

## Women Participation in Democracy Empowerment: Case of Electoral Process in Pakistan - Psychological and Social Impact

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### Abstract

*This article explores the multifaceted dimensions of women's participation in the democratic process in Pakistan, focusing on their involvement in elections and the subsequent psychological and social impacts. Women's engagement in electoral activities is not only a measure of democratic inclusivity but also a critical factor in their broader economic and social empowerment. This study delves into the historical context of women's political participation in Pakistan, highlighting key milestones and persistent challenges. The research investigates the barriers that women face, such as cultural norms, educational disparities, and economic dependency, which hinder their active involvement in the electoral process. It examines the psychological effects of political participation on women, including enhanced self-esteem, increased political efficacy, and the empowerment that stems from active civic engagement. Furthermore, the study assesses the social impact, considering how women's participation influences community attitudes towards gender roles, the acceptance of women in leadership positions, and the broader implications for gender equality in Pakistani society. The findings reveal a complex interplay between empowerment and participation. While legal frameworks and quotas have facilitated greater representation of women in political bodies, significant socio-cultural obstacles remain. The psychological benefits of participation are substantial, fostering a sense of agency and confidence among women. Socially, women's active involvement in elections is gradually transforming traditional gender norms, although progress is uneven across different regions and communities.*

**Keyword:** Women, Democracy, History, Electoral, Empowerment, Gender Quota and Reserved Seats for Women 1985, Politics, Pakistan, Participation, Policy Decisions, Economic Empowerment, Legislative Reforms for women protection, women's psychological well-being etc.

### Introduction

The importance of women's role in democracy cannot be overstated. Women constitute roughly half of the global population, and their participation in democratic processes is not just a matter of equality but a fundamental necessity for the health and vitality of any democratic society. First and foremost, women bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the table, enriching the decision-making process. Their inclusion ensures that a wider range of issues, concerns, and

priorities are considered, leading to more comprehensive and equitable policies. Women often advocate for issues such as healthcare, education, family welfare, and gender equality, which are crucial for the well-being and progress of any society. Agbalajobi and Agunbiade (2016)

Moreover, women's participation in democracy fosters social cohesion and stability. It empowers them to be active contributors to their communities, and this, in turn, can lead to stronger, more harmonious societies. Women's engagement in the political process can also help counterbalance the influence of dominant power structures and promote accountability within governments. When women actively participate in politics and hold leadership positions, they serve as role models for future generations. Their presence challenges traditional gender norms, inspiring young girls to aspire to positions of power and influence, and encouraging a more inclusive and diverse political landscape. Grimalda and Tanzer (2018). Thus, the importance of women's role in democracy goes beyond mere representation. It is essential for the vitality, equity, and stability of democratic societies, and it paves the way for progress, inclusion, and the realization of democratic ideals. Embracing and promoting women's active involvement in politics is a vital step towards achieving true democratic representation and social progress.

### **History of Women in Pakistan Politics**

The historical perspective of women's role in Pakistan's politics is a complex and evolving one. Pakistan's political landscape has seen significant changes over the years, and women have played a pivotal but often challenging role in this arena. Allaudin and Khan (2020) One of the defining moments in the history of women's participation in Pakistani politics was the passage of the Pakistan Muslim Family Laws Ordinance in 1961. This legal reform aimed to improve the rights of women, particularly in the realm of marriage and divorce. It was a significant step toward recognizing women's rights within the country's legal system. Despite this, it was only during the tenure of Benazir Bhutto as Pakistan's first female Prime Minister in the late 1980s and mid-1990s that women's participation in politics gained significant momentum. Bhutto's leadership was an inspiration for many women in Pakistan and around the world. However, it's essential to note that the journey for women in Pakistani politics has been fraught with challenges, including cultural and societal barriers, conservative norms, and discrimination. These obstacles have limited the representation of women in political offices and decision-making positions.

In recent years, there have been positive developments with an increasing number of women entering politics in Pakistan. The Reserved Seats for Women in National and Provincial Assemblies have helped improve their representation, but it is crucial to transition from reserved seats to more women actively participating and contesting in general seats. Khan and Naqvi (2020)

Despite the challenges, women have continued to make their mark in Pakistani politics. Figures like Malala Yousafzai, who advocated for girls' education and won the Nobel Peace Prize, and Asma Jahangir, a prominent human rights activist, have shown that women can have a powerful voice in shaping Pakistan's political landscape.

However, the historical perspective of women's role in Pakistan's politics reflects a complex journey marked by progress and obstacles. Women in Pakistan have made significant contributions to the country's political development, and there is a growing momentum toward

increased participation and representation. However, continued efforts are necessary to address the remaining gender disparities and create a more inclusive and equitable political environment for women in Pakistan.

### **Women Role in Electoral Process**

The role of women in Pakistan's electoral process is of great significance as it reflects their participation in the country's democratic institutions. While there have been improvements in recent years, challenges persist, and the historical context provides insights into this evolving situation. Historically, women's participation in Pakistan's electoral process faced numerous barriers. Societal norms, traditional customs, and cultural biases often limited women's involvement in politics and voting. This situation began to change with legislative reforms and constitutional amendments that aimed to ensure women's participation in the electoral process. The 1956 and 1962 Constitutions of Pakistan granted women the right to vote, and in 1985, reserved seats for women were introduced in the National Assembly to ensure their representation. Bano (2009)

One of the key aspects of women's role in the electoral process in Pakistan is the reserved seats for women in the National and Provincial Assemblies. These seats are allocated to ensure female representation in the legislature, both at the federal and provincial levels. These reserved seats have allowed women to enter and participate in electoral politics, even if the broader political landscape remains male-dominated.

Women role in Pakistan's electoral process underscores the multifaceted challenges and opportunities they face. Historically, patriarchal norms, low female voter turnout, and limited representation were prevalent in the country's political landscape. However, constitutional amendments and legislative reforms have aimed to enhance women's political participation, including the allocation of reserved seats for women in the National and Provincial Assemblies. The importance of these reserved seats in improving female representation but also emphasizes the need to transition towards increased participation in general seats. Cultural and societal barriers, including voter suppression and intimidation, continue to be obstacles. Nonetheless, recent studies show a growing interest among Pakistani women to actively engage in electoral politics and advocate for gender equality, providing hope for a more inclusive and equitable democratic future.

Women in Pakistan have also shown increased political activism in recent years, with more women contesting elections on general seats, running political campaigns, and engaging in grassroots mobilization. This demonstrates a growing interest in actively shaping the political future of the country. Despite these positive changes, challenges persist, including cultural and societal biases that can hinder women from fully participating in the electoral process. There are issues such as voter suppression, intimidation, and patriarchal attitudes that continue to limit women's access to their electoral rights. Imran and Munir (2018)

Thus, the role of women in Pakistan's electoral process has evolved over time, with legislative reforms and constitutional amendments aiming to ensure their participation. While reserved seats have increased female representation in legislative bodies, there are still many challenges to overcome, including societal biases. Nevertheless, women in Pakistan are increasingly engaging

in electoral politics, and their role in the electoral process is crucial for building a more inclusive and equitable democracy.

### **Significance of the Study**

Research on women's participation in the electoral process and political activities is of utmost significance as it serves as a foundational tool for advancing gender equality and empowering women socially and politically. By examining the barriers, opportunities, and impact of women's involvement in politics, such research not only provides valuable insights for policymakers but also highlights the critical role women play in democratic societies. It sheds light on the factors that hinder women's engagement and suggests strategies for enhancing their political participation. Empowering women politically and socially through research-driven initiatives leads to more inclusive and equitable societies, strengthening the foundations of democracy and fostering a more just and representative political landscape.

### **Research Methodology**

Through secondary literature on women participation in the electoral process and political activities to empower them socially and politically observed the barriers of women in socially and politically. Different research studies, laws for women empowerment, scholarly articles incorporated during study. This study explores women challenges to women in Pakistan politics and way out to empower them.

### **Literature review**

Gruber et al, (2021) research investigates how political empowerment affects women's psychological well-being in emerging democracies. The study uses qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the mental health outcomes of women who participate in political processes.

Findings: Political engagement and empowerment are linked to higher levels of self-esteem, reduced feelings of powerlessness, and improved mental health among women, suggesting that active participation in democracy can have profound positive psychological effects.

Irshad at el, (2023) research highlights the critical role of women political elites in shaping policies aimed at fostering social and psychological empowerment among women in Pakistan. Existing research highlights the challenges faced by women in political leadership roles, including entrenched gender biases, patriarchal norms, and institutional barriers that limit their influence and effectiveness in policymaking. Despite these obstacles, studies reveal the significance of women political elites in advocating for gender-responsive policies, legislative reforms, and social programs that address women's rights, access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and protection against gender-based violence. Furthermore, research underscores the importance of creating enabling environments and support structures that empower women political elites to effectively navigate political landscapes, build alliances, mobilize support, and leverage their positions of power to advance gender equality, social justice, and psychological well-being for women across Pakistan.

Shakil et al, (2023) study underscores the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by women in the political sphere of Pakistan, particularly highlighting psychological and economic dimensions. Studies reveal that Pakistani women engaged in politics encounter psychological

hurdles such as gender-based discrimination, societal expectations, and cultural norms that undermine their confidence and agency in political participation. Additionally, economic barriers, including limited access to resources, financial support, and opportunities for political mobilization, further marginalize women in the political arena. Research emphasizes the need for comprehensive interventions addressing both psychological and economic factors to promote gender equity and women's meaningful participation in Pakistan's political landscape, fostering inclusive governance and social change.

Akram et al, (2023) discusses the complex and evolving landscape of women's socio-economic empowerment in Pakistan over the past decade. Research underscores the multifaceted challenges faced by women in accessing education, employment, healthcare, and political representation, compounded by socio-cultural norms, legal constraints, and economic disparities. Despite concerted efforts to promote women's empowerment through policy interventions, grassroots initiatives, and international development programs, studies reveal persistent gaps in implementation, enforcement, and sustainability of empowerment initiatives. Moreover, research emphasizes the importance of addressing structural barriers, patriarchal attitudes, and institutionalized inequalities that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and hinder women's full participation and agency in socio-economic spheres. Moving forward, scholars advocate for holistic approaches that integrate legal reforms, economic incentives, educational opportunities, and social support systems to create enabling environments for women's empowerment, foster gender equity, and promote inclusive development across Pakistan.

Akram (2023) highlights the political instability in Pakistan from 2018 to present scrutinizes the multifaceted factors contributing to the country's tumultuous political landscape, encompassing governance challenges, institutional fragility, socio-economic disparities, and security concerns. Research highlights the interplay of political dynamics, including power struggles among political parties, military intervention in governance, civil-military relations, and the impact of regional geopolitics on Pakistan's internal affairs. Studies underscore the implications of electoral irregularities, corruption scandals, and governance failures for democratic consolidation and public trust in state institutions. Furthermore, scholars explore the role of social movements, media activism, and civil society mobilization in contesting political authority, demanding accountability, and advocating for democratic reforms. Amidst ongoing political turbulence, researchers stress the importance of strengthening democratic institutions, promoting inclusive governance, and fostering political dialogue to address systemic challenges and mitigate the risk of further instability in Pakistan's political landscape.

Akram et al, (2023) study delves into the complex ramifications of this prevalent social issue on the mental and emotional well-being of young girls. Research underscores the profound psychological distress experienced by child brides, including feelings of powerlessness, anxiety, depression, and trauma resulting from early marital unions and associated pressures. Studies reveal the adverse impact of child marriages on girls' self-esteem, identity formation, and social integration, as they grapple with disrupted education, limited autonomy, and heightened vulnerability to domestic violence and reproductive health risks. Furthermore, scholars emphasize the intergenerational transmission of psychological harm, as girls forced into early marriages are more likely to perpetuate cycles of poverty, gender inequality, and social marginalization within their families and communities. Addressing the psychological effects of

child marriages necessitates comprehensive interventions that combine legal reforms, educational initiatives, community mobilization, and psychosocial support services to empower girls, protect their rights, and break the cycle of intergenerational harm perpetuated by this harmful practice in Pakistan

Rafay et al, (2016) discusses the women role in Pakistan's democracy is integral to the nation growth and development. Despite numerous challenges, women have made substantial strides in recent years, with increased representation in both the legislature and local governance. Their participation in the democratic process is vital for fostering gender equality, inclusive policy-making, and social progress. Women bring diverse perspectives and priorities to the political arena, addressing issues such as education, healthcare, and gender equality. Their involvement not only strengthens the democratic fabric of Pakistan but also serves as an inspiration for future generations, challenging traditional gender norms and promoting a more inclusive and equitable society. To harness the full potential of democracy in Pakistan, continued efforts to remove barriers and enhance women's participation in all aspects of political life are essential.

Saiyid (2001) mentioned that women participation in Pakistan's elections has seen both progress and challenges. Historically, cultural and societal norms often limited women's involvement in the electoral process. However, legislative reforms and constitutional amendments have aimed to empower women politically, with the introduction of reserved seats for women in the National and Provincial Assemblies. These reserved seats have increased female representation in legislative bodies, although they also underscore the need for a transition toward women contesting general seats. Cultural and societal barriers, including voter suppression and intimidation, still persist, but there is a growing trend of more women actively participating in elections, running political campaigns, and engaging in grassroots mobilization, reflecting a promising shift toward greater gender equality and female political empowerment in Pakistan's democratic landscape.

Khattak (2010) discusses those women participation in local government politics is a critical component of grassroots democracy. It has the potential to foster more inclusive and equitable governance by bringing diverse perspectives to the decision-making process. Historically, women often faced barriers in this arena due to cultural and societal norms. However, various countries have implemented measures to promote gender balance at the local level, such as reserved seats for women in local councils. This has led to increased representation and active involvement of women in shaping local policies and development initiatives. Their participation at the grassroots level can address community-specific issues, leading to more responsive and effective governance and contributing to women's empowerment in both social and political spheres.

Jabeen (2019) explores that women representation in local government politics is pivotal for creating more inclusive and responsive governance structures. Historically, women's participation in these roles has been limited due to societal and cultural barriers. However, many countries have taken affirmative steps to address this imbalance, such as implementing reserved seats or quotas for women at the local level. Such measures have resulted in a noticeable increase in women's participation, enabling them to play a more active role in shaping policies,

addressing community-specific issues, and advocating for gender equality. This enhanced representation not only promotes more balanced and effective decision-making but also empowers women to engage in the political process, fostering greater social and political equality at the grassroots level.

Bari (2010) discusses the women in Pakistan continue to face numerous challenges in the realm of politics, despite some progress in recent years. One of the primary challenges is the deeply ingrained patriarchal culture and societal norms that perpetuate gender disparities. These norms often limit women's mobility, their freedom to participate in political events, and their ability to campaign in conservative areas. Gender-based discrimination and violence against women in politics is another significant challenge. Threats, harassment, and even physical violence against women politicians and activists are not uncommon, which hinders their political participation. Additionally, there are systemic obstacles, including the lack of access to education and resources for women, which can impede their political aspirations. The dearth of female role models in Pakistani politics also presents a challenge, as it can be discouraging for aspiring women politicians. Despite these challenges, many women in Pakistan have been resilient and have managed to break through these barriers, making valuable contributions to the country's political landscape. However, addressing these challenges comprehensively and creating a more enabling environment for women's participation remains a crucial task for Pakistan's political and societal development.

Ghafoor (2018) discusses the empowering women in Pakistan's political landscape faces multifaceted challenges. A deeply entrenched patriarchal culture and conservative societal norms continue to be formidable barriers, limiting women's opportunities and representation in politics. Discrimination and violence against women in the political sphere are persistent threats, discouraging their active participation. Structural obstacles, including limited access to quality education and economic resources, impede women's political ambitions and limit their ability to engage meaningfully. Furthermore, the lack of a comprehensive legal framework to protect women's political rights and interests adds to the challenges. Despite these hurdles, women in Pakistan have shown resilience and determination, breaking barriers to participate in politics and advocate for gender equality. To achieve meaningful women's empowerment in Pakistani politics, it is crucial to address these challenges through legislative reforms, social change, and continued efforts to promote women's participation and leadership in all aspects of political life.

Awan (2016) stated that women in Pakistan face several challenges when it comes to their participation in political parties. While some progress has been made, gender disparities persist within political organizations. Discrimination and bias are prevalent, hindering women's access to leadership positions and decision-making roles. Party structures and cultures often reflect patriarchal norms, making it difficult for women to break through and have their voices heard. Traditional societal expectations and familial responsibilities can also pose significant challenges, as they sometimes limit women's ability to engage in political activities. Furthermore, the prevalence of harassment and violence against women within and outside political parties creates a hostile environment for their political involvement. To address these challenges and ensure greater inclusion of women in Pakistan's political parties, efforts are needed to promote gender equality within the organizations, establish clear anti-harassment

policies, and provide opportunities and support for women to actively participate in party politics.

Batool (2019) discusses to increase women's participation in Pakistan's politics, a comprehensive approach is needed. This includes implementing and enforcing gender quotas, reserved seats, and affirmative action measures to ensure women's representation at all levels of government. Simultaneously, it's vital to address cultural and societal barriers by launching awareness campaigns to challenge traditional gender norms, provide political education, and create safe spaces for women to engage in politics. Encouraging women's participation at the grassroots level, promoting mentorship and networking opportunities, and establishing mechanisms to address harassment and violence against women in politics are also crucial. Additionally, political parties should adopt more inclusive internal practices, and the media should ensure balanced coverage of female politicians. By collectively pursuing these strategies, Pakistan can make significant strides in enhancing women's involvement in politics, fostering a more inclusive and equitable political landscape.

Reshi and Sudha (2023) defined the women social empowerment is intricately linked to their economic empowerment, and the two aspects are mutually reinforcing. When women are socially empowered, they gain a stronger voice in their communities and households. This, in turn, can lead to greater decision-making power regarding their own lives, family matters, and community issues. Socially empowered women often have increased access to education and healthcare, enabling them to make informed choices about their health and that of their families. Conversely, economic empowerment provides women with the means to gain financial independence and contribute to their households' income, which can significantly enhance their social status. With economic independence, women can invest in their children's education, access better healthcare, and improve overall family well-being. This financial stability further elevates their role and influence within their families and communities.

## **Conclusion**

Women's participation in democracy profoundly impacts both societal dynamics and individual psychological well-being. Greater inclusion of women in democratic processes enhances the representation of diverse perspectives, leading to more comprehensive and equitable policy-making. This inclusivity fosters a sense of empowerment and agency among women, which is linked to improved mental health, higher self-esteem, and a stronger sense of belonging. Additionally, seeing women in leadership roles challenges traditional gender norms, inspiring future generations and contributing to a more progressive and balanced society.

Women's participation in Pakistan's electoral process and political activities holds immense potential for fostering gender equality, social progress, and equitable governance. The journey has been marked by significant challenges, including cultural and societal norms, discrimination, and violence against women in politics. However, notable progress has been made through legislative reforms, reserved seats, and the growing determination of women to engage in politics. To truly empower women politically, Pakistan must continue to address these challenges comprehensively, with a commitment to legal reforms, awareness campaigns, and institutional changes that promote women's participation and leadership. It is only through these collective efforts, involving government, civil society, and international partners, that Pakistan can build a

more inclusive and representative democracy that empowers women politically and benefits the nation as a whole. Women's full and active participation in the electoral process and political activities is not just a matter of gender equality; it is a fundamental requirement for the country's democratic health and progress.

The challenges faced by women in Pakistan's politics are deeply entrenched and multifaceted, rooted in cultural, societal, and institutional factors. One of the most formidable obstacles is the pervasive patriarchal culture and deeply ingrained gender norms that perpetuate gender disparities in political participation. Discrimination and bias within political parties and institutions continue to limit women's access to leadership positions and meaningful roles in decision-making. Gender-based violence and harassment further compound the challenges, discouraging women from actively engaging in the political sphere. Additionally, structural obstacles such as limited access to education and economic resources can hinder women's political ambitions and opportunities. The dearth of female role models in Pakistani politics presents yet another hurdle, as it can be discouraging for aspiring women in politics.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and sustained effort that involves legislative reforms, awareness campaigns to challenge traditional norms, and the establishment of anti-harassment mechanisms. Encouraging the participation of women at the grassroots level and promoting mentorship and networking opportunities can also be instrumental in overcoming these obstacles. Despite the daunting challenges, the resilience and determination of women in Pakistan continue to drive progress, and as the nation collectively works to remove these barriers, it holds the potential to foster a more inclusive and equitable political landscape that empowers women to participate fully in shaping the future of the country.

### **Suggestions**

Empowering women in Pakistan politically, socially, and economically is a multifaceted endeavor that requires concerted efforts at various levels. Political empowerment can be promoted by implementing gender-sensitive policies and legislation, including gender quota and reserved seats for women in political bodies, to ensure their representation. Political parties should adopt affirmative action measures to increase the participation of women, and anti-harassment mechanisms must be enforced rigorously. Additionally, civic education programs should be initiated to enhance women's awareness of their political rights and opportunities.

Social empowerment can be advanced through awareness campaigns and initiatives aimed at challenging traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Promoting gender equality in education and addressing child marriage and honor killings are critical steps. Encouraging women's participation in community and civil society organizations can also foster social empowerment, as it allows women to influence local decisions and advocate for their rights.

Economic empowerment can be facilitated by enhancing access to education and vocational training for women, enabling them to access diverse economic opportunities. Microfinance and entrepreneurship programs specifically targeting women can be instrumental in their economic self-reliance. Additionally, policies that support work-life balance and affordable childcare services can enable women to participate more actively in the workforce.

Fostering women's empowerment in Pakistan requires a holistic approach that addresses political, social, and economic aspects. Collaborative efforts among government institutions, civil society organizations, and the private sector are essential to drive meaningful change and create a more inclusive and equitable society for women in Pakistan.

Ensuring the implementation of laws related to women's rights in Pakistan is critical to advancing gender equality and empowering women in various spheres of life. One of the key steps in this process is to strengthen the legal framework itself. This includes reviewing and amending existing laws to make them more gender-sensitive and comprehensive. Legislative reforms can help close gaps in protection and support women's rights more effectively. It's essential to introduce clear and practical guidelines for law enforcement agencies, judges, and legal practitioners to ensure that these laws are applied consistently and fairly.

Simultaneously, there is a need for rigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to oversee the implementation of these laws. This can involve establishing dedicated government bodies or commissions responsible for women's rights, with the authority to investigate and take action against violators. Regular reporting and public awareness campaigns can further ensure transparency and accountability in this process.

Moreover, it's crucial to provide training for law enforcement officials and judicial officers on gender sensitivity and the application of women-related laws. This can help reduce gender bias in the legal system and improve the overall quality of justice.

To encourage women to report violations of their rights, it is essential to establish easily accessible and confidential channels for filing complaints. Legal aid services and support systems should be made available to women who seek justice.

Collaboration with civil society organizations and women's rights advocates can also play a pivotal role in monitoring and promoting the implementation of laws related to women. By working together, the government, NGOs, and the broader community can create a more comprehensive and effective system that ensures women's legal rights are protected, upheld, and respected. Ultimately, the successful implementation of these laws is crucial for empowering women, fostering gender equality, and promoting a just and inclusive society in Pakistan.

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