

Women in Pakistani Politics: Breaking Barriers and Achieving SDG's Goal 5

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the challenges, progress, and prospects of women's political participation in Pakistan within the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which advocates gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. Despite constitutional guarantees and mechanisms like reserved seats, women remain underrepresented in substantive political roles. Using a qualitative methodology based on secondary data from 2002–2024—including policy documents, official reports, global indicators, and academic literature—the research analyzes trends and barriers to women's political empowerment.

Applying Feminist Theory, the study finds that while women occupy about 20–21% of parliamentary seats, most enter politics via party-nominated reserved quotas, limiting their independence and influence. Deep-rooted patriarchy, tokenism, and restrictive party structures continue to marginalize female voices. Pakistan shows slow progress on SDG 5 indicators, especially women in parliament and women in leadership, and lags behind regional peers like Bangladesh and India.

The findings stress that achieving SDG goal 5 requires more than quotas—it calls for structural reforms, grassroots empowerment, civic education, and cultural change. The study offers for electoral reform, leadership development, and institutional accountability, contributing to the discourse on gender equality and inclusive governance in Pakistan.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goal 5, United Nations Women's Organization, National Assemblies, Provincial Assemblies, United Nations Development Program.

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, world leaders convened under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) and established a set of global development goals called the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There are a total of seventeen Goals, which consist of 169 main targets. These targets cover a wide range of areas, including basic human needs and rights, as well as the management of natural resources and climate change. Gaining the necessary outcomes poses a significant obstacle for governments worldwide. In order to address these difficulties, it is imperative to promote the democratization and localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This refers to the inclusion of local communities in the process of making decisions (Khan, A., 2013). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to integrate social, economic, and environmental planning in order to address the needs of both present and future generations while also prioritizing preservation. Sustainable development as a comprehensive approach to human development, it is widely believed to encompass the majority, if not all, of the principles, values, and objectives outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (Khalid, 2023).

The 5th goal of the Sustainable Development Goals focuses on promoting gender equality as a fundamental notion for a more prosperous future. The empirical evidence has shown that enabling women and girls leads to economic expansion and progress. Consequently, eradicating any kind of bias or prejudice against them is not only crucial for a lasting future but also a fundamental entitlement of every human being. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has prioritized gender equality as a fundamental aspect of its initiatives. Over the past two decades, substantial advancements have been achieved in this domain. In comparison to fifteen years ago, the present enrolment of females in schools has increased, and the majority of regions have successfully attained gender parity in basic education. Despite the increasing number of women in the workforce, notable disparities persist in various domains. Women are consistently denied equal employment chances as males. The source of this information is the United Nations Organization in the year 2018. Women and children are still being disproportionately impacted by disasters, climate change, and other catastrophes including Sexual abuse, exploitation, gender pay disparity, and lack of professional atmosphere pose significant challenges for women in the workplace (SDGs). It is necessary to provide a woman with adequate living space. Women should be granted equitable distribution of resources within families, including wealth, access to quality healthcare, a conducive work environment, and opportunity to leverage current technologies for optimal personal and professional advancement. Pakistan's labor market has a comparable imbalance. Pakistan has one of the lowest rates of female labor force participation worldwide, with only 25 PC, according to the International Labor Organization's estimation. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 2019, the number of men is predicted to be 81 percent (81PC). What are the reasons for the comparatively low female labor force participation in Pakistan compared to other countries? The reason for the disparity between men and women in Pakistan is that men possess a considerably larger amount of assets and are more extensively involved in the paid labor market compared to women. Upon observing the discrepancy in education and politics in women's are, in 2019, the estimated literacy rate for adult women was 46%, while it was 69% for adult men. In the field of politics, the voter turnout for men in the 2018 general election exceeded that of women by approximately 9.1%, according to the Election Commission of Pakistan. When examining the gender breakdown of our National Assembly, we find that just around 20 percent of the parliamentarians are women. Furthermore, a significant portion of these women hold seats that are earmarked for them. It is important to note that Pakistanis priorities investing in men's education over women's education (cheetah, 2023).

Problem of the Statement

Women in Pakistan still confront major obstacles to empowerment and involvement in socioeconomic and political arenas, despite tremendous international and national efforts to promote gender equality. The purpose of this study is to investigate the level of women's empowerment in Pakistan, as well as the main obstacles they encounter and the roles and contributions they make across a range of industries. This

research aims to emphasize the opportunities and inequities that exist inside Pakistan and to comprehend the socio-cultural, economic, and political variables influencing women's empowerment through a thorough case study of the nation. The findings of this study will contribute to the establishment of targeted policies and programs to increase women's empowerment and participation in Pakistan's development.

This study answers the questions, How far women in Pakistan have overcome the hurdles in securing space and equality for themselves in the politics and governance concerning SDGS?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The purpose of this study is to assess the status, obstacles, and potential of women's political engagement in Pakistan, with a particular emphasis on the fulfillment of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality). The research approach utilized in this study is qualitative, and secondary data sources were used to collect relevant information. The selection of qualitative research was made due to the fact that it is ideally suited for investigating social phenomena, interpretive meanings, historical settings, and structural barriers, particularly in the context of politics, gender studies, and development frameworks.

Through a descriptive and analytical research design, the purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the breadth and depth of women's participation in political processes from the years 2002 to 2024. The purpose of this study is not to test hypotheses; rather, it is to investigate current narratives, policies, legal frameworks, global commitments, and statistical patterns through the prism of gender.

Data Collection Method

For this study, only secondary data are used, and they come from a variety of qualitative and quantitative sources, including the following:

- Reports created by the government and official statistics
- Information provided by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP)
- The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) reports from the Ministry of Planning and Development
- PBS stands for the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics.
- Records from both the National Assembly and the Provincial Assembly
- Publications and databases from around the world
- UN Women, UNDP, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Indicators Database
- The Gender Gap Reports Compiled by the World Economic Forum
- Statistics on Women in Parliament, as Provided by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)

Publications from Nongovernmental Organizations and Policy

According to reports compiled by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, the Aurat Foundation, and ShirkatGah

The Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) has published a number of policy papers.

An Examination of the Media and Content

Archive articles from newspapers, interviews broadcast on television, and political debates

Articles of opinion and coverage of female politicians in digital media

Through the use of manual thematic coding, these materials were examined and interpreted, with a particular emphasis placed on recurrent themes such as tokenism, quota politics, patriarchal norms, policy gaps, grassroots issues, and international commitments.

The Method of Data Analysis

Using qualitative thematic analysis to analysis the data

Women's Political Participation in Pakistan

Representation at the National and Provincial Assemblies (2002–2024)

Women's official representation in Pakistan's legislative bodies has witnessed considerable growth since the early 2000s, particularly when the military dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf reintroduced gender-based quotas in 2002. This improvement has been particularly noticeable since the beginning of the decade. An important institutional shift in Pakistani politics that occurred after 1999 was marked by the Legal Framework Order of 2002, which reserved sixty out of three hundred and forty-two seats in the National Assembly (NA) and seventeen percent of seats in provincial assemblies for women.

Trends in Representation (2002–2024)

In the general elections held in 2002, sixty women were elected to reserved seats, while thirteen women gained regular seats. This is a significant increase in comparison to the elections held in 1997, when only seven women were elected to the National Assembly.

In 2008, women held a total of 76 seats in the National Assembly, with 16 of those seats being reserved and the remaining 60 being regular seats.

Seventy women were elected to the National Assembly in 2013, with sixty of them holding reserved seats and ten holding regular seats.

In the general elections held in 2018, women made up almost twenty percent of the National Assembly. This was primarily accomplished through reserved seats, which accounted for sixty seats, while only eight women were elected through direct competition.

According to the political landscape of 2024, this number is approximately the same: 70–75 women in the NA. This number is subject to change depending on political reshuffles and resignations.

In the Assembly of the Provinces

According to the Punjab Assembly (2018), women had 66 out of 371 seats, the majority of which were designated for them. According to the Sindh Assembly (2018), women have 29 out of 168 seats now. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly in 2018 allocated 22 of its 124 seats to female candidates. The Balochistan Assembly in 2018 had 11 seats out of a total of 65. Despite the fact that these data reflect the progress that has been made in terms of numerical representation, they also highlight the persistent reliance on reserved seats, which reveals that women continue to have a difficult time securing general (direct) seats in elections.

The Role of Reserved Seats and Electoral Quotas in the Election Process: Representation vs Empowerment

Both reserved seats and electoral quotas were implemented in order to address the gender imbalance that existed in the political system and to give women with a means of entering political organizations. In South Asia, Pakistan is frequently shown to be an example for the implementation of institutional gender quotas. Nevertheless, despite the fact that these quotas have been successful in increasing descriptive representation (numbers), the substantive empowerment of women in politics continues to be limited.

Benefits of Reserved Seats

The guaranteed presence of women in legislative bodies is one of the advantages of reserved seats. The formal conformity with Sustainable Development Goal 5, specifically, which aims to ensure that women have equal opportunity for leadership and full and effective involvement. For newly elected female legislators, exposure and political training are essential.

Limitation

There is a dependence on male-dominated party leadership. Women are frequently selected by party chiefs rather than elected directly by constituents, which results in patronage based on loyalty rather than accountability to the public.

A significant number of women do not have any actual impact in the decision-making processes and are excluded from the core debates that take place in parliament.

Women from working-class and tribal backgrounds are excluded from political visibility because reserved seats are typically granted to women from aristocratic families or relatives of male politicians. This results in the underrepresentation of women from rural and grassroots communities.

Despite the fact that they are members of parliament, many women experience challenges when it comes to tabling bills, participating in committees, or influencing party policies, according to research conducted by Zia and Bari (for the year 2019). According to a report published by the United Nations Development Program in 2021, female members of Pakistan's National Assembly are responsible for initiating fewer than ten percent of the legislative activity.

Role of Political Parties and Civil Society in Participation of Women in Politics in Pakistan

Parties in Pakistan's political system play a significant factor in determining whether or not women are able to develop in their political careers. One way to examine their function is to consider: Manifestos of political parties

The wings of women

Participation in the primary decision-making organizations

Party Manifestos and Execution

Although the three largest political parties in Pakistan—the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP)—have made formal commitments to gender equality in their manifestos, there is still a significant gap between policy and execution.

In terms of symbolic representation, the PPP has been more progressive than other parties. Benazir Bhutto, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, is the only female Prime Minister that the PPP has produced.

However, the PML-N rarely elevates women to top leadership posts, despite the fact that it has frequently brought attention to the advancement of women, particularly in the context of Punjab-based administration (for example, the Punjab Women Empowerment Package 2012).

During the period of the PTI (2018–2022), numerous prominent female leaders, including as Shireen Mazari, were promoted to management positions; yet, the decision-making process inside the party continued to be primarily controlled by men.

Wings for Women

Although the majority of major parties have distinct wings for women, these wings are frequently symbolic and are not included in the process of policy making. The majority of the time, their duty is limited to mobilization during elections, and they do not provide agenda shaping.

Non-Governmental Organizations and Civil Society

A significant contribution has been made by organizations such as the Women's Democratic Front, ShirkatGah, and the Aurat Foundation in the areas of advocacy, training, and capacity building. They are: Run programs that raise awareness about gender issues.

Women who aspire to be politicians should receive training in leadership leadership.

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and political parties should be put under pressure to guarantee that gender-related election codes are adhered to.

However, since 2015, Pakistan's civil space has shrunk, which has hampered the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), making it more difficult to sustain grassroots momentum.

Case Studies of Notable Representatives of Women in Politics

Several Pakistani women have been able to break through political obstacles and emerge as significant leaders, despite the fact that they have been subjected to structural restraints. Throughout their careers, they have experienced both instances of success and enduring difficulties.

Benazir Bhutto

She was the first Muslim woman to lead a democratic government in the Muslim world. Benazir Bhutto was born in 1953 and passed away in 2007.

In the years 1988–1990 and 1993–1996 was the Prime Minister.

Her leadership was a symbol of women's empowerment, despite the fact that some people believe she did not alter women's access to political power in a structural setting.

It was during a political rally in 2007 that she was murdered, and her death brought to light the dangers that women in Pakistan who are politically active confront in terms of their safety.

Sherry Rehman

A former journalist and diplomat, currently a Senator and former Minister of Climate Change.

Her fight for democratic changes and women's rights, as well as her policy involvement, have earned her a reputation.

Since the beginning of climate diplomacy, she has been at the vanguard of bridging the gap between gender and environmental justice concerns.

Maryam Nawaz Sharif

She is the Vice President of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and is widely seen as the political heir to Nawaz Sharif.

A rising force in Pakistani politics, she has led important public campaigns.

Critics, on the other hand, point out that her entrée into politics is dynastic, which highlights the aristocratic aspect of women's entry into mainstream politics.

Dr. FehmidaMirza

In 2008–2013, Dr. FehmidaMirza served as the first woman to hold the position of Speaker of the National Assembly.

Particularly well-known for her work in forging bipartisanship and reforming the parliamentary system. These leaders are confronted with challenges such as criticism from the media and personal attacks based on their gender.

Exclusion from the decision-making process is more prevalent during times of crisis.

When it comes to political gatherings, there are security risks and a shortage of safe areas. navigating party hierarchies that are dominated by men and that are resistant to feminist leadership.

The Media, Public Perception, and the Safety of Women in Politics

The media has a dual function in creating public perception regarding the safety of women who are engaging in political activities.

One of the Positive Effects of the media is that it has enhanced the visibility of women in leadership positions through discussions, interviews, and interaction on social media.

As a result of their regular participation in the media, female politicians such as ShireenMazari, HinaRabbaniKhar, and SanamJaved have garnered fame.

Negative Impact: Personal attacks and character assassination are prevalent.

Policies and performance are not the only factors that are considered when evaluating female politicians; appearance, dress, and personal life are also considered.

Online harassment is a widespread problem. The Digital Rights Foundation (DRF, 2023) reported that the following:

Ninety percent of the female politicians who were interviewed claimed having experienced internet abuse. There are a lot of women who are discouraged from keeping their digital activity because of sexist trolling, bogus news, and intimidation.

Concerns Regarding Safety and Security Politically active women are subject to physical threats, particularly when they are participating in rallies or making public appearances.

Despite the fact that it occurred in the setting of education in 2012, the attack on MalalaYousafzai reverberated throughout political circles, as it served to reinforce the dangers that are associated with outspoken female advocacy.

During election campaigns, women are more susceptible to being victimized because there are not enough female police officers and safety mechanisms in place.

Despite the fact that women's political engagement in Pakistan has unquestionably increased since the quota reforms that took place in 2002, their influence continues to be limited due to a combination of patriarchal, institutional, and security concerns. The reliance on reserved seats, the elitist nature of female political recruitment, and the tokenism embedded within party structures are all indicators of a political system that has not yet fully internalized the norms of gender equality advocated in Sustainable Development Goal 5.

Hope is still available, however, because to the efforts of civil society organizations, the growing awareness of the general public, and the tenacity of renowned women leaders. The transformation of women's political status in Pakistan will involve institutional reforms, the empowerment of grassroots individuals, and a persistent challenge to deeply ingrained cultural practices that impede gender parity.

Assessing Progress Towards SDG Goal 5

An Overview of the Targets and Indicators for Sustainable Development Goal 5

As of September 2015, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been replaced by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations. In the context of the larger global goal of inclusive and equitable development, Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, is of utmost importance. Objective 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) is both a stand-alone goal and a cross-cutting issue that affects the fulfillment of other SDGs.

Key Target Under SDG 5

One of the most important goals of Sustainable Development Goal 5 is to put an end to all forms of discrimination against women and girls. Achieve the goal of ensuring that women have equal opportunities for leadership and full and effective involvement at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life. This is the target for target. The adoption and strengthening of solid policies and legislation that is enforceable for the purpose of promoting gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls is the objective of Target

There are a Number of Relevant Indicators for Political Empowerment, one of which is the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and municipal governments. The percentage of women who hold managerial jobs (including political leadership roles) is the subject of the fifth indicator. The purpose of these indicators is to keep track of the progress that has been made toward achieving gender parity in leadership positions, particularly in the areas of politics, public administration, and economic governance administration.

Pakistan's Commitments and the National Framework for Sustainable Development Goals

Pakistan was one of the first countries to embrace the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as its national development agenda in 2016. In 2016, Pakistan also created a National SDGs Framework and incorporated the SDGs into the Pakistan Vision 2025 blueprint. SDG Units were developed by the government at both the federal and provincial levels, in conjunction with the United Nations Development Program and other development partners.

Important Initiatives

In 2016, a Parliamentary Task Force on Sustainable Development Goals was established. The incorporation of Sustainable Development Goal targets into Regional Annual Development Plans (ADPs). The provinces of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa participated in the launch of gender-sensitive budgeting pilots. The involvement of Pakistan in global forums, the submission of reports to the United Nations High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), and the measures taken by the Ministry of Human Rights have all served to reaffirm Pakistan's dedication to Sustainable Development Goal 5. On the other hand, the real progress, particularly with regard to the political empowerment of women, is a reflection of sluggish implementation and structural hurdles.

The Advancement of Political Representation Indicators and the Existence of Gaps

The Ratio of Females to Males on the Board of Directors

By calculating the percentage of seats held by women in national and sub-national legislatures, this indicator provides relevant information.

Trends at the National Level (2002–2024)

In 2002, as a result of quota changes implemented by General Musharraf, the percentage of women who were represented in the National Assembly increased to 21% (60 reserved seats plus 13 general seats). During the year 2008, the representation remained at 22.2%.

Twenty-five percent of the seats in 2013 were held by women.

Twenty-nine percent of the National Assembly was made up of women in 2018.

2024 (Current Estimate): The percentage of people who are represented ranges from 19.5% to 21%, and there has been no significant increase over the past two decades.

Provincial Assemblies

The percentage of people who are represented in provincial assemblies varies from 17% in KP and Balochistan to 19% in Punjab and Sindh. The majority of women access general seats through reserved quotas, which are still uncommon. **At the level of local government**, there are reserved seats for women in the systems of local government; nevertheless, elections have been sporadic and inconsistent between provinces. Women's participation in the local government elections held in KP in 2021 was below 10% in many districts, and over 200 polling stations received no votes from female voters, which is indicative of significant socio-cultural hurdles. Despite the fact that quotas have increased exposure, they do not always have an influence on policy. When it comes to party nominations, campaign money, and public scrutiny, women confront a number of obstacles. Most women are appointed rather than elected, which limits their credibility at the grassroots level.

The Proportion of Women in Positions of Decision-Making

This indicator measures the proportion of women who hold positions of authority and management, such as cabinet positions, heads of legislative committees, and senior bureaucracy jobs. Just two to three women are currently serving in full cabinet posts at the federal level as of the year 2024, according to the current snapshot of cabinet-level ministers. Fewer than fifteen percent of parliamentary committees are chaired by women, and these women often serve in fields that are traditionally associated with women, such as education and health. Women make up less than ten percent of officer positions in the Pakistan Administrative Services (PAS), according to the bureaucracy. Justice Ayesha Malik, who was appointed to the Supreme Court in 2022, is the only female judge who has ever represented the United States on the court. In the field of law enforcement and the police force, female officers make up only 1.8% of the overall force across the country (National Police Bureau, 2023).

The Role of National and International Institutions

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP)

Since 2017, political parties have been required to ensure that women candidates receive at least five percent of the general seats in their constituency. Parties frequently nominate women in constituencies that are not winnable because there are not enough robust enforcement mechanisms. Although it has carried out awareness efforts on women's voting rights and gender-disaggregated data disclosure, there is room for improvement in terms of monitoring party compliance.

As per ECP directions to collaborates with both federal and provincial Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) departments.

UNDP (United Nations Development Program)

Facilitates workshops aimed at enhancing the capabilities of female politicians. In order to encourage inclusive institutions, we have shown our support for the Gender Equality Seal campaign. Published a

number of Gender Equality Reports between the years 2021 and 2024, which evaluated the responsibilities that women play role in governance and development.

UN Women

HeForShe is a program that was launched in Pakistan by UN Women to encourage males to participate in the promotion of gender equality. Advocates for gender audits of the operations of the parliamentary body.

Funded grassroots political training initiatives for female candidates, especially in rural areas. Promotes data-driven advocacy to track SDG 5 progress. However, their initiatives are frequently fragmented and urban-centered, with limited access to tribal or undeveloped communities. These institutions have been crucial in increasing awareness, providing technical help, and providing funds; however, their efforts are rarely coordinated.

Comparative Analysis with Certain Countries in the Region

India

Women hold 15.2% of seats in the Lok Sabha (Lower House) as of 2024.

In September 2023, India enacted the Women's Reservation Bill, which mandates 33% reservation for women in Lok Sabha and state assemblies, anticipated to be implemented after the 2029 census.

It is because of India's Panchayati Raj system that the country has a robust female political leadership at the local level. Since 1993, a reservation of 33 percent of the positions in local governments has been filled by more than 1.4 million women.

Bangladesh

Women have 20.9% of parliamentary seats.

The country has had a woman Prime Minister (Sheikh Hasina) for much of the previous three decades.

There are reserved seats, but a greater number of women are elected directly, which suggests that the public is more accepting of women in leadership positions.

A thriving women's political rights movement complements institutional reforms.

Sri Lanka

Women occupy only 5.3% of seats in Parliament (2024)—the lowest in South Asia.

Introduced a 25% quota for local councils in 2016, leading to modest gains at the grassroots level.

Cultural and institutional constraints still impede larger political engagement.

Although Pakistan's national-level representation is equivalent to that of India and Bangladesh, the country trails behind in terms of the number of women who are directly elected to positions of power and those who hold positions of decision-making authority.

In contrast to the panchayat system in India and the open electoral success of women in Bangladesh, Pakistan places a significant emphasis on reserved seats and nominations from elite class individuals.

FINDING AND ANALYSIS

A Comprehensive Analysis of the Trends in Political Representation (2002–2024)

This is mostly owing to reserved quotas at both the national and provincial levels, which have resulted in a moderate numerical improvement for women in Pakistan's political landscape between the years 2002 and 2024. Nevertheless, the achievement of substantial empowerment and equal participation is still a long way of coming.

National Assembly

As a result of Musharraf's devolution plan, sixty seats were set aside for women, which accounted for seventeen percent of the total three hundred forty-two seats. Additionally, thirteen women won general seats, reaching a total of around twenty-three percent of the seats. The representation of women in the 2013 elections was twenty-five percent, with sixty women holding reserved seats and ten women holding regular seats. Elections in 2018: 70 women (60 reserved, 10 elected), a percentage of 20.9% that demonstrates a stand still. In the year 2024, the current values have remained almost unchanged, indicating that there is no substantial rising tendency.

Provincial Assemblies

It is mostly owing to quotas that women's representation falls somewhere between 17 and 19 percent. The fact that direct elections on general seats are so uncommon draws attention to more fundamental sociopolitical resistance.

Local Government

Quotas ensured that all provinces were represented (33 percent in most of them), although elections continue to be sporadic. Regarding the KP 2021 Local Government elections, for example, the number of female voters who participated was exceedingly low, with almost 200 polling stations registering no female votes.

Observations and Inferences Derived from Secondary Sources

Token Politics and Elite Capture: According to reports published by the Aurat Foundation and UN Women (2021), reserved seats are frequently filled by women who have familial ties to influential male politicians, which restricts access to the grassroots level of government.

According to research conducted by Mujahid (2015) and Khan and Zia (2020), there are a number of cultural and structural barriers that impede true involvement. These barriers include social stigma, movement constraints, a lack of political training, and party bias.

The Harassment of the Media and Online: It was discovered by the Digital Rights Foundation (2023) that more than ninety percent of female politicians have been subjected to internet abuse. As a result of media coverage, women's roles in politics are frequently objectified or trivialized, which contributes to the delegitimization of the public.

Support from Institutions That Is Limited: Furthermore, political parties frequently fail to provide platforms, leadership roles, or financial assistance to female candidates, particularly for general elections, despite the fact that they are mandated to do so.

Analysis in the Light of the Theoretical Framework Using Feminist Theory and Rational Choice Theory, this part provides an interpretation of the data as they were obtained.

Theories of Feminism

It is possible to reveal gender-based exclusion and systematic injustice in Pakistani politics with the assistance of feminist theory. Mary Wollstonecraft and Betty Friedan are two examples of intellectuals that believe that in order to achieve gender equality, it is necessary to move beyond representation and challenge systemic patriarchy. The fact that Wollstonecraft places such a strong emphasis on education and rights is consistent with the results that illiteracy and a lack of access to political education pose significant obstacles to the involvement of Pakistani women.

The idea of symbolic versus substantive representation is readily apparent; quotas, on the other hand, provide a numerical presence; yet, women do not have any influence over the policymaking process. A critique of patriarchal party structures is offered by feminist theory. In these institutions, even women who are members of parliament are frequently restricted to responsibilities like as health and education, rather than defense, finance, or foreign policy, which continue to be dominated by men.

Implications for Social Development Goal 5

Evaluation in Relation to SDG Five Goals and Indicators to Watch

There is a lack of consistency in Pakistan's performance with regard to Target goal no 5, which is to ensure that women are fully and effectively participating in leadership roles.

The Number of Seats Held by Women in the Parliament

By the year 2024, Pakistan has maintained a female participation in the National Assembly that is approximately 20.6%. While it is higher than some regional peers (for example, Sri Lanka: approximately 5.3%), it is lower than the global norms (almost 26% according to IPU 2023). It is concerning that the majority of these seats are reserved and not earned through electoral contestation, as this raises questions about the extent of the empowerment.

Leadership Positions in Public Institutions

There were just two women cabinet ministers who possessed ministries that went beyond "soft" sectors in the year 2024. There has only ever been one female judge nominated to the Supreme Court, and that person is Justice Ayesha Malik, who was appointed in 2022. When it comes to the police and the bureaucracy, women hold fewer than ten percent of top posts.

GAP AND CHALLENGES

Implementation of New Policies

In spite of the fact that there is a National Gender Policy (2022) and a Parliamentary SDG Task Force, the methods employed for enforcement and accountability are inadequate. There is a persistent resistance among political parties to mainstreaming women, with token representation being preferred.

Resistance to Sociocultural Factors

In places including as FATA, KP, and Balochistan, women's mobility and engagement are restricted due to gender roles, religious interpretations, and conservative traditions.

Deficiency in Records and Monitoring

However, disaggregated gender data is either inconsistent or nonexistent, particularly at the municipal level, which makes it difficult to track progress.

Policy and Practical implications

Taking into consideration these findings, the multi-level treatments that are advocated are as follows:

Reforms to the Legislature

Increase the amount of reserved quotas: Increase the number of reserved seats from 17 percent to 33 percent, including a portion for general constituencies. Amendments should be made to electoral regulations in order to impose more severe penalties on parties that do not fulfill the criterion of five percent female candidates.

The reforms for reserved seats should ensure that candidates are selected democratically through open and transparent party primaries rather than through leadership nominations.

Institutions Measures

Enhance the capabilities of the ECP:

Pay attention to the gender-balanced financing of campaigns.

Maintain a record of party compliance and make gender representation statistics available to the public.

In order to encourage female leadership and internal reforms, establishment of gender units within major political parties is recommended.

Developing political ability at the district and tehsil levels, rather than merely in metropolitan areas, requires a partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Women.

Educational Programs and Awareness

For the purpose of dismantling long-term patriarchal thinking, gender sensitization programs should be implemented in schools and universities.

In order to guarantee responsible and fair coverage of female lawmakers, it is important to work together with various media outlets.

To promote female political participation as a right rather than a threat, initiatives should be launched in conservative districts with the participation of religious academics and tribe elders working together.

Safety Mechanisms: Both Digital and Physical

Especially for women who hold public office, legislation should be enacted and enforced to prevent harassment on the internet.

Legal assistance and psychological support should be made available to politically engaged women who have been threatened or subjected to violence.

Mobilization of the Community and from the Grassroots

Incorporate economic assistance, transportation facilities, and literacy initiatives in order to empower rural women who are in leadership positions. Make use of the platforms provided by local governments as entrance points for women in politics. Incorporate female councils at the district level that have fiscal authority.

The findings from secondary data shed light on an important realization: Pakistan has achieved symbolic political participation for women, but they have not acquired substantive empowerment. Although there have been quotas, legal frameworks, and international support for women's political engagement over the past twenty years, the revolutionary potential of women's political participation continues to be limited by patriarchal systems, elite capture, and policy stagnation.

A demonstration of how power is gendered and firmly ingrained in society standards is provided by the incorporation of feminist theory. The rational choice theory provides an explanation for the strategic

conduct of organizations and actors that maintain male supremacy while putting on a superficial appearance of complying with the law.

To achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5 in Pakistan, more than just numerical representation is required. An all-encompassing strategy is required, which includes changes to election law, cultural transformation, institutional support, and meaningful engagement from the general population. In the absence of this, the concept of gender equality in politics will continue to be more of a dream than a reality, and the process of sustainable development will be both slowed down and undermined.

CONCLUSION

The present study set out to explore the status, challenges, and potential for women's political participation in Pakistan, with a particular focus on achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which calls for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Using a combination of secondary data, theoretical analysis, and policy evaluation, this research examined the structures, trends, and transformative potential of women's engagement in politics from 2002 to 2024.

At the heart of this research lies a paradox, Pakistan has formally institutionalized gender representation through reserved quotas, yet substantive political empowerment for women remains a distant objective. While the country maintains a steady 20–21% female representation in the National Assembly, this figure has plateaued over the past two decades. Provincial and local governments reflect similar trends, with women primarily occupying reserved seats and remaining underrepresented on general seats—a telling indicator of systemic barriers that prevent broader inclusion.

This research has found that quantitative presence does not necessarily translate into qualitative power. The vast majority of women in parliament and provincial assemblies gain access through party nominations on reserved seats, often determined by familial or elite connections rather than political merit or grassroots support. Consequently, their legislative agency, independence, and influence over party policy remain limited. This phenomenon, known as tokenism, undermines the transformative role women could otherwise play in redefining political norms and governance priorities.

The application of Feminist Theory helped reveal how patriarchal structures—both cultural and institutional—continue to marginalize women's political voices. These structures are reinforced by party gatekeeping, male-dominated leadership hierarchies, media objectification, and widespread societal beliefs about women's roles.

Despite constitutional guarantees and Pakistan's global commitments—including the National Gender Policy (2022) and participation in UN SDG reporting—the country struggles with implementation deficits. Key SDG 5 indicators—Indicator 5.5.1 (proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments) and Indicator 5.5.2 (women in leadership roles)—have seen minimal progress. Notably, while Pakistan has more women in formal politics than some regional neighbors like Sri Lanka, it lags significantly behind countries like Bangladesh and India in terms of women's electoral success on general seats, cabinet leadership, and local governance visibility.

This thesis also highlighted the role of national institutions and international partners such as the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), UNDP, and UN Women. While these entities have made commendable efforts in training, advocacy, and capacity-building, their efforts remain fragmented, urban-centric, and politically under-leveraged. The lack of gender-disaggregated data and weak enforcement of laws further diminishes their impact.

The findings also emphasized that grassroots-level empowerment is critical for achieving sustainable gender parity. Without reforms that strengthen local governments, promote civic education, ensure economic security for aspiring women leaders, and engage with community leaders, especially in rural and tribal areas, the scope for broader transformation will remain limited. Cultural attitudes, particularly in regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, continue to deter women's political participation, voter turnout, and visibility.

The research leads to several broader implications. Firstly, without real improvements in women's political participation, Pakistan will fall short of SDG 5, which could also affect other goals related to poverty reduction, education, and peace. Secondly, having more women in decision-making roles improves the quality of governance, and failing to include them limits national development. Thirdly, a democracy that excludes half of its population is neither inclusive nor legitimate. Women's equal participation is not just a right—it is essential for a healthy democracy. Lastly, Pakistan's consistently low rankings on global gender indexes, like being 142nd out of 146 on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index (2023), harms its global reputation and credibility.

In conclusion, while Pakistan has made some institutional efforts and taken small steps forward, the country's political system remains heavily male-dominated. Achieving SDG Goal 5 will require more than just adjusting quotas or passing policies. It will need a full transformation of attitudes, institutions, and social norms. Only through a multi-pronged approach—involving law reforms, stronger political inclusion, awareness campaigns, and cultural change—can women in Pakistan truly become equal partners in shaping the country's political and democratic future

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