



RESEARCH PAPER

Understanding the Gender-Sensitive Political and Legislative Behaviors in Pakistan through the Lens of Feminist Theory

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ABSTRACT

Even as the numbers of women in legislative bodies in Pakistan have been boosted by gender quotas, the actual empowerment of female legislators in the main is more symbolic than real. The feminist theory and political representation theory help frame the analyses of the roles played by gender in the actualization of political power and participation within the patriarchal Pakistani society. The elevation of women in political statuses in different parts of the globe is one major sign of advance of equitable relations between the genders more so in such cultures as the Pakistani culture, which for a long time limited women in their interaction with the public domain. The issue of women's participation in the political field is not only a question of fairness but also of the improvement of democracy qualification since democratic values presuppose the presence of a diversity of opinions and views to develop policies that meet the interests of all the segments of society. The instant study qualitatively examines the nature of gender-sensitive political behaviors by applying feminist theory and uses secondary data collected from books, and research journals for conclusions. It recommends that possible changes in the national assembly are required to happen institutionally where women empowered politically as the agency; reforms that include changes in party structures, gender-sensitive policies, and training of women and men in society to transform gender stereotypes.

KEYWORDS Feminist Theory, Gender and Political Power, Patriarchal Norms in Pakistan

Introduction

In order to explore and understand the level of female political participation in Pakistan, Dr. Allauddin along with other colleagues investigated the impact of community structure on women's political decision making. This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to reveal that the political participation of women in Pakistan is a multilayered, multidimensional issue which is genuinely expected from a country that is still endeavoring to constitute a truly stable and participatory democracy (Allauddin, *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, Noor and Yaseen carried out a broader environmental analysis of women's engagement while focusing over the district Sialkot of Pakistan. The aim of this mixed research approach study was to identify which economic, social and culture factors affect women's engagement in grassroots political leadership. The analysis of the results revealed a number of significantly intertwined factors that hinder women's political participation in the area (Noor & Yaseen, 2023).

Another very important comparative study of the lower House legislative business during civilian and military administrators in Pakistan was done by Begum and

Jamal. In the pursuit of the study's objectives, thereby employing qualitative research techniques, the dynamics of legislation as well as the roles of different political players in this process were explored. The findings of the study describe on how the lower chamber functions in relation to the prevailing political climate and power balance in Pakistan (Begum & Jamal, 2021).

Introducing the Theoretical Dimensions of the Study

A comprehensive scholarly toolkit to examine the intricate dynamics between gender and political participation comprises upon utilizing feminist theory, political representation theory along with the concept of Intersectionality. Each of these theoretical approaches offers a distinct perspective that enriches our understanding of the challenges and contributions of female parliamentarians in a complex socio-political landscape of Pakistan.

Feminist Theory: Exploring Power and Gender in Politics

Feminist theory offers a set of paradigms through which one can systematically analyze power and gender in society. It provides a framework which can be used to analyze and comprehend the cultural and institutional frameworks that have subjugated women all these years across all fields, including politics. Feminist theory aims at questioning the normal practices that perpetuate male power and female subordination with a view of revealing inequalities entrenched in social institutions and culture. This theoretical framework is especially useful in the context of Pakistan in which formal and informal parameters of power in the country are presented as forming a closed circuit in which women Members of Parliament (MPs) especially those in the lower house cannot easily overcome the rules, regulations and resistance they encounter on a daily basis. Using the feminists' view, it is possible to analyze gender-based prejudices at multiple levels to understand the institutionalized exclusion of women in politics and the platform to facilitate the fight for decentralized political leadership (Kakar, *et al.*, 2023).

Gender and Power Dynamics: Currently, the role of women in Politics presents a social issue that the feminist theory questioned regarding how the power has influenced gender for women and girls. Feminist theory is all about assessing the role of gender and power concerns in social life, especially in the political domain. It is a theoretical frame that goes against the traditional view of women as subordinate and domestics, which has been the natural thing for centuries. In the political context, these norms help in determining not only the holders of political power but also the way in which political power is wielded. Feminist theory challenges the existing power relation that denies women the opportunities to occupy central and authoritative roles because these relations are socially constructed and maintained for purpose of undermining women. In this way, feminist theory poses questions about the power relations that shape political systems and mobility of women thereby framing gender prejudices in political realms and reducing the ability of the female gender to engage in politics and affect the laws and policies that are made. Because such criticisms emphasize gendered power relations, it is important to apply them to help explain why women still have not been able to attain political parity.

Analyzing the role of gender and power in political domains, it is crucial to lean on the cultural models proven to shape them, in this case, patriarchy. Such norms also set not only power relations and capabilities but also limits and possibilities for women in politics.

A tremendous influence on the interaction between the two aspects of gender and power dynamics in political contexts is seen to be impacted by cultural expectations by the society, and particularly in the areas of patriarchal cultural rules and regulations. They provide a general framework of how the superior gender – the male is supposed to dominate the inferior gender – the female. In politics it is expressed in one's degree, from the sparse number of women in the legislative bodies to their exclusion in debate. The dominant male culture affects the distribution of power by developing and enforcing factors which exclude women from attaining and exercising political power. Such limitations include prejudices in the political parties where women candidates are given a raw deal, prejudices in journalism where women politicians are covered in a biased way, and prejudice in society where women are often asked questions about their capacity to lead. These are not only structural norms but also the norms of culture that shaped people's perception of women in the political process. Feminist theory aims at revealing these norms and at striving for the power relations that enable women to engage in politics to the same extent as men do.

As this investigation seeks to understand the ways in which such dynamics play out in Pakistan's political arena, exact details and statistics are used to capture the depth of the problem of patriarchy affecting the qualitative participation of women in the parliament (Rehman, *et al.*, 2023).

In the case of Pakistan, the analysis of the gender and power relation within the political sphere demonstrates the manner of how patriarchy saturates women's parliamentary involvement. Gender quotas are not enough to change the traditional attitude towards women's position in Pakistan and their active participation in the country's political institutions is still limited by patrimonial attitudes. These norms are for instance expressed in terms of women's restricted political party agency and leadership, the gendered division of labor in legislation, and the society's doubt of women's capability for governance. Actual data shows the severity of such obstacles. For instance, in as much as gender quotas have ensured that women sit a certain percentage of parliamentary seats, their ability to influence policy processes is trivial. Female MPs are sometimes appointed to committees or sectors of the law often considered to be not as important as those assigned to male MPs, thus re-enforcing the stereotype of women's subordinate role to their male counterparts. Moreover, the social conditioning, which still remains to a large extent a patriarchal structure, negatively influences the position of women politicians and their ability to gain people's trust and effect change. Through the use of findings, the feminist theory demonstrates the constant fight for women rights in Pakistan's political realm as well as the requirement of further fight against the structures that are being in place to ensure the continued subjection of women.

Contextualizing Gender and Power in Pakistan

Ever since the creation of Pakistan, politics has been a male-dominated field, a clear testimony to the facts that this country is a male chauvinist society at its best. Such norms have been in the society for quite some time, holding that power and decision making belongs to man while women are to remain subordinated within society and the politics. There have been attempts to enhance the status of women politically including the recent introduction of gender-based seats in the National Assembly but these have not severed the cultural practices and beliefs that were limiting women in their political power and authority. Despite the fact that many women are able to obtain political positions, they may experience a tremendous degree of difficulty in exercising power and making decisions. The current powerful political culture in Pakistan is male-dominated whereby women are sidelined in the decision-making processes, and their

potential, contribution is unrecognized and given low value hence the continued marginalization.

Statistical Overview: Even in 2023, women are only occupying twenty percent of the boards of the top companies in the United States of America. The case of Pakistan was much alarming where, as of October 2011, only 7% seats out of the total 342 seats in the National Assembly of Pakistan were occupied by the female member, proving that women face obstacles to enter the political industry. This percentage although has been achieved as a result of gender quotas aimed at providing minimum representation of women in national parliament is still low compared to the world average of twenty-five percent for women in parliaments according to the Inter parliamentary Union. Analyzing the numbers, one can see that the legal possibility of women's participation in political life is still not enough. Pakistan has a very low share of women in the parliament which is evident from that only 2.4% of the women have been elected at the Pakistani parliament and thus women struggle to gain access and stay in the politics. These figures also echo the societal perception that still considers politics as an almost man-only affair, where women are met with a lot of hostility and disbelief when making attempts to make themselves prominent in such positions.

Historical Perspective: The status of women political participation and political leadership in Pakistan has improved slightly in the recent past especially from early 2000s when women constituted about 10 percent of National Assembly. This has risen to over 20% in the recent past and this has been due to legislative reforms like the Women's Reserved Seats Act which has helped in a big way in increasing the numerical strength of women in the parliament. However, the growth of women in legislature has not in equal proportion benefited the women in way of having a direct control over the legislations being passed. Various restrictions are still felt by many feminine lawmakers among which leadership opportunities are rare, and they are often excluded from important decision-making. With regard to legislative solutions, they were effective in some way in increasing the representation of women in Parliament but still do not solve the problem of structural and cultural barriers that hinder women's effective political power. This historical perspective proposed that more efforts in the area are still required not only to get women into the boardroom but also to secure substantive board representation for women.

Impact of Patriarchal Norms

Political culture is thus a key determinant of the Political opportunity structures for Women because it determines how patriarchal norms will shape perceptions and practice in public institutions.

Cultural Expectations: Pakistani culture is particularly significant because it determines the woman's roles and keeps them limited to domestic duties and responsibilities rather than career and productivity in the public sphere. This societal map, predefined in the spirit of male domination, poses considerable problems to women who would like to be politicians. Since childhood, girl child is trained to be more fixated to family duties rather the dreams, hence creating such a culture in the society where women are viewed more as mothers and caregivers not as the leaders or the decision makers. This cultural socialization discredits women from actively participating in politics, because to do so is to act against the social expectations of a woman. In addition, these expectations reduce women's ability to access the resources that are essential for their political ascendancy including educational, professional and financial capital that is required for a good political career. Therefore, women who may wish to participate in

politics and other political processes are all but lost, as they struggle to balance between societal norms, and their perceived political dreams and aspirations.

Institutional Barriers: In Pakistan and its political parties and legislatures, women face profound institutional hurdles that are principally sociopolitical: officialdom remains patriarchal. still after the legal mechanisms and quota systems have been put in place, women find themselves being placed in less powerful positions or in unimportant committees, which almost form no part of the mainstream organizational structure. This exclusion is usually proof of the existing 'patriarchal politics' of power where leadership is assumed to be the preserve of men. There are also many women who want to be appointed at leadership positions in their political parties though they encounter more challenges of lack of sponsorship, training and promotions compared to their male counterparts. These institutional barriers are further encouraged by the limited numbers of females in senior political positions hence few other females are encouraged to follow suite. Also, the oppression of women in party affairs means that they do not sit in decision-making organs and therefore cannot influence policy or legislation in a way that challenges masculine hegemony. Hence women's ability to participate in policy making is demeaned, and their capacity to effect equitable transformation is virtually unrealized.

The Interplay between Gender Roles and Political Power

It shows how the position of women affected legal mandates' development and which ideas receive support or do not have the backing of political systems and gender expectations.

Policy Focus: Most of the time, women parliamentarians of Pakistan have to defend the matters of country's family law, gender issues, education, health and social uplift. However, despite the fact that these areas undoubtedly occupy an important place and have a rather great, sometimes decisive, influence on the state of society and the welfare of its members, women's activities are expected to be limited only to these spheres, thereby continuing the gender stereotyping in the process of policy-making. Such confinement to what can be called 'softer' policy areas is quite restrictive in that it still tends to eliminate women from policy-making debates on truly national and economic policies, such as finance, defense, foreign policy, and infrastructure, which is seen as being more serious and effective. When the political party or the political system places certain women politicians into several policy areas, it not only limits the chances of those women to work on other areas, it also denies the system rich voices and understandings that are necessary to deal with problems that affect Pakistan today. While this means that gender specific issues can be promoted and attended to, these gender specific issues can also reinforce the complementary nature of women's work and therefore their marginal importance to the core business of law-making carried out by men.

Visibility and Influence: The enhancement of democracy in Pakistan requires more participative female parliamentarians by focusing on visibility and improving access to decision-making roles and authority. Still, various academic research suggest that women are underrepresented in these key positions in the National Assembly by a wide margin. This underrepresentation is not only evidence of the external and internal constraints that remain a feature of women's experiences in today's society and in institutions, but it also works against women who wish to bring about change in the political system. Women's assertiveness in leadership is vital for changing and reestablishing the features of leadership and governance in Pakistan where leadership powers have long been centralized among men. It is comprehensible that when women

hold leadership positions they not only fight for women's interest, but also women's voice and concerns are introduced to national and economic discourses, beneficial for more encompassing policy making. Besides, the presence of women in leadership positions is an incentive to other females as well as a sign that the political power is within their grasp. Nevertheless, the current state of practices still sees the minimum representation of women in the rights of appointments and promotions thus seeing women's contributions to the legislative and policy reform sidelined. It re-establishes the social trend of oppression of the rights of women to political participation and mainly the consequential exclusion of their impact in the charting of the policies affecting the nation.

Analyzing the issue of gender and power relations in the context of the Pakistani politics is an interesting and complex endeavor because it demonstrates how the aspects of a patriarchal system allow and define the women's roles and possibilities. Therefore, as much as legal frameworks have been put in place for women participation the actual leverages that they have to influence and participate are still constrained by cultural, societal and institutional frameworks. To transform such kinds of attitudes and practices, it is pivotal to carry out wide ranging changes that go to the root of gender political marginalization. These include and extending educational endeavors, political policies, and the change of cultures which, as a unite, strive for the abolishment of patriarchal systems and the attainment of the actuality of gender equity in the various aspects of politics (Rashid & Zaka, 2012).

Advocacy for Institutional Change

It fights for reform of laws, policies and practices and gender democratic in political leadership and voting rights. Championing for institutional transformation in relation to gender equality especially in electoral systems is crucial in altering the social framework within which women were erased from all forms of power. In Pakistan some of the major legal reforms and policies have been launched in order to reduce the gaps between gender and provide more political rights to the women. Here, we focus on the important legislative and policy measures that have been taken in order to reduce gender disparities (Sarangi *et al.* February 2023).

Key Legislative Reforms and Policies

Women's Reserved Seats Act: The Women's Reserved Seats Act is amongst one of the most revolutionary acts for the enhancement of legislative seats for women for gender equality in Pakistan. Implicit since the early 2000s, and later formalized through constitutional changes and the electoral legislation, this policy has greatly contributed to raising the proportion of women in the National and Provincial Assemblies. What the Act does is it assigns a given percentage of the seats to be given only to women so that there is a mandatory level of representation of women in those legislative bodies. This was a quota to ensure women's representation in the political affairs since they are rare in politics; this is due to the prevailing cultural and societal policies in the Pakistan society. Thanks to this policy, women are employed in 20 percent of general board of directors' seats. This amount is for 7 % of the seats in the National Assembly -much higher than the pre-quota situation. Nevertheless, this percentage is still lower than the global average, but it is an important improvement as regards the role of women in Pakistan's government. The Act has also had a domino effect, with the increased number of female political aspirants in the country and a progressive social change with reference to women in politics. However, the weaknesses persist in transforming this numerical

representation in to empirical political power since women remain trapped in a structural cultural politics that defines the political arena.

Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010): One of the crucial laws that reformed the rights of women at the workplace is the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act that was passed in 2010. This legislation is special for women who hold political positions since many of them suffer from toxic interactions in the form of sexual harassment or discrimination. The Act ensures that several complaints touching on harassment are addressed within a comprehensive framework to guide employers and ensure that there are means of protecting and compensating the victims. It requires the establishment of the inquiry committees in organizations, including government offices and political institutions to help hear cases of harassment and recommend for penalties to be taken against the perpetrators. This legal protection is imperative if women are to perform their professional activities without the menace of gender based violence or coercion. Through creating the work environment friendly towards women the Act also contributes towards more women engaging in politics and other decisions making bodies thus eliminating one of the major causes of the lack of women's rights in Pakistan. Furthermore, the legislation has a more general gender equality task that involves trying to change the culture that perpetuates or minimizes harassment, which can lead to progressively healthier work environments.

The Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offenses in the name or pretext of Honor) Act (2016): The Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offenses in the name or pretext of Honor) Act of 2016 is such legal measure that was needed to reign in the prehistoric cultural values that oppress women in Pakistan. Prevalent in Pakistani society, honor killings involve women being killed by their male kin for tarnishing the family's honor and have preposterously often gone unheard and unprosecuted. This amendment made the honor killings as a non-compoundable offence which means the murderer cannot get himself acquitted on the basis of forgiveness by the victim family or the reconciliation of the families involved as was permissible under the law earlier. In eradicating this legal invisibility, the Act puts its efforts in preventing honor killings and also for asserting its stand towards gender equity and women's rights. It is crucial legislation in the sphere of women's involvement in both public and political activities, since threats of violation have always served as the means of women's confinement to the private domain. In this way, the Act helps to promote changes in wider society that address women abuse and make women's rights and their ability to participate in the political process to be respected and protected.

Election Act (2017): The Election Act of 2017 was approved to facilitate the following critical antidotes to increase women's involvement and security in Pakistan's electoral process for both the national and provincial assemblies. Among the distinctive features of this legislation is the provision that provides for the obligatory conversion of no less than 5% of party lists for the election of the maximum number of members of the Parliament into women's lists. The intention of this provision is to encourage female contender especially in electorally contentious states above and over the set-apart seats that offer baseline representation in the National and Provincial Assemblies. The Act that insisted on women to contest for general seats envisages to enable women to be more fully participating in the political process where they are allowed to vie for general seats in the competition with male counterparts. Also, some security measures for women during the elections, such as cases of harassments of female voters, have also been addressed under the Election Act. These provisions are important as they contribute to establishment of a fair environment for women in politics and increase the rates of

women's voting. These reflect a broader well-articulated policy on women in governance where the Act recognizes that women are critical in the distortion of democracy.

Impact and Outcomes of these Developments

These legislative actions have had varied impacts on the landscape of political representation for women in Pakistan:

Increased Female Representation: The legal measures such as the reserved seats for women and other supporting actions in Pakistan show the positive results in terms of the increased female participation on both the federal and provincial levels. This has been helpful in transforming the domain of politics that has for a long time been male-dominated by women. Reserved seats have offered a chance for women to occupy certain seats in the parliament and thus can speak their part in the parliamentary debate. Therefore, women have been able to champion key questions on gender power, health, education and social justice in the political agenda. These more engagements have not only liberated women politically but have also begun to change the social perspective of the role of women in governance. It is a quantitative advance; but the quantitative change also paves way to a more qualitative change in the direction of the female status in Pakistan's political framework.

Policy Initiatives Focused on Women: The status of women has improved in Pakistan because many of them have become representatives of the parliament which consequently has prompted the formulation of legislation and policies on the rights of women and gender parity in different spheres. Women participations have been strategic in campaigning for causes that concern women including health, education, law and social concerns. This participation has claimed the recent laws and policies for women such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) and the amendments to the criminal law in honor killings. These policy measures have not only offered the legal standards, and obtained more opportunities in accessing the necessary services to women but also stressed the respect of the gender-sensitive approach to governance. Women have therefore been able to participate in policy making processes and put forward the issues that affect only women and for them to be a given proper recognition in development.

Challenges and Limitations: Even if there has been progress in terms of the presence of females and the development of gender-oriented strategies and measures, it is important to emphasize that there are obstacles and drawbacks in the effort to alter the gender power relations at the level of political chambers in Pakistan. The status of women has improved in the fact that today they occupy more seats, but remain in the political booth limited to only being symbols of their sex and not participants. Such a perception hampers their participation and ensures that the community keeps premising their findings as inferior to those of male counterparts. Also the gratis seats have established foothold, but they have not erased the patriarchal shaped politics system altogether. The advancement of women occupies the central place in the agenda of societies and organizations, but they still struggle with the barriers to leadership and decision-making powers. Thus, while the legal measures have brought progress in the question of women's quota and numerical representation, other changes are needed to achieve the real substantive presence of women in politics and enable them to steer change from the positions they occupy.

Since this legislative requirement has been articulated, efforts are being made to gain ground and provide women with political representation at least at the provincial

level, though the fight for women's rights in Pakistan continues yet. Of course, many of these such as reserved seats and gender sensitive laws have acted as a useful starting point towards enhancing women's participation in politics. Nevertheless, a real and complete equality has not yet been achieved in the field of gender. To decolonize such spaces and systems, more attention needs to be paid to advocacy to ensure the stress is maintained to forge deeper transformational reforms. This advocacy must be backed with good implementation of existing laws and policies in order to make sure that they bring positive impacts to women in politics. Not to be overlooked is the issue of culture as there is still so much culture that has not embraced the change from the traditional male domination, that discourages women from being part of the decision making. It is necessary to understand that there is need for legal compliance for women's rights; institutional changes for women's political participation and enabling environment at societal level for women to be empowered fully in the political realm (Gul *et al.*, 2023).

Conclusion

This legislative achievement of women in Pakistan highlights the important role that women can play in addressing issues that directly impact other women. It demonstrates the need for more female representation in politics to ensure that gender-sensitive issues are addressed in policy-making. Future studies could examine the impact of other female-led legislative initiatives and explore how women's presence in parliament influences policy outcomes in areas such as health, education, and social justice. The absence of mentorship programs for female politicians is a critical gap in capacity building. Women often experience isolation in their early careers which is also a shared problem for many women entering politics for the first time in Pakistan. Creating formal mentorship networks within political parties and across the political system could provide aspiring female politicians with the support and knowledge needed to succeed. Capacity-building programs, leadership workshops, and peer-to-peer mentoring should be prioritized to ensure that women are equipped with the tools to navigate the complexities of political life. In a nutshell, institutional barriers, such as the lack of family-friendly policies and inadequate support systems for female politicians, are significant obstacles that need to be addressed. Introducing childcare facilities, flexible work hours, and mentorship programs within the political system would create a more inclusive environment that invariably allows women to balance their political and personal responsibilities. These measures would also encourage more women to enter politics, knowing that they will be supported at the institutional level.

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