



Legislating Empowerment: Strengthening Women's Political Leadership in Local Governance Structures

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Abstract

The active role of women in the governmental structure is a basis of the democratic consolidation and the sustainable development. Although Pakistan, among other states, has been enacting legislative quotas to ensure that women are represented in the local government, the implementation of these initiatives into real leadership forms has been biased. This paper critically examines the effects of legislation to promote women concerning political leadership in local systems of governance, especially in South Asian experiences and the changing law system in Pakistan. This research holds that quotas are not valuable on their own but have to be accompanied by meaningful legislative support that includes structural obstacles like patriarchal culture, political favors, absence of capacity-building strategies, and insufficient institutional protections. Based on comparative legal discussion, the constitution, and the global commitment to programs, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5 on gender equality), the paper discusses how the law can cease being symbolic and begin to transform leadership.

The research methodology is the doctrinal approach that is supported by policy analysis and case studies that are chosen among the local government practices in Pakistan. It also points out the successes, as well as the ongoing struggles to put legislative tools of empowering women on the ground when it comes to grassroots governance. The results highlight the importance of the fact that successful legislations should be combined with political intent, institutional change, and community involvement to develop the agency of women as decision-makers, and not as a representative of the community. Finally, the paper suggests a multidimensional model of legislative empowerment, which redefines the local governance as a gender-inclusive democratic space. By placing this discourse in the wider discussions of gender and governance, the study will add to the policy discussions about empowering legal avenues of women political leadership, as well as increasing the legitimacy of democracy in the local context.

Keywords: Women's Political Leadership, Local Governance, Legislative Empowerment, Gender and Democratic Consolidation, Comparative Legal Frameworks (Pakistan and South Asia)



1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Significance

Political leadership of women has now been a necessary aspect of democratic consolidation and sustainable development. The involvement of women in the local governance has offered varied perspectives, enhanced social accountability as well as the ability to make decisions that are community-oriented. Nonetheless, ensuring that women have a bigger number representation in the form of legislative quotas does not necessarily translate into a significant and valuable leadership position. This disconnect is especially great in the Pakistani context with the devolution reforms establishing a 33 percent quota on women representation in local bodies leading to much better numbers but not to political empowerment. Studies have shown that although women are sitting in local councils, they are under the patriarchal restraints, lack of control over finances and they have no sufficient systems in the institutions. As Ahmad and Bano (2019) emphasize, women councillors tend to work in the environment of male dominance, in which their voices have been marginalized, and their possibilities to affect policy making processes are limited.

1.2. Problem Statement

The essence of the issue considered in the given research is the lack of correlation between representation and substantive leadership. Although the legislative changes have helped to institutionalize women in the local governance systems, it has left the women without allowing them to become full-fledged and autonomous decision-makers. Empirical data collected in various districts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reveal that women are not fully represented in important committees, budgetary, and political negotiations, which reveals the lack of connection between the law and practice. As Ali, Bibi, and Sardar (2015) note, there is often a tendency to ignore the contributions of women who visit meetings and participate in them on a formal level, which is explained by the entrenched social attitudes that do not believe women are able to lead the team. Consequently, the legal system, as it seems to be progressive, tends to be symbolic, but not substantive.

1.3. Research Objectives and Questions

This research will critique the efficacy of the legislative tools that are intended to enhance the empowerment of women in the local governance in Pakistan. The overall goals include; assessing the effectiveness of gender quotas in real-life, determining the political, social and institutional obstacles to the leadership potential of women and finally coming up with a broad framework of legislative empowerment that does not just stop with representation. The research questions that are used to direct this research inquire into the degree to which women quotas lead to substantive political empowerment, the character of the barriers that still limit the role of women in leadership within the local government set ups and what legal, institutional, and community-based reforms are required to empower women in an effort to increase agency within the local government structures. These questions help the research to position itself in broader arguments of gender, governance, and democratization.

1.4. Research Methodology

The research methodology in this research is the doctrinal approach which pays attention to the provisions of the constitution, the legislation enacted by the statute and the local government legislation in Pakistan. This legal discussion is supported by policy review, comparison of experience by other countries in South Asia where gender quota systems are similar and by the



case studies based on local government in Pakistan. The paper is also informed by the world standards and obligations, such as the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Sustainable Development Goal 5, which both underline the relevance of gender equality and female leadership. The balanced approach of combining research in the doctrine with that in policy-making, through the use of practical and case-based studies, gives the study a comprehensive perspective of the role of empowerment in legislative actions in both theory and practice.

1.5. Scope and Significance of the Study

Along with the international and regional debates of political representation by women, this paper highlights the vital difference between descriptive representation that is a condition in which women only sit and substantive representation where women actively contribute to policy formulation and governance. According to comparative research conducted by Singh, Maggo, Gupta, and Tandon (2025), the real way of evaluating the empowerment of women is the power to wield authority, bargain, and transform the institutions rather than the number.

This research has importance as it is multidimensional in its perspective of empowerment because it proposes that quotas are not adequate without institutional changes, financial independence, capacity-building processes, and community involvement. This contribution of this work to policy debate is to make known the legal and structural changes that are needed so that local governance can be truly an inclusive democratic arena in which women can go beyond symbolic roles to truly have a leadership position.

2. Women's Political Leadership – Concept & Global Framework

2.1. Defining Women's Political Leadership

Political leadership of women is not just in being in the political houses and offices, but in being able to influence the decisions made, be able to shape the political agendas of the political systems and be able to have authority in the governing institutions. This type of leadership lies in the concept of substantive representation- whereby the women in their positions do transform the power relationship and not just sit in the seats. In contrast to descriptive representation which can meet the requirements of numerical quotas, substantive leadership requires agency: women have to play a meaningful role, have resources, and authority over the political process (Roy & Sachdeva, 2025). The idea also acknowledges that leadership is not a mono-dimensional concept, there is the formal political leadership, the informal leadership in the community, and the involvement in the public discourse. Their unique governance perspectives are manifested in the kind of priorities, which women introduce in most of the local governments, which are social welfare, education, and community development (Olaitan, 2024).

2.2. Importance of Women's Leadership in Local Governance

Women leadership can be particularly transformative at the level of local governance. The local governments are generally more in touch with the citizens and provide the basic needs of the people such as health, education, sanitation and infrastructure. Once women are engaged and empowered in these local institutions, they are more likely to focus on the problems that are associated with social welfare and communal integration (Zothansanga, 2024). In Aizawl (Mizoram, India), as an example, it has been studied that women councillors add a certain sensitivity in the needs of the community and that they assist in providing answers to issues that had hitherto been under-represented in male dominated decisions. This leadership is not merely symbolic: it promotes



service delivery and democracy in terms of responsiveness. Additionally, female leaders tend to go through twofold problems of both institutional resistance and cultural pressures as Chen and Chen (2025) posit in their research about women in community governance, but they have the potential of making a profound contribution in the local development, social inclusion and participatory governance when empowered.

2.3. Global Normative and Policy Frameworks

The comprehensive normative frameworks support political leadership of women at local level internationally. One of the central sources is the UN Women Working Paper on Women Representation in Local Government containing the statistics of more than 130 countries and expanding the correlation between the increased representation of women in local authorities and the existence of their legislated gender quotas and electoral systems that are inclusive (UN Women, 2022). This normative context fits well with the agenda of Sustainable Development Goal 5, namely, goal 5.5, that requires women to be provided with full and effective participation and equal opportunities to leadership at all levels of decision-making (UN Women, 2022). These tools do not simply require the inclusion of women, but focus on the eradication of structural obstacles to their real participation, including the exclusion of women in leadership, insufficient capacity-building and bias in institutional practices.

2.4. Challenges to Genuine Women's Leadership

Although there are positive international standards and an increase in the local representation, the women still struggle with the significant obstacles in changing formal power to real leadership. Cultural and institutional bias in local governance is one of the barriers that are eminent. The research by Roy and Sachdeva (2025) records how the issue of gender stereotypes, inadequate access to political networks, and financial limitations remain to be barriers to the effective involvement of women in decision-making posts in the local self-government. In certain places, the women councillors are relegated to a peripheral role in committee work and their ability to shape up budgets and policy is vitiated by the hegemony of power. In China, role conflict between the family roles, and the government roles, and institutional barriers that do not allow women to be involved in the long term are among the challenges that women experience in the leadership of their communities (Chen and Chen 2025).

The perception and legitimacy of female leaders is also another dimension of this challenge. Mostly elected women are not regarded as full-fledged decision-makers even in most of the places; they are even perceived as expansible carriers of gender quotas instead of being independent political players. Women are still dramatically underrepresented in the major leadership positions in the municipal governance of South Africa not only due to the numerical disadvantage but because of the continuation of the organizational cultures largely patriarchal (Joseph, 2022). This glass ceiling in the local government institutions derails the rise of women to executive offices and their power to make critical decisions affecting the organization.

2.5. Theoretical Perspectives: From Presence to Power

Feminist governance theory comes in handy to make sense of such dynamics. It indicates that women empowerment in politics needs more than a numerical inclusion, it needs institutional changes that promote the agency, accountability, and voice. The main idea is the transformative leadership: the leadership that not only changes policies but also the relations of power, redistributes resources and reorganizes the system of decision-making (Roy and Sachdeva, 2025).



In this light, gender quotas need to be interpreted as merely a temporary special measure not an end but a means used to initiate a more pervasive structural change.

The other theoretical insight is based on network and organizational analysis. The case study information in the structured environment (e.g. municipalities in developed countries) suggests that women tend to have lower positions in networks despite having formal positions. According to DeHart-Davis, Humphrey and Whetsell (2022), women supervisors might be more inclined to create work-related discussion ties but are less acceptable as authoritative leaders by their colleagues, which leads to a weaker upward mobility and influence. What this indicates is that informal power and communication networks, together with formal institutional roles, are also important to reach in realizing the real kind of leadership.

2.6. Why Leadership Matters for Development

This is hardly only about the representation of women in politics; the significance of female political leadership has very real development impacts and effects on the quality of governance. As the local context demonstrates, the focus of the community changes when there are women in the decision-making process: more money is invested in health, education, water, sanitation, and social protection (UN Women, 2022). In addition, female leaders who are empowered provide an enhanced socially trusted and participatory governance which strengthens legitimacy of local institutions. Democratically, empowering women to transform presence into power enhances gender equality but most importantly the principles of inclusive democracy. In such a way, the position of women as a leadership prerequisite in governance makes the point about the pivotal role of women in social justice and the effectiveness of the institution (Leal Filho et al., 2021).

3. Legislative Framework for Women in Local Governance

3.1. Global Legal Commitments Supporting Women's Political Participation

The international legal systems form the basis of empowering women political leadership through compelling the states to remove discrimination barriers and provide a fair access to political leadership. The CEDAW Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is the framework of these commitments. Articles 7 and 8 demand that states ensure women are given the right to engage in public and political life equally without any form of discrimination. The CEDAW Committee has also understood these provisions to mean that active steps have to be undertaken, namely, quotas, electoral reforms, capacity-building, etc., to increase the presence of women in local institutions (CEDAW Committee, 2022). The other powerful international framework is the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action that calls on states to promote the involvement of women in the political decision making process at the institutionalized level through legal reforms and institutional support. In line with these promises, the Sustainable Development Goals (especially SDG 5.5) focus on the full and complete involvement of women in every tier of governance, such as the local councils and grassroots institutions. All these international legal frameworks are a collective move to affirm the fact that women leadership is not a choice but an obligation under human rights and development.

3.2. Regional (South Asian) Approaches to Women's Representation

The legislative approaches to enhance the involvement of women in local governance have assumed a wide approach in South Asia. The reservations in India are unique to the amendments on constitutions that provide a minimum 33 percent representation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. This quota has also been extended by many Indian states to 50 percent and is one of



the most extensive experiments of affirmative action in the local level in the world. Studies by Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal indicate that gender quotas in local councils have a considerable effect on increasing the number of women in the councils but have different effects on the leadership of the country because of cultural and institutional constraints (Akhter and Raihan, 2023). The 2015 Constitution of Nepal also requires gender balanced representation in local bodies, so that the mayoral and deputy mayoral position can be equally divided between men and women. Since 1997, Bangladesh elected women into reserved seats of Union Parishads, and even though implementation difficulties remain, such a legal structure has rendered women more visible in the local governance systems (Hossain et al., 2024). These comparative experiences underscore the fact that the legislative systems in South Asia have increasingly become gender responsive although the actual performance of leadership still remains mediated by patriarchal standards.

3.3. Constitutional and Legislative Provisions in Pakistan

The constitutional and statutory framework of Pakistan is the reflection of various endeavors to integrate the idea of women political empowerment into the local governance. Article 32 of the Constitution of Pakistan requires the state to promote the local government institutions by providing a special representation of women. This constitutional directive has been operationalized by the introduction of consecutive provincial governments' laws by provincial governments following the 18th Constitutional Amendment. Punjab Local Government Act 2019, The Sindh Local Government Act 2013, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act 2013, and Baluchistan have all reserved seats of women based on the percentage: 33-33.3, as per the province. Although these statutory frameworks ensure the numerical representation, the scholars believe that most women councilors have no freedom to exercise actual power because of male-controlled structure of committees, limited access to financial resources, and the power of local political elites (Shah & Naqvi, 2023). In spite of these impediments, the constitutional and legislative commitments are a must-have in increasing the visibility of women in the local governance.

3.4. Gender Quotas: Symbolic Inclusion or Substantive Empowerment?

The main legislative mechanisms of women inclusion are gender quotas on global, regional, and national levels. Nevertheless, studies indicate that quotas are not sufficient to bring substantive empowerment. They need to be accompanied by other complementary responses like training, institutional backing, clear election, and freedom against gender discrimination. In a Nigerian study, women can be seen more, but the presence of reserved seats does not allow them to affect policy, as gender stereotypes and political gatekeeping tend to restrain those (Omodan & Tsotetsi, 2023). Equivalent trends are observed in the South Asian region whereby most women who are elected to seats of reserved setups have lesser access to decision-making because of the patriarchal bargains and political favors. Consequently, quotas have to be initiated along with reforms that will increase the powers of the women, develop the leadership qualities and create the equal access to resources within the local government system.

3.5. Institutional Reforms and Implementation Gaps

The legislative frameworks in Pakistan and South Asia in general tend to experience structural implementation difficulties. The transformative potential of the laws in existence is compromised by weak institutional capacity, absence of gender sensitive budgeting, inadequate orientation programs to newly elected women and inadequate monitoring mechanisms. Moreover, the election



policies are not always favorable to women, such as the situation of indirect election to the reserved seats which has made women to be dependent on the nomination that is made by male party leaders. Other institutional weaknesses are the lack of grievance redressal mechanisms against harassment, lack of structured leadership training, and insufficient funding of female-led committees (Awan and Yousaf, 2022). These loopholes show that legislative changes should be coupled with institutionalization to ensure the formal representation is turned into actual political leadership.

3.6. Harmonizing Global Norms with Domestic Law

In the case of Pakistan, there is a need to make global gender equality commitments to be consistent with domestic legislative regulations. Recommendations of CEDAW often urge Pakistan to have stronger temporary special measures, gender-responsive local government reforms and to have equal representation in decision making processes. It is necessary to have long-term political will, resource influence, and monitoring systems to achieve the conformity of local government laws with SDG 5, CEDAW and the Beijing Platform of Action. Once domestic laws and global norms support one another, they become a harmonious system that empowers women in the field of politics. Devoid of this congruency, legislative reforms may turn to mere symbolic acts instead of being transformational.

4. Structural Barriers to Women's Leadership in Local Governance

4.1. Patriarchal Norms and Gendered Power Relations

One of the most entrenched obstacles to the political leadership of women in South Asia (and especially in Pakistan) is still patriarchal social organization. The gendered norms that are present in daily life both in families, communities, and even the political space limit the independence of women and determine the access of women to the public position. Most women joining the local governance have to operate under demands that put domestic duties ahead of politics. In her analysis of gender and political space in Punjab, Saeed (2023) identifies the patriarchal attitude as the cause of making women leadership appear as outsiders in the political decision-making process, and this perception, in turn, undermines the credibility of the women leaders with the people they represent and with others in the political sphere. Voter behavior is also affected by this cultural environment with women leaders' possibly experiencing opposition not necessarily based on their capability but on stereotyped attributes of gender and power. Therefore, despite having formal role, patriarchal norms make women less visible, less influential and do not allow them to play active roles but act as symbols instead of being present at the helm of the company.

4.2. Political Patronage and Male Gatekeeping

Pakistani politics and electoral networks are often run by patronage based on the male-dominated systems, which has huge implications on women who seek office particularly on reserved seats. Women who are indirectly elected through reserved seats also tend to rely on party leaders to nominate them hence they lack independence and are not able to oppose the status quo. Rasheed and Farooq (2022) explain that this way of political gatekeeping allows establishing a hierarchy where women councilors are supposed to become loyal to male leaders instead of pursuing independent political ambitions. Equally, women in most of the South Asian local governments have complained that his/her access to any development funds, membership in committees, and leadership is mediated by the male party members. Such networks of patriarchal patronage influence the political career of women by limiting their mobility, bargaining power and enhancing



disability in political institutions. Due to this, there is a likelihood of marginalization of women in critical policy debates even when they are elected in offices (Ahmed, 2018).

4.3.Limited Access to Resources, Training, and Capacity-Building

The availability of training, political education and resources is essential to good leadership but women councilors are usually given much less institutional support as compared to their male counterparts. In cases where the local government institutions are not designed to be gender responsive through provision of gender responsive training programs, newly elected women will find it hard to maneuver through the governance process, budgetary frameworks and administrative rules. In a research by Narayan and Sultana (2023), it was found that a great majority of women local leaders in South Asia come to office with little information on how politics works, and this lack of information influences their confidence and participation. Financial limitations are also a major contributing factor to the problem: without discretionary funds, women councilors find it difficult to develop projects, which makes their reputation in society. The lack of systematic orientation programs and regular capacity-building programs shows a systematic fault in facilitating the change of women as representative images into emancipated decision-makers.

4.4.Social and Economic Constraints on Women's Mobility

The socioeconomic status of women is one of the key factors of their involvement in politics as it influences mobility, the time and possibility to participate in political life. The most significant limitations some women in Pakistan, particularly in the rural regions, have are having less freedom to travel alone, meet with others at night, or socialize with their male colleagues-- limitations that are not present in the case of male leaders. These limitations have direct effects on their access to council meetings, community forums or interaction with voters. Another significant impediment is economic dependence: women with scarce finances might have difficulties meeting campaign costs, transportation, or even basic administrative expenses incurred in working in offices. Habib and Jatoi (2024) suggest that socioeconomic marginalization diminishes the capacity of women to bargain political space and more and more depends on the male family members or party networks weakening their autonomy in leadership positions. Therefore, gender norms are exposed to social and economic obstacles that restrict the exercise of women as full agents of political agency.

4.5.Institutional Bias and Gender-Insensitive Governance Structures

One of the difficulties facing women in local governance is the institutional bias relating to the organizational structures. Male dominance is strengthened through council processes, assignments of committees and even administrative ranks. The gender-insensitive governance systems can marginalize women by not making them part of powerful committees like the finance, infrastructural or developing planning committees but assign them to the less significant departments like the education or health departments. Studies by Bhatti and Rahman (2022) have demonstrated that most women councilors in Pakistan have been left out of the actual decision-making processes because of institutional regulations, which are not gender sensitive. Moreover, childcare, safe transportation, or harassment surveillance systems are often not offered in municipal offices, which is another obstacle to women. It is the procedural and structural design of local governance institutions in this sense that generates the conditions of formal equality on paper and substantive equality that is far off (Rahman & Tiwari, 2021).



4.6. Gender-Based Violence, Harassment, and Political Intimidation

Political participation by women is often dissuaded, leadership weakened, and gender-based violence, harassment, and intimidation experienced. This violence can be through verbal harassment during council meetings, online attacks, intimidations by political adversaries or pressures by fellow members of the community to take a back seat in the public positions. According to a 2024 study by the Pakistan Institute of parliamentary studies, harassment and threats are two of the three most popular deterrents of women in the grassroots level of politics. Equally, in Nepal and Bangladesh, the female local representatives have cited that they have been targeted in coercion and cyber-violence so that their political voices can be suppressed (Khan and Bhatta, 2024). The vulnerability of women councilors is further heightened by the absence of institutional protection, which may include complaint procedures, legal assistance or the legislation regarding anti-harassment. This institutionalized violence does not only scare women away but it also deprives them of the opportunity to take charge of leadership responsibilities in a confident and independent manner.

4.7. Intersectional Barriers: Class, Caste, Ethnicity, and Rural Marginalization

Women are not homogenous; they have different experiences in local governance according to their classes and caste, ethnicity, religion and differences in rural and urban locations. The barriers of intersectionality are compounding the difficulties of the marginalized women, who might not have the social networks, financial resources, and neighborhood support necessary to engage in politics. Compounded discrimination in women belonging to minority groups (or economically disadvantaged backgrounds) is a common phenomenon in Pakistan, which determines their access to leadership opportunities. Devi (2022) conducted a study in India and showed that Dalit and tribal women in local councils are more resistant, have low political visibility, and encounter higher levels of harassment than women of upper caste. In the same manner, Pakistani women in rural settings are more subjected to patriarchal values, employment, and education is more counter-productive to their leadership capabilities. Intersectional analysis indicates that legislative changes cannot be a one size fits all situation; they have to consider the cumulative obstacles of the political experiences of women.

5. Comparative Legal Framework: Lessons from South Asia

South Asian region has offered a good comparative environment to explain how political systems of legislations affect the role of women in political leadership in the local governments. These countries have similar backgrounds of history of colonial rule, high patriarchal values, and other socio-economic issues, yet, their legislative ways of empowering women differ markedly. These regional experiences can be observed to assist in the understanding that quotas do not solely change the local governance; rather, the success of the empowerment is based on constitutional anchoring, decentralization, specific training, political will and powerful institutional mechanisms. These comparative lessons indicate the models that Pakistan can follow, modify, and not follow in its quest to empower women as political leaders (Adhikari and Chapagain, 2020; Lakshmisha and Venkatesh, 2021).

5.1. India's Panchayati Raj System: A Model of Deep Institutionalization

The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) of India are the most successful example of women in politics in the South Asian state. The 73rd Amendment act 1992 under the constitution saved one-third of the local government seats to women and this figure was later raised by many states to 50



percent. These quotas have the advantage of uniform application and institutional safeguarding regardless of the election cycle since they are included in the constitution (Lakshmisha & Venkatesh, 2021). Research has shown that most women elected by reservation tend to become more responsive to the needs of the community especially on matters related to water, education and health among others than their male counterparts. Longitudinal studies have found that the Indian quota policies not only increase the immediate representation of women but also alter the gender norms in the generations to come by making women as the political decision-makers a matter of normalization (Lakshmisha & Venkatesh, 2021). The Indian model demonstrates to Pakistan the significance of continuity of the law and constitutionalism as the measure to safeguard the political space of women.

5.2. Bangladesh: Strong Quotas but Weak Institutional Support

The Local Government (Union Parishads) Act, 1997, made Bangladesh introduce reserved seats to women in Union Parishads. In contrast to Pakistan, these seats are directly elected to female members, which makes them individually electively legit. Nevertheless, women still have a long way to go through despite the progressive legal provisions, as there are still major challenges such as the exclusion of women in meetings, political violence, and overpowering of male members of the council (Hassan and Nazneen, 2017). It has been found that a large proportion of female representatives in the Union Parishads in Bangladesh are deprived of real power as they lack administrative guidelines and training as well as face cultural opposition (Hassan and Nazneen, 2017). To Pakistan, the experience of Bangladesh is a caution not to pass a law without institutional frameworks since it will lead to the figurehead representation and reaffirm instead of altering gender hierarchies.

5.3. Nepal: Constitutional Recognition and Post-Conflict Transformation

The 2015 Constitution of Nepal presented one of the most progressive gender-inclusive patterns in the region with the requirement of having 40 percent women representatives in the local governments. Such a quota is facilitated by the fact that Nepal is facing a newly decentralized federal structure which aims to establish an inclusive democracy within the post-conflict framework. The 2017 and 2022 local elections were marked by a high presence of women, even in the leadership positions, deputy mayors, and ward chairs (Adhikari and Chapagain, 2020). The effectiveness of the Nepal paradigm is associated with constitutional recognition, effective civic mobilization, and well-organized training programs supported by state and foreign organizations (Khanal, 2019). To Pakistan, Nepal illustrates how gender-inclusive reforms can be made successful after they are integrated into a wider constitutional construction and reinforced with decentralization and civil mobilization.

5.4. Sri Lanka: Late Reforms and Persistent Structural Barriers

The Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act, No. 1 of 2016 mandated the use of a 25% local government quota on women in local government in Sri Lanka. Even though the women were twice the number of women represented in the later local elections due to the reform, structural limitations such as political gatekeeping, party supremacies, and survival of political violence still restrict the substantive participation of women (Perera, 2019). Besides, the quota law is not very specific on implementation whereby political parties are able to manipulate nomination lists to hold onto male domination. The situation in Sri Lanka shows that the reformation of the quota system has to go hand in hand with the rules of its enforcement, protection of the candidates, and



transparent nomination process. To Pakistan, this case makes it clear that stringent implementation frameworks are very important in any quota law (International Foundation for Electoral Systems [IFES], 2023).

5.5. Comparative Lessons for Pakistan

The four key lessons that apply to the legislative and administrative reforms in Pakistan are observed through the regional review:

a. Constitutional Entrenchment Ensures Stability:

India and Nepal show that constitutionalization of quotas helps prevent the representation of women in politics, as well as legislative reversals (Adhikari and Chapagain, 2020; Lakshmisha and Venkatesh, 2021).

b. Capacity-Building Determines Substantive Empowerment:

The long-term change in leadership performance can be observed in the countries where state-funded training programs of elected women exist, in particular, India and Nepal (Khanal, 2019).

c. Clear Administrative Authority Is Essential:

The examples of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka indicate that quotas that lack administrative clarity and decision do not enhance the quotas to symbolic representation (Hassan and Nazneen, 2017; Perera, 2019).

d. Cultural Transformation Strengthens Political Legitimacy:

In South Asia, mobilization (via grass root mobilization) is pivotal in transforming cultural beliefs and promoting the legitimacy of women leaders in the community (Khanal, 2019).

These lessons all point to the fact that it is not the lack of quotas that is the challenge facing Pakistan; rather it is the lack of institutional, cultural, and administrative factors that can enable quotas to bring effective transformative empowerment. The most promising way forward to ensure that constitutional empowerment is transformed into political leadership by Pakistan is a multidimensional strategy that incorporates institutional empowerment, building of capacity and the cultural engagement.

6. Pakistan's Policy Reforms and Proposed Multidimensional Legislative Model

An attempt by Pakistan to advance feminine leadership in the political leadership within the local government continues to be influenced by a sequence of disjointed legislative changes, disproportionate provincialism, and profoundly embedded patriarchal culture. Although the nation has occasionally introduced quota system among women in the local governments, such reforms have not been constitutional in permanence and institutional coherence to turn political participation into leadership. Consequently, the functions of women usually tend to be symbolic but not substantive and their input is usually limited by poor administrative backing, lack of training facilities and socio cultural constraints. To solve these challenges, a multidimensional approach will need to be employed, which will comprise legal reform, institutional fortification, administrative clarification and cultural change. This part will analyze the policy environment of Pakistan and offer a comprehensive legislative framework based on comparison of experience and human rights practices (Jamil, 2021; Zia, 2020).

6.1. Constitutional Strengthening of Women's Representation

Articles 25 and 34 in the Constitution of Pakistan give women the basis of equality however, it does not specifically stipulate that women be represented in the local governments. This is in



contrast to the case in India and Nepal where minimum quotas of women are guaranteed by constitutional provisions, concerns in Pakistan have always depended on the mundane provincial laws which change with every shift in politics and administrative realignments. Researchers have pointed out that the entrenchment of constitutional women representation is critical in stabilizing the representation of women and avert reversals of policies based on the change of political priorities (Shah, 2022). The inclusion of quotas of women in the Constitution would strengthen gender inclusion as a political choice rather than as a requirement of the country. These constitutional guarantees would contribute to safeguard the leadership of women irrespective of any political changes as well as enhance the women rights of meaningful participation in financial planning committees, development projects and dispute resolution committees. Integrating such provisions into the constitutional system would result in a multigenerational system of gender-equitable government and minimize the susceptibility of the current quota systems.

6.2. Harmonization of Provincial Local Government Laws

The federalism of the Pakistani government system gives the provinces freedom to legislate on local government systems and this has led to a huge disparity in terms of quota of women, modes of election, and powers of the administrations. As an illustration, provinces like Sindh always have 33 percent quota of women, and others like Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have varied the quotas of women in various elections depending on the political interests. Researchers state that the lack of harmonization generates unequal results and restricts the possibilities of developing women in the leadership positions across the country (Nafees & Khan, 2021). A common legal framework could not harm provincial autonomy but would rather offer similar guiding principles that would ensure minimum standards of female representation, the process of elections, and government power throughout all the provinces. This uniformity would stabilize the political spaces of women, minimize ambiguity in the legal system and develop monitoring mechanisms at both national and provincial levels. It would also facilitate harmonization of training efforts, budgetary processes and committee composition to bring similar governance settings in the country.

6.3. Institutional Strengthening and Administrative Reforms

Where women are given reserved seats, in most cases, they cannot perform well due to lack of institutional support. Local councils often do not have gender desks, specific personnel, as well as gender-sensitive budget-writing resources, so women rely on male co-workers to carry out the necessary administrative procedures. Studies emphasize that to make elected women more than mere participants, institutional addressing is necessary to make them active decision-makers (Zia, 2020). The operational environment needs to be improved through a total reform of the local government institutions; this will include the establishment of gender facilitation units, training of personnel to work with elected women, as well as gender-responsive planning. These institutional reforms would offer women the information, resources and administrative power they need to participate in meaningful leadership. The building of institutions is also useful in changing the attitudes towards female representatives as active members of a political process to rightful political players, which strengthen the legitimacy of local governmental institutions.

6.4. Capacity-Building and Leadership Development

The capacity-building is one of the most significant aspects of women empowerment in local democracy. The studies of South Asia show that systematic training programs have a positive



impact on the performance of women in the governance positions and can lead to their future involvement in the political process. Nevertheless, in Pakistan, the capacity-building processes are typically ad hoc and not institutionalized in the governance systems of the state, but they are instead based on the short term donor-funded projects (Jamil, 2021). Sustainable model would require training of women prior to and after elections, which would be funded by the state, and would provide training to women in areas of budgeting, legal framework, development planning and dispute resolving. The continuity would be guaranteed by the institutionalization of the capacity-building programs in local government academies and universities to minimize dependency on the outside organizations. Moreover, mentorship programs comprising of seasoned women leaders, civil society members and scholars may prove useful in providing new elected representatives with knowledge and tactics to cope with intricate political settings. These training would instill confidence, build political agency and increase the substantive effect of the contributions of women in the grassroots.

6.5.Strengthening Accountability and Enforcement Mechanisms

The political power of women in Pakistan still remains weak in spite of the quota laws because there are weak mechanisms in the enforcement of the laws. No political machinery is complete without political parties trying to perpetuate the dominance of men in nomination processes and local councils also fail to involve women in important committees or decision making. The continuation of these practices is partially due to the fact that the local government laws rarely have any consequences on non-adherence or any form of discriminatory behaviour. Studies show that the law change should specify the means of enforcement and contain punishment of practices that infringe the rights of women to political involvement (Shah, 2022). Enhancement of accountability should be through open tracking by provincial committees, regular reporting of gender inclusion and easy complaining channels whereby women who are discriminated or harassed can get access. Enforceable legal safeguards such as penalties against exclusionary behavior and entitlement to serve in main committees would work to ensure that quota policies are turned into actual political force. The institutional accountability and the legitimacy of women in leadership are also encouraged with the aid of effective enforcement.

6.6.Community Engagement and Cultural Transformation

In addition to the legal and institutional changes, socio-cultural norms are the strongest and most enduring obstacle on the way of political empowerment of women. Political leadership is seen as a masculine sphere, and thus, communities can only allow women to move freely, as well as limit their participation in community events, and compromise their power in local councils. Such attitudes exist even in the cases when women are elected to office legally (Nafees & Khan, 2021). Therefore, to empower the leadership of women in politics, community intervention must be instituted to help change the culture. This can be done through public awareness campaigns, civic education in schools, and working with religious scholars and elder persons in the community to help establish a wider acceptance of women in governance. The civil society organizations and the local institutions can support the discussions that will break stereotypes and argue in favor of the gender equality narrative based on the principles of the constitutional, religious, and developmental theories. Cultural change would need to take long-term approaches to ensure the legislative changes would be implemented into life through altering the societal norms in regard to leadership and decision-making.



6.7. The Multidimensional Legislative Model

There should be a multidimensional legislative framework of Pakistan that should combine legal, institutional, and cultural policies into a unified framework. Guarantees of the constitution should have a stabilizing effect on the representation of women and protect quotas against political instability. The uniformity of the standards and minimization of inconsistencies can be achieved through harmonized provincial legislation which will help women get involved. The institutional changes should be aimed at provision of conducive governance conditions in which elected women can have the administrative means of utilizing power. The leadership abilities of women should also be increased through regularized capacity-building programs in order to sustain them across different elections. The institutions should be made answerable by robust enforcement mechanisms to keep women out of discriminatory practices and efforts should be made to change the cultural discourse and make the community members accept women leading politics as a norm. Combined, these interventions can turn the local governance into the inclusive democratic space in which women leadership is not only legally prescribed, but also socially condoned, institutionally encouraged, and politically efficient.

7. Conclusion

Women empowerment in local governance is a legislative ideal and a real challenge when it comes to Pakistan and South Asia. This paper has proved that though legal systems- especially quotas- have increased the numbers of women in local government institutions, their political leadership remains weak in substance due to an established system of patriarchy, organizational frailties and insufficient state assistance. The discussion indicates that legislative interventions will never change governance spaces without other more comprehensive socio-political and administrative changes. The case of Pakistan, like that of other South Asian states, shows that quotas are a necessary but not sufficient tool in that they open doors to representation but not voice, agency and influence. Thus, effective empowerment also demands legislations that do not merely mandate inclusion but go beyond that to break the barriers that limit their ability to be decision-makers.

The study also emphasizes the fact that sustainable development is pegged on the establishment of an enabling environment whereby legal reforms are converted into working power. These involve the provision of training opportunities, financial independence, institutional power and immunity against political discrimination. South Asian experience confirms that in countries where this type of support is in place, women do not stay in a symbolic level but actively participate in policy formulation, monitoring and development of the community. The data also indicates that women in terms of exercising actual leadership would have better governance outcomes that are more inclusive and development-focused and more responsive to the local needs. This highlights the fact that enhancing women politically in terms of leadership is not a gender right issue but a key aspect of democratic consolidation and proper governance.

Finally, the paper supports the thesis that the notion of legislative empowerment should be seen as a multidimensional process, and not a single legal act. It demands some legal requirements, political goodwill, administrative changes and the involvement of the grassroots. The forces of the dimensions can only become coherent when then laws can become instruments of changing the gender equality rather than symbolic statements. In order to make this change, the policy makers have to follow a comprehensive approach to incorporate gender sensitive legal changes alongside sustained institutional reinforcement, societal consciousness and well-established mechanisms of



accountability. By so doing, local systems of governance will become truly democratic sites whereby women not only sit at the table but also influence decisions, policies and developmental pathways. This kind of change is necessary towards enhancing the validity of the democratic institutions as well as making sure that governance represents the interests and ambitions of the entire society.

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