



WOMEN POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN PAKISTAN (2002-2018)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines women's political representation in Pakistan from 2002 to 2018, focusing on their participation in national and provincial assemblies. During this period, Pakistan implemented reserved seat mechanisms for women, ensuring a defined level of female representation. The National Assembly had 60 reserved seats for women, while provincial assemblies like Punjab and Sindh had allocations like 66 and 29 seats respectively. Despite these provisions, women's direct electoral victories on general seats remained relatively low, with eight women winning in the 2018 National Assembly elections. The research highlights challenges women face, including patriarchal societal structures, limited mobility, financial constraints, and gender stereotypes affecting their political engagement. Notable female politicians like Fahmida Mirza, Yasmin Rashid, and Hina Rabbani Khar held significant roles, showcasing women's contributions to governance. The study underscores the interplay of constitutional measures, party dynamics, and socio-cultural factors influencing women's political participation in Pakistan.

Introduction of the Study

Women's political representation in Pakistan from 2002 to 2018 was a complex narrative of progress and persistent challenges. During this period, Pakistan witnessed significant electoral reforms and initiatives aimed at enhancing women's participation in politics. The

introduction of reserved seats for women in the National Assembly and provincial legislatures was a key mechanism intended to boost female representation. According to the Election Act of 2002, reserved seats were allocated for women, constituting 17.5 percent of women legislators in the National Assembly. Despite these efforts, women's political empowerment in Pakistan faced numerous challenges. Socio-cultural barriers, patriarchal norms, and regional variations significantly influenced women's engagement in politics. The Electoral Commission of Pakistan (ECP) implemented measures to promote female voter turnout, including mandating returns from constituencies with low female participation to be nullified and criminalizing obstruction of women's voting rights. Understanding women's political representation in Pakistan from 2002 to 2018 provides insights into the interplay of legislative frameworks, societal attitudes, and individual agency shaping women's roles in politics. Prominent female politicians like Benazir Bhutto and Hina Rabbani Khar exemplify leadership milestones, though women continue to face obstacles in achieving equitable political representation. The study was initiated to explore the state of women representation in Pakistan during first two decades of 21st century by using the qualitative content analysis technique.

Women Political Representation Prior to Musharraf

Women's representation in 20th century Pakistan was marked by fluctuations and female leadership experienced significant milestones and challenges. Pakistan's early years saw pioneering women like Fatima Jinnah, who played a crucial role in the Pakistan movement; Begum Shaista Ikramullah, the first woman in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan; and Zahra Aziz, the first elected female on general seat (Bano, Kokab, & Mohabbat, 2021). The country's constitutions, starting with the 1956 version, reserved seats for women in the National Assembly, initially ten seats divided between East and West Pakistan. Later the reserved seats were enhanced to 20 in 1985 but no nomination was made during 1990 to 1999 on reserved seats for females in National Assembly. Notable leaders like Benazir Bhutto broke barriers, becoming Pakistan's first female Prime Minister in 1988 and serving two non-consecutive terms. Other prominent female politicians included Dr. Fehmida Mirza, the first female Speaker of the National Assembly, and Hina Rabbani Khar, Pakistan's first female Foreign Minister. Despite progress, women's political participation faced socio-cultural barriers, patriarchal norms, and legislative challenges, such as the Hudood Ordinances introduced during Zia-ul-Haq's regime. Women's rights organizations advocated for women's empowerment and rights, navigating complex political landscape.

Musharraf's Step for Women Political Representation

In October 1999, General Pervez Musharraf overthrew the government of Nawaz Sharif through a military coup, proclaiming himself Chief Executive of Pakistan and later assuming the presidency. Musharraf unveiled a seven-point agenda outlining his future plans, emphasizing his government's commitment to enhancing the status of Pakistani women by safeguarding their political and economic rights. He asserted that women's political empowerment was crucial for their overall development, aligning with Pakistan's international commitments to promote women's empowerment through concrete actions (Afzal D. N., 2023).

Musharraf established the National Commission on the Status of Women to provide a comprehensive report on women's conditions in Pakistan (Dawn, 2000). He expressed his government's determination to effect significant positive change in Pakistani women's lives through empowerment, urging women to leverage these opportunities to transition from subjugation to progress (Dawn, 2004). Through the Legal Framework Order (LFO), Musharraf introduced substantial political reforms. Key changes included increasing parliamentary seats, reviving the joint electorate system, and lowering the voting age

from 21 to 18 years. Notably, Pakistan saw a historic milestone with a substantial number of seats reserved for women in both the National Parliament and Provincial Assemblies, alongside increased representation for minorities in political institutions.

It was widely perceived that quotas alone were insufficient to eradicate the undemocratic internal party structures and centralistic, patriarchal hierarchies that persisted in Pakistan. There were varying opinions regarding the effectiveness of the new policy of reserved seats (Afzal D. N., 2023). A female journalist expressed the view that merely having 60 women elected through reserved seats shouldn't be considered a landmark achievement, given that these women lacked a power base in any constituency. This form of mediated politics suggested that Pakistani women were still not deemed suitable to contest elections for general constituency seats, highlighting the limitations of quota systems in ensuring genuine political empowerment (Khan S. B., 2007).

Another area of concern for women at the time was the procedure for electing representatives to reserved seats. As stipulated in Article 51, sub-article 6 (d) of Chapter 2 of the amended constitution, women's reserved seats were filled through a system where political parties nominated candidates based on the number of general seats they held in the National Assembly. There was a strong push from women's groups advocating for direct elections to these reserved seats. The feminist lobby argued that the existing procedure relegated women to second-class members of parliament, making them dependent on male party leaders and undermining their ability to drive policies beneficial to women (Malik, 2023).

Women in Assemblies 2002

In 2002, women had a notable presence in Pakistan's National Assembly, bolstered by constitutional provisions reserving seats for them. During General Pervez Musharraf's era, the number of reserved seats for women in the National Assembly was increased to 60. As a result, 74 women were elected as Members of the National Assembly (MNAs), comprising 60 women elected to reserved seats, 13 women who won on general seats showcasing their electoral prowess, and 1 woman elected to a non-Muslim reserved seat. Women held leadership roles, chairing 2 out of 34 standing committees of the National Assembly, highlighting their contribution to parliamentary processes. Despite their participation, challenges persisted concerning their effective engagement and influence in decision-making within the legislative framework, reflecting the complexities of women's political representation in Pakistan's context.

Notable women played significant roles in Pakistan's National Assembly. Dr. Fehmida Mirza stood out as the Speaker of the National Assembly in 2008, showcasing prominent leadership. Other influential figures included Shireen M. Mazari, who chaired a key committee related to the Election Commission's appointments, and Zubaida Jalal Khan, who served as Federal Minister for Defence Production. Pioneering women like Begum Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah and Begum Jahanara Shahnawaz were part of Pakistan's early political history, contributing to constituent assemblies post-independence. Additionally, politicians like Ghinwa Bhutto leading Pakistan Peoples Party (Shaheed Bhutto), Farkhanda Amjad chairing Pakistan National Muslim League, Tehmina Amjad heading Mutahida League, and Hina Manzoor leading National Front Pakistan represented female leadership in various political entities. The 2002 elections saw 74 women elected as MNAs, with 13 winning general seats, highlighting women's participation amidst Pakistan's political landscape at the time.

Women in Assemblies 2008

In 2008, women's representation in Pakistan's National Assembly was marked by a combination of reserved seats and direct electoral successes. Seventy-one women were members of the National Assembly, with 60 seats reserved for women allocated

proportionally across provinces like Punjab (35 seats), Sindh (14 seats), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (8 seats), and Balochistan (3 seats). Additionally, 16 women won National Assembly seats through direct elections, with 11 hailing from Punjab and 5 from Sindh, showcasing their electoral achievements. The reserved seat mechanism played a crucial role in ensuring a defined level of female parliamentary presence. Women parliamentarians participated in legislative processes, and initiatives like the Women's Parliamentary Caucus advocated for gender-sensitive legislation, though challenges remained regarding their broader impact and effective engagement in Pakistan's political decision-making landscape.

In Pakistan's 2008 National Assembly elections, several notable women held significant positions and represented various provinces. From Punjab, prominent figures included Fehmida Mirza, from PPPP, became the Speaker of the National Assembly, Ms. Tahira Aurangzeb and Ms. Shaista Pervaiz from PML-N, Hina Rabbani Khar from PPPP, showcasing their political influence. Ms. Muneeba Iqbal and Ms. Nuzhat Sadiq, both PML-N members, were part of the assembly. Sindh was represented by Ms. Sehar Kamran and Dr. Sharmila Sahiba Faruqi Hashaam from PPPP. Ms. Shagufta Jumani from PPPP and Ms. Shaista Khan from PML-N were notable members from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Balochistan had representatives like Ms. Izbal Zehri from PPPP and Ms. Kiran Haider from PML-N. Other influential women included Ms. Asma Arbab Alamgir from PPPP, Ms. Samina Khalid Ghurki from PPPP, and Ms. Nikhat Shakeel Khan from MQM, highlighting the diverse political participation of women in Pakistan's National Assembly in 2008, Elections Act 2017

The parliament of Pakistan had landmark legislation in 2017 when the Elections Act, 2017, reformed and consolidated the election laws of the country. There has been a number of laws pertaining to the political mainstreaming of women, but this law had significant role in increasing the number of women candidates in elections for national and provincial assemblies (GOP, Election Act 2017, 2017). The highest ever a number of women candidates (183) contested the 2018 election for general seats, but this is partially being attributed to a provision in the Electoral Act 2017 that bound all political parties to allocate at least 5 percent tickets to women on general seats for NA and Provincial Assemblies.

Section 206 of the Act provides that:

A political party shall make the selection of candidates for elective offices, including membership of the Majlis-e-Shura (Parliament) and Provincial Assemblies, through a transparent and democratic procedure and while making the selection of candidates on general seats shall ensure at least five percent representation of women candidates (GOP, Election Act 2017, 2017).

Political parties always award tickets to women on weak constituencies. It is argued that “Legal experts believe that ECP and its monitoring teams have to play a vigilant role in the implementation of these provisions of the Election Act, 2017, so as to ensure the political mainstreaming of women” (Dawn , 2018) . This section of the Act permits the Election Commission of Pakistan to declare an election void. It has been made compulsory that at least women should cost 10 percent votes of the total votes polled in a constituency. If women cost less than 10 percent, it might be an indication that the women voters were restrained from casting their votes through agreement (Afzal D. N., 2023).

Section 9 (1) of the Election Act states:

Notwithstanding anything contained in this Act, if, from facts apparent on the face of the record and after such enquiry as it may deem necessary, the Commission is satisfied that

by reason of grave illegalities or such violations of the provisions of this Act or the Rules as have materially affected the result of the poll at one or more polling stations or in the whole constituency including implementation of an agreement restraining women from casting their votes, it shall make a declaration accordingly and call upon the voters in the concerned polling station or stations or in the whole constituency as the case may be, to recast their votes in the manner provided for bye-elections (GOP, Election Act 2017, 2017).

This was a valid reason for the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to declare "polling at one or more polling stations or an election in the whole constituency as void". Prior to this Act, the ECP lacked legal authority to declare an election void on such grounds. In 2015, the ECP declared a by-election for a Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) provincial assembly seat void because no women had cast their votes; however, the Peshawar High Court overturned the ECP's order in 2016. Historically, every election witnessed a disparity between male and female registered voters. Section 47 of the Act mandated that if there was a variation exceeding 10 percent in disaggregated data within a constituency, the ECP was required to take special measures to reduce such discrepancies.

General Elections 2018 and Women's Role

Women played a dynamic and vibrant role in Pakistan's political affairs, particularly in a developing country like Pakistan, where they contributed to shaping societal dynamics in line with modern trends while adhering to ethical and Islamic principles. It was argued by modern forces that Pakistan's democratic development hinged on active female participation in politics. Women's electoral stance in Pakistan was significant because they constituted almost 50 percent of the electoral college, and fifty percent of voters could play a crucial role in determining a candidate's victory, as was evident in Tharparkar, Sindh, during the 2018 general elections. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) secured victory in National Assembly elections in that area for the first time, largely attributed to the power of women's votes (ECP, Report of General Elections 2018 Vol-II, 2018).

The political landscape of Tharparkar had historically been unfavorable to the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), with the party suffering losses in the area since Pakistan's independence. The Arbab family held significant influence in the region and had traditionally blocked PPP's progress. However, after the PPP came to power in 2008, the party made concerted efforts to address local issues. A major problem in Tharparkar, particularly affecting women, was resolved by the PPP-led government. Tharparkar, being largely desert terrain, faced acute water supply challenges, an issue that even the provincial government led by Arbab Ghulam Rahim had failed to tackle. The PPP initiated water supply projects in the area from 2008 and managed to resolve the problem within a year. Extensive construction work was also undertaken in the region.

In the desert areas of Tharparkar, women had traditionally been responsible for fetching water for their families, often traveling long distances daily for this purpose. When the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) provided water supply facilities at their doorstep, women appreciated the party's efforts, and this was reflected in a shift in voting patterns in the 2013 elections. Women voted for PPP candidates in both the 2013 and 2018 general elections, even in instances where their male counterparts opposed PPP candidates. The 2018 general election marked a significant change in the area, representing the first time a poor Hindu candidate had won an election against powerful feudal lords in Tharparkar's history. This Hindu candidate, Mahesh Kumar Malani, was nominated by the PPP, and his victory was largely attributed to the support of female voters (ECP, Report of General Election 2018 Vol-I, 2018).

Women in National Assembly

In the 2018 Pakistani general elections, women's parliamentary representation manifested through multiple avenues, showcasing both the structured inclusion via reserved seats and the competitive electoral process for general seats. The National Assembly had 60 special seats allocated for women, filled through a proportional representation system based on parties' general seat wins, ensuring a defined quota for female legislators. Additionally, one woman was elected to a seat reserved for minorities. Beyond these reserved categories, eight women achieved victories in the fiercely contested general seats, out of 183 female candidates who stood for election nationwide, underscoring the challenges women face in winning direct mandates. The winning women represented various parties – three affiliated with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), two with Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), two with Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN), and one each with Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) and Balochistan Awami Party (BAP). Notable among them was Fahmida Mirza, who had previously served as Speaker of the National Assembly (2008-2013) with PPP and won in 2018 on a GDA ticket, illustrating shifts in political affiliations. Prominent female politicians like Firdous Ashiq Awan, who served as Minister of Information and Broadcasting, and Hina Rabbani Khar, who held the position of Minister of External Affairs, both from PPP, highlighted women's significant roles in Pakistan's political leadership and governance, reflecting a blend of electoral outcomes, party dynamics, and individual political trajectories that characterized women's participation in Pakistan's politics during that period (ECP, Report of General Election 2018 Vol-I, 2018).

Women in Punjab Assembly

In 2018, the Punjab Assembly's composition included significant female representation, reflecting both reserved seat allocations and direct electoral victories. Women occupied 66 reserved seats in the assembly, determined through proportional representation based on the electoral performance of winning political parties, ensuring a structured inclusion of female legislators. Beyond these reserved categories, seven women achieved notable wins in general seats across various constituencies: Zahra Batool (PP-272 Muzaffargarh), Syeda Maimanat Mohsin (PP-184 Okara), Syeda Sonia Shah (PP-123 Toba Tek Singh), Saleem Bibi (PP-96 Chiniot), Naghma Mushtaq (PP-223 Multan), Hameeda Mian (PP-65 Mandi Bahauddin), and Ashifa Riaz Fatiana (PP-122 Toba Tek Singh), showcasing their electoral success amidst competition. Additionally, one woman was elected to a reserved seat designated for minorities, further diversifying female representation. Cumulatively, the Punjab Assembly comprised 74 female members, with prominent figures like Yasmin Rashid and Ashifa Riaz holding ministerial portfolios in the provincial government, underscoring women's roles in leadership and governance within Punjab's political landscape during that period (ECP, Report of General Election 2018 Vol-I, 2018).

Women in Sindh Assembly

In 2018, the Sindh Assembly had 29 reserved seats for women, filled based on proportional representation of winning political parties. Two notable women, Azra Afzal from PS-37 Shaheed Benazirabad and Faryal Talpur from PS-10 Larkana, won general seats showcasing their electoral success. Azra Afzal served as Health Minister, highlighting her significant role in the provincial government, while Rehana Laghari held the position of Deputy Speaker of the Sindh Assembly. The assembly included numerous other female members such as Heer Soho, Hina Dastgir, Farhat Saleem, Ghazala Sial, and

many others, contributing to women's representation in Sindh's political landscape. These women represented various constituencies and were affiliated with different political parties, reflecting the diversity of female participation in Sindh's politics during that period (ECP, Report of General Election 2018 Vol-I , 2018).

Women in KPK Assembly

There are 26 reserved seats for females in KPK Assembly, and all are filled with the proportional representation of winning political parties. Only one female, Samar Harron from PK-78 Peshawar won on general seats. There is no female minister in provincial cabinet (ECP, Report of General Election 2018 Vol-I , 2018).

Women in Baluchistan Assembly

There are 11 reserved seats for females in Baluchistan Assembly, and all are filled with the proportional representation of winning political parties. NO female won on general seats as well as there is no female minister in provincial cabinet. Bushra Rind, Miss Bano, Ms. Shaheena, Dr. Rubab Khan, Fareeda Bibi Rind, Laila Bibi, Mahjabeen Sheeren, Ms. Mastoorha, Shakeela Naveed, Ms. Zubaida and Zeenat Shahwani are serving as member provincial legislature (ECP, Report of General Election 2018 Vol-I , 2018).

In 2018, there were four political parties registered with the Election Commission of Pakistan that had female leaders. The Pakistan Peoples Party (Shaheed Bhutto) was led by Ghinwa Bhutto, the Pakistan National Muslim League was chaired by Farkhanda Amjad, the Mutahida League was headed by Tehmina Amjad, and the National Front Pakistan was led by Hina Manzoor. Notably, major political parties like PMLN, PPP, PTI, PMLQ, and JI did not have female leaders serving as their central chairpersons or presidents at that time (ECP, List of Enlisted Political Parties, 2018).

Conclusion

Women's political representation in Pakistan between 2002 and 2018 showcased a blend of progress and persistent challenges. During this period, reserved seats for women in national and provincial assemblies like the Punjab and Sindh Assemblies ensured a structured level of female participation. For instance, the Punjab Assembly had 66 reserved seats for women filled through proportional representation, alongside seven women winning general seats, contributing to a total of 74 female members. Notable female politicians like Yasmin Rashid and Ashifa Riaz held ministerial positions, illustrating women's roles in governance. In Sindh, Azra Afzal served as Health Minister, and Rehana Laghari was Deputy Speaker. Nationally, figures like Fahmida Mirza, who was Speaker of the National Assembly, and Hina Rabbani Khar as Minister of External Affairs, highlighted significant leadership roles. Despite these advancements, major political parties like PMLN, PPP, PTI had predominantly male leadership, though parties like Pakistan Peoples Party (Shaheed Bhutto), led by Ghinwa Bhutto, demonstrated female-led political entities. Overall, while mechanisms like reserved seats facilitated women's parliamentary presence, broader political participation and top leadership roles remained areas of ongoing evolution.

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