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## Political Participation of Women: A Study of Pakistan (2001-2013)

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**Abstract:** *The importance of women in political participation cannot be ignored. Women comprised half of Pakistan's population but since the inception of Pakistan, their participation in politics remained limited. Women have fundamental rights to political participation. Women's participation in politics is indispensable to maintaining gender equality, promoting good governance and upholding human rights. In Pakistan, President Musharraf's government introduced several policies, for the empowerment of women, such as the number of women seats being increased in the parliament and provincial assemblies, the establishment of a commission on the status of women, and repealing of discriminatory laws. In the 2002 general elections, a large number of women were elected to parliament, with women's representation increasing from 2% to 22%. Similarly, during the Zardari regime, measures were taken for the political participation of women at both provincial and national levels. This study addressed women's representation and participation in Pakistan politics and find out challenges, impediments and opportunities for women during 2001-2013.*

**Key Words:** Women Participation, Pakistan, Legislation, Quota, Representation, Women Empowerment.

### Introduction

Women's participation in politics is crucial for the functioning of democratic societies. Women's political involvement helps to ensure gender equality and is essential for ensuring that women's perspectives and needs are represented in political decision-making processes. When women are excluded from political participation, policies and laws are often biased towards male perspectives and interests, which can perpetuate gender inequality. By increasing women's political representation, democratic societies can promote gender equality and social justice (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019).

Meanwhile, women's political participation enhances democratic legitimacy. Democratic societies rely on the participation of all citizens to

ensure that their voices and their interests are represented. When women are excluded from political participation, democratic legitimacy is compromised, as the government may not reflect the diversity of its citizens. By increasing women's political representation, democratic societies can enhance their legitimacy and strengthen the democratic process (UN Women, 2021).

Thus, women's experiences and perspectives are often different from those of men, and this can lead to policy decisions that are essentially inclusive and responsive to the requirements of diverse communities. By including women in political decision-making, they can advocate for policies that benefit not only women but also other marginalized groups, such as ethnic and racial minorities, and people with disabilities.

Women have played a significant role in Pakistan's politics since the country's inception in 1947. Pakistan's first constitution, adopted in 1956, recognized the right of women to vote and hold public office (Latif [2009](#)). However, the participation of women in politics remained limited due to cultural and social barriers.

Benazir in 1988 served two non-consecutive terms (1988-1990 and 1993-1996). Bhutto was a vocal advocate for the rights of women and played an instrumental role in promoting gender equality in Pakistan (Watson, [2006](#)). Similarly, the services of other Pakistani women like Fatima Jinnah, Dr Fahmida Mirza, Lieutenant General Nigar Johar, Maryam Mukhtar, Shehla Raza, Dr Maleeha Lodhi, Abida Hussain, Dr Shireen Mehrunnisa Mazari, Sharmeen Ubaid Chinoy, Malala Yousafzai, Saima Saleem are appreciable.

In 2000, Pakistan's government introduced a quota system and increased women's seats in the local councils and the parliament. As a result, women's role in politics increased significantly, as they were holding 22.7% of seats at the national level in the national parliament in 2021 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, [2021](#)).

### **International Commitment and Treaties for Women's Empowerment**

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International treaties play a crucial role in protecting and promoting women's rights and empowering women globally. These treaties are legally binding agreements that provide a framework for governments to take action to promote gender equality and enhance the participation of women in all aspects of society.

#### **Equal Remuneration Convention 1951**

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The Equal Remuneration Convention, also known as Convention No. 100, was adopted by the (ILO) in 1951. This convention is an important international treaty that aims to promote gender equality in the workplace by safeguarding that women obtain equal wages for work.

The Equal Remuneration Convention is important for women sharing in politics because it addresses the important barriers to women's economic empowerment and political participation. Women often face discrimination in the workplace,

including lower pay for the same or similar work as men, which can limit their skills to fully contribute to political life and make choices that mark their lives and communities. The treaty promotes the balancing of payment. The Equal Remuneration Convention helps to address discrimination against women and promotes women's economic empowerment. This, in turn, can women's role in politics by giving them the economic resources and independence necessary to engage in political activities and make their voices heard.

In addition to promoting equal pay, the Equal Remuneration Convention also requires countries to take steps to overcome discrimination against girls and women in employment, including recruitment, promotion, and training. This can help to create a protective environment in the workplace and promote their full participation in political and social life.

#### **Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women 1967**

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United Nations General Assembly adopted this declaration in 1967. It is a significant international instrument for promoting women's rights and political empowerment. The Declaration recognizes that discrimination against women is a defilement of basic human rights and urges the governments to take different measures to eliminate such discrimination.

The Declaration is important for women's social and political empowerment. This declaration suggests to states take appropriate measures for women's development in all fields of society and politics meanwhile this declaration guarantees to provide equal opportunities for women in society.

In addition to promoting women's political empowerment, the Declaration also calls on governments to take steps to overcome discrimination in access to education, healthcare, and employment. This can help to create a more level playing field for women and promote their active involvement in all the key aspects of economic affairs and social life.

#### **CEDAW 1979**

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CEDAW was actually signed to protect women against discrimination as well as is an important

instrument for empowering women politically because it recognizes that girls' and women's rights are basic human rights. CEDAW recognizes the importance of women's participation in political and public life and calls on governments to ensure that women have equivalent chances to contribute to the social life and political process. This includes measures to ensure women's equal representation in elected and appointed positions, as well as in civil society and community organizations.

CEDAW recognizes that women's perspectives and experiences are essential to informed decision-making, and calls on governments to make sure that women have equal opportunities to actively participate in policy-making and decision-making processes at all levels, from local to national.

### Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 2000

United Nations adopted the set of eight global development goals, also known as MDGs, in 2000. While the MDGs were not explicitly focused on women's political empowerment, they included targets related to women's empowerment and gender equality that have important political implications.

Education: The MDGs included a target to achieve universal primary education, which is critical for enabling women's political empowerment. Education helps women to gain the knowledge and skills necessary for political participation and leadership and to challenge gender stereotypes and discrimination.

The MDGs included a target to promote gender equality and empower women, which has important political implications. Gender equality is essential for ensuring that women have equal opportunities to participate in political life and exercise their rights as citizens. Meanwhile, the MDGs included a target to reduce poverty, which is critical for enabling women's political empowerment. Poverty disproportionately affects women and can limit their access to education, health care, and other resources that are essential for political participation and leadership.

### Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2015

The SDGs were a significant step taken by the UN in 2015 to achieve women and girls-related matters and empower them till 2030.

Gender Equality (Goal 5): This goal explicitly targets women's empowerment and gender equality, including equal chances to access leadership and decision-making processes, as well as equal opportunities for political participation at all levels.

Education (Goal 4): The SDGs include targets related to universal access to education, particularly for girls and women. Education is a critical tool for empowering women politically, as it provides them with the knowledge and skills necessary for political participation and leadership.

Health (Goal 3): The SDGs include targets related to improving maternal and reproductive health, reducing violence against women, and promoting reproductive and sexual health and rights. These targets are important for enabling women to control their own bodies and make informed decisions about their lives.

Economic empowerment (Goal 8): The SDGs include a target to promote decent work for all, including equivalent pay for identical work, which is important to empower women economically and thus their political empowerment.

### Significance of Study

Women's participation in politics is significant and cannot be ignored, as it is critical for establishing gender equality, women's rights, and the overall development of society. Women's participation in politics ensures that women's issues are adequately represented and addressed in policy-making processes. Women have quite different experiences, perspectives, and priorities than men, and their presence in politics ensures that these perspectives are reflected in the decisions made (Glimartin, 1995).

Women's participation in politics enhances the legitimacy of government and democratic processes by reflecting the diversity of the population. It ensures that the voices of women are heard and that their interests are appropriately represented (United Nations Development Program, 2019).

Meanwhile, women's participation in politics leads to better decision-making, as it brings diverse perspectives and experiences to the table. Different studies describe that the states with increased political participation and representation of women in society lead towards more inclusive laws and policies (World Bank, 2020).

It can be firmly asserted that increased women's participation in politics can lead to increased empowerment of women in society, as it provides them with a platform to voice their opinions and advocate for their rights. It also inspires other women to actively participate in politics and take on leadership roles (Bari [2005](#)).

## **Literature Review**

In the contemporary era, there is a growing interest in conducting research on women's political participation. While there is still a significant gender gap in the decision-making process and political representation worldwide, there has been progress in some countries and regions. Several factors have been recognized as contributing to women's political participation such as cultural norms, legal frameworks, and socioeconomic factors.

In Pakistan, during 2008, 2013 & 2018, three prolific as well as successive democratic elections have been held at the national level. But the introduction of reforms in 2000-2002, restored the quota for reserved seats for females in national and provincial assemblies, by Musharraf. So, the quota for reserved seats for women increased to 17% in elected assemblies and 33% in local government. Political mobilization and representation of women were improved considerably by this step (Khan & Naqvi 2020).

A significant change in Pakistani politics can be witnessed after entering many women politicians at the local level. The electoral procedure which made women authorized is quite irretrievable. In the current scenario, women are more authoritative and confident. The history of Pakistan displays a culture based on socio-economic structure, class-based political culture, rural/urban divide as well as patriarchal practices by means of aspects that vigorously participate in the subservience of women (Ali 2012).

Women had to face manipulation as well as unfairness from men all over the world. Romans, Greeks and Chinese, which are the most enlightened and polite nations of the world, unluckily, did not have confidence in the self-determining character of women. It is an irony that women of these nations do not have equal rights and privileges as men. Western

Christian women remain humiliated and destitute till the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Chheenah, 2019).

Women have faced physical and verbal harassment at their workplace and there are certain laws which provide shelter and also harm to such working women. It can be rightly said that workplace cruelty is a significant factor in the present discourse in Pakistan which hinders the way to prosperity and success for women as well (Jafree, 2017).

Women did not possess even citizen rights during the ancient Greek period. In the history of the Greek city-state, an equal education system was claimed by Plato, for the first time, for both women and men. In the case of Pakistan, the Musharraf period is well thought-out as a superb period. In 1999, many reforms were introduced by Musharraf for the empowerment of Pakistani women. During the general elections of 2002, there were 66 seats reserved for women in Punjab Assembly and 60 seats were reserved for women in National Assembly. In District Councils, Tehsil Councils and Union Councils, a 33% quota for women was introduced by Musharraf through the "Devolution of Power Plan" (Imran & Shahzad 2019).

Legitimately quota guarantees to increase women's participation and role in parliament, meanwhile they can resolve women's genuine issues at the state central platform of the National Assembly. Numerous studies revealed that quota systems have meaningful results to increase women's participation and resolve women's issues (Krook & O'Brien, [2012](#)). However, quota systems are not a one-size-fits-all solution and may have unintended consequences, such as reinforcing gender stereotypes or reducing women's legitimacy (Baker, [2019](#)).

Cultural norms and gender stereotypes also play a part in women to increase the contribution of women in politics. Women may face social barriers and discrimination that prevent them from participating in political activities, such as gender-based violence (Mukhopadhyay, 2018). Efforts to challenge these norms and stereotypes, such as through public education and media campaigns, can help in enhancing the participation of women in the political sphere (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).

Socioeconomic factors also influence the political participation of women in politics in general

and in Pakistan in particular. Women with higher levels of education with higher family income are more prospective to participate in politics, as are those with access to social networks and resources (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Economic empowerment programs, such as microfinance or vocational training, can help to enhance women's participation in politics by providing them with the means to pursue their goals (Kabeer, 2005).

In conclusion, a variety of factors influenced women's political participation such as legal frameworks, cultural norms, and socioeconomic factors. These factors need important consideration during the efforts to increase women's representation in politics. Similarly, a range of strategies are required for women's representation in politics such as from legal quotas to cultural change programs and economic empowerment initiatives.

### Women's Representation in Musharraf Era

During the 12th Assemblies of Pakistan, which spanned from 2002 to 2007, women's representation in parliament increased significantly. Here are some key statistics and references:

In the 2002 elections, women won 60 out of 272 seats in the National Assembly, which represented 22% of total seats. This was a significant increase from the previous elections in 1997 when only 17 women had been elected to the National Assembly (Reyes, 2002).

In the 2003 elections for the Senate of Pakistan, 17 women were elected to the upper house of parliament, which represented 17% of the total seats. This was a significant increase from the previous elections in 1997 when only 8 women had been elected to the Senate (Jabeen, 2021).

In the 2002 elections for provincial assemblies, women won 86 out of 728 seats, which represented 12% of the total seats. This was also a significant increase from the previous elections in 1997 when only 29 women had been elected to provincial assemblies (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2013).

Moreover, during the period of 2002-2007, several women held important political positions as ministers and advisors in the government of Pakistan. Member of the National Assembly, Hina Rabbani served as Minister of State for Economic Affairs and Statistics from 2004 to 2007. Later she

went on to become the first woman to hold the position of Foreign Minister of Pakistan in 2011 (Dawn, 2011). In 2006, Shamshad Akhtar was appointed as Deputy Governor, making her the first woman to hold this position (The News International, 2006). Nafisa Shah served as the Advisor to the Chief Minister of Sindh for Culture and Tourism from 2002 to 2007. Later on, in 2008, she was elected as a Member National Assembly (The News International, 2008).

### Legislation for Women during Musharraf Era

During the period of 2002 to 2007, the government of Pakistan introduced several laws and policies to promote women's empowerment to address gender inequalities. Here are some examples, along with references:

The Protection of Women Act 2006 was passed by the National Assembly of Pakistan. This law introduced several amendments to Pakistan's criminal laws to provide better protection to women against various forms of violence, including acid attacks, honour killings, and domestic abuse. The law also established special courts to hear cases related to violence against women (Government of Pakistan, 2006).

Another policy for women's empowerment was approved by the National Assembly of Pakistan. Basically, this policy was devised for women's empowerment by promoting gender equality in almost all important sectors of society, including health, education, employment, and political participation. This policy also emphasized the need to address issues such as gender-based violence, discriminatory laws, and lack of access to resources (Government of Pakistan, 2002).

Womens Empowerment Package 2006 included several initiatives aimed at improving women's social and financial status, including the establishment of a women's bank, a women's health centre, and a women's shelter in each district of Pakistan. The package also included measures to enhance women's participation in politics and to address violence against women (Government of Pakistan, 2006).

### Women's Representation during Zardari Era

The 13th NA of Pakistan was formed after the general elections held in 2008. Women's political

contribution to this assembly was significant. The total numbers of seats in the National Assembly were 342 and a total of 76 women legislators were representing the National Assembly of which 60 seats, 33 per cent, were reserved for women whereas 16 women were elected, through election, on general seats. So there were 76 women in the National Assembly of 342 members. 139 women were represented in different provincial assemblies of Pakistan. Out of these 139, 11 were elected through general elections on general seats and 128 were nominated on reserved seats for women. These women legislators held important positions in the assemblies.

In the history of Pakistan first time women speaker of the National Assembly (Fehmida Mirza) was elected and served duty in this position from 2008-2013 (Dawn, [2008](#)). Another female member of parliament (Sherry Rehman) served as the Information Minister from 2008-2009, and later as the Ambassador of Pakistan to the United States from 2011 to 2013. Hina Rabbani was elected as a member of the National Assembly by contesting an election in 2002 and served as the Minister of State for Economic Affairs and Statistics from 2004 to 2007. In 2008, she served in an important position as Minister for Economics and finance affairs (Dawn, [2008](#)). Marvi Memon was elected as a Member of the National Assembly in 2008 and served as Chairperson of the National Assembly standing committee on Broadcasting and Information from 2008 to 2012. She also served as the Chairperson of the Benazir Income Support Program from 2013 to 2018 (The News International, [2018](#)).

### **Legislation for Women's Empowerment during Zardari Era**

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The 13th National Assembly of Pakistan, which was formed after the general elections held in 2008, passed several laws aimed at women's empowerment.

The law related to protection against harassment of women 2010 was passed in 2010 to provide protection to women against harassment at their workplaces. The law requires all public and private organizations to establish a grievance redresser committee to investigate complaints of

harassment (The Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010, March 2010).

The Act on acid control was passed in 2010 to curb the growing trend of acid attacks on women in Pakistan. The law provides for severe punishment for those who commit acid attacks, including imprisonment and fines (Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act, 2010).

Prevention of Anti-Women Practices (Criminal Law Amendment) Act, 2011: This act was passed in 2011 to criminalize various forms of violence against women, including forced marriages, acid attacks, and other harmful practices (United Nations Women, [2012](#)).

The act on National Commission was passed in 2012 to establish National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW). This is an independent statutory body that is established to promote and protect women's rights in Pakistan. NCSW is assigned with the task to monitor policies and laws related to different issues of women and making recommendations to the government for their improvement (NCSW 2012).

### **Conclusion**

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It is an irony that the representation of Pakistani women in policy-making and political participation of Pakistani women is restricted regardless in spite of the fact that a woman ruled Pakistan as Prime Minister for two terms. Moreover, a large number of women also served in various important positions in Pakistan. However, Pakistan, still, is a country where women, with some exceptions, face a lot of difficulties. The Constitution of Pakistan put no limitations on women's participation in the field of politics. Therefore, it is the major obligation of any democratic government in Pakistan to provide fair opportunities to women so that Pakistan can be an equal opportunity and stress-free state for women to live.

Women's political participation is a prerequisite for building inclusive and representative democracies. Over the past century, women have made significant gains in terms of political rights and representation, thanks in part to international agreements and national-level policy reforms. However, there are still many hurdles to achieving gender equality in politics. Women are facing many

structural barriers to political participation, such as patriarchal dominance, discrimination, gender bias, and a shortage of access to resources and networks. Moreover, intersectional factors such as ethnicity, class, race, and sexual orientation also play a significant role in terms of opportunities and challenges to women's role in politics.

After a thorough study of legislation for women in Pakistan during the Musharraf and Zardari regimes from 2002 to 2013, the following findings can be drawn;

### Findings

To address the current challenges, it is essential to promote such initiatives and policies that promote both social justice and gender equality in politics. This includes efforts to increase women's representation in elected office, promote women's leadership and decision-making roles, and ensure equal access to resources and opportunities. It also involves challenging gender stereotypes and discrimination and promoting a culture of inclusivity and respect for diversity. Overall, promoting women's political participation is not only a matter of social justice and gender equality, but it is also crucial for building more responsive and representative democracies that work for all members of society.

It is observed around the world that there are different treaties working for the empowerment of women in different countries in different ways, like flowing treaties including MDGs, and SDGs role, especially with reference to Pakistan. In this connection, President Pervez Musharraf's taken practical steps towards the empowerment of women and enhance women's representation in Parliament from 2% to 17%.

According to research by Alexander Bolzendahl & Jalalzai (2016), women's political empowerment can be measured how women empower socially and politically. The state laws' reflection can be measured when more women in society obtain equal chances and easily participate in political activities and decision-making processes. Otherwise, male hegemony dominates in society and they cannot provide equal chances for each of them.

Several barriers prevent women from achieving political empowerment, including social and cultural norms, institutional barriers, and gender-based

violence. One significant obstacle to women's political empowerment is the shortage of access to education and economic resources. The World Bank estimates that nearly 500 million women worldwide are illiterate.

Studies show that women's political empowerment can have a positive impact on governance, including increased social welfare, better decision-making, and reduced corruption. A study by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) confirmed that women's participation in politics is associated with more effective governance and greater responsiveness to citizens' needs. Similarly, research shows that women in positions of power are more likely to support policies that benefit children and women, such as childcare and healthcare programs.

To increase women's empowerment in terms of politics, several strategies have been proposed, including affirmative action policies, quotas, and training programs. Affirmative action policies aim to address the historical discrimination against women and other marginalized groups by providing them with equal opportunities to contribute to democratic activities. As quota in parliament introduced by Pervez Musharraf in 2000 Government for the political empowerment of women on one side and for their social uplift on the other side, there is a dire need to evaluate women's role practically in parliament that how much they are independent in decision-making and participating in policy-making and legislation.

Research shows that these strategies for increasing women's political participation and women empowerment have been successful in several countries, including India, Rwanda, and Norway. Different treaties and international commitments have played an instrumental role in order to empower women in politics and their participation in Equal Remuneration Convention is an important international treaty for promoting gender equality and women's contribution in politics by addressing one of the key barriers to women's economic empowerment.

Similarly, the Declaration for elimination and discrimination against Women is an important international instrument for promoting women's rights and political empowerment. CEDAW

guarantees to empower women at all levels of society against harassment in the workplace, secure working hours and elimination of discrimination. CEDAW also ensures women's social and political empowerment and forcing to state they make laws according to international treaties and ensure equal opportunities for women and girls in society.

One more commitment MDGs 2000 were not specifically focused on women's political empowerment, they included targets related to women's empowerment and gender equality that can be seen as empowering women politically. The success of the MDGs in achieving these targets has contributed not only to women's empowerment but also to greater gender equality globally.

Most recent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2015 can be seen as empowering women politically by explicitly targeting women's empowerment and gender equality, as well as including targets related to health, education, and economic empowerment that are essential for enabling women to participate fully in political life. By promoting inclusive and participatory decision-making processes and reducing discrimination and barriers to political participation, the SDGs help to create an enabling environment for women's political empowerment.

## **Suggestions**

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There are some suggestions that can be made to enhance women's participation in politics, including:

**Promote gender-sensitive policies:** Governments should develop policies and programs that ensure women who were deprived of basic needs of life, can easily access their basic needs as Pakistan's constitution provides girls education till the age of 16 for each citizen of the state and girls.

**Provide access to resources:** Women often face significant barriers to accessing resources and networks that are essential for political participation, such as funding, training, and mentorship. Governments and civil society organizations should work to ensure that women have equivalent access to these resources.

**Enhance women's participation in decision-making roles:** Women's representation in decision-making roles like elected office, civil service, and leadership positions in political parties needs to be

increased. This can be achieved through affirmative action policies, such as quotas or reserved seats, and by promoting women's leadership development programs.

**Challenge gender stereotypes and discrimination:** Governments and civil society organizations should work to challenge gender stereotypes and discrimination that stop women from participating in politics. This target can be achieved through awareness-raising campaigns and education on the one hand and through legal and policy reforms that promote gender equality on the other hand.

**Engage men in promoting women's political participation:** The role of men cannot be ignored in promoting women's political participation and gender equality. Governments and civil society organizations should work to engage men as allies and advocates for gender equality and women's rights.

Overall, promoting women's political participation requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses the various structural, cultural, and social barriers faced by women. By working together and implementing these suggestions, we can build more inclusive and representative democracies that work for everyone.

The importance of women's contribution to politics cannot be excessive, as it is critical for the enhancement of women's rights, gender equality, and the overall development of society. Women's participation in politics ensures that women's issues are adequately represented and addressed in policy-making processes. Women have different experiences, perspectives, and priorities than men, and their presence in politics ensures that these perspectives are reflected in the decisions made.

Women's contribution to politics enhances the legitimacy of the government and democratic processes by reflecting the diversity of the population. It ensures that the voices of women are heard and that their interests are represented. Hence women's participation in politics can lead to increased empowerment of women in society, as it provides them with a platform to opinion their views and advocate for their rights. It also inspires other women to partake in democratic activities and in taking leadership roles.

Meanwhile, women's participation in politics leads to better decision-making, as it brings diverse perspectives and experiences to the table. It is a dire

need of contemporary times to address the representation of women as per true democratic spirit not they dependent on their male counterparts.

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