



Factors Affecting the Political Empowerment of Women: A Case Study of Pakistan

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Abstract

The research paper examines factors affecting women's political empowerment in Pakistan. Globally, the importance of women's political empowerment; their representation in legislative assemblies, and their role in the democratic system are much realized. Almost half of the population of the country is consist of female, but still not empowered to play role in the development of the country. Women in Pakistan have less access to education, finance, and politics. This research paper will focus on impediments



affecting women's role in political affairs in Pakistan. The paper will highlight literacy challenges, social and cultural barriers, economic obstacles, and patriarchy as a system affecting overall gender equality and women empowerment in Pakistani society. Smooth running and positive outcomes of any form of a democratic system are not possible without the representation of women. In Pakistan, the general perception is that political affairs are dominated by males and politics is something unfamiliar to women. Women need to argue for their political rights to contribute to the decision-making process. The constitution of Pakistan guarantees women's political rights. But the social, patriarchal, cultural, and structural barriers are obstacles in their way to political empowerment, and their role in political affairs, at the local, provincial, and national level remains limited. The study aims to explore barriers hindering the growth of political empowerment of women in Pakistan.

Key Words: Politics, Empowerment, Mobilization, Education, Customs, Social Laws, Socio-economic indicators.

Introduction

Women across the world are facing numerous socio-economic and political issues. According to United Nation "women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women" (UN, 2011). The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees the fundamental rights of women. The empowerment of women was also part of Muhammad Ali Jinnah's vision. In 1944, he once said: "No nation can rise to the height of glory unless your women are side by side with you, we are victims of evil customs. It is a crime against humanity that our women are shut up within the four walls of the houses as prisoners. There is no sanction anywhere for the deplorable condition in which our



women have to live. You should take your women along with you as comrades in every sphere of life.” (Past in Perspective, 2016) Unfortunately, women in Pakistan are still not empowered despite their fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution of Pakistan.

In Pakistan, even though women’s representation in legislative assemblies increased during the last two decades, gender equality and women’s empowerment remain an issue. Women are still facing many socio-economic issues which are also impacting their role in political affairs. Socio-economic factors are considered as obstacles to women’s advancement in the domain of politics. “It is generally said that mobilization of women depends on their identification of interests which may vary due to class structures of the society, but on the other hand autonomous state apparatus had provided a space for the mobility to both privileged and under-privileged to get their targets”. (Ali & Akhtar, 2012, pp. 221-228)

Pakistan has failed to ensure gender equality and women’s empowerment. At the global level, Pakistan is among the countries where women are less empowered especially in the domain of politics. In 2018, Pakistan was placed as the second-worst country in the world in terms of gender equality and women’s empowerment. Pakistan was ranked 148th out of 149 countries in the “global gender gap” (Global Gender Gap, 2018). In 2020, Pakistan has ranked 151 out of 153 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index Report. Pakistan could only manage to surpass Iran and Yemen. The list places Pakistan at 150th position in terms of economic participation and opportunity, 143 in education, 149 in health and survival, and 93 in Political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2020).

The representation of women in legislative bodies is not an indicator of empowerment only, but it also needs positive impacts and efficiency. During the last two decades, Pakistan took serious steps to ensure gender equality in women’s empowerment in the political sphere. In the general election of 2002, the number of women’s reserved seats was increased which gave them more representation in the parliament of Pakistan. Women’s reserved seats were increased from 2% to 20% in Assemblies. (Election Commission Report, 2002). Moreover, in the same



year, the Government of Pakistan formulated the National Policy of “Development and Empowerment”, to ensure women’s empowerment in the social, economic, and political domain. These initiatives have proven effective and resulted in the rise of numbers of women’s seats in National and Provincial assemblies and the Senate of Pakistan. However, despite these initiatives, women in Pakistan are still not authorized even to decide their fate (Latif, et al., 2020). The Study aims at exploring the factors affecting women’s political empowerment in Pakistan. The paper aims to examine the present situation of women’s political empowerment in Pakistan.

Research Methodology

This Research paper aims to explore blocking factors in a way to women’s political empowerment in Pakistan. The study is designed based on a systematic approach that aims to attain quality. The qualitative analysis method is adopted which uses secondary sourced data. For this research paper, data has been collected through secondary sources of data collection. The researcher found adequate data through secondary sources relating to women’s political empowerment, economic empowerment, social issues, challenges to education, and covering many other aspects. Hence, the researcher did not adopt primary methods of data collection. The secondary sources used for conducting this study range from scholarly books, research journals, magazines, newspapers, online reports, official reports published by international and national organizations such as the world economic forum, Gender Gap Index, and UN Women.

Theoretical Perspective of Women Political Empowerment

Women empowerment refers to improve the social, economic, and political strength of women in society to ensure gender equality and justice. Empowerment is defined as a “social action process that promotes participation of people, organizations, and communities in gaining control over their lives in their community and larger societies. With this perspective, empowerment is not characterized as an achieving power to dominate others, but rather the power to act



with others to affect change”. (Stein, 1997, p. 7) Women's empowerment is central to the overall development of society.

Political empowerment of women ensures their role in political affairs and promotes gender equality and fundamental rights. “In the Non-Western society political and non-political spheres are diffused and people’s mobilization is happened along with the primordial factors rather than the instrumental ones and all political behavior is strong color by the considerations of communal identification”. (Pye, 1958, p. 471) In the case of Pakistan, gender equality and the political empowerment of women still do not exist in most parts of the country. Globally, Pakistan is one of the countries with the worse situation of the gender gap. Women-particularly in rural areas lacks access to education, health care facilities, finance, and employment. Social taboos and conservative mindsets are still prevalent in many areas of Pakistani society, affecting women’s empowerment.

Literacy Challenges

Nelson Mandela has rightly said that “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” So it is pretty much apparent that the power of education helps humans walk in the right direction and make the right decision. Education plays a pivotal role in the development of a society. It empowers humans to struggles for their rights in society. Education promotes awareness among society. It is fundamental for individuals for acquiring their rights with proper justification using legal and moral means. In Pakistan, the literacy rate is 58% with a constant increase in female literacy from 2008 to 2012 reported 6.5% which shows that people of the country are now realizing the significance of female education (Halepoto, 2020).

Many families in Pakistan give no importance to female education. They are still not ready to realize the importance of female education in a society or believe a girl should receive education till a certain age. Perceptions regarding female education across different communities particularly in rural areas remain unfavorable towards female education. In some areas, families going against cultural norms in regards



to female education can face pressure and hostility-particularly when it comes to higher education. In such a situation, the girls themselves may be face hurtful consequences. Many families prohibit girls from school due to the fear of sexual harassment at school and on the way back home.

Across the country, there are large numbers of out-of-school children and major gender inequalities in schooling, but some regions are much worse than others. In the period 2014-2015, around 81% of women in Baluchistan, the province with poor statistics on education, had not completed primary level of education, as compared to 52% of males. Almost 57% of women, compared to 40% of males, had never attended school. Based on these statistics, the province Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) had higher education rates than other provinces of the country, but the gender inequality remains equally worsen. Sindh and Punjab provinces reported with higher literacy rate, but the gender gap remained at 14 to 21% (World Economic Forum, 2018).

In Pakistan, girl's lack of access to education reflects a larger picture of gender inequality. The country has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in Asia. Rape, so-called honor killings and abuse, acid attacks, domestic violence, forced marriage, and child marriage are all major issues, and government solutions are woefully insufficient. According to Pakistani advocates, over 1,000 honor killings occur each year. Twenty-one percent of females marry while still at an early age. Despite constituting half of the population of the country, female education in Pakistan is still below the literacy line. In Baluchistan, the situation is even worse. The gender gap prevalent in the province is even worse than in other provinces of the country. The female literacy rate stands at 33.5% (Baloch, 2020, January 2), the low female literacy rate is considered one of the hurdles in the way to their political empowerment. Education is considered a weapon of social change. It is the most powerful weapon which can promote social justice, gender equality and reduce poverty.

Socio-Economic Challenges



Women's empowerment of democratic and legislative representation can be linked to economic factors. Empowerment is the capacity to make strategic decisions and explain the current void due to a lack of activism. Empowerment assessment and quantification methodologies are combined in all forms of resource management, including individual, content, and social marketing.

According to United Nations, political participation is consists of a wide range of responsibilities. “ The freedom to speak out, assemble and associate; the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs; and the opportunity to register as a candidate, to the campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all levels of government” (United Nations Women, 2011a)

In Pakistan, the status of women in urban areas of the country has less distinction despite urban women has more opportunities to play their role in different spheres of life. As IPU also briefed on this serious problem in October 2016 based on survey findings, sexual violence in gender non-segregated societies is a major challenge to women's political participation. There are still no frameworks for women's security within political parties due to the patriarchal structure not just in Pakistan but globally.(IPU, 2016). In the course of national growth and advancement, women pay a higher price for their participation in politics.

Economic empowerment is vital for political empowerment. In Pakistan, the majority of the female population is dependent on the male in terms of finance. Independent economic status plays a significant role in enhancing political empowerment and representation in legislative bodies (Kassa, 2015). Women in Pakistan are facing challenges many issues which affect their role in politics. Lack of economic empowerment of women remains a factor affecting their role in politics. Lack of economic empowerment can limit women’s political participation the costs associated with elections. Independent finance could enable overcoming impediments to electoral engagements.

Women in Pakistan have considerable contributions to economic activities. Despite women play a major role, the economic value of their contribution in the



reproductive field and unpaid work as a family laborer in terms of productivity has not been recognized as productive and is not accounted for. Financial issues remain hurdles in women's role in politics because they enjoy no authority in the economic sphere. Since a major portion of the female population is financially dependent on their male counterparts, they cannot participate in politics without their consent. Women should be empowered and provided financial support by family i.e. father, husband, or brothers to contest elections. Women can play an effective role in politics but obstacles in their way make their role limited and ineffective. If women are economically empowered, it will also make them politically empowered.

Socio-Cultural Challenges

According to George (2019) “women’s ability to engage politically both within and beyond the voting booth—particularly as community organizers and elected officials—is often shaped by norms that drive wider social structures. Fundamental to the constraints that women face is an entrenched patriarchal system in which family control and decision-making powers are in the hands of males”. Traditional notions and cultural norms about women’s role in society still play dominating role in shaping the role and responsibilities of women, particularly in rural areas. Social norms make it more difficult for women to get rid of their traditionally domestic rules and serve in the field of politics and another sphere of life (Kangas et al., 2015).

In Pakistani society, women’s gender identity is still perceived as being domestic. The socio-cultural norms are unfavorable for women and make their role limited to household activities, particularly in rural areas. The socio-cultural norms in our society favor men’s role in every sphere of life. The socio-cultural norms create hurdles for women to play role in politics. The changing trends in Pakistani society have changed the situation to some extent, but socio-cultural norms still affect the lives of women in rural areas. A majority of Pakistan’s population live in rural areas, women face more difficulties to play role in politics. The cultural rules for women make its movements weak and prevent them from contributing to politics.



Moreover, the culture around women's political empowerment is unfavorable and unacceptable. The cultural hurdles are resulting in gender inequality which damages the country's image in the international community. Pakistan is already ranked one of the worst countries in terms of the gender gap. The cultural factors are potential obstructions to women's political empowerment, which not only make their role restricted but also contribute to the submissive and discriminated status of women (Rafay, et al. 2016). These barriers have made the status of women feeble. It eventually leads to societal discrimination against women, affecting their role in every sphere of life. The strict and illogical social and rational rules make women more vulnerable to domestic violence (Baehr, 2020).

The social and cultural rules have divided society into two separate worlds of men and women. These traditions do not call for gender equality and women's empowerment. Home is perceived as a legitimate and ideological place for women, while men are encouraged to dominate society. The false-perceived ideological line between public and private, inside and outside worlds is based on the cultural and social notion of honor and institution of *pardah* in Pakistan. Since the perception of male honor is linked with women's sexual behavior, their sexuality is deemed a potential threat to the honor of the family. Hence, women's mobility is strictly limited and dominated through the notion of *pardah*, sex segregation, and violence against them.

In rural areas of the country, women are facing even more socio-cultural hurdles. Women living in rural areas living under the extreme dominance of men. Women work in fields along with men and do involve in all household activities. But despite all their sacrifices and handworks, she is given no right and enjoys no share in anything and her life remains the property of men who enjoy a dominant role in society. In Pakistan, in rural areas, women are living in the worst state, a major portion of the female population enjoy no rights and their rights are suppressed in the name of prestige and their lives are sacrificed in the name of honor killing and other illegal customs, which has no place in Islam and are man-made rules. These women have no access to education, so they remain entirely dependent on men and this is one of the blocking factors in their representation in politics. Their role



remains restricted in such a society. Women living in rural areas of the country lag in all aspects of their lives as compared to their male counterparts. Their role in the political affairs of the country is extremely low (Sheikh, 2005). Socio-cultural obstacles are factors in gender inequality against women in politics.

Patriarchy and Women's Political Empowerment

The patriarchal system is a factor that has significantly contributed to the disregarding of women in the arena of politics. In societies where stronger patriarchal and traditional values exist, "women are not only limited by society in terms of the opportunities they seek but also choose to limit themselves" (Inglehart & Norris, 2003 p. 9). "This process of self-limiting and internalization of patriarchy has gone as far as many women viewing political activities as not included in their image of what a woman should do or is even capable of doing well in public" (Gouws & Coetzee, 2019). The prevalence of such an image has compelled many women in a defensive position about their role as a woman in a highly patriarchal realm of politics.

Gender inequality is prevalent in all its forms in Pakistan, but a fundamental one — and one which if eradicated would help address all other forms as well — as political inequality. The gender-based impediments in politics include obstacles to voting, barriers to elected office, challenges within political parties, and barriers to representation in decision-making and governance. Women in urban areas have more opportunities to exercise autonomy over different aspects of their lives including political empowerment. Yet this has not translated into better outcomes when it comes to political empowerment. (Javed, 2021, March 8).

Patriarchy is a social system based on the domination of menfolk in society. "It transforms male and female into man and women and constructs the hierarchy of gender relation where man is privileged" (Eisenstein, 1979). Adrinne rich defines patriarch - "a familial, social, ideological, the political system in which man by force, direct pressure or through rituals, tradition, law, language, custom etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not



play in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male” (Rosenberg, 1990). The system of patriarchy has dominated Pakistani society, particularly in rural areas it influences all aspects of social life. This social system is one of the obstacles in ensuring gender equality and women’s political empowerment in Pakistan.

Owing to a male-dominated society, women are deprived to play their role in the political system of the country. Patriarchal structure influences political culture which as a result discourages women’s political participation. Women enjoy no such power to take the initiative of political activities because politics is dominated by men in Pakistan. The patriarchal structure is favorable for men, it makes men more superior to women in every sphere of life especially in Politics. Women under this system are mostly deprived to decide their future, select life partners, right to vote, political affiliation, and contest election. Women are given the status of second-class citizens as compared to their male counterparts. This social and traditional system has been one of the blocking factors affecting women’s political participation. It dominates political culture where women find no place. Thus, the male-dominated nature of Pakistani society influences women’s political empowerment in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The study explored the factors which affect women’s political empowerment in Pakistan. It is obvious from the examined factors that the role of women in the political arena is still not encouraging. Even in the twenty-first century, women’s role in political affairs in Pakistan remains limited. They face many social, cultural, economic, and educational issues which restrict their role in the domain of politics. Though significant steps have been taken to empower women in Pakistan, the statistics on women’s literacy rate and numbers of their representation in politics reveal that there are still gaps to be filled. It is evident from the discussion, that women have no political empowerment due to socio-cultural, financial, and educational obstacles. Though half of the population of the country comprise of women, their political empowerment is still not promising. A strong democratic



system and developed society are impossible without the full representation of women.

They examined data that reveals that political empowerment in its true sense is still not observed in Pakistani society. Women in Pakistan still lack a full say in political affairs. Mainly in rural areas, they even have no right to cast vote as per their choice. Most of the time even don't know about the candidates and parties. Education is fundamental to empowerment. Without education, empowerment remains futile. In Pakistan, the statistics on female education-particularly in rural areas reflect the poor image of our society in terms of education. Education is deemed a foundation stone for women's empowerment in any society. It enables them to struggle for their fundamental rights and change their lives. Women in Pakistan are almost half of the total population of the country but still live in worse situations particularly in rural areas. They need to be empowered in a way that they contribute to the development of the country.

Political empowerment is necessary for the overall development. The political empowerment of women helps in economic development. As women constitute half of the country's population, it is important that are politically empowered. During the last two decades, Pakistan has been significant progress in empowering women politically. Despite taking steps, the international reports on Gender Gap in 2018 and 2020 show that Pakistan needs concert measures to ensure gender equality and political empowerment of women. Pakistan needs more female representation in its political system that is economically empowered and politically active.

Recommendations

- To address the negative notions, reforms should be started at the family and social level.
- Education plays a pivotal role in eliminating gender discrimination against women and women's political empowerment. Serious steps should be taken to ensure access of females to education. The enhanced literacy rate of females would play a crucial role in women's political empowerment.



- Economic empowerment is fundamental for political empowerment. Women should be economically empowered and independent which will help in their political empowerment.
- Women's representation in political parties is still not very specified. They enjoy no right in the decision-making process. Political parties should play a role to enhance women's political empowerment.
- The Election Act 2017 is a significant step to enhance women's representation in politics. The government should take steps to fill the gap in its implementation.
- Government and all stakeholders should devise and implement a gender action plan to eliminate political inequality and ensure the political empowerment of women.



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