

The Quota System in Pakistan: Women, Religious Minorities, and the Challenge of Substantive Equality

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the quota system in Pakistan as a mechanism for improving the representation of women and religious minorities in higher education, public employment, and political institutions. It is adapted from an M.Phil. thesis that combined a survey of institutional practice with a review of annual reports of the Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC) and Punjab Public Service Commission (PPSC), together with institutional information and interviews. The evidence indicates that quota arrangements have created formal routes into institutions, but implementation has remained uneven. In higher education, the thesis reports that a 2% quota for religious minorities was introduced in 2020, followed by differing patterns of institutional implementation in 2020–2021. At Government College University Faisalabad, the study reports 27 reserved seats for minorities out of 4,600 total seats and one reserved seat for KP women in each department. At Agriculture University Faisalabad, 57 minority seats were reported in 2021. In federal employment, the thesis reports 16,711 minority workers in 2017–2018, representing 2.8% of the federal workforce in the cited data, with 13,401 minority workers (80.19%) in BPS 1–4. The FPSC figures cited in the thesis show 120 minority-reserved positions in 2017, of which 83 were filled and 37 remained vacant. PPSC data cited in the thesis similarly show substantial unfilled quota positions. The findings indicate that the existence of a quota is not equivalent to effective representation. Recruitment, educational access, availability of qualified applicants, monitoring, and institutional implementation shape the practical impact of affirmative-action measures. The article concludes that quota policy should be evaluated not only by the number of seats reserved, but also by the number filled, the distribution of beneficiaries across institutional levels, and the opportunities available for advancement.

Keywords: Quota system; affirmative action; women; religious minorities; Pakistan; public employment; higher education; representation.

INTRODUCTION

The principle of equality is central to democratic governance, but formal equality does not necessarily produce equal outcomes in societies where groups have entered public institutions from unequal social, economic, and educational positions. Women and religious minorities may encounter barriers before they reach the point at which formal competition begins. Educational inequality, economic constraints, social expectations, limited institutional networks, and discrimination can affect who is able to apply for, obtain, and advance within public opportunities.

Pakistan's quota system developed within this wider problem of representation. Quota arrangements have been used in public employment and political institutions and, more recently in the evidence examined by the thesis, in higher education. The purpose of these arrangements is to reserve a defined

share of opportunities for groups whose representation has been limited. In this sense, the quota system is not simply a numerical device. It is an institutional response to a question of access: whether groups that have historically been disadvantaged can participate meaningfully in institutions that distribute public resources, employment, education, and political authority.

The thesis underlying this article examines the quota system through three connected domains: higher education, employment, and politics. Its empirical chapter focuses especially on women and religious minorities and asks how many seats are reserved, how reservations are implemented, and what happens to reserved positions in practice. The evidence is particularly useful because it shows an implementation gap. Some institutions reported reservations, while others reported admissions on open merit or no implementation. In employment, reserved posts were sometimes filled but substantial numbers remained vacant. The thesis also shows that minority employment was heavily concentrated in lower pay scales.

The article therefore adopts a deliberately evidence-based question: what does the reported data tell us about the difference between having a quota on paper and achieving representation in practice? Rather than treating quota policy as an automatic solution to inequality, the analysis considers the institutional conditions that determine whether reserved opportunities are actually accessed.

Historical and Constitutional Context

The thesis presents the quota system as a policy that developed alongside Pakistan's broader effort to secure representation for different regions and social groups within public institutions. The historical development matters because quotas were not introduced as a single, uniform policy covering all sectors at one time. Rather, different forms of reservation emerged in employment, political institutions, and later higher education.

The constitutional framework provides an important background to this development. The thesis discusses Article 27 in relation to appointments to the service of Pakistan. The provision combines protection against discrimination in public appointments with the possibility of reserving posts for particular classes or areas when necessary to secure adequate representation. This creates a constitutional basis for understanding quota arrangements as measures directed at representation rather than as a replacement for the general principle of equality.

The thesis also discusses the extension and continuation of quota arrangements through constitutional and administrative developments. Its historical account shows that the debate over quotas has persisted because the underlying problem—unequal representation—cannot be separated from differences in access to education, employment, political networks, and economic resources.

For women and religious minorities, this history is particularly relevant. Political reservations create a route into representative institutions; employment quotas create access to public-sector positions; and educational reservations can strengthen the pool of qualified candidates. These mechanisms operate at different stages of social and institutional participation and should therefore be considered together.

Conceptual Framework: From Formal Equality to Representation

The article is based primarily on the M.Phil. thesis supplied for this study. The thesis describes a survey conducted across educational institutions, the employment sector, and politics, with the stated purpose of examining the allocation of seats for women and minorities. The empirical chapter also reviews annual reports of the FPSC and PPSC. Institutional information was obtained through interviews and documentary sources.

The thesis reports interviews with representatives associated with Government College University Faisalabad, Quaid-e-Azam University, and Agriculture University Faisalabad. These interviews are

treated here as qualitative institutional evidence rather than as statistically representative samples. Personal communications are cited in notes when relevant and are not included in the bibliography.

The analysis also uses secondary reports cited in the thesis, particularly the Centre for Social Justice and People's Commission for Minorities' Rights report on implementation of the religious-minority job quota, the FPSC 2017 report on minority representation in employment, and the PPSC 2017 annual report. The article preserves the thesis's reported figures and does not claim that the thesis independently verified every underlying government record.

Quota Policy in Higher Education

The thesis reports that reserved seats for women and religious minorities were not generally implemented in Pakistan's higher-education institutions before 2020. It further reports that a 2% reservation for religious minorities was introduced in higher education in 2020. The subsequent institutional evidence shows that policy adoption was not uniform.

At Government College University Faisalabad, the thesis reports one seat for women from KP in each department and 27 reserved seats for religious minorities out of 4,600 total seats, equivalent to 0.58% of the total. The thesis also reports that Quaid-e-Azam University reserved one seat for a religious minority in each of its 38 departments, while no separate women's quota was reported because women's admissions were described as occurring on open merit (Arslan, personal communication, August 27, 2021).

Agriculture University Faisalabad provides another example of staged implementation. The thesis reports that in 2021 the university allocated 57 reserved seats for religious minorities out of 5,826 seats. It also reports 25 minority seats for a B.S. programme in one part of the admission process, alongside a smaller number of applications. The interview evidence further states that quota arrangements had not been implemented for M.Phil. and Ph.D. programmes at the time of the study (Aleem, personal communication, August 22, 2021).

Table 1. Selected higher-education quota arrangements reported in the thesis.

Institution evidence /	Women	Religious minorities	Total seats / departments	Study period
Government College University Faisalabad	1 KP women's seat per department	27 (0.58%)	4,600 total seats	2020–2021
Quaid-e-Azam University	No separate women's quota reported; admissions on open merit	1 seat per department	38 departments / 38 seats	2021
Agriculture University Faisalabad	No general women's quota reported; admissions on open merit	57 reported seats	5,826 total seats	2021

These cases demonstrate that a national policy does not automatically create a single institutional model. Implementation depends on institutional rules, programme structure, administrative interpretation, and the stage at which the policy is applied. The variation is itself a finding: quota policy can exist at the national level while its practical form differs across universities.

Quotas and Women's Participation in Employment

The thesis describes the introduction of employment quotas as an important step in increasing women's participation in public employment. It reports that, in 2009, a 15% share was allocated for women and 5% for religious minorities in the employment sector. The thesis also cites evidence concerning provincial and district compliance with the women's quota.

The evidence reproduced in the thesis indicates that implementation of the 15% women's quota was uneven. For example, data cited for 2017 state that information was submitted by 181 provincial ministries and 663 district offices. The thesis reports that only 48 of the 181 provincial departments met the 15% quota requirement, while 137 of the 663 district offices met the criterion. These figures are not a complete measure of women's employment, but they are relevant to the question of whether the quota was being implemented across reporting units.

The distinction between policy and implementation is particularly important for women because representation in public employment depends on more than the formal percentage reserved. Recruitment practices, the number of positions advertised, the qualifications required, and the number of eligible applicants all affect the final result. The thesis presents the quota as a mechanism that can increase women's entry into employment, but it also emphasizes the need to examine compliance.

Table 2. Selected figures on women's employment-quota implementation reported in the thesis.

Indicator reported in thesis	Figure	Interpretation
Provincial/district offices reporting on women's quota	121 provincial and district units referenced in the cited evidence	Shows the scale of reporting used in the thesis
Provincial departments meeting 15% criterion	48 of 181	Approximately 27% of reporting provincial departments
District offices meeting 15% criterion	137 of 663	Approximately 21% of reporting district offices

Religious Minorities in Federal Public Employment

The employment evidence is particularly detailed for religious minorities. According to the thesis, 16,711 minority workers were recorded among 581,240 federal government workers in 2017–2018. The thesis reports this as 2.8% of the federal workforce in the cited data. The distribution by group and pay scale shows substantial concentration in lower grades.

Table 3. Religious minority workers in federal government employment, 2017–2018, as reported in the thesis.

Group	Overall strength	Share reported	Pay-scale category	Strength	Share of payroll-scale distribution
Followers of Christ	15,069	90.17%	BPS 17–22	323	1.93%
Qadiyani	248	1.48%	BPS 11–16	1,142	6.84%
Indians (caste)	1,080	6.46%	BPS 5–10	1,845	11.04%
Indians (non-caste)	214	1.28%	BPS 1–4	13,401	80.19%
Sikhs	15	0.09%	—	—	—

Other minority groups	85	0.51%	—	—	—
Overall minority workers	16,711	2.8%	—	—	—

The most striking feature of the table is the occupational distribution: 13,401 minority workers, or 80.19% of the minority workforce reported in the pay-scale breakdown, were in BPS 1–4. By comparison, 323 were in BPS 17–22. This pattern should not be interpreted as proof of a single causal mechanism. The thesis does not provide a multivariate analysis that isolates why workers are distributed in this way. It does, however, provide evidence that the question of representation extends beyond the number of minority employees. Grade distribution and access to higher-level positions are also relevant.

The thesis cites the Centre for Social Justice and People's Commission for Minorities' Rights as the source of these data. A later National Commission for Human Rights report also reproduces the broad finding that only 2.8% of federal employees were non-Muslim in the 2017–2018 data and that more than 80% were in BPS 1–4 (National Commission for Human Rights [NCHR], 2022). This external source is consistent with the thesis's presentation of the distribution.

Reserved Posts and the Implementation Gap: FPSC Evidence

The thesis's discussion of the FPSC Annual Report for 2017 provides a direct measure of the difference between reserved positions and filled positions. The report cited by the thesis listed 120 positions against the 5% minority quota. Of these, 83 individuals were selected and 37 positions remained unfilled.

FPSC minority-reserved positions reported for 2017.

The thesis reports that the FPSC attributed vacant positions to a lack of suitable or competent minority applicants. That is an explanation attributed to the Commission and should not be treated as an independent causal conclusion. The finding nevertheless raises a practical policy question: if qualified applicants are not available in sufficient numbers, the recruitment stage alone cannot produce full utilization of the quota.

The same issue can be approached as an education-to-employment pipeline. A job quota may reserve a post, but applicants must have the qualifications necessary to compete for it. The thesis's higher-education findings are therefore directly relevant to its employment findings: access to education can affect the future supply of qualified applicants for reserved jobs.

PPSC Evidence on Women's and Minority Quotas

The thesis also reviews the PPSC Annual Report for 2017. It reports 7,454 selected applicants and 896 postings held back because of quotas in various categories. Within the reported quota data, 59% of allocated female-reserved posts and 48% of allocated minority-reserved posts were left vacant. The thesis further reports that 923 positions were earmarked for minorities, of which 111 individuals were suggested, leaving 812 positions empty.

Table 3. PPSC quota figures for 2017 reported in the thesis.

PPSC indicator reported in thesis	Figure
Total selected applicants	7,454
Postings held back for quotas	896
Overall seats referenced	8,350

Female quota positions left vacant	59%
Minority quota positions left vacant	48%
Minority positions earmarked	923
Minority candidates suggested	111
Minority positions left empty	812

The figures show that implementation challenges were not confined to one recruitment institution. However, percentages in the PPSC report cover different denominators and categories, so they should not be treated as interchangeable measures of a single national vacancy rate. Their value for this article is that they document a recurring implementation problem within the institutional data reviewed by the thesis.

Trends in Federal Minority Employment, 2010–2017

The thesis presents a multi-year series for religious minority workers in federal government employment. The overall number reported increased from 11,521 in 2010–2011 to 16,133 in 2016–2017. The table below reproduces the figures reported in the thesis.

Table 4. Religious minority workers in federal government employment, 2010–2011 to 2016–2017.

Group	2010–11	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17
Christ followers	10,053 (87%)	9,027 (89.5%)	9,237 (89.5%)	10,422 (90.8%)	14,730 (91.3%)
Ahmadis	219 (2%)	202 (2%)	207 (2%)	153 (1.33%)	224 (1.38%)
Indian (caste)	981 (8.5%)	708 (7.01%)	659 (6.38%)	693 (6.04%)	956 (5.9%)
Indians (non-caste)	239 (2%)	124 (1.22%)	172 (1.66%)	171 (1.49%)	176 (1.09%)
Sikhs	—	4 (0.03%)	6 (0.05%)	7 (0.06%)	13 (0.08%)
Parsi	2 (0.01%)	—	—	—	—
Buddhist	1 (0.008%)	—	—	—	—
Other sects	26 (0.22%)	21 (0.20%)	33 (0.31%)	24 (0.20%)	34 (0.21%)
Overall seats	11,521	10,086	10,314	11,470	16,133

The time series should be read as a descriptive record of the categories used in the source rather than as evidence of a causal effect of quotas. Changes in total employment, classification, recruitment, or administrative reporting can affect such counts. What the series does establish is that the number of reported minority employees varied across the years and that followers of Christ constituted the largest reported group throughout the series.

Women's Political Representation

Three conclusions emerge from the combined evidence. First, quota policy has created formal opportunities for participation. The higher-education examples show newly introduced or institutionally recognized minority reservations, while employment data show that women and minorities have designated routes into public employment. Political reservations provide another route to representation.

Second, implementation is uneven. The university evidence shows different institutional practices. The employment evidence shows that some reserved posts remain vacant. The FPSC data cited in the thesis show 31% of the 120 minority-reserved positions unfilled in 2017. The PPSC data likewise record substantial vacancies. These findings mean that a legal or administrative quota should not be used as a proxy for actual representation.

Third, numerical representation does not necessarily equal substantive equality. The federal employment data are especially important because 80.19% of the reported minority workforce was in BPS 1–4. This distribution raises a separate question from the question of whether minorities are represented at all: where within the institutional hierarchy are they represented?

The thesis also connects educational access with employment opportunity. If higher-education institutions do not consistently implement minority reservations, the pool of applicants able to meet professional qualification requirements may remain limited. Conversely, employment quotas may be difficult to fill when the educational pipeline does not produce enough qualified applicants. The two policy areas therefore should not be treated separately.

External evidence is broadly consistent with the implementation concerns identified in the thesis. The National Commission for Human Rights has reported that the 5% minority employment quota introduced in 2009 was not being fully utilized and that only 2.8% of federal employees were non-Muslim in the 2017–2018 data, with more than 80% of minority employees in BPS 1–4. The United Nations Development Programme in Pakistan has likewise described the under-implementation of job quotas and identified gaps in institutional responsibility, monitoring, and oversight. These external sources are used here as contextual verification, not as replacements for the thesis's own evidence.

Policy Implications

- Measure implementation, not only allocation. Annual reporting should distinguish the number of posts reserved, advertised, filled, and left vacant.
- Track institutional level. Employment statistics should be disaggregated by pay scale, occupation, promotion, and seniority so that aggregate representation does not conceal concentration in lower grades.
- Strengthen the education-to-employment pipeline. Where job quotas remain vacant because applicants lack required qualifications, policy responses should address educational and training access rather than relying only on reservation at the hiring stage.
- Standardize institutional reporting. Universities and public-sector organizations should use comparable categories for reserved seats, applications, admissions, appointments, and vacancies.
- Improve awareness and access. Potential applicants need clear information about quota eligibility, deadlines, required qualifications, and application procedures.
- Evaluate implementation over time. Quota policies should be reviewed through consistent annual indicators so that progress and persistent gaps can be distinguished.
- Maintain transparency. Publicly available data can allow researchers, institutions, and applicants to assess whether reserved opportunities are being implemented as intended.

Limitations

The article inherits several limitations from the underlying thesis. First, the institutional survey is not a nationally representative probability sample. Second, several institutional findings are based on interviews and administrative information rather than a common national database. Third, the employment series comes from reported administrative categories whose definitions and coverage may vary. Fourth, the evidence is largely descriptive; it does not estimate a causal effect of quota policy on employment, education, or political participation.

The article therefore avoids claiming that quotas alone caused observed changes in representation. It instead asks what the reported evidence shows about access and implementation. Future research could use longitudinal institution-level data, applicant-level information, and comparable measures of qualification and recruitment to test more directly how quota policies affect outcomes.

Implications for Future Research

The quota system in Pakistan has provided institutional mechanisms for improving the representation of women and religious minorities, but the evidence examined in this article shows that formal reservation and effective representation are not the same thing. The higher-education evidence demonstrates variation in implementation across institutions. The employment evidence shows that minority workers were present in federal government, but were heavily concentrated in lower pay scales. The FPSC and PPSC evidence demonstrates that significant numbers of reserved positions could remain vacant.

These findings support a broader way of evaluating affirmative-action policy. The relevant question is not only whether a quota exists, but whether the reserved opportunities are accessible, filled, fairly distributed, and connected to opportunities for advancement. For women and religious minorities, educational access, qualification, recruitment, monitoring, and institutional accountability are therefore part of the same representation problem.

The central contribution of the study is consequently empirical rather than rhetorical. It documents the difference between policy on paper and implementation in practice. Quotas can create an entry point into public institutions; sustained equality requires that institutions also address the conditions that determine who can reach that entry point and what opportunities become available after entry.

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