



The Socio- political Impact of Increased Women’s Representation in National Assembly on their Economic Growth in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore the perception of educated urban women of Lahore about the relationship between women's socio-political participation and their economic development in Pakistan. The research uses a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative data from a survey of 40 educated urban women in Lahore with qualitative insights gained from three semi-structured interviews with female professionals working as an entrepreneur, civil servant, and female political worker. Majority of the women who were a part of the study strongly believed it is important to give women fair representation in politics if we want to have balanced economic policies that can help women become financially independent. Most respondents felt that even with enhanced visibility within political institutions, women in Pakistan still encounter both structural and cultural obstacles that play a negative role in their ability to gain economic independence. The semi structured interviews shed light on the subtle but persistent male dominated hierarchies in socio-political hierarchies that sometimes lead to restricted access to women of Pakistan in the decision-making processes. The study draws the conclusion that even though women have gained visibility in the National Assembly of Pakistan, they are still facing several obstacles in their road towards economic independence. Real economic transformation can only arise if institutional reforms are made that integrate gender inclusivity into governance structures. Policy implications encompass the expansion of gender-responsive budgeting, the enhancement of women's political literacy and mentorship initiatives, and the promotion of equitable access to fiscal and developmental policymaking.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Before the 2002 constitutional amendment in the National Assembly only 20 seats were reserved for women in Pakistan. The Musharraf government increased the number of reserved seats in National Assembly to 60(out of total 342 seats). This was an attempt to empower women in Pakistan and to make them an active member in country's sociopolitical environment. The aim was to give women representation with the help of reserved quota that will not only make them a part of active politics but also improve their socio-economic stature. Pakistan's politics apparently give space to women politicians as it has given birth to several key female politicians; Benazir Bhutto being the first female Prime Minister of Muslim world but according to World Economic Forum, 2024 Pakistan is still struggling with gender equality Pakistan stands at 142nd position out of 146 countries according to The Global Gender Gap Report 2024. Policy makers have increasingly contended that giving women more economic power is an important part of long-term development (World Bank, 2023). In developing nations, women's political engagement can both mirror and catalyze socio-economic transformation. However, only 23% Pakistani women have joined the workforce and out of these very few of them enjoy key decision-making positions. The main focus of this research is to give voice to how the educated urban women of Lahore perceive this situation where their representation in political parties is increasing but is it actually bringing any change to the socio-economic challenges facing women of Pakistan?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Several studies have been conducted in the past that have proven that economic progress of a country depends upon the enhanced gender equality that is granted in leadership positions. In a study that was carried out in 2023, Mirziyoyeva and Salahodjaev researched upon the data taken from 44 countries and they reported that a 10-percentage-point rise in women's parliamentary representation led to a 0.74-point increase in GDP growth of a country. It has been observed that if women are given executive powers, they tend to spend more on public health (Mavisakalyan,2014). It has also been observed that transparency increases when women are in power (Dollar, Fisman, and Gatti 2001) Gender gaps in education, employment and politics lead to negative outcomes in the growth of a country, whereas reducing these gaps improve the productivity of a country (Kabeer & Natali, 2013; Agénor & Canuto, 2015) It can be contended that if women are given equal opportunities, it leads to more comprehensive policy frameworks where education, healthcare and social protection gain priority thus leading to long term developmental benefits of a country . The government of Bangladesh has made policies to encourage women entrepreneurs through microfinance loans and other schemes; women were also given voice in legislative decision making. These steps brought positive changes to the country's economic development. According to one World Bank report, the number of women starting businesses in Bangladesh rose by 17% between 2015 and 2022. This was the time in Bangladesh when women were also in a leadership role in the economic ministries of the country. Kenya, another developing country made reforms in their constitution in 2010; a two-thirds gender rule was set which made it much easier for women to be elected to the legislature. Research carried out in Kenya proved that women who were elected to county assemblies promoted several community welfare initiatives, such as the Women's Enterprise Fund. Altuzarra et al. (2021) demonstrate that increased female parliamentary representation significantly enhances GDP growth. Several studies have suggested that female leaders positively influence socio-economic policies of a country as they have broader social objectives thus fostering growth. However, it has also been observed that sometimes norms, party structures, and resource

constraints can hinder the conversion of women representation into actual policy change (e.g., Shvedova, 2005; Powley, 2006). Pakistan is also a developing country that has a struggling economy with a big gender gap existing in its political scenario. To address this divide, in 2002 General Pervez Musharraf increased the number of reserved seats for women from 20 to 60 out of total 342 seats which is approximately a 17% increase in the quota of reserved seats for women (Government of Pakistan, 2002; Bano, 2019). At that time, it was considered a revolutionary step to narrow down the gender divide existing in the socio-political scenario of Pakistan that was negatively affecting the economy of the country. This study aims to enhance existing literature by articulating the perspectives of educated urban women in Lahore regarding the impact of increased female representation in the National Assembly on their socio-economic development and whether the increased political representation helped in narrowing or increasing the gender divide in Pakistan.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

3.1 Research Design

This is a mixed-methods research design, in which both quantitative and qualitative approaches have been utilized to gain insights into the perception of educated urban women of Lahore on the influence of increased female political representation on their socio-economic growth in Pakistan. During the quantitative phase of the study a structured survey was carried out with 40 randomly selected educated urban women. During the qualitative phase semi-structured interviews were conducted with three purposively selected women out of the 40 participants of the survey to gain insights. The purpose of choosing this study design was to ensure the triangulation of findings, thereby improving the validity, reliability, and contextual depth of the results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.2 Research Location and Subjects

The study was carried out in Lahore, specifically in the Defense Housing Authority (DHA) region—an urban, upper-middle-class community targeting women with good educational background and media literacy. This area was consciously chosen as the aim of the study was to record the perceptions of educated young women who have either firsthand experience or knowledge about the socio-economic and political challenges that Pakistani women face. The survey was administered with 40 women between the ages of 18 and 24. About 80% were college students, and 70% said they regularly read political news and current events. Out of these 40 subjects, three key informants were also chosen through purposive sampling to give qualitative insights. These people were part of the group:

- a) A woman who owns a business in the private sector,**
- b) A retired female civil servant**
- c) A female political worker.**

These subjects were purposively selected because they could help in providing an in-depth insight into the challenges facing Pakistani women in their socio-economic struggle.

3.3 Data Collection Tools

3.3.1 Quantitative Tool (Survey):

The main aim of the survey was to record the perspective of these women on the impact of increased political representation in the National Assembly on their socio-economic and

political growth. The survey consisted solely of closed-ended yes/no questions aimed to get information on the following topics:

- a) What women think about their roles in politics and leadership.
- b) Do gender specific quotas work in politics.
- c) Perspectives on the correlation between political engagement and socio-economic empowerment.
- d) How women perceive the obstacles that keep them from gaining socio-economic freedom

It was important to keep the questions closed- ended so that a clear and simple quantitative analysis could be carried out on the data elicited from the survey.

3.3.2 Qualitative Tool (Semi-Structured Interviews):

During the second phase of this study, semi-structured interviews were carried out with three purposively selected participants. The semi structured interviews were guided by open-ended questions that examined participants lived experiences and professional perspectives on the socio-economic consequences of women's political engagement. The researcher conducted these interviews face-to-face, which were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The semi structured interviews lasted for 30 to 45 minutes each. Before the final analysis, the transcriptions were shown to the interviewees to check for accuracy.

3.4 Data Analysis

3.4.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

The responses of the subjects were recorded and a simple statistical analysis of the responses was carried out. Percentages were calculated to analyze the number of participants agreeing with a statement written in the survey. This simple statistical analysis helped in understanding the perceptions of these women regarding women's political empowerment and its perceived socio-economic consequences in Pakistan.

3.4.2 Qualitative Data Examination

A thematic analysis of semi structured interviews was carried out during the qualitative phase of the study. The major themes that arose out of the thematic analysis was how women perceived symbolic versus substantive representation in the National Assembly of Pakistan, what type of barriers undermined their participation in Politics, and the gap between political representation and the actual socio-economic growth of the women in Pakistan.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

To maintain ethical integrity of this research informed consent was taken from all participants. The researcher made sure to maintain confidentiality of the respondents. All the participants were given the choice to voluntarily participate in the study and they were told that they could leave the study at any time if they felt any harm to their mental or physical health. (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018). The researcher made sure that the data was being utilized solely for academic objectives.

3.6 Limitations

This is a small-scale study aimed at gaining insights of women belonging to an urban and socioeconomically advantaged population (DHA, Lahore). It is limited in its scope as it has excluded women from diverse social strata or rural areas. The study contributes by providing

limited insights into the perceptions of politically informed urban women regarding the gender disparity and consequent economic impact on the women of Pakistan. Large scale studies can be carried out in future with bigger sample sizes and utilizing both primary and secondary data to gain better insight into this pressing issue facing Pakistan

4. Results and Findings:

4.1. Statistical Representation of Survey:

Table 1 presents the key findings from the survey conducted by the researcher on 40 women from Defense Housing Authority Lahore to record their perception regarding an increased political representation in National Assembly on their socio-economic development and reducing gender disparity in Pakistan.

Indicator	Agreement Percentage (%)
Believe female leaders make better economic decisions	78%
Support gender quotas in parliament	85%
Believe political participation directly improves women's financial independence	72%
Have participated in political and community event(s)	48%
Felt excluded from political discourse	62%

Table 1 Political Awareness and Economic Attitudes of Females

The data in Table 1 show that 78% of the respondents felt that women should have leadership positions as they make better economic decisions. 85% of the respondents felt that women quotas should be there in the parliament. 72% agreed that if women engage in active politics, it improves their financial autonomy. Even though these women believed that women need to play an active role in politics only 48% had actually taken part in any political or community activity. However, 62% of the women said they felt left out of political conversations.

4.2. Qualitative Findings:

During the qualitative phase of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three educated females purposively selected out of the 40 subjects for this study: a female entrepreneur, a female political worker, and a female civil servant. Their viewpoints helped in gaining an in-depth understanding of women's perceptions regarding the correlation between political representation and socio-economic empowerment, especially within the Pakistani context. Several common themes of hope and obstacles facing women arose out of these in depth semi structured interviews. Participants accepted the fact that women are being represented more, but they also agreed that institutional and cultural barriers still make it hard for real change to take place and we are a long way from actual economic and political equality in Pakistan.

4.2.1. Perspective of a Female Entrepreneur:

The female entrepreneur acknowledged that more women in politics has helped in improving how people view working women and was an encouraging trend for young women who wanted to be economically independent. She was cautiously optimistic about the future of women in

Pakistan and their socio-economic independence as she felt that the visibility of women in politics had not yet led to big changes in the way women entrepreneurs do business. However, having more women in politics had opened doors to more conversation about giving representation to women in varied fields. She contended that Pakistani business women still face several hurdles, like limited access to credit, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and limited state support. She said, "Women empowerment is the new buzz word in Pakistani politics but policy implementation is still not consistent and women running small businesses still face several hurdles." She further said that "women politicians don't have the power to make decisions in parties as these parties are mostly male dominated with women only having positions for the sake of better optics". However, she accepted the fact that Pakistani politics is moving in the right direction despite these limitations, especially in the growing legitimacy of women's entrepreneurship and the availability of more mentorship opportunities for women in Pakistan as compared to the past. Her interview made it clear that only having women in politics is not enough on its own. In addition to political representation, women of Pakistan must be given real decision-making roles in the policy making.

4.2.2. Perspective of a female political worker:

The female political worker helped in providing a more comprehensive perspective on how gender is represented in Pakistan's politics. She believed that women were given more representation in parliament which has led to raising awareness about gender issues, but sadly it hasn't really changed policy outcomes or the way political institutions in Pakistan work. She said, "yes we can see more women in the National Assembly of Pakistan but it doesn't mean that women's issues will also be addressed in policy-making." She expressed her dissatisfaction with the difference between representation and power. She further pointed out that most of the women who are given reserved seats have only symbolic roles, these women do not have much say in important economic committees or the legislative process. She also pointed out the issues most of the women-oriented policy initiatives had; they lacked long term planning and viability and were dependent on donors meaning they had no local support. However, she was hopeful as more and more educated young women were becoming politically aware and eager to take a stand for their beliefs. She felt that we need to take steps to organize more mentorship initiatives that will link seasoned female leaders with developing professionals in both the political arena and civil society. She also endorsed the fact that we need to convert numerical representation into real power through collaboration and accountability as mere representation cannot facilitate economic inclusion. She said that "women empowerment necessitates the implementation of institutional reforms providing women with significant policymaking authority".

4.2.3. Perspective of a female Civil Servant:

The female civil servant helped in gaining an in-sider's perspective on how women in government work within bureaucratic structures and real-life situations. She acknowledged the fact that more women taking part in active politics, had a good symbolic and cultural effect on making bureaucrats more sensitive about gender issues. However, she felt that these changes were only procedural rather than transformative. She also felt that the gender equity goals included in official planning documents, were more of a talk then a real policy shift. She felt that orthodox thinking was still ruling economic ministries and that there weren't enough women in charge of planning and financial divisions, where important budget decisions were being made. Weak monitoring systems had also made it harder for governments to be gender-responsive. She felt that there were several obstacles that women were facing in civil services, still women were taking small steps forward, such as more and more young women were now joining the civil

services which would be beneficial for the cause of women empowerment in the long run. She suggested that real progress can only be made if political representation and bureaucratic reform go hand in hand. To achieve this capacity building of women should be done. More women should be included in decision-making bodies. Her insights confirmed that although women's political participation has a symbolic significance, but real transformation can only be achieved with institutional reconfiguration that integrates gender inclusivity into governance structures.

4.2.4. Synthesis of Qualitative Findings:

A common theme arises from the three semi structured interviews; all three interviewees felt that representation of women in Pakistani politics was symbolic in nature and there was still a long road to the actual socio-economic and political empowerment of women in Pakistan. These women perceive the recent rise in female political representation as a good but not a complete change. They believed that including more women in the political process had not yet led to real changes in policy outcomes or the way resources were being utilized. All the respondents acknowledged that gender awareness in Pakistan had improved, but at the same time women had very limited access to policymaking spaces, and socio-cultural resistance were still problems that needed to be solved. These semi structured interviews endorsed the quantitative results by pointing out that the advantages of political representation are dependent upon an institutions receptiveness, policy coherence, and authentic authority that it is willing to give to its women representatives during the governance. The study therefore shows that educated, urban women in Lahore acknowledge that there is a significant correlation between political engagement and socio-economic empowerment. But women in Pakistan still don't have much of a say in making economic policy making because of ingrained ideas about political elitism, lack of transparency in institutions, and a general distrust of political processes. These things all make it hard for women to stay involved in socio-economic policy making of the government.

5. DISCUSSION:

This study has helped in exposing a persistent paradox in Pakistan; on one hand educated Pakistani women see a strong connection between women representation and socio-economic development but only a small number of women actually get involved in politics. This indicates that there are still several socio-economic obstacles that Pakistani women face. Pakistani women only hold a small number of important economic decision-making positions in Pakistan (a UN Women analysis shows that only 4.7% of top economic leadership positions were held by women as of 2023). Mostly women feel that male-dominated party structures, and socio-cultural norms hinder them from taking an active role in economic policy making. The study thus highlights the fact that, real empowerment means more than just getting more women into the National Assembly; it means giving women more power and a voice in making decisions about policy.

6. Recommendations:

Based upon the insights gained from the analysis of data gained through survey and semi structured interviews following recommendations are made:

1. Pakistan should make a gender sensitive economic policy as was done by Bangladesh. Bangladesh's recent gender-budget efforts resulted in a 30% rise in money for programs that help women start businesses. It means that Pakistan should train female finance officers and including women economists in budget committees.
2. Political parties in Pakistan need to take steps to go beyond giving symbolic representation to female politicians through quota system. Practical steps should be taken by the political parties to

give their female politicians tickets during general elections in winnable districts. This will help these women in gaining more power and a stronger voice in their parties if they are elected through a rigorous voting system.

3. Political parties in Pakistan should make an effort to make women's organizations of their female leaders stronger at the local level. In Kenya, county women representatives and councils have made it easier for women to get services increasing the agricultural productivity of rural women by 15%. Pakistan should also try out similar local governments, with women given an active political and social role to bring reforms to their districts with adequate funding

4. Women in Pakistan need to learn more about politics and should play an active role in politics. Workshops and mentorship programmes should be organized by established female politicians where young females can be mentored to join politics in future.

5. Women entrepreneurs in Pakistan should be given incentives to start their businesses and to gain economic stability. Bangladesh has offered tax breaks or grants to businesses run by women, the corporate reforms in 2019, such as reserved board seats and support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), are said to have increased the number of women-owned SMEs by 25%. Pakistan can also offer similar incentives to women that can include access to credit (microfinance), market training, and legal help. These type of steps can help women gain more economic power, which would ultimately create groups of women who would want to be actively involved in politics.

CONCLUSION:

This study has helped in giving representation to the perception of women regarding how they view the increased representation of women politicians in National Assembly of Pakistan and the actual impact on their socio-economic independence and growth. The data analysis and findings of the study indicate that a substantial number of women support gender quotas in National Assembly but a limited number of them have actually played any active role in politics. Another important issue that arose during this study was that representation alone is not enough, women need to be given real power and should be included in the policy making process. Policymakers in Pakistan need to enhance women's influence by making real steps through gender-responsive budgeting, authentic quotas, local empowerment, and capacity-building to realize the extensive socio-economic advantages of female leadership. It is important to conduct this study on a larger scale to keep track of women's policy influence and socio-economic outcomes. It will take political will, cooperation between parties, and ongoing investment to reach these goals, but the rewards could be big: a more open economy and society for everyone.

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