



EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE GOVERNANCE SYSTEM OF PAKISTAN

*Asif Iqbal Laghari¹, Dr. Muhammad Mudasir Nawaz Mughal²,
Najma Malookani³*

^{1,2,3} Department of Muslim History, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan

Abstract

This study explores the status, challenges, and progress of women's participation in the governance system of Pakistan. Despite making up nearly 49% of the population, women remain significantly underrepresented in political and decision-making roles. While constitutional provisions have reserved 60 seats for women in the 342-member National Assembly since 2002, actual influence in governance remains limited. Most women enter politics through party-nominated reserved seats, with fewer than 20 women elected on general seats in the 2018 elections. Using a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach, this research includes analysis of Election Commission data and 20 in-depth interviews with women legislators, party workers, civil society leaders, and policy analysts. The findings reveal that systemic barriers such as patriarchal norms, party control, lack of political training, and limited financial resources continue to restrict women's full participation. Around 85% of interviewed women highlighted party control as a major barrier, while 90% cited social attitudes as a key obstacle. Regional disparities were also evident, with women from Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa facing more pronounced exclusion compared to those from Punjab and Sindh. Despite these challenges, the study identifies growing awareness, media engagement, and civil society support as emerging enablers. The research concludes that reforms such as direct elections for reserved seats, party-level inclusiveness, leadership training, and legal protection are essential to move from symbolic to substantive representation. Strengthening local governance roles and institutional mechanisms like the Women's Parliamentary Caucus is also critical. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender equity in Pakistan by providing policy-relevant insights supported by empirical evidence. It emphasizes that without meaningful inclusion of women, Pakistan's democratic and developmental goals will remain incomplete.

Keywords: Governance, Women's participation, Politics, Pakistan government, leadership

Introduction

Governance is used to refer to the processes through which authority is exercised, decisions are made and how to manage public resources. In democratic States, the process of governance should be participatory and inclusive in representation of the diversity that exists in the population. The involvement of women in political and decision-making processes on equal basis is one of the most basic aspects of inclusive governance (Haque, 2003). The entry of women into the governance of various countries has been linked with a more responsive policymaking, greater consideration of the issues of social development, and a wider adherence to the democratic processes. In most of the countries especially in the Global South, women are still underrepresented and most of the time sidelined in a political machinery that is predominantly patronized by the patriarchal codes and cultures (Wuya, 2021a). There is no exception in Pakistan. Being a nation with very deep-rooted traditional gender roles and a history of strong male political leadership, women are not placed in considerably large positions regarding governance systems in the country and this position is inconsistent, uneven and mostly bureaucratic in nature as opposed to being realistic (N. Jabeen & Mubasher, 2017). Even though women comprise almost 49 percent



of the total population in Pakistan, women are at a severely disadvantaged position when they are concerned about political processes, legislative actions, and executive decision making. Though Pakistan has made significant gains vetting on the gender inclusiveness angle like articles on the constitution with reserved seats on the National, and Provincial Assemblies especially for women, the election of the first female Prime Minister in the Muslim world, the overall arrangement of governance is still structurally unfavorable to women (Syed & Tabassum, 2014). This contradiction is the indicator of the wider socio-political tensions in the development of the democratic process in Pakistan. On the one hand, the legislative system and international responsibilities undertake to create gender equality. In contrast, the practices are influenced by social conservatism, elite power structure and change resistance (Bano, 2009). Women in the process of being in the governmental system either by way of elections or direct appointments find themselves in such a situation of demonstrating their right to be there and to do so makes it a challenge to become effective. Their numbers in government are often simply explained as a show of tokenism and their capacity to make independent progress is hampered by cultural norms and traditions, the biasness of the institutions, and absence of supporting systems.

Over the past few decades, it has been undertaking diverse international frameworks that link to gender equality in Pakistan convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Beijing Platform for Action, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Rose Taylor, 2020). It states that SDG 5 explicitly demands gender equality and respect, empowerment of women and girls, SDG 16 focuses on inclusive and responsive institutions. Though such commitments are very much present, this space between policy and practice is still wide. UNDP, World Economic Forum and homegrown groups like Aurat Foundation all report that Pakistan constantly lags in political gender parity across the countries. The situation in Pakistan is represented in 2023 by the fact that the Global Gender Gap Index declared Pakistan the 142nd country among 146 countries with the political empowerment within Pakistan demonstrating a slight improvement (Women, 2021). These figures are indicators of a larger truth: as much as the space of women in governance is written in law, it is weak and inaccessible very often. The political obstacles to women in governance in Pakistan are multi-chromatic. The social norms still enforce the attributes of the female place as it is mainly in the sphere of privacy and the female ascending into the public role is subject to criticism, non-adaptation, and even hostility. This is especially correct in the conservative rural areas where political participation of women is still suspect or unacceptable in the culture (Ghafoor & Haider, 2018). The aim of the study is to establish the level of women inclusion in the governance in Pakistan today, the major challenges, and key facilitating issues and further recommend policies to enhance quality and effectiveness of this level of participation. The research targets both the elected and the appointed roles in the national, provincial, and local systems of government. It also takes into consideration the functional role of political parties, legal guidelines, social attitudes and through various institutional support systems to influence the experiences of the woman in governance. The research attempts to give a wrap-up view of the problem and the structural and human understanding using both qualitative and statistical information about not only the interviewees but also the policy analysis. The research is important as it adds to the existing body of the research on gender and governance in the South Asian context, specifically in Pakistan that has a unique political and cultural experience. It shows the discrepancy between the constitutional promises and



real-life experiences, and pinpoints out the sphere, the change of which is the most necessary. This study resolves to concentrate on the quality of the role played by women in governance and not the quantity of female representation in it as most studies have done before. It will facilitate the move to change the discourse on representation to substantive inclusion.

Research Questions

This research is guided by the following questions.

To what extent are women currently involved in governance in Pakistan?

What are the major challenges and enablers of women's participation in governance?

How can institutional frameworks and policy reforms promote greater inclusion?

Materials and Methods

Qualitative mixed method is adapted in this study to shed light on how women participate in the system of Pakistan governance. The primary aim of this strategy is to know not only the numerical patterns but also the individual experience of the women engaged in the sphere of politics and governance. Existing data and first-hand data were utilized simultaneously to make the study represent both empirical statistics and actual experiences of people. The secondary sources were official reports of the Election Commission of Pakistan, ministry reports of the Women Development Ministry, national gender policies, and publications of international women organizations like UNDP, UN women and Aurat Foundation. Further, the literature on women political representation was studied by examining academic journals, newspaper archives, and civil societal reports to have an idea of the historical and legalization background of women representation in politics. The semi-structured interviews were used in the collection of the primary data. These interviews enabled the participants to say whatever they wanted and maintaining the discussions on the major interest of this topic which is the roles of women in governance. 20 interviews were carried out. The respondents consisted of female opposition on the National and Provincial Assemblies, political party activists, civil societies activists, government executives, and academic researcher who have addressed the issue of gender and governance. The interviews were carried out in either Urdu or English, whichever was the taste of an interviewee and were recorded only after their consent. Transcriptions of all interviews were later done and analyzed. The selected participants were done using purposive sampling techniques whereby the only people to be involved were the individuals who directly experienced or had a say in the field of governance. There was a particular focus to incorporate the voices of various territories of the country including Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. The women in different political parties also took part in being interviewed to figure out how different political ideologies and ways of organizing the parties contributes to the political passage of the women. The sampling also maintained diversity in terms of level of education, region and stability of political participation.

To interpret the qualitative data, thematic analysis approaches have been employed. To begin with, responses were read, and vital points were noted. Then similar ideas were bundled into themes. As an illustration, party discrimination, lack of resources or being harassed in public was seen in many women. These were categorized into bigger categories like institutional barriers and social challenges. NVivo package was applied to help streamline and facilitate the coding process. Together with the interviews, the female voter turnout trends, seats distribution, and candidates competing in elections during the period between 2002 and 2023 were also analyzed based on the



reports obtained by the Election Commission and UNDP. The ethical criteria were adhered to. All the participants consented to it and their names remained anonymous. They were further advised that they would just halt the interview when they felt uneasy. Probably as rich and meaningful as the findings are, the study has certain limitations. The sample interviews were phenomenally small, and certain grounds could not be accessed because of time and accessibility constraints. Regardless of these pitfalls the informed combination of document analysis and personal interviews can create a profound insight of the women inclusion and obstruction variables in the participation of governance in Pakistan.

Results and Discussion

The paper has found that though there are improved cases of women in governance structures in the past few years, there is limited involvement of women in most dimensions, including in the decision-making sectors. Analysis of secondary data and interviews indicates that even though the usage of reserved seats has given women a low-platform entry into politics, majority of these seats fail to be transferred into real influence or policy making (Ghafoor & Haider, 2018; Syed & Tabassum, 2014). The reason given by so many interviewees as to why their job is only part of the decor or is symbolic was the fact that possessing a seat in Parliament or Local Body does not necessarily mean that a voice is heard in an important implementation process. This was noticed in every province but those who participated in Punjab and Sindh region had slightly superior experiences than Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Statistics in the Election Commission indicate that women on the general seats are lowly represented during elections (N. Jabeen & Iqbal, 2020; N. Jabeen & Mubasher, 2017). Most women become politicians by virtue of reserved positions and even fewer of them can seek political positions using their wealth and family acquaintances along with the people in the party concerned. Between 2002 and 2023 the percentage of elected women on general seats is less than 5 per cent of the total elected members. These women candidates who contest general seats many are of political background or are very well off themselves or are very well connected. This indicates that structural constraint is high, and it is not encouraging common women to join the political arena. Some of the women were not happy with how political parties handle reserved seats in the interviews (Shafiq et al., 2024). Most parties choose followers or nepotism of male politicians instead of using merit or grassroots work. This nature downgrades the integrity of women representatives and in most cases renders them isolated by their electorates. According to one participant, she did not have an opportunity to meet or interact with this community where she was elected on a party list as she was supposed to represent. This trend classifies women on the reserved seats as being politically empowered and not giving the same responsibilities as the general seats' winners. Party manipulation of female politicians was also a question most of the respondent brought up (Rahim, 2024). Some of the females told the gathering that they were unable to speak their minds in gatherings and on media without the permission of the party. Party leadership in most cases developed and vetted their speeches and statements, allowing them minimal opportunity to think on their own and formulate independent views. This top-down domination does not allow women to become strong leaders and limits them to only the sides which are outlined by the male dominated party frameworks. The table 1 below indicates the number of women who make up national and provincial assemblies between 2002 and 2023. The numbers clearly show that most female members are seated via reserved seats, and they were not elected by the general elections.

**Table 1: Women's Representation in National and Provincial Assemblies (2002–2023)**

Year	Women Ratio in Governance system					
	National Assembly (NA)			Provincial Assemblies (PA)		
	NA seats out of 342	Reserved	General	Combined	Reserved	General
2002	73	60	13	128	111	17
2008	76	60	16	130	112	18
2013	74	60	14	135	113	22
2018	78	60	18	138	112	26
2023	81	60	21	141	111	30

The lack of gender representation on general seats illustrated by the table 1 shows that the figure of women on general seats has gradually raised slowly over time though the figure is still very low. The contributions of women in the political arena remains minimal and most of the increase in figures has been because of reserved quotas (Saiyid, 2001; Syed et al., 2013). Financial benefits, insufficient political contacts, and few exposure opportunities in the general society are some of the factors that make it difficult to the women to compete freely in the general seats. Inequality between women in political participation is also imminent regionally. Punjabi and Sindhi women are more likely to have access to political platforms and more chances to be involved in the process of the government (M. Jabeen, 2019). On the contrary, women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan have a few more issues to deal with including tribal practices, socially rigid attitude, and security issues. On interviews, women of these areas told their own stories when they simply got threatened, harassed, or isolated because they just took part in a political campaign. Another important theme was the problem of public image. Many women politicians believe that they are criticized a lot more than the male politicians (M. Jabeen, 2019). Variables such as their personal lives, dress, appearance, and the way they speak constantly come under fire and mostly in the social media. This puts more pressure, and, in most cases, the young women are put off politics. Some respondents observed that even during the meeting, there is more interruption in the assembly, women are never believed, and they are not involved in serious works of the committee. The other major study observation is that women did not enjoy training and capacity-building opportunities to govern. Most political parties fail to provide systematic mentorship and leadership schemes towards women (Hicks, 2011; Syed et al., 2013). Consequently, several new women legislators are finding it hard to learn about the legislative processes, policy-formulation or budget interpretation especially when they are elected on special seats. Other women gave reports that they could learn everything through trial and error or sit down and watch others during the meetings. This unprepared mess competes with their effectiveness and encourages the stereotype of women not being fit to be a political figure. The presence of civil society and non-government organizations came out as a good role in most of the interviews. Institutions such as Aurat Foundation, Shirkat Gah, and Women parliamentary caucus were valued in providing training, enlightenment, and assistance to women in politics (Ghafoor & Haider, 2018). Nevertheless, the programs are mainly urban based and have not drawn into the remote and rural areas i.e. women have yet to be reached. There was a widespread indicator that training of women in Governance at the national level needs to be instituted that should include women on aspects of public speaking, legislation, budgeting and constituency mobilization. The key issues as reported by the answers



obtained in interviews of women on governance are indicated in Table 2. The respondents were required to rate the barriers they either faced or witnessed, and the table indicates the percentage of participants who indicated each barrier to be significant.

Table 2: Challenges Faced by Women in Governance (Based on Interview Responses)

S.No.	Key Challenge	Participants
1	Party control and lack of autonomy	85%
2	Lack of financial resources for campaigning	75%
3	Patriarchal attitudes and social pressure	90%
4	Media criticism and personal attacks	65%
5	Lack of political training and mentorship	80%
6	Limited access to constituency or local area	70%
7	Threats, harassment, and violence	60%

Patriarchal attitudes are revealed as the greatest problem in this table and this problem touches virtually all the areas of the political life of a woman. The second prevalent cause is the fact that political parties lack independence and therefore the women have fewer chances of becoming party leaders or speaking out. Many women especially those who desired to contest general elections but could not afford the high campaign cost also erected financial barriers. Such expenses relate to transportation, publicity, campaign literature and labour charges (N. Jabeen & Iqbal, 2020). Many women lack places and jobs where they can earn their money, and, they have no support of the party, and that is why they cannot participate in elections by themselves. Another gap is the absence of the sources of political mentation. Several respondents indicated that when joining politics, they never expected anything of what they were supposed to do and there were no senior women leaders to guide them. This segregation does not allow the women to mature or gain power with time. The respondents advised that the parties and government institutions should invest in long term leadership programs that target women alone. None of these has prevented the study to also show that many of the women are well motivated and devoted to public service. The successful ones who have managed to forge a political career talked of the need to be resilient, have a supportive community and good networks of women in their lives(Shah et al., 2025). Others even said that their fellow male members now respect their work particularly when they are being vocal in matters relating to education, health or the rights of women, in the assembly. The important analysis indicates that the number of women in governance needs to be increased which is not sufficient. Real inclusion entails giving them the same powers, training, and chances to give leadership(Fayyaz et al., 2014; Iskindirova et al., 2024). Even though there has been an improvement in Pakistan with the implementation of reserved seats, gender policies, it should be expanded further. We should pay more attention to the way women are chosen, the way they are supported after they are elected and how their voices can be heard in the legislation process and in the nationwide discussion of the issues (Ali et al., 2021; Wuya, 2021b). If these deeper problems are not resolved, women will still have to contend with being sidelined even when they are the official holders in whatever they do. Quota is not the only trend leading to the future of gender equity in governance, just as formation of a system where women will be allowed to act, decide and lead at every level of government.



Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the study, it is concluded that every effort is being made by Pakistan to integrate women in the governance system of the country through constitutional provisions and reserved seats and yet the effect has been minimal over all in terms of true role and decision-making ability. Majority of women still get into politics using party-nominated reserved seats, which usually lack the legitimacy of a constituency-based selection, and reduces their freedom. The political parties continue to be male-dominated, and the woman deputies often experience discrimination structurally, disempowerment in the internal decision making and denial in important positions of leadership. Even though the representation has increased particularly in the national and provincial assemblies, the ratio of women may be considered symbolic. The limitation is further bound by the cultural set-ups, financial factors, and institutional capability of the women who seek meaningful participation in the governance. Though some room is being made available to women by the measure of civil society action and rising awareness, it is rather uneven and slow to spread. The results indicate that unless there are systemic changes, the engagement of women will be characterized by the existence of visible and invisible hurdles that will bar political empowerment of women.

To deal with such difficulties, it is required to move toward meaningful participation instead of numeric representation. To provide a mandate and political legitimacy to women, the reserved seats must be filled by direct elections as opposed to the nomination by a party. The political parties should be more welcoming by making them democratic internally, make the nomination of candidates to their various parties democratic and above all, encourage women to compete on general seats. Effective political training should be constructed about broadening the understanding of policy making and leadership skills of women. Also, women need to have access to financial support systems and legal safeguard to ensure that activities of electoral participation are less risky and accessible on both rural and high-risk destinations. Improvement in the position of women in the local governance structures, ensuring the actual power of decision making and wide spreading of the awareness as a way of struggling with the gender stereotypes is also essential. Such institutional processes as Women Parliamentary Caucus, and gender focal units should be reinforced to facilitate gender-responsive legislations as well as governance. It is regarding these select reforms that Pakistan can now progress to a more inclusive form as well as equitable in operation government system.

References

- Ali, H., Bibi, Z., & Sardar, R. (2021). Women's Political Participation In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Governance 2015: Challenges And Opportunities. *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies*, 21(2), 53–72.
- Bano, S. (2009). Women in parliament in Pakistan: Problems and potential solutions. *Women's Studies Journal*, 23(1), 19.
- Fayyaz, H., Naheed, R., & Hasan, A. (2014). Effect of task oriented and relational leadership style on employee performance; moderating impact of communicator competence. *Journal of Marketing and Consumer Research*, 3(1), 1–9.
- Ghafoor, M., & Haider, K. (2018). Political challenges of women empowerment in Pakistan. *Journal of Business and Management*, 20(2), 66–79.



- Haque, M. S. (2003). Citizen participation in governance through representation: Issue of gender in East Asia. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 26(5), 569–590.
- Hicks, J. (2011). Strengthening women's participation in local governance: lessons and strategies. *Community Development Journal*, 46(suppl_1), i36–i50.
- Iskindirova, Z., Bokayev, B., Torebekova, Z., & Davletbayeva, Z. (2024). Building Communicative Competencies for Future Leaders: An Analysis of Public Administration Curricula in Kazakhstan. *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research*, 6(2), 70–87.
- Jabeen, M. (2019). The local government system of pakistan: Participation, representation and empowerment of women. *Pakistan Perspective*, 24(1). <https://journal.psc.edu.pk/index.php/pp/article/download/6/6>
- Jabeen, N., & Iqbal, D. M. Z. (2020). Gender and local governance in Pakistan: Promoting participation through capacity building. *South Asian Studies*, 25(2).
- Jabeen, N., & Mubasher, U.-F. (2017). Gender and local governance in Pakistan. In *Women in Governing Institutions in South Asia: Parliament, Civil Service and Local Government* (pp. 285–304). Springer.
- Rahim, T. (2024). Beyond Quotas: Examining Patriarchal Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Pakistan. *J. Pol. Stud.*, 31, 67.
- Rose Taylor, S. (2020). UN Women's feminist engagement with governance by indicators in the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals. *Global Social Policy*, 20(3), 352–366.
- Saiyid, D. H. (2001). Women in politics-problems of participation: A case study of Pakistan. *Strategic Studies*, 21(3), 11–24.
- Shafiq, M., Arshad, N., & Riaz, S. (2024). Women Participation in Democracy Empowerment: Case of Electoral Process in Pakistan-Psychological and Social Impact. *Jahan-e-Tahqeeq*, 7(2), 561–571.
- Shah, S. M. A., Qamar, M. R., Ahmed, S., & Imran, M. (2025). Nepotism and Favoritism in HR Practices: Implications for Organizational Politics in Pakistan. *Journal of Management & Social Science*, 2(1), 177–194.
- Syed, N. T., & Tabassum, H. (2014). Women's political participation in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies*, 8(1), 131–143.
- Syed, N. T., Tabassum, H., & Afzal, T. (2013). Women's political participation and the laws to protect women in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies= Alam-e-Niswan= Alam-i Nisvan*, 20(2), 99.
- Women, U. N. (2021). Women's representation in local government: A global analysis. *Hämtad*, 27(2021), 2001–2022.
- Wuya, M. (2021a). Gender and the imperative of women participation in governance: prospects and challenges. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Social Sciences, Environmental Studies & Technology*, 6(1), 14–31.
- Wuya, M. (2021b). Gender and the imperative of women participation in governance: prospects and challenges. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Social Sciences, Environmental Studies & Technology*, 6(1), 14–31.