

**Political Empowerment of Women in Pakistan; Performance of Female  
Parliamentarians in Punjab Assembly  
(Case Study of Lahore District: 2002-2007)**

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**Abstract**

The study endeavors to analyze the ontology of political empowerment of women with the role of female legislators from Lahore in the Punjab Assembly (2002-07). The selected era has a peculiar importance as the number of reserved seats was increased up to 17% in the National and Punjab Assembly and 33% in the local governments. The initiatives taken by President Pervaiz Musharraf led to the process of women empowerment which continued even after his era. The study is an effort to encompass the outcomes of those initiatives and the performance of women legislators in the Punjab Assembly. Semi-Structured interviews of the women legislator, academician and the media person were conducted to infer the results. Secondary sources were used to make the study more authentic.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Feminism, Lahore, Legislators, Women Rights

**Introduction**

Women empowerment is comparatively a new concept in the field of Political Science and gender Studies. Women were not even considered as citizens in the Greek period, even though Plato was considered as the first feminist when he insisted for a same educational system for both men and women. Women empowerment is perceived as the ability of women to bring a change on the social, economic and political level as well as have the power to take decisions and implement them. The concept of women empowerment has emerged from the theories of feminism, which is not a single concept but a group of theorists striving to raise their voice for women rights. The common objective of these theories is to remove gender discrimination from the society. Feminism emerged in 1848 at Seneca Falls<sup>1</sup> to focus on the right of franchise for women. It has three major branches identified as Liberalism, Socialism and Radical Feminism. Liberal Feminists believe in equal rights of women. On the contrary the Socialists consider capitalism as the main cause of oppression of women and the only solution to the problem is to implement Marxist economic system. The Radicals believe that patriarchy and male dominance is the main issue and the entire system will have to be replaced through a revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Women convention (1848)

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Over a period of time the phenomenon of women empowerment was introduced in European Colonies with the process of delegation of powers to the grass-root. Significantly, the Pakistan Movement in the sub-continent evidently exhibited the intellectual and political empowerment of women. The Muslim League leadership always encouraged the women to participate in politics. Women like Mohtarma Fatima Jinnah and Rana Liaquat Ali Khan played a vital role in the struggle for independence. The struggle for political empowerment of women in Pakistan continued even after independence. All the governments reserved seats in the legislative bodies for women to ensure their participation in the decision making process. The first legislature had two female representatives, whereas the first constitution reserved 10 and the second constitution six seats for women in the National Assembly. The constitution of 1973 granted equal rights to both men and women and ten seats were reserved for women in the federal assembly. The era of Zia-ul-Haq was considered as a gloomy period with regard to women rights. Still 20 seats were reserved for women in the National Assembly. The next decade could not obtain any significant achievement in this regard.

The era of Pervaiz Musharraf could be considered as a land mark in the history of Pakistan. After assuming power in 1999, he committed to empower the female strata of Pakistan. Through a Legal Framework Order, he raised the reserved seats for women up to 19% in the federal and provincial assemblies and 33% in the local bodies. In the general elections of 2002, 60 seats were reserved for women in the National Assembly. Along with other provinces, women were given due status in the provincial assembly of Punjab and being the largest province in terms of population, 66 seats were reserved in the provincial assembly for women. Local bodies are an integral part of democracy to assure the decentralization of powers. In March 2002, Pervaiz Musharraf introduced 'The Devolution Plan' to provide a three-tier local government structure. The main aspect of the Devolution Plan was the provision of 33% quota for women in District, Tehsil and Union Councils.

This study is primarily related with the performance of the women parliamentarians elected from the District of Lahore on either general or reserved seats in Punjab Assembly. The fourteenth Punjab Assembly consisted of Seventy three women, out of which sixty five were selected on reserved seats and eight were elected on general seats. Fourteen women Parliamentary Secretaries were also part of the Assembly along with 13 Committee Chairmen and one Advisor to the C. M. Throughout the 31 sessions, the women parliamentarians remained extremely active and vigilant in the law making process. Thirty two women belonged to the district of Lahore.

### **Contextual Analysis and Literature Review**

Feminist theory and women empowerment are comparatively new areas of academic study. But different scholars have divergent opinions regarding the meaning and concept of these terms. Some have explained the concept as gender discrimination and others have discussed the role and agency of women as major variable in the political

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structure of a society. But very few have highlighted the impact of women legislatures on the process of legislation. Some of the literature reviewed in this context has been given below:

Evans (1977) has established a general framework of interpretation tracing the origins, development and eventual collapse of women emancipation movements in relation to the changing social formations and political structure of Europe, America and Australia in the era of liberalism. His focus is on organizations and their development, rather than on effects to bring changes in the social position of the women. Walby (1996) has examined the empowerment of women in the society and public sphere. She has laid importance on women's agency in the patriarchal structure. She has analyzed the problems faced by women in the male oriented society and their increasing participation in politics, both in legislatures and political organizations. While analyzing the political aspect of the theory, Hooks (2000) has emphasized to remove the misconceptions and stressed that feminism is not a movement against men or patriarchy but the basic objective is to give equal political, economic, cultural and social rights to women to protect them from all kinds of harassments and violence.

Showden (2009) has stressed on the need of creating a new gender regime. He has argued that the basic dangers towards women still exist and they are still deprived of their fundamental rights. The Feminist theory has led to the concept of 'Women Empowerment' including a number of aspects like economic, political, social and domestic empowerment. Chung, Kantachote, Mallick, Polster, & Roets (2013) have showed different indicators of women empowerment in the developing nations. The report has identified the indicators of women empowerment in five different dimensions as economic contribution, education, governance, health and media. They have scrutinized different indicators in these dimensions and compared these indicators to the available information of U.S. Agency for International Development. The report has identified 581 different indicators and recommended thirty seven indicators to measure women empowerment in the developing states.

Omvedt (2005) has also explicated political empowerment of women with reference to South Asia. He has analyzed that even though South Asia has the honor of presenting most powerful women leaders of the world like, Benazir Bhutto, Indira Gandhi and Khalida Zia, but the overall participation of women in politics is not significant. Due to the socio-economic marginalization and the nature of politics, the women have not been capable of participating equally in the governance and decision making process. The concept of political empowerment in Pakistan has emerged immediately after the independence and continued over a period of time.

As Mirza & Wagha (2002) have analyzed the performance of women representatives in the National Assembly from 2002-2005. They have given a brief description of the assembly year wise account of different bills and initiatives moved by the women candidates, either elected on general or reserved seats. Ali & Akhtar (2012) have

inquired the meaning of 'empowerment' along with the history of political empowerment in Pakistan after independence. The philosophical and pragmatic view of the phenomenon has also been analyzed. They have argued that there has been a significant and qualitative change in the number of women participating in politics. The process of women empowerment is irreversible. Most of the women activists have limited their activities to legal and domestic rights of women.

Choudhry, Nosheen, & Lodhi (2012) have analyzed women empowerment in Pakistan with reference to Islamic point of view. They have strived to remove the misconception about Islam as an obstacle in the way of women empowerment. They have taken the district of Southern Punjab as a sample to collect and analyze the data that the Islamic concept of women empowerment can strengthen the status of women in the society and can be implemented properly by improving the educational, working and health opportunities for them.

However none of the reviewed literature has presented a comprehensive account of the implications of the increased representation of women during Musharraf era in the legislative and decision making process with reference to Punjab. Mostly the proponents stretch back the history to elucidate their apprehensions. But the performance of female legislators, their political and consociational approach to the general masses and the outcomes of the representation in their constituencies have not been epitomized. The study endeavors to analyze the initiatives of president Musharraf and their impact on the general women and the relation of women representatives with the masses. It also breaks new vistas for future research in the field of Political Science due to its generalizability and predictability.

### **Research Questions**

The study endeavors to answer the following questions.

- Could the initiatives taken by President Musharraf win the confidence of the masses?
- How far the increased women representation contributed towards the effective women empowerment in Punjab?
- What kind of difference was made by the women parliamentarians in the legislative process?
- Were the women legislators selected on their political background and party affiliation or their performance?

### **Objectives**

The study was conducted to achieve the following objectives:

- To evaluate the performance of the women parliamentarians of Punjab Assembly.

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- To scrutinize their impact on the legislative process of the Assembly.
- To assess the parameters for their selection as member of Punjab Assembly.
- To examine the nature of legislation initiated by them and its impact on the social and political system of the province.

**Methodology**

Qualitative method is applied to encompass the performance of women parliamentarians in the Punjab Assembly, while using case-study method. The research envisages the following themes to empirically verify the data for results.

**Table 1**

*Themes for Interviews*

| Major Theme   | Sub Theme   |
|---|---|
| Initiatives regarding women empowerment could be able to ensure mass participation at grass-root level. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation was confined to elite class only.</li> <li>• Women were elected on party affiliation.</li> </ul>                               |
| How far the gap was bridged between the women legislators and the females of the society.               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The legislators were know how of the problems of general women.</li> <li>• They could develop a healthy relation with the masses.</li> </ul> |

The primary nature of the study is qualitative, as in social sciences, interviews are considered the most useful data collection method to infer the results by gaining useful information of the respondent’s experiences regarding the research area. Interview protocols were established to conduct In-depth and semi-structured interviews of the women parliamentarians of Punjab Assembly, academician and media person belonging to the district of Lahore. Secondary sources were utilized to streamline the study and to identify the initiatives taken by President Musharraf to empower women and their impact on the masses. Proceedings of Punjab Assembly (2002-2007) were reviewed to probe into the performance of the female parliamentarians.

**Table 2**

*Demographic Profile of the Respondents*

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| <b>Code No.</b> |   |
|-----------------|---|
| 1               | Member Punjab Assembly<br>2002-07<br>Advisor to Chief Minister and as Chairperson, Punjab Social Services Board. Member of Public Accounts Committee. |
| 2               | Media person<br>Daily News  |
| 3               | Assistant Professor. Political Science Department<br>Lahore College for Women University  |

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**Evaluation of the Initiatives taken during Musharraf Era and an anatomization of the performance of women parliamentarians of Lahore District in Punjab Assembly**

In the first public speech delivered by General Pervaiz Musharraf on 17<sup>th</sup> October, 1999, a seven point agenda was announced to reform the political and electoral system of the state. The sixth point ensured the devolution of power to the grass root level. Immediately a National Reconstruction Bureau was developed to ensure equal participation of citizens in the political system, irrespective of gender discrimination. In its formative phase the fundamental objectives were encapsulated under which the Local Government Ordinance was issued by the President to guarantee decentralization of power and resources at all levels and 33% reserved seats for women in the local governments. The first local body elections held in 2001, led 36,105 women councilors to participate in the decision making bodies. The legal Framework Order of 2002 allocated 60 seats for women in the National Assembly and 66 seats in all provincial assemblies, to guarantee female participation in legislative process. (Mezzera, Aftab, & Yusuf, 2010)

A major step in this regard was the establishment of ‘National Commission on the Status of Women’ to review and examine the programs and policies for the progress of women. The Commission was responsible to coordinate among different departments of the government to implement the initiatives taken for development of women. Seminars and workshops were organized to create awareness regarding gender related issues. The commission endeavored to achieve women participation in formulation and implementation of government policies as well as interacted with different organizations and NGOs at regional and international level to provide dignity

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and justice to women. Ministry of Women Development was formed for the first time to formulate laws and policies for emancipation of women in the society. The ministry worked under the leadership of Ms. Nilofer Bakhtiar and later on under Ms Zubaida Jalal. The Ministry fostered to achieve women empowerment through legislation and capacity building. (JICA, 2008)

On the occasion of the International Women's Day in March 2002; National Policy for the Development and Empowerment of Women was issued to achieve a gender balanced society. The major objectives were to develop a responsibility-based approach towards the females of the society especially women of rural areas and to implement Islamic principles of justice and equality. Special programs were initiated in the villages to provide them opportunities for economic empowerment. Vocational and technical education was provided to the women and medical facilities were delivered at their door step. Probably, the largest program initiated by the government was the 'Gender Reform Action Plan (GRAP)' with the assistance of Asian Development Bank.

The purpose of GRAP was to revise the institutional structure in the light of CEDAW (Convention on the elimination of all forms of discriminations against women). Women entrepreneurs were provided loans on easy installments to develop their enterprises. About Twenty Five Million Rupees were distributed in One Hundred and Eleven districts for the financial assistance of women. The project aimed to support women of all strata to achieve economic empowerment. Moreover National Gender Mainstreaming Committee was formed to review the performance of Phase 1 and 2 of GRAP. (Yazdani & Jawad, 2010)

The biggest challenge faced by the government was to protect the legal rights of women. Being the signatory of CEDAW, Pakistan had committed to ensure the legal rights of women, but no positive step could have been taken so far. Under the slogan of Enlightened Moderation, President Musharraf got Pakistan Citizenship Act and Human Trafficking Ordinance amended. Another important task was the amendment in the controversial Hadood Ordinance, issued by Zia Ul Haq. Along with it a number of bills were approved like Honor Killing, Bill on Domestic Violence, amendment in offence of Qazf and Zina, Family Bill 2005 and Women Protection Bill 2006 by the assemblies. Women Protection Act 2006 was approved by the National Assembly in spite of the criticism from religious parties for promoting westernization in the country. (Noreen & Musarrat, 2013)

Moreover the fourteenth Punjab Assembly was inaugurated on 25<sup>th</sup> November, 2002 and was adjourned on 5<sup>th</sup> October, 2007<sup>2</sup>. Seventy Three women were part of the

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<sup>2</sup> The Assembly conducted 31 sessions. Speaker of the Assembly was Choudhry Afzal Sahi , Leader of the House was Choudhry Pervaiz Elahi. And Leader of the opposition was Mr.

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Assembly. Sixty five of them were selected on reserved seats whereas 8 were elected on general seats. Throughout the five years the women participated actively in the legislative process. Their attendance was better than the male members and they eagerly participated in the legislative business and deliberations. The women discussed all the major issues faced by the general women and also tabled a number of important bills in the Assembly.

Regarding the subject of social welfare and education, the women stressed on the importance of the provision of better schools with uniform Syllabus and clean drinking water. Ms. Saba Sadiq mentioned the role of NGOs for the promotion of education. Ms. Shaheen Atiq Ur Rehman emphasized to maintain a regulatory policy for Private schools<sup>3</sup>. Ms. Azma Zahid Bokhari introduced the Punjab Education Foundation Bill, 2004. The women also accentuated the importance of technical education to make the women self-reliant and empowered. The women legislators criticized the health policy too and inquired about the budget allocated to the health department, provision of facilities and shortage of medicines in the Basic Health Units<sup>4</sup>.

Security was basic apprehension for the legislators. They criticized the fruitless efforts of the government to control street crimes and robberies. They demanded training for the police officers to behave with the prisoners and the public<sup>5</sup>. The female MPAs criticized the role of media in promoting violence and criminal culture in the society. They emphasized on the necessity to improve the sanitary condition of the peripheries as well as provision of clean drinking water to the people. Need to improve the transportation system was a major concern for them. They inquired about the merit to issue road permits to the bus drivers along with the policy of issuance of driving license.

Most of the women legislators were deeply involved in the problems faced by general women in the society. They demanded to establish more vocational schools for women to improve their future. They asserted to increase the funds allocated for the general women to help them to lead a better life. An important resolution raised by the women in the assembly was regarding the marital status of men in the Marriage Deed Form. The resolution was unanimously supported by the women MPAs. The proposal was sent to The Islamic Ideological Council for their verdict<sup>6</sup>. Ms. Kanwal Naseem

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Qasim Zia. Party with the majority of the seats was Pakistan Muslim League (Q) with 221 seats

<sup>3</sup> PAP Debates, 2003. Vol- 5, No- 1, dated 29.01.03.

<sup>4</sup> PAP Debates, 2005. Vol- 19(1), No-5, dated 01.04.05

<sup>5</sup> PAP Debates, 2003. Vol- 5(1), No- 2, dated 30.01.03

<sup>6</sup> PAP Debates, 2005. Vol- 19, No- 6, dated 06.04.05



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also presented a resolution for implementation of the Law of Inheritance according to the Islamic Law and Shariah, which was approved<sup>7</sup>.

Despite all the above mentioned policy measures the phenomenon of women empowerment remained enigmatic and inexplicable. Mere increase in number could not materialize the viability of women empowerment. Although Quantitative participation by females enhanced opportunities at the grass roots but in qualitative terms the non-discriminatory and equitable political frame work could not be entrenched. The females at the local level were not incorporated in the broader perspective due to lack of education and awareness. The vulnerabilities of the poor women critically constrained the process of women emancipation. The illiterate segment of the society was not able to develop the compatibility to their women empowerment program. There were relatively insignificant foot steps towards delivering the spirit of women empowerment to local entities. In fact the fruits of women empowerment did not surely trickle down to the peripheries. Though seminars and workshops were conducted by “National Commission on the Status of Women” at the upper level for nurturing the impetus of the status enhancement on the part of women but discrepancies were commonly observed in the absence of feedback mechanism. There were no boost for the uplift of confidence and cognizance among lower stratum in the remote areas of a metropolitan city like Lahore .Therefore the asymmetries kept on widening over a period of time. The meaningful assessment of development and empowerment of women remained questionable due to the unjust participatory framework.

Then the celebrations of ‘International Women Day’ generated polarization in the society between liberalists and traditionalists due to the lack of social capital. The liberal proponents believed that women empowerment was remarkable indicator of democracy while removing gender discrimination. On the other hand the exponents from traditional school of thought perceived this ontology purely in the religious context and most of the deliberations were interpreted for encroaching the religious boundaries i.e. women were apprehended not suitable for political decision making while having domestic responsibilities and little exposure to the outside world. In this backdrop the initiatives postulated by the government could not bring cataclysmic change for the womenfolk. However it was reiterated by media and female political workers to create propitious environment to put the women in the mainstream of state affairs. Under the UN report 1990 the attention was driven to the widespread disparities in third world states. Among 1,300 million poorest people, about seventy percent of them were women. Notwithstanding an unavoidable restraint had been a patriarchal society which constrained the very foundation of women development programs mainly in rural areas.

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<sup>7</sup> PAP Debates, 2005. Vol- 19, No- 6, dated 06.04.05

Political empowerment of women was interplay of actualization of their potential along with the provision for opportunities to ensure political participation. In this regard practical measures were taken encapsulating school of women councilors and women participation programs but all the possibilities could be ensured through checks and balances in the system. There was also another polemic that the overall development of women was not only conditioned with increased political participation rather there was an exigency for a more pragmatic approach. It was critical to give a new orientation to an amorphous developing society. Empowering women had always been a moot principally in third world states. Predominantly the feminists supported the bottom-up programs for fortifying active women participation because the top-down approach was used to be perceived as making the women mere dependent entities. These trends impinged the real spirit of empowerment process. The summative assessment of empowerment programs needed to inculcate self-consciousness to enable women for articulation of their rights as well as to comply with their obligations. In this context Ministry of Women development initiated multidimensional projects for imparting modern educational and vocational knowledge but at the operational level women remained the passive recipient and could not step forward from gender discrimination to the state of equality. Therefore women specially in peripheral areas remained under the subordination of male chauvinism and political biases. It undermined their capacities to emerge as a significant actor of change. Infact the social and political configuration of the society was less promising to extinct elitism and nepotism.

Hence political empowerment could be effective if it was accompanied with socio-economic autonomy of general women. The degree of autonomy could be apprehended in terms of the control over resources and the positive outcomes. Mere having strong socio-economic status, suburban residence and other material quintiles by few personalities were not the true indicators of empowerment. Infact fiscal autonomy along with decision making power and fair distribution of resources could pave a way towards the journey of mass level women empowerment. It was closely related to cultural, demographic and social attributes of the society. If the social taboos and local value system contributed to strengthen the women folk then their autonomy was surely rationalized. Albeit the governmental authorities were determined to seek National Action Program to devise modalities for mitigating gender discrimination. However the social rigidity and the orthodox local structures were reluctant to acknowledge the gender equality. Therefore delinquent behaviours led towards gender - based violent incidents i.e. domestic violence, rape, slapping and forced prostitution mainly in peripheries.

Although women legislators vociferously raised issues of women emancipation but it was largely depends upon good governance and rule of law. The developing political culture, economic asymmetries, regional political cleavages and meager approach to pluralism undermined the women to articulate their legitimate aspirations. Apart from it the province of Punjab witnessed the intra-provincial discrepancies which added up

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the complexity of the process of women empowerment. The role of women legislators was necessitated with the purge of institutionalized inequities and the promotion of comprehensive social and political measures along with follow-up mechanism to ensure women empowerment.

### **Trend Analysis**

The qualitative analysis of the interviews is given below to scrutinize the trends related to the case study.

Theme – 1: Initiatives regarding women empowerment could be able to ensure mass participation at grass-root level.

#### **R-1:**

The initiatives taken by president Musharraf in his era were something new for the women. The increase in the women seats led a number of women to the assemblies and provided them an opportunity to increase their representation. The women and the political parties were not prepared for such a change. Therefore, there was no other option for them to nominate the women on family association and party affiliation and only few women were selected on the basis of their abilities. Women from middle and lower middle class were less represented in the assemblies.

#### **R-2:**

It's a matter of fact that women from elite class comparatively availed more opportunities but that was not the result of an intended policy of the regime. However due to the fact that in given political culture of Pakistan, political parties generally preferred their loyal members and their considerations which led to confine the prospects of empowerment initiatives to specific classes and groups of women and immediate advantages were not provided to the women from masses.

#### **R-3:**

Though Political participation wasn't confined to the women from elite class by putting some financial conditions into the process however significant influences of strong families into various political parties remained intact as these were largely controlled by the powerful personalities. It limited the opportunities for women from economically lower classes to come forward. Furthermore, political parties and their leadership in power during the Musharraf regime were in more advantageous position to promote women who were associated with these respective political parties due to selective political co-option of the regime and not providing an appropriate environment for a just process of political participation.

Theme – 2: How far the gap was bridged between the women legislators and the females of the society.

**R-1:**

The women had to face multiple challenges to develop a relationship with the general women of the society. They might not have sufficient resources but they had an inclination to work for their betterment. In spite of constraints faced by them they did struggle to address their issues. The women councilors made all possible efforts to develop a healthy relationship with the masses through the institutions established by Pervaiz Musharraf.

**R-2:**

To some extent, the gap between different classes of women was bridged as an increased number of women in assemblies and local government system provided the prospects of integration of women as a group irrespective of their family, political, social and economic backgrounds. Though in comparison with other provincial assemblies, one can assert that due to strong foothold of some families in Punjab politics and their networks of relationship based on marriages, businesses, class associations and feudal background, some women got in assembly more conveniently without experiencing political hardship and barriers.

**R-3:**

As well as bridging up the gap between the masses and classes is concerned, policies of regime and consequent results were not remarkable. Most of women legislators as the part of elite class were largely ignorant of women issues and challenges and did not contribute in questioning and debate during the sessions of Punjab assembly which made them less concerned to develop connections to the grass root level as their nominations were mostly result of powerful sources.

**Conclusion**

The era of 2001-2007 was a landmark in the achievement of political empowerment of women. The previous governments did make some efforts but they were unable to make a positive impact on the political system. On the contrary, the Zia regime casted a negative impact and his process of Islamization dragged the women away from the socio-political activities. After assuming power through a military intervention, Pervaiz Musharraf took some major steps to ensure the participation of women in the legislative process. Under the policy of Enlightened Moderation, he opened new avenues for the women of Pakistan. The most important step taken by him was the increase in the number of women seats at the local, provincial and Federal level, which made the participation of women in the decision making process possible.

The proceedings of the Punjab Assembly 2002-2007 indicated that women in the Punjab Assembly actively participated in the decision making process. They were more responsible and punctual as compared to their male colleagues. They asked questions and initiated many bills. But unfortunately, most of them could not be approved as laws. The women in the Punjab Assembly were quite vigilant and

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actively participated in the legislative business, but they had to follow the party policy and could not rise above their party affiliation to raise the women issues in the assembly.

The respondents confessed that most of the women nominated on the reserved seats were selected on the basis of their party affiliation and were relatives of leading male leader of their respective political parties. They stated that in the year 2002, there was no other alternative method to select those women but later on the procedure of selection should have been changed. Even though the women parliamentarians were selected on the basis of their party affiliation. Unfortunately, the initiatives taken by Musharraf could not be continued after his time period. The number of seats still remain the same. The process continued in the ten-year era of Shahbaz Sharif. He offered a number of packages for the women of Punjab, but nothing practical could be done in order to improve the general political conditions of women.

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