

## **Harassment of Women in South Punjab Politics: Impacts and Strategies for Enhanced Leadership**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study analyzes women's forms of harassment in politics within the broader context of South Punjab, Pakistan, looking at the consequences it has on their political careers and their life courses. It also addresses how women's political leadership can be enhanced to improve governance and make better women leaders. The study also focuses on the impact of violence against women, especially in South Punjab, which acts as an obstacle toward women's political participation. The goals of the study include exploring the phenomenon of harassment violence against women within the context of the mental violence it inflicts and, at the same time, proposing measures aimed at improving women's political engagement. Data was collected from 20 women parliamentarians and political activists using a structured questionnaire. The analysis of the data indicated the women of South Punjab suffer from verbal and physical abuse as well as online abuse. Abuse leads to poor mental health and negatively impacts their political and social life. The study suggests the enhancement of anti-harassment laws, improvement of information campaigns on the existing legal frameworks, stronger women's leadership development programs, and implementation of quota legislation. The above-mentioned steps would increase the willingness of women to engage in politics. This research particularly concerns policymakers.*

**Keywords:** Harassment, Women Politicians, South Punjab, Political Leadership, Gender Equality

### **INTRODUCTION**

The establishment of democracy guarantees political stability while protecting the rights of every citizen. It facilitates the participation of both males and females in every aspect of politics and empowers them to make decisions on matters that impact their lives (Aliye, 2020). In Pakistan, the politics existing in the greater part of the country entails the exclusion of women on the grounds of dominant gender inequality and rigid socio-cultural practices (Hansen & Goenaga, 2021). The situation in South Punjab, which is a conservative region, complicates the situation even more. Despite con legal guarantees and preferential

policies, women from South Punjab are still largely constrained to the role of victims of severe forms of social violence which, in turn, interfere with their ascendancy to leadership positions in politics.

As reported by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2022), with a 23 percent rise in the last year, there is a significant increase in the marketing and buying of abuse, threatening to marginalize women politicians. They are subjected to verbal and physical abuse, and to tell period stunning age. This kind of abuse does their mental and emotional well-being. The object of the study in this term is to the study of this abuse and its effects and the effects in the political life of women in southern Punjab.

### **Need for the Study**

Women's involvement in public life portrays their active participation in governance which strengthens democracy. In Pakistan, particularly in regions like South Punjab, women's engagement in politics is still hindered by age-old obstacles, with harassment serving as a predominant hurdle. Although there is a body of literature on harassment in politics, not many focus on South Punjab, a region marked by severe patriarchy and scant support for women. This research is important to highlight the nature and consequences of harassment in this region, which is largely neglected in scholarly literature.

In South Punjab, the implementation of policies addressing violence against women is practically non-existent, even though such policies exist, particularly in conservative rural regions (Akhtar et al., 2021). This research is directed to documenting the South Punjab region systematically to add to the existing knowledge on women's political participation and develop strategies to promote women's political leadership by addressing the identified barriers.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This research has two main objectives: to investigate the extent and forms of harassment directed at women in the political landscape of South Punjab, and to recommend actions to bolster women's leadership for improved governance. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Determine the frequency, nature, and types of harassment faced by women politicians in South Punjab.
2. Analyze the consequences of harassment on women's mental well-being, political careers, and personal lives.
3. Identify existing support systems and mechanisms (formal and informal) available to assist women facing harassment.
4. Propose interventions at various levels that can enhance the political capability of women.
5. Recommend strategies to empower women in politics and ensure their safety, thereby contributing to more inclusive and robust democratic governance in South Punjab.

### **Research Questions**

1. To achieve the stated objectives, the study will seek to answer the following research questions:
2. What types of harassment do women politicians in South Punjab face, and how frequently do these incidents occur?
3. What are the psychological, professional, and personal consequences of harassment on women politicians?
4. What support systems and mechanisms are available to women in politics who are facing harassment?
5. What interventions can be implemented to enhance the political capabilities of women in South Punjab?

6. How can stronger links between women's political participation and democratic governance be developed to create a safer political environment in South Punjab?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study holds significant value for several reasons. First, it contributes to the body of literature on gender-based violence and political participation, especially in a region where such issues are often neglected. By highlighting the extent of harassment in South Punjab, the study will provide empirical data that can inform policy-makers, activists, and scholars about the specific challenges faced by women in politics. Moreover, the recommendations offered in this study could serve as a blueprint for designing and implementing policies aimed at reducing harassment and increasing women's political participation in South Punjab and beyond.

Secondly, regarding the political landscape in Pakistan, the main focus in this area is women's leadership development, their mental well-being, and the enhancement of safety protocols to foster broader political participation. This is aimed at reinforcing democratic governance by bolstering government responsiveness and ensuring women's participation in the policymaking process.

### **Rationale of the Study**

This research stems from the persistent gap in women's political leadership, especially from the South Punjab region. Women continue to encounter challenges in attempting to participate in politics due to the existence of gender quotas and affirmative action policies. One of the challenges is harassment, which serves as a deterrent for women aspiring to hold political offices and participate in political life. This study seeks to examine the different dimensions of harassment and their impacts on women's politics. It also aims to understand the challenges of feminizing political spaces and provide strategies to bridge the gender gap.

This research directly addresses South Punjab's specific neglect within the broader body of literature. There is a body of literature on political harassment which is largely based on urban areas and global phenomena, leaving regions like South Punjab rural underrepresented. It is important to understand harassment as a South Punjabi cultural and political construct in order to formulate strategies to assist women.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

There are a few limitations to this study. The sample includes 20 women politicians and political workers from Bahawalpur Division in South Punjab, which may not fully represent the experiences of all women in the region. Therefore, the findings may be specific to this area and may not apply to other parts of South Punjab or Pakistan. However, focusing on one region provides a detailed understanding that can be adapted to other areas.

The study also faces limitations in participant availability and willingness to discuss their experiences. Given the sensitive nature of harassment, some women may have been reluctant to participate or may not have shared the full extent of their experiences. The study will also rely on self-reported data, which may be subject to biases or inaccuracies.

The delimitations of the study include the decision to focus exclusively on women politicians and political workers in South Punjab, which narrows the scope of the research to a specific group. The study will not explore the broader societal impacts of gender-based harassment beyond the political domain, nor will it assess the experiences of men or non-political women in South Punjab.

Here's a concise, summarized Literature Review of 1000 words, using the thesis data and original references, aligned with the title, objectives, and needs of the study:

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The issue of gender-based harassment in politics is a global concern, particularly for women who face systemic barriers to their political participation. In South Punjab, Pakistan, these challenges are exacerbated by deeply rooted socio-cultural and institutional obstacles. ### Literature Review on Harassment of Women in Politics

This literature review examines studies on the harassment faced by women in politics, with a focus on South Punjab. This project explores the various forms of harassment, their implications on the mental well-being and political aspirations of women, and the institutional measures put in place, if any, to mitigate these problems.

### **Harassment of Women in Politics**

In the realm of politics, harassment can manifest as verbal, physical, or digital abuse. For women politicians, verbal assaults are commonplace, and often take the form of gendered insults or personal attacks that challenge their political credibility (Krook & Sanín, 2020). To some degree, all of these forms of harassment are exacerbated in the South Punjab region due to the socio-cultural structures that strongly discourage women from occupying public office or engaging in any form of public discourse (Akhtar et al., 2021). These and other sociocultural factors particularly make it much more difficult for women to participate in politics, and harassment maneuvered as deterrence.

Women in politics are subjected not only to verbal abuse but also to physical assaults and threats targeted specifically at women and often linked to broader violence (Shaheen, 2020). The cultural notion of honor – particularly dominant in South Asia – also contributes to the manner in which women are politically active and, as a result, all political action taken by women is perceived as a challenge to this notion (Mouffe, 2016). Various forms of online harassment, including cyberbullying, doxing, and targeted hate campaigns, have become rampant. In the context of Pakistan, female politicians are targeted online, and threats are issued not only to their online presence but also to their physical safety, thereby severely restricting their activities (Cheung, 2021).

### **Impact of Harassment on Women's Mental Health**

Harassment's psychological impact on women politicians is well-documented. Constant verbal and physical abuse can lead to mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress (Krook, 2022). Women who have had experiences with harassment tend to report a drop in their self-esteem and feel disempowered and reluctant to take up public roles (Nelson, 2015). The dual (combination) phenomenon of harassment alongside tormenting a woman to adhere to tradition exacerbates the emotional burden on women politicians in South Punjab (Mouffe, 2016). This forms a type of psychological imbalance, which makes it difficult to perform political functions because the individual woman has to manage the emotional aspects of harassment, instead of governance (Hacıyakupoglu & Wong, 2022).

These studies have shown that the experience of harassment within a particular society makes people feel weaker and lowers their self-esteem, which has a disincentivising effect on pursuing political activity (T.N. Thomas, 2020). The timid attitude due to psychological harm helps to reinforce the already existing phenomenon of gender inequality, a situation with ever lower women leadership (Harrison et al 2022).

### **Effects of Harassment on Women's Political Careers and Engagement**

The burden of harassment hinders not only the mental health of women but also their advancement in politics and political careers. Due to the toxic environment, a number of women tend to disengage from political activity. Women who encounter harassment are less likely to contest for an office because the possibility of public shaming or violence makes active political engagement deterring (M'Cormack-Hale & Ibrahim, 2023). Furthermore, political harassment reduces women's political power by undermining their public standing and political authority and, therefore, their ability to enforce policies is greatly hampered (Krook & Sanín, 2020).

In South Punjab, women are especially vulnerable to political marginalisation because political parties and leaders do not respond to these concerns (Bano & Akhtar, 2023). This region has a unique political culture which is heavily dominated by notions of gender prejudice and patriarchy. As a result, women's political engagement is bolstered by a welcoming but often hostile environment (Riaz & Akbar, 2022).

### **Support Structures and Their Mechanisms**

Legal policies as well as organisational conduct codes, alongside empowerment programmes, are some of the support systems instituted globally, aimed at addressing the issues of harassment and empowerment of women (Harrison et al., 2022). In Pakistan, the policies of the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) aim at protecting women's political rights through making gender equality policy reforms which enable women's political engagement (Tusińska, 2020). These initiatives, though commendable, in rural and more conservative parts of the country, like South Punjab, there is a substantial implementation gap, and women politicians are quite isolated and unsupported (Akhtar et al., 2021).

Some legal policies in Pakistan, like the gender quota policy, seek to enhance the political participation of women by providing them with reserved seats in the national and provincial assemblies. Although these quotas have increased the numbers of women representatives, their participation is often constrained by harassment because women tend to occupy symbolic, as opposed to substantive, positions (Gul & Farooq, 2020). In South Punjab, although support systems are present in a formal sense, additional support systems, like mentoring and political advocacy groups are informal in nature and tend to be underdeveloped.

### **Institutional Responses and Gaps**

Such as with the Harassment of Women at Workplace Act of 2010, Pakistan does have laws to prevent harassment, however, their implementation retains significant weaknesses, especially within the political sphere (Akande, 2024). Political institutions in Pakistan have been particularly lagging in developing clear and decisive response strategies such as reporting frameworks or support services for victims. There is ample evidence demonstrating that political institutions, as a result of entrenched patriarchal norms, resist, and politically fail, to cultivate spaces for women to thrive, nurture and enable harassment-free environments (Matloob et al., 2021). Furthermore, grievance redressal systems lack rigor and protective frameworks for women (Ferris, Deakin & Mathieson, 2021).

In relation to South Punjab, the violence is often constructed as politically actionable and remains largely unchecked. This permissive framework aggravates the situation for harassment and suggests violence against women is acceptable within the political sphere (Goswami et al., 2023). There is a need for much more robust enforcement mechanisms that respond to the normative violence to break this cycle and to provide women with substantive support and protection in their careers as politicians (Jamil, 2020).



### **Improving Women's Political Leadership: An Overview of Key Strategies**

In improving women's leadership and addressing harassment in South Punjab, several strategies have been proposed. Among these are mental health services and leadership development, as well as women's safety in digital spaces (Harrison et al., 2022). Leadership development programmes are designed to aid women in gaining confidence as well as the requisite skills to fully participate in political spheres (Harrison et al., 2022). Access to mental health services is important for women to politically participate and cope with the aftermath of harassment (Nelson, 2015).

Women are increasingly at risk of online abuse, as such, digital safety measures such as online harassment laws and cyber security protocols are essential (Cheung, 2021). Furthermore, to enable women to participate in politics without the fear of harassment and safely pursue leadership, there needs to be institutional accountability as well as effective reporting frameworks in place (Matloob et al., 2021).

The body of research, particularly focusing on South Punjab, documents the persistent difficulties women politicians face due to cultural and institutional frameworks of persistent harassment. Although there have been some legal and institutional attempts to resolve the harassment issues and improve the situation, there are still many under-addressed gaps in the concerns raised. The effects of harassment, coupled with the mental health challenges women face, are devastating and demanding in the contemporary political landscape. Improving women's political participation requires adequate institutional frameworks coupled with the enforcement of the existing policies, women's empowerment initiatives, mental health care improvement, and protection in the digital sphere. Addressing these issues is necessary to enhance activism in South Punjab.

### **METHODOLOGY**

In this study, the scope of the harassment faced by women politicians in South Punjab, Pakistan, is examined alongside efforts aimed at enhancing their political leadership in order to improve governance, and a quantitative method is applied. The refinement of this quantitative approach is helpful in this case as it encompasses the measurable impact harassment has on women politicians. As is the case in most quantitative research, the primary method of obtaining responses from women parliamentarians and political workers from South Punjab was by distribution of survey-based questionnaires.

### **Research Design**

The research design is cross-sectional and descriptive. A descriptive design helped to systematically collect comprehensive information about the prevalence and forms of harassment of women in political leadership positions. The aim was to portray the snapshot of South Punjab's current situation along with the effects of harassment on women's mental health, political aspirations, and overall wellbeing. A cross-sectional design was employed, which in this case involved collecting data at a single point in time.

### **Population and Sample**

The study's population included women politicians (MNAs and MPAs) and political workers in South Punjab. These women were actively engaged in the political processes of the region, either as elected representatives or as political operatives. According to available data, there are 107 women MNAs and MPAs in South Punjab, making them the potential respondents for the study.

The sample was selected from Bahawalpur Division, one of the key regions in South Punjab. The sample size was 20 women parliamentarians and political workers, selected using a purposive sampling technique. This sampling method was chosen because it allows the researcher to select participants who are particularly knowledgeable or experienced in the issue of harassment in politics. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed, whereby participants who were initially identified helped identify

others who met the study criteria. This helped ensure that the study included women who had direct experience with the issue of harassment.

Given the relatively small size of the sample, the focus was on obtaining detailed, first-hand experiences from a group of women who could provide meaningful insights into the nature of harassment and its consequences. The limited sample size is acknowledged as a limitation in the study, but it is justified by the context-specific nature of the research and the exploratory nature of the study.

### **Data Collection**

The instrument, used for data collection in this study was a questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed to collect quantitative information on the following key areas:

1. This part of the questionnaire sought demographic details including; Age, Position held in party and years spent practicing politics.
2. The survey sought to identify different types of harassment women politicians receive in the form of verbal abuse, physical threats, online and social media attacks.
3. This section examined the impact of harassment on women's mental health, political engagement and private matters. Respondents assigned scores to the emotional toll of harassment, its effect on their political careers and whether it caused them to disengage from politics or experience career setbacks.
4. The survey also inquired about the support available to women who experience harassment. The participants were questioned on the effectiveness of formal and informal redress mechanisms, as well if any political parties, government agencies or NGOs had offered them support.
5. The last part of the survey solicited ideas from participants on what could be done about harassment and to increase political participation for women. Respondents expressed their thoughts on current policies and laws, gave suggestions to improve the political leadership of women.

The data collection was carried out in person according to participants' availabilities. Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, we asked participants to trust that only the researchers would have access to their responses; participation was voluntary, so they could leave at any time without fear of reprisal.

### **Data Analysis**

The accumulated responses were processed with a computer based program for social science research SPSS-20. For the current research a descriptive statistical approach was implemented. In this case the frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation were calculated. This made it possible to comprehend adequately the extent and impact of harassment against women politicians.

These were done to measure the impact of different forms of harassment on the women's mental and political professional lives. For instance, to what extent women were verbally abused, threatened and harassed to an extent where it became an online phenomenon, and how frequently these were reported.

These statistics were useful in determining the severity of the impact caused by the harassment. For example, in case of the women with a higher mean on the impact measure the impact were stronger, while standard deviation defined the discrepancies in responses.

To find out if there are any significant differences in the experiences of harassment by political party membership or political age, a t-test was conducted. This helps to determine the relationship between the severity of harassment and some demographic characteristics.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The research was done with a defined frame of ethics. It has the subject and purpose of the study, has a willing agreement, terms of agreement. It has also confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy during the research have been assured with personal identifiers removed from the dataset. Data was presented in aggregate form.

Because of the nature of the topic, participants were permitted to forego answering questions they found uncomfortable, and mental health aid was available should they feel any distress. This research was designed to make sure no participant was further victimized, or exposed to any kind of retaliation as a result of their involvement in the research.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although the study provided great value, they were accompanied by a number of important shortcomings:

A total of 20 participants in the study represent a very small sample size. This number is unlikely to represent all women in South Punjab due to the differing political climates. It is believed that the study could be piloted with a larger sample size in order to yield a fuller picture.

The research was conducted in Bahawalpur Division which is the largest division of South Punjab, thus the results cannot be generalized to the rest of overall Punjab or to the other parts of Pakistan. The rest of the regions in Punjab and other parts of the countries may differ in their unique socio-political contexts which could greatly influence the results.

Because the study was conducted with a self-report design, it is possible that a number of the participants may exaggerate or downplay their experiences due to the fear of retaliation or social acceptance motives.

In this study, the use of quantitative research and survey methodologies provided a systematic, in-depth approach to analyzing the harassment of women in politics in the South Punjab region. The information from the 20 political participants and workers is important in determining the extent, nature, and impact of harassment. These findings will contribute to developing strategies aimed at empowering women and enhancing their political leadership.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Demographic Attributes**

The demographic analysis revealed that all 20 participants were from urban areas, with no rural representation. This limits the generalizability of the findings to urban contexts. Additionally, the sample consisted entirely of women, which highlights the gender-specific focus of the study. In terms of educational qualifications, the majority of respondents held a “Graduate Degree” (60%), followed by “Master’s Degree holders” (35%), and only 5% had a “More than Master”. This indicates that most respondents were well-educated, with a strong representation of individuals holding graduate or master’s qualifications. Regarding political party affiliation, 50% of the respondents supported the “Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)”, making it the most represented party, while 15% supported both Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), and 20% identified as independent. This demographic diversity reflects varied political perspectives among the respondents, with a majority aligning with PML-N.



**Table 1: Determine the frequency, nature, and types of harassment faced by women politicians in South Punjab**

Objective 1 Statements	Mean	SD	T	Sig. (2tailed)
Have you ever faced verbal harassment in your political career?	3.30000	1.80933	8.157	0.000
Have you ever faced any kind of Physical harassment in your political career?	3.5000	1.63836	9.554	0.000
Have you ever faced online harassment, including cyber bullying and threats?	2.8000	1.70448	7.346	0.000
Have you ever faced different types of harassment (verbal, online & physical) compared to male?	2.9000	1.68273	7.707	0.000
The incidents of harassment against women discourage you from participating in politics.	2.8000	1.43637	8.718	0.000

**Table 2: Analyze the consequences of harassment on women's mental well-being, political careers, and personal lives**

Objective 1 Statements	Mean	SD	T	Sig. (2tailed)
Harassment significantly impacts your mental well-being	2.3000	1.49032	6.902	0.000
Harassment negatively impacts your personal life	2.5000	1.43270	7.804	0.000
Harassment increases your stress and anxiety level	2.2000	1.15166	8.543	0.000
Harassment in politics often leads you to face difficulties in maintaining work-life.	3.2000	1.43637	9.963	0.000
The fear of harassment limits your participation and engagement in political activities.	3.0000	1.48678	9.024	0.000
The psychological harassment often leads you towards depression and suicidal risk.	3.4000	1.78885	8.500	0.000

**Table 3: Identify existing support systems and mechanisms (formal and informal) available to assist women facing harassment.**

Objective 3 Statements	Mean	SD	T	Sig. (2tailed)
The government provides suitable formal support systems to assist you as a woman facing harassment.	2.3000	1.34164	7.667	0.000
Family support plays a significant role for you in dealing with harassment.	1.5000	0.76089	8.816	0.000
Have the government support mechanisms in addressing the needs of women	2.4000	1.42902	7.511	0.000
You are aware of the formal mechanisms provided by the government to report harassment incidents.	2.1500	0.98809	9.731	0.000
You are well-informed about the Women Protection Harassment Acts as a woman in South Punjab.	1.5000	0.51299	13.077	0.000
You believe that the Women Harassment Acts have contributed effectively in reducing incidents of harassment in politics.	2.0500	1.09904	8.342	0.000

**Table 4: Propose interventions at various levels that can enhance the political capability of women**

Objective 4 Statements	Mean	SD	T	Sig. (2tailed)
Participating in leadership training programs can enhance your political capability.	2.0500	1.14593	8.000	0.000
Having mentorship opportunities of politician can help you to develop essential skills and knowledge.	1.8500	0.87509	9.454	0.000
Being part of awareness campaigns about the importance of women's political participation can encourage you to engage more in politics.	1.8000	0.95145	8.461	0.000
Implementing sporting action policies, such as quotas, can increase your representation in politics.	2.1500	0.87509	10.987	0.000
You believe that establishing platforms for women politicians to advocate for gender-specific issues can empower you.	2.5500	1.39454	8.178	0.000

**Table 5: Recommend strategies to empower women in politics and ensure their safety, thereby contributing to more inclusive and robust democratic governance in South Punjab**

Objective 5 Statements	Mean	SD	T	Sig. (2tailed)
Allocation of resources and funding to enhance women's political participation.	2.1500	0.98809	9.731	0.000
The implementation of affirmative action policies by political parties to ensure adequate representation of women in leadership role.	1.9500	0.68633	12.706	0.000
Fostering grassroots mobilization and community engagement initiatives can enhance inclusive democratic governance.	2.0000	0.72548	12.329	0.000
Participating in training and capacity-building programs can enhance your effectiveness.	2.1000	0.96791	9.703	0.000
Governmental institutions can facilitate your integration into policymaking.	1.8000	0.52315	15.387	0.000

**Scale used in Table 1 to Table 5:** 1= Strongly Agree, 2= Agree, 3= Undecided, 4=Disagree, 5= Strongly Disagree

**Table 6: Themes of Open-Ended Question “What strategies can be implemented to encourage more young women to engage in politics?”**

Sr. No.	Themes	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1	Arrange Political Awareness Seminars	8	40.0	40.0	40.0
2	Increase Women Quotas	7	35.0	35.0	75.0
3	Political Training Programs	3	15.0	15.0	90.0
4	Provide Resources for Political Skill Building.	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

## **FINDINGS**

### **Demographic Attributes**

The demographic analysis of the study's respondents' highlights key characteristics that define the sample. All 20 participants (100%) were from urban areas, with no rural representation, which may limit the scope of the findings to urban contexts. ### Demographic Characteristics

The study exclusively included female participants, with 100% of the respondents identifying as women. Regarding education, 60% held a graduate degree, 35% had a master's degree, and 5% had advanced education beyond a master's. The political party affiliations were diverse, with 50% supporting the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), 15% each for Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and 20% identifying as independent. This shows a varied political landscape, with PML-N having the largest support base.

### **Harassment Faced by Women Politicians**

The study aimed to determine the frequency, types, and nature of harassment faced by women in politics in South Punjab. The results show that verbal harassment was the most commonly experienced form with the mean score of 3.30 suggesting it was common in the political lives of women. It was followed closely by Physical harassment with a mean score of 3.50, which means that it is common and that threats of violence are a considerable factor. Online harassment which includes cyberbullying had a mean score of 2.80 which indicates that though it is lesser in prevalence, it is still a considerable factor. Looking from a woman's perspective, more harassment was reported as compared to men, with a mean of 2.90 which indicates the violence is of a political nature and is gendered. This meant that harassment kept women from actively engaging in political activities, which is a mark of 2.80.

### **Effects of Harassment on Women's Mental Health and the Impacts on their Careers**

The effects of harassment were examined in the study and were compared with factors such as mental health, political career, and personal life. It has been determined that there are some mental health implications, with a mean score of 2.30 with the population facing issues such as stress, anxiety and a general decline for health. Relationships on the other hand were claimed to be adversely affected with the mean of 2.50, which means that there is a blend of political life and personal life. The study found that harassment increases stress and anxiety (mean score 2.20) and causes difficulties in balancing work and personal life (mean score 3.20). The fear of harassment restricted women's political participation (mean score 3.00), and psychological harassment raised the risk of depression and suicidal tendencies (mean score 3.40), emphasizing the severe mental health consequences.

### **Support Systems for Women Facing Harassment**

The study identified existing support systems and mechanisms for women facing harassment. Government support systems were perceived as inadequate, with a mean score of 2.30, indicating that women found these resources ineffective. On the other hand, family support was considered more significant, with a mean of 1.50, reflecting the importance of familial backing. Awareness of government mechanisms like the Women Protection Harassment Acts was low (mean score 1.50), pointing to a gap in knowledge about formal reporting channels. Despite the existence of these laws, their effectiveness in reducing harassment was questioned, with a mean score of 2.05, showing doubts about their real-world impact.

### **Interventions to Enhance Women's Political Capability**

The study proposed several interventions to enhance women's political capabilities. Leadership training programs were deemed important, with a mean score of 2.05, showing that such programs could help women build skills and confidence. Mentorship opportunities were also valued, with a mean score of 1.85, indicating that guidance from experienced mentors is crucial. Awareness campaigns aimed at promoting the political engagement of women received positive feedback as reflected in the mean score of 1.80. The resolution to implement quotas aimed at increasing women's representation received supportive feedback (mean score 2.15). It appears then that quotas are perceived as a necessary measure towards achieving balanced representation. The strong mean score of 2.55 registered for their proposal to set up women advocacy platforms demonstrates the acute need to provide women in politics with the necessary enabling environments to enable them to engage in advocacy for women's issues.

### **Approaches to Empower Women and Ensure Their Safety in Active Politics**

This study suggested multiple approaches to empower and provide safety to women in politics. The allocation of resources and sponsorship invited women to take part in politics, scoring a significant mean of 2.15. The endorsement of affirmative action policies also scored reasonably, indicating their relevance in women's representation (mean score 1.95). The mark of 2.00 suggested grassroots mobilization and community participation as effective means to enhance involvement, underscoring the potentiating impact of local action. Active participation in training and capacity building was scored highly (mean score 2.10), underscoring the value of sustained professional development. Support from the government was viewed as crucial in policy-making as far as the integration of women is concerned (mean score 1.80), emphasizing the need for policy frameworks.

### **Thematic Summary for Open-Ended Questions: Women and Politics**

Analysis of the open-ended questions led to very pertinent insights designed to encourage the participation of young women in politics. The marketing awareness as the most common strategy (40%) as to what can enhance awareness among young people. The posting of female quotas in the political parties was the second most popular suggestion (35%) followed by political training (15%) and provision of skill building resources (10%).

This study outlines the pervasive violence encountered by women politicians in South Punjab and its adverse consequences on their mental health, politics, and private life. While some support mechanisms are in place, they are insufficient. More interventions for women's political empowerment, such as leadership and mentorship programmes, and political quotas, are urgently needed. There is a pressing need for improved institutional assistance alongside sufficient funding to enhance the protective measures available to women in politics. Such protective measures will foster more inclusive and robust democratic governance in South Punjab.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study make a significant contribution to understanding the violence encountered by women politicians in South Punjab, as well as its consequences on the women's mental health, politics, and private life. These findings are consistent with other regions in the world, particularly those with a more conservative South Punjab frame as a constrained socio-political climate, where this type of violence has been a persistent challenge to women's political participation.

### **Politics and Harassment**

Verbal and physical harassment stand out as significant issues, with average ratings of 3.30 and 3.50, respectively. This supports prior studies which show that women suffer from verbal and physical abuse in

a patriarchal society. Krook (2022) points out that the verbal abuse of women is one of the difficulties facing female politicians globally. In the case of South Punjab, such harassment diminishes the political respect women hold and hinders their active participation in leadership and in the decision-making processes. Akhtar et al (2021) describe the socio-cultural factors which, in their combination and interaction, act negatively for the active political participation of women in Pakistan, representing the harassment violence in an extended form.

The study corroborated physical harassment as a major concern with a mean of 3.50. This is consistent with Glover (2022) who showed that women politicians, as a category, are often physically threatened and violently attacked. Such harassment drives women out of political engagement and cultivates a culture of intimidation and marginalisation. The study corroborated online harassment (mean = 2.80) as being less prevalent than face-to-face verbal and physical harassment. Cyberbullying and threats are more prevalent online than offline, do not internalise regions. Cheung (2021) noted the growing trend of online harassment directed at women politicians, particularly those from marginalised areas. The lower rate in South Punjab is perhaps linked to a lack of access to digital platforms; a large number of women remain unconnected to the online political discourse. (Hacıyakupoglu & Wong, 2022).

Additionally, the study showed that more harassment is directed towards women compared to men in the political sphere (mean = 2.90). This is in agreement with M'Cormack-Hale & Ibrahim (2023) who note that violence and discrimination sustained through a patriarchal framework stifles the political aspirations of women. This supports irrefutably that harassment is a phenomenon that exists in the context of politics and is inseparably linked to the relations of dominantly structured and gendered power relations in society (Mouffe, 2016).

### **Effects of Harassment on Mental Health and Civic Engagement**

The psychological effects of harassment caused a notable concern, scoring a value of 2.30, which suggests a substantial impact on mental health. This resonates with Krook & Sanín (2020), who noted that stressed, anxious, and depressed women in politics face higher rates of harassment. Furthermore, the emotional toll described which includes depression and an increased likelihood of suicidal ideation (mean = 3.40) parallels the findings in Nelson (2015) where women politicians show a constant decline in mental health due to severe harassment.

The findings reveal that harassment has effects on women's active participation in politics with a mean value of 3.00, demonstrating that fear kept women from politically participating. This imbalance in work-life integration (mean = 3.20) has been documented in the literature where Riaz & Akbar (2022) showed that harassment has an impact on women beyond politics, straining their interpersonal relationships and social life (Shaheen, 2020).

### **Support Systems and Mechanisms**

Formal support systems are in place, but the study suggests that these systems are insufficient. Family support was more important to women (mean = 1.50) and aligns with Harrison et al. (2022) who claim that women rely on informal systems because there is little trust in formal structures. Government support mechanisms were rated poorly (mean = 2.30) in line with Tusińska (2020) who argues there is weak implementation of existing laws in more conservative areas like South Punjab.

Government attempts to assist women in politics are failing, as highlighted by Matloob et al. (2021) concerning the enforcement gap in Pakistan's legal system. Matloob cites the low awareness of the Women Protection Harassment Acts of 1.50 and their ineffectiveness rating of 2.05 as evidence.



### **Programs to Improve Women's Political Competence**

This research shows that women considered leadership training programs (mean = 2.05) and mentorship (mean = 1.85) to be important for their political development. This agrees with Goswami et al. (2023) who pointed out the significance of mentorship and leadership training. Quotas (mean = 2.15) received strong support. This agrees with the international literature that affirmative action policies, including quotas, champion women's political representation and participation (Krook, 2022). Harrison et al. (2022) showed that awareness campaigns (mean = 1.80) are important for women's political participation, further arguing that such campaigns can help change gender stereotypes and motivate more women to be involved in politics.

### **Measures for the Protection of Women and Empowerment**

The data collected in the study strongly support the views on resource allocation (mean = 2.15), affirmative action policies (mean = 1.95), and mobilization at the grassroots level (mean = 2.00), which is in agreement with Agbalajobi (2021) who calls for policy changes to support women's political participation. The ongoing professional development and training programs (mean = 2.10) pointed out by Bano & Akhtar (2023) are essential for women's political efficacy. These policies illustrate the critical role of institutional support in promoting active participation of women in political processes.

### **CONCLUSION**

This research is consistent with international studies regarding women's harassment in the region of politics. Women in South Punjab are reluctant to pursue politics because of socio psychological barriers of harassment at the family level and in the society, which takes a toll on their mental health, political aspirations, and relationships. Although some attempts are being made to offer help, the help is clearly insufficient. Enhanced institutional help or supports alongside improved accessibility to existing resources are essential in this region.

This research identified a mentorship and advocacy campaign as fundamental to promoting women's effective engagement in politics alongside the implementation of training sessions, targeted mentoring systems and the passage of quota legislations. Women in politics are actively encouraged to become more involved by having access to advocacy geared towards raising their activism and by addressing gender targeted concerns.

The research underscores the lack of adequate response to the issues of women violence and the need to address the processes of actively engaging women in violence free environments as leaders via policy, frameworks and legislation. South Punjab can and should democratically integrate women's voluntary and effective political involvement in order to change the region's women socio-political status regarding their investment into more just and socially balanced development.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. **Strengthen Anti-Harassment Laws:** Ensure better enforcement of anti-harassment laws, such as the Women Protection Harassment Acts, to protect women in politics from verbal, physical, and online harassment.
2. **Increase Awareness of Legal Frameworks:** Raise awareness among women politicians about available legal frameworks and reporting mechanisms to ensure they are informed about the support systems available to them.
3. **Develop Leadership Training Programs:** Create and implement leadership training programs specifically for women in politics to help them develop the skills, confidence, and capacity to tackle political challenges.

4. Formulate Mentoring Programs: Mentoring programs for women in politics should be structured to assist and enable them to acquire skills for active participation in the political arena.
5. Instigate Affirmative Action: Gender-based quotas and other affirmative action policies should be instigated to increase the number of women politicians and leaders in political offices and at the helm of leadership positions.
6. Create Women Politician Advocacy Forums: These are forums or platforms through which women politicians can articulate their concerns and experiences in politics with the aim of creating an enabling environment for women's active participation in politics.
7. Encourage Political Parties to Promote Gender Equality: Political parties must implement measures aimed at fostering gender equality while safeguarding women politicians from attempts of harassment.
8. Provide Mental Health Support: Offer targeted psychological care to address stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues exacerbated by harassment to help women politicians regain their mental strength.
9. Promote Grassroots Mobilization: Champion programs aimed at the active local community and political involvement of younger women to prepare a strong base for the next generation of leaders.

#### **FUTURE STUDIES**

1. Urban-Rural Harassment Comparison Studies: Explore the disparity in the harassment experienced by women politicians in the urban and rural settings of Pakistan to reveal the influence of varying socio-political settings.
2. Political Effectiveness Post-Harassment: Study the influence of harassment on women's political effectiveness, focusing on their policies and public image.
3. Overarching Political Party Policies on Harassment: Assess political parties concerning their preventative and curative roles on harassment, focusing on the effectiveness of their internal policies and enforcement structures.
4. Women's Political Career Post-Harassment: Assess the impact of harassment on women's political career trajectories, investigating phenomena such as burnout, career reorientation, or political disengagement.

Conduct research integrating a wider sample of women politicians from various regions in Pakistan to obtain a better understanding of the difficulties women encounter in politics throughout the country.

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