

## **HIERARCHY OF WOMEN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND INCOMMENSURABILITY BETWEEN WOMEN REPRESENTATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN SOUTH ASIA: PAKISTAN IN PERSPECTIVE**

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**Abstract:** *Political empowerment of women is considered the highest level of women empowerment, and a result and indicator of socio-economic empowerment of women, which in turn ensures the continuity of the latter kind of empowerment. This paper analyzes the unfortunate incommensurability between political representation and socio-economic empowerment of women in South Asian societies by employing available lines of arguments: a) challenging the criterion of representation; b) post-structuralist critique and Foucauldian concept of power – the one that challenges the whole idea of empowerment through legislation and state policies – and c) attributing the incommensurability to the missing stages of hierarchy of women political participation. In doing so, the paper identifies a gap between lowest and highest levels of women participation in South Asian societies and highlights the gap between the state laws and laws of truth imposed by knowledge borne by socio-cultural norms of Pakistani society.*

**Keywords:** Women empowerment, women political participation, women representation, South Asia, Pakistan

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### **Introduction**

Political empowerment is the highest level of women empowerment, which is a result of social and economic empowerment of women and, in turn, ensures continuity of their social and economic empowerment. Political empowerment is, inter alia, gauged by women representation in government in general and in national legislatures in particular. Women representation in Pakistan's national legislature is 19.3%,<sup>1</sup> which is third highest in South Asia, higher than almost two-thirds of Muslim countries, and higher than the average of the Asia (18.3%). But unfortunately this ranking does not commensurate with the rank of Pakistan in terms of women status in society or women empowerment – approaching 150<sup>th</sup> in the world.

This paper analyzes why political empowerment through representation of women has not brought fruits in terms of equal rights for women and their real empowerment in society. The paper presents a detailed situational analysis highlighting the incommensurability between political representation and socio-economic empowerment of women in Pakistan and analyzing the available lines of arguments for this incommensurability. The concluding segment highlights the pattern of women political participation in Pakistan and identifies a gap between its lowest and highest levels.

### **Representation and Women Empowerment in Pakistan**

Pakistan has quite satisfactory representation of women compared to its regional and religious context – 3<sup>rd</sup> highest in South Asia and higher than almost two-thirds of Muslim countries. Table 3 shows percentage of women representation in lower houses, upper houses, and combined in both houses of national legislatures of the Muslim countries in descending order. The table would also help in analyzing the religious context of Pakistan.

Pakistan has also witnessed women leaders of national stature before and after partition. Begum Shah Nawaz, Begum Shaista Ikramullah, Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan, Miss Fatima Jinnah, Begum Salma Tassaduq Hussain, Abadi Begum, Lady Sughra Hidayatullah, Geti Ara Bashir Ahmed, Begum Viqarunnisa Noon, Lady Nusrat Haroon, and Begum Nawab Muhammad Ismail are some of the worth mentioning women leaders of freedom movement who continued to participate in politics after 1947. Benazir Bhutto (Two-time prime minister of the country), Nusrat Bhutto (chairperson of Pakistan People's Party), Fahmida Mirza (Speaker National Assembly), and Hina Rabbani Khar (Foreign Minister) are the prominent women who served on key positions in Pakistan's post-independence politics. Although Pakistan was the first Muslim country to elect a woman as head of national government, the overall picture of women representation in national legislature has been gloomy since 1947.

In the first two constitutions of Pakistan, 6 seats were reserved for women in National Assembly. The current constitution of Pakistan stipulated that there would be 10 seats reserved for women for next 10 years or for next three general elections, whichever occurred later. The number was raised to 20 in 1985 by General Zia ul Haq, but then these seats lapsed after three general elections of 1977, 1985, and 1988; and therefore, there were no women reserved seats in elections of 1990, 1993, and 1997. Then General Pervaiz Musharraf increased the number of women reserved seats to 60 in 2002.

Currently women representation in Pakistan's National Assembly and Senate combined stands at 19.3%. The number of women members of National Assembly is 69 out of 340 filled seats, out of which 8 women have been elected in general elections, 60 women have been elected on women reserved seats, and one woman member has been elected on minority

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reserved seat. The number of women in Senate currently stands at 17 out of 104 total seats, all of which are reserved seats (4 seats are reserved for women to be elected by each provincial assembly and one from federal capital). Moreover 137 seats are reserved for women in provincial assemblies – 61 seats in Punjab Assembly, 37 in Sindh, 25 in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, and 14 seats in Balochistan Assembly. Seats reserved for women are allocated to political parties as per their general seats in legislative assemblies on the basis of list system.

The participation of women members of parliament is satisfactory, to say the least, in terms of parliamentary business. Following excerpt of a report by FAFEN (Free and Fair Election Network)<sup>2</sup> on women parliamentarian's performance during fourth parliamentary year of 13<sup>th</sup> National Assembly of Pakistan gives an idea about the level of their participation:

“The fourth parliamentary year was marked by passage of four pro-women bills... [including] Prevention of Anti-Women Practices (Criminal Law Amendment) Act 2011... Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Bill 2010... National Commission on the Status of Women Bill 2012... Women in Distress and Detention Fund (Amendment) Bill 2010... Single female Members [authored] 20 out of 53 Private Members' bills that appeared on the Orders of the Day in the fourth parliamentary year. Similarly, during the third parliamentary year, 17 out of 34 were authored by single female Members... [T]heir legislative interests encompass a variety of important national issues. They moved two bills each on criminal law, employment, elections and NADRA, and one each on the Capital Development Authority (CDA), banking, child rights, food security, foreign affairs, health, housing and works, citizenship, and right to information. [They] contributed exceptionally to oversight of executive by putting up questions. Out of 2,365 questions raised during the fourth parliamentary year, more than half (1,196 or 51%) were put forward by female members. On average, 16 questions were submitted by each female MNA, almost four times more than their male counterparts who raised 1,169 questions... [W]omen legislators were part of 75 of the total 97 Calling Attention Notices either individually or jointly with their male and female colleagues... Out of 1764 Points of Order raised in the House, the women parliamentarians' share was 252 or 14 percent... The female representatives moved 42 Resolutions.” (FAFEN, 2012, pp. 1-4)

### Situational Analysis

The abovementioned facts and figures are impressive, and portray quite optimistic picture of women participation in parliamentary role in Pakistan. In fact women role in parliamentary business makes us believe that women are far more active and empowered than their male counterparts in legislature. But one cannot keep his eyes from looking back to the ground realities. Pakistan has been ranked 145<sup>th</sup> in Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and 127<sup>th</sup> in Gender Inequality Index (GII) of 187 countries of the world. Socio-cultural practices in Pakistan pose serious threats to women empowerment in Pakistan. Forced or early age marriages, so-called honor killings (Karo Kari), dowry killings, *Purdah*, *Watta Satta*, *Swara* and *Wani*, and ‘Marriage to Quran,’ perpetuate subjugation of women in Pakistani society. Women's access to education, healthcare, and gainful employment is limited because of socio-cultural and economic constraints.

Socio-cultural and economic indicators of women empowerment draw a deplorable image of Pakistani society. In spite of the fact that Islam and the state laws allow women to inherit and have property, women in Pakistan normally do not own land; most of the cultural practices like marriages to Quran, or to the boys of very young age, or to the brothers of deceased husband are aimed at depriving women of their inherited land. Even in cases where women do have property, they seldom exercise decision making power vis-à-vis use, rent, or sale of that property, which is done by male members of the family. Access to other economic resources and employment is also very limited. They normally do not have access to formal sectors of employment; even when they do, they do not get equal pays to that of men. Women constitute major chunk of informal sector employment, where they are more vulnerable to exploitation.

The access to education is very limited for women in Pakistan. Parents normally do not send their girls to school in rural areas; and even when they do, they dropout early on account of financial limitations, early marriages, and traditional beliefs. The condition of health sector in Pakistan is not up to the mark in general, but for women it is miserable to say the least. Women do not normally exercise reproductive choices either in terms of number or spacing of children, due to which they often face serious health issues. Frequent pregnancies in pursuit of male offspring, domestic violence, malnourishments, and treatment by pseudo doctors, quacks, and *peers* often cause physical and psychological disorders.

This incommensurability between political representation of women in Pakistan and socio-cultural and economic indicators of women empowerment puts a question mark to the quota system of women representation adopted in Pakistan, or elsewhere in the world. The principle of reserved women seats is in place in around 40 countries on the premise that equal or proportional representation of women – no matter how it is accomplished – is the first step towards women empowerment and establishment of a more balanced system of governance. It is, no doubt, a very plausible argument, especially considering the performance of women in Pakistan's parliament. But then why this performance of women on reserved seats has not been transformed into socio-economic empowerment of women at the grassroots level? Why women political leaders at the highest level of the government machinery and women in parliament on reserved seats don't seem to have any implication for the women whom they supposedly represent?

There can be three lines of arguments in response to this question: the first one challenges the representation criterion or process through which these women elites come to power; second argument challenges the whole idea of bringing change through legislation and state policies; and the third argument attributes the prevalent incommensurability to the missing stages of the women political participation in Pakistan. Let's apply both of them to analyze the relation between political empowerment through representation and socio-economic empowerment of women.

The reserved seats are allocated to political parties as per their general seats in legislative assemblies on the basis of list system. But who gets to represent women on reserved seats? The answer is kith and kin of top political leaders get to be elected on these reserved seats. The major chunk of the women on these reserved seats comprises of daughters, wives, sisters, sisters-in-law, and close relatives of the top leadership of different political parties. In 14<sup>th</sup> National Assembly of Pakistan elected in May 2013 general elections, the relatives of male political leaders have "once again grabbed a lion's share of the reserved seats for women in both the National Assembly and provincial assemblies" (Gishkori, 2013, May 30). These reserved seats are also used by the political parties to get those women of their party elected who have otherwise lost in the general elections. "Some of the lucky women, who lost on May 11, [2013] are now members of the assemblies via the reserved seats route" (Gishkori, 2013, May 30).

What adds to the problem of women representation is the fact that the women who have been elected in general elections are also relatives of the top political leadership and belong to influential political families. Furthermore, most of them have been elected after death, removal, or disqualification of male members of their family. Let's take the example of current national assembly. Total 8 women have been elected in general elections and all of them belong to influential political families with a history of male members of their family being former or current office holders. Therefore, the first line of argument – the one challenging the modus operandi of the election on reserved seats that ends up sending female relatives of top leadership to parliament – does not hold water; because women who are elected on general seats do not also represent the common women of Pakistan. Let's analyze the second line of argument that challenges the whole idea of bringing change through legislation and state policies.

Second explanation of the lack of women empowerment despite women representation in legislative assemblies and cabinets is close to Foucauldian discourse, which equates power with knowledge, norms, and values and not with laws and force. It understands power to flow along discourses and move through populations and does not accept power as a property of individuals or institutions. Applying this explanation of power to the problem of incommensurability between women representation and women's socio-economic empowerment leads us to conclude that no matter how many women are present in national legislatures and no matter how much legislation is done to empower women, women would not be empowered practically unless the society is not structurally transformed.

Laws and state policies cannot change the fate of women in any society unless the norms and values do not equate them with their male counterparts and favor their real empowerment. State policies and laws declaring women equal to men would not have any practical value unless there's acceptance of the fact in general masses. What is the point in making offences against women more and more severely punishable, if they are not reported because the norms and values of Pakistani society dictates to keep matters related to female members of family undisclosed in the name of 'family honor'? What benefit would it yield to fix minimum wages for women workers, when they are not employed in formal sectors of economy and informal sectors are not regulated by law? What purpose would it serve to reserve seats for women in legislative assemblies, if only women from influential political families can get elected on those seats, and common women of society cannot afford to contest in general elections and do not have influence to get elected on reserved seats?

Third explanation is based on Musai, Alehashem, and Abhari's model of socio-political participation of women (2014), which outlines a hierarchy of women political participation, having non-involvement in politics at the lowest level and then identifying following levels as higher ones in women political participation: voting, participation in informal political discussions, passive membership in organization or political party, participation in public societies, demonstrations etc, and having formal political position (governmental). Musai, Alehashem, and Abhari are of the view that an indigenous movement for political empowerment of women would be the one achieved as a result of these steps of political participation.

Social norms in Pakistan do not question the voting right of women nor do they object political representation of women in parliament, but the intermediary stages of political participation of women do not have the social legitimacy or sanction of social norms and the law of truth imposed by those norms. The absence of intermediary stages between voting and having formal political position creates a gap between electors and their representatives. The women in Pakistan have right to vote (lowest level) and they have representation in parliament (highest level), but intermediary levels of political participation of women are missing in Pakistan. Women do not take part in political discussions, women membership of political parties is very rare, and they do not take part in political demonstrations. So the women representatives on reserved seats do not follow the stepwise route of political participation to the highest level, and therefore, remain alien to the system. Electors, on the other hand, do not make learned choices as the system is alien to them.

Political empowerment is indeed highest level of women empowerment, which results from socio-economic empowerment, but it does not work the other way around. Political empowerment of women can, however, ensure continuity of socio-economic empowerment of women in society, provided former is a result of the latter. If political empowerment comes through socio-economic empowerment, it would definitely strengthen and perpetuate socio-economic empowerment of women.

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> National Assembly of Pakistan currently have 69 women out of 340 sitting members (60 women reserved seats, one woman on minority reserved seat, and 8 elected in general elections), and Senate has 17 women senators out of total house of 104.
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