South Asia, addresses violence against women in three countries of India, Pakistan and Nepal. It specifically discusses violence against women during the general elections. The investigation discovers that violence against women are presented in

all areas, including society, political parties and the government in all three countries. Although this study ignores a holistic image of women's challenges and problems during elections, but it suggests remedies to increase political empowerment of women in the respective countries (Ranjana Kumari, 2014).

The perception of men about women in the political process is such an important factor that has been analyzed in a previous investigation. In this search, the issue of women's participation in parliament is discussed with a central focus to examine men's perception of women's participation in the political process. This qualitative study finds that there are several factors such as religion, social and political that are impeding the political participation of women in general elections. Once again, the study has focused on the macro level, while ignoring the local politics that acts as the nursery of the national polity.

Saira Bano reviews the factors that have contributed to the growing number of women in the legislatures of different regions of the world but with a special reference to Pakistan. Bano concludes that women have consistently ensured greater representation based on their activism and government attention throughout the history of Pakistan (Bano, 2009). Yet again Bano's study stresses on women efforts than challenges faced by them.

Gallego using data from the European Social Survey focuses on the impact of age, gender, social class and education on the voting behavior of men and women. The study concludes that age, social class and education are more important factors to understand gender issues in politics (Gallego, 2017).

Sue Maguire, from the University of Bath, scrutinizes women's barriers both in parliament and locally in the United Kingdom. She believes that the participation of women both nationally and locally has increased considerably, but still women face many barriers. She recognizes social, institutional, cultural and even literacy barriers in the participation of women, and recommends ways and means to overcome them (Maguire, 2018). Maguire's report suggests that women face challenges in both the developing and developed world.

Ballington's study is very comprehensive, as it tries to cover many aspects of political participation of women. He contends that gender equality in parliament should not be an ideal but a real objective to be achieved. Women continue to face resistance mainly from men to participate in parliament. Political parties are dominated by men who work against women's equality. He further maintains that the participation of women in parliament is not about guaranteeing gender equality, but that it helps the priorities of political and development activities, not only for the good of national societies but for the world in general (Ballington, 2011). Ballington should be credited by conducting such a detailed study, but once again the gap that this research tries to fill is lost that there is a dearth of literature covering women's participation at local bodies level.

And finally, the issue of devolution of power and problems associated with it has also been addressed by Muhammad Ali. Ali notices that the Pakistani government has made efforts to delegate powers locally, but the process is painfully slow as the government has not transferred the powers to make decisions and utilization of resources locally (Ali, 2018).

The current patterns of women's representation in formal political forums and inclusion of their viewpoint in law-making are showing improvements. The global pattern of quota allocation for women in political forums, as advocated by liberal feminists, has emerged as a fast-track strategy to tackle this problem around the globe (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005). Now more and more women are entering political offices at various levels of state machinery from national parliaments to local councils. Bryjak and Soroka (1997: 229) claim that "[t]he presence of some specific number or proportion of women in federal, state and local governmental offices by itself does not guarantee that "the women's view" will automatically be considered and promoted. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the presence of female political officeholders makes no difference at all." Women should have right to participate in politics including (Sullivan, 2019)

Women empowerment is used in social sciences; it is a way to define the barriers and also challenging those barriers by giving solutions to overcome these barriers. This process will be ended up in strengthening women dignity, women equality and their status at household as well

as societal level. The change in norms, values is the first step towards policies and laws. (Dandona, 2015)

From the previous discussion we have discovered that the relevant literature on the current study is scarce. This is the point where the importance of this study fits in. The strength of this study originates from the fact that it examines the barriers and challenge of women in women parliamentarian of National Assembly (2008-2018). In addition, the impact of lack of political participation on common women has been missing in earlier studies. To conclude this section, this study aims to make following contributions.

Significance of the Study

The historical review of women's participation in Pakistan's parliament from 2008 to 2018 holds profound significance in understanding the dynamics of socio-political empowerment for parliamentarians. By examining the opportunities, challenges, and hindrance barriers faced by women in this period, the study sheds light on the complexities of gender inclusion in a patriarchal society. It provides valuable insights into the institutional and societal factors shaping women's political engagement, offering a nuanced understanding of the progress made and the obstacles encountered. Moreover, the study serves as a critical resource for policymakers, activists, and scholars alike, informing strategies for advancing gender equality and amplifying the voices of women in Pakistan's democratic processes. Ultimately, by unraveling the intricacies of women's parliamentary participation, this study contributes to broader discourses on inclusive governance and socio-political empowerment, both within Pakistan and beyond.

Methodology

Secondary data was collected from published material including books, articles in journals, conference proceedings, newspapers, reports, project periodic reports, constitution of Pakistan, debated of parliament sessions etc. as well as from videos, documentaries and data from internet.

To collect first hand data, a semi-structured questionnaire was developed. Open ended questions were designed for individual interviews. The same tool was developed on Google based software for convenience of respondents.

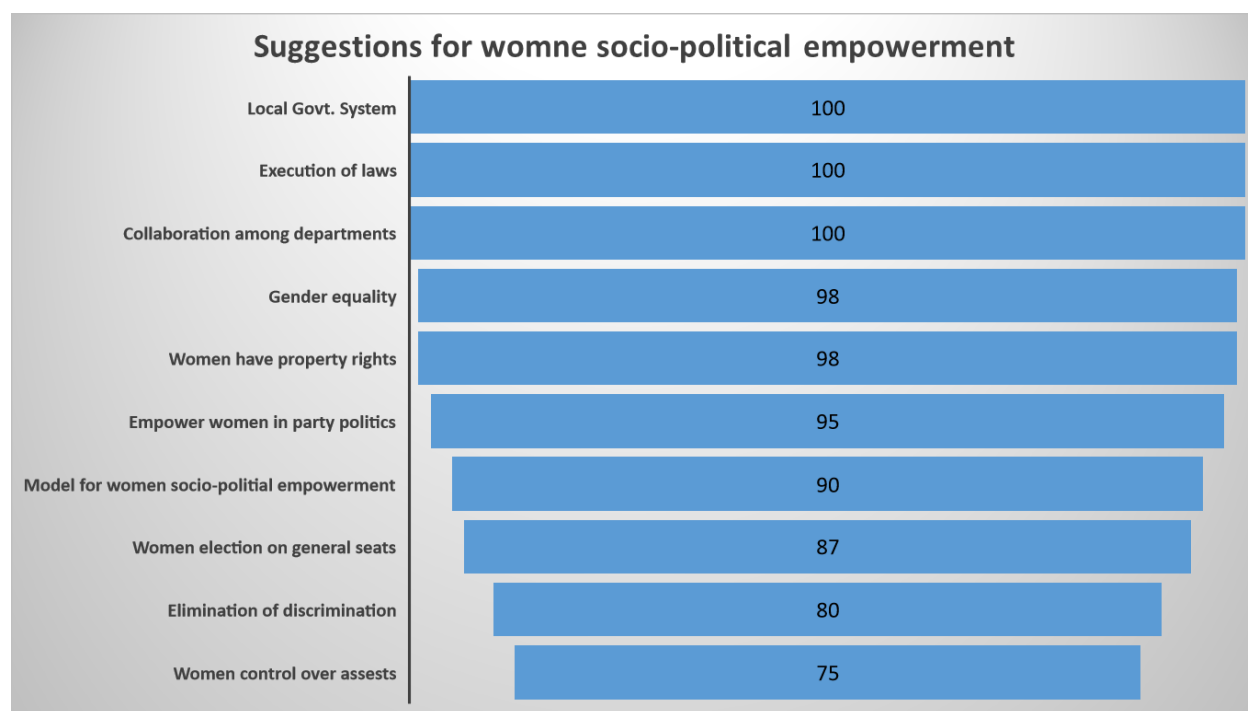
Data was collected from 39 out of 212 women parliamentarians from current and former governments from 2008 to 2018 from all political parties and all provinces of Pakistan.

Findings:

Based on research analysis it was found out that women participation in parliament is increasing gradually as only concepts of gender equality. There is women presence in parliament on quota basis that does not ensure their empowerment in decision-making. During 2008 – 2013 women participation in parliament was increased and for legislation too which left impact on women empowerment. Women presence in parliament through quota does not guarantee their empowerment in decision-making. Although women issues are addressed but there is still needed to solve many issues. There is no standard perimeter and permanent model for women socio-political development or women empowerment. Women are left behind as they are not given enough exposure, chances and trust to lead and take decisions. Women wings in political parties are mostly symbolic. Constitutions of Pakistan includes provisions aimed to support and empower women.

Study findings suggest that state ensure women participation in leading roles and decision-making in parliament. During parliament session at least one hour should be spare for women related matters legislation. Women must be encouraged by political parties and have opportunities to participate equally at party level. Women parliamentarian should have training and development opportunities and exposure to learn more about political system and leadership. Women participation in parliament may be more effective through women participation in grass root level politics. On the other hand awareness of general public and relevant departments on women socio-political empowerment is very important. State should allocate resources for women inclusion in socio-political activities.

There is need to rremove institutional barriers and enhance their performance. Women liberty to take decisions and equal access to quality services such as study, profession etc. are essential for their empowerment. There is need of behavior change and breaking of gender stereo type from the society. Women empowerment may be ensured by taking decisions at domestic level. There is need of positive contribution of media on women rights. Law enforcement agencies, social safety nets and judiciary may facilitate by collective efforts and allocation of resources.



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