Dearth of Women Political Participation: A Hurdle in the Way of National Integration in Pakistan

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Introduction

National integration has become the most persistent need in the contemporary world. It plays a vital role for the socio-economic and political development of any society. The process of National Integration can be development when all the segments of society irrespective of gender are involved in the decision making process. Women in the developing states particularly in Pakistan are facing several obstacles and challenges to the political participation regarding their political rights, gender disparity, patriarchal societal trends and discriminatory attitudes of political parties which created hinderance in the way of national integration. There are socioeconomic barriers to restrict the participation of women in the mainstream politics which resulted in the inbalanced system of political and national integration. Women’s role in the politics has been confined to the supporting roles in their political families generally in Pakistani politics. There are multiple obstacles which are hindering their way to perform their role in the national politics. This research illustrates, that a number of strategies have been deployed in Pakistan, by political elites to create national integration without ensuring women participation in national politics. This study aims to address the obstacles and challenges faced by women while gaining their political rights.

Introduction

National integration is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. It is the process of bringing together all the members of society irrespective of their class colour and gender, by reducing their differences and blunting the edge of their ethnic, regional and parochial affiliations. Hence, the creation of harmony and integration is the most thriving task in the heterogenous societies which are facing the issue of gender discrimination. In these societies, National integration is considered, the most
essential condition for the economic and political upbringing. National integration is worldwide phenomenon and it is obvious from the history that it is the common problem faced by almost all of the states at various stages of the history. Women are not accepted as a political ally in the political field in general and in rural areas in particular. Equal political participation of males and females in every field of politics is a precondition for the creation of national cohesiveness.

The number of women in Politics and in political parties determines the effectiveness of their representation. Therefore, there is no constitutional restriction for women’s political participation in mainstream politics of Pakistan. However, their existence in politics remains insignificant because of social, cultural, economic and political constraints. The major obstacles that tackle any serious difference of opinion to challenge the gender disparity throughout the party system in Pakistani Politics are, how Pakistani Political Parties characterize women’s participation as individuals, not as members of a group that has experienced discrimination. Women’s participation in party politics promotes undermines their sense of collective identity.

Women’s participation in party politics is the challenge of having their sense of collective identity. Not astonishingly, those women who have attained positions of
political power in South Asia do not be obliged these positions to political parties. Nor have parties lived up to their promise to concentrate on gender inequality. Such commitment has only come out while movements that have identified themselves with women’s communal distinctiveness have worked closely with political parties.

Women have been historically absent from the discourse of state and citizenship. Their relation to the state is mediated by their immediate male relatives. Women’s relational identity, as members of families and communities, makes problematic their insertion into the state as independent, sovereign agent. Farida Shaheed has pointed out two false assumptions that underline the discourses on the state and citizenship: the assumption that equal citizenship and rights for all was a fundamental principle in the creation of national states and that the state has a direct relationship with its citizens. Women’s subordinate status reinforced through their indirect relation to the state appears then to be the mainstay of the patriarchal social order.

The women, frequently given no say in the arguments and decisions, ended up rubber-stamping decisions made elsewhere. The enlarged number of seats for women came to indicate the strengthening of feudal power and of the existing social structure. Rather than providing feminist critiques of governance and devolution, a number of non government organizations became the partners of a military regime, creating local constituencies for itself by bypassing the provinces and consolidating power from the federal government directly to the districts.

**Patriarchal Society**

The patriarchal nature of the society is again a major challenge which hindered the process of national integration. The nature and degree of women’s oppression/subordination vary across classes, regions, and the rural/urban divide. Patriarchal structures are relatively stronger in the rural and tribal setting where local customs establish male authority and power over women’s lives. Women are exchanged, sold, and bought in marriages. They are given limited opportunities to create choices for themselves in order to change the realities of their lives. The most powerful aspect of social and cultural context is the internalization of patriarchal norms by men and women. This aspect of women’s lives has been largely ignored by the development initiatives in the country.

**Issue of Participation of Women in Decision Making Process in Politics**

The balanced participation of both men and women in the decision making process is an essential requirement for the creation of balanced and united society. If men monopolize the political process, passing laws which affect society at large, the decision-making process does not always balance the interests of the male and female populations. As noted in the Millennium Development Goals, women’s equal participation with men in power and decision making is part of their fundamental right to participate in political life, and at the core of gender equality and women’s empowerment. It thus prevents them from establishing the
patron/client relationship which is generally considered as the core of Pakistani electoral politics.\(^7\)

**Role of Women in Policy Making**

Although women do not have a role in the formulation of macroeconomic and social policies, they have borne the brunt of such policies. Women’s exclusion from decision-making bodies at the local, provincial, and national levels does not provide them any opportunity to voice their concerns or promote their perspective on governance. The male-dominated governance structure has been creating and recreating gender inequalities. It is critical that women claim their share of power to make decisions that affect their lives. The synergy of women’s strong political representation and reduction in the incidence of female poverty has been increasingly recognized all over the world. Women’s representation in formal political bodies is negligible in Pakistan.

Women have raised issues of accountability, have persistently followed up on certain issues, and have in smallest contests, made at least Nazims of their Union Councils more sensitive to their concerns. While conscious of the constraints which the local government system placed on them, women councilors in Balochistan claimed that they had made small differences to the lives of their constituents: they had taken problems to the authorities to be solved; they had, albeit in smaller numbers gone to the bureaucracy to get matters resolved, they had called up their nazims to fix drains, water shortages, etc. They had cleared passages of girls’ schools from male stalkers. They had taken up all the immediate and everyday problems that would typically be the concern of a councilor and resolved many of them.\(^8\)

Tehmina Daultana\(^9\), who stood by PML-N they were in opposition and signed the Charter of Democracy, mentioned in a discussion, that women have to toe lines in politics which are their party lines. There are very few women who can deviate from their party program. She said that women’s role change as their parties come in opposition. Women are not in focus in their main decision making process. She said that every woman is struggling. As Night Orakzai, she was in the Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid I Azam) during 2002-2008 then she moved in PPPP in 2008. She commented that women never encouraged to stand unitedly against the speaker, that’s why women caucus’ could not work well. Parliamentary secretaries had right to please party leadership. However, she explained Pakistan Tehrike Insaaf, Domestic Violence Bill was surrendered in Khyber Pakhtunkha, to please their Alliance, like Awami National Party. Andaleeb Abbas from PTI, quoted that role of the CII, (Council of Islamic Ideology), should be minimized. She said that mindset of men towards women in politics and parties should be changed. Usually, men assume themselves more intelligent than women in party politics and decision making. Men call it as “set mind” regarding women. She mentioned that women should fight for their due rights within party politics too.\(^10\)
Numerous intellectuals have found that the female quota of representatives has often consisted of members of the social and economic privileged class and can easily draw into patronage politics. Similar findings have been drawn from the Pakistani context where women on reserve seats are mostly from the families of feudal or industrial, political elites or close relatives of male party leader rather than candidates or party workers drawn from the female wings of the party on a fair and democratic basis. Female parliamentarians elected on reserve sets are not treated equally or consulted by party leadership on important decisions. The reasons as to why this is the case may be numerous, but most importantly, since these women are not directly elected representatives of the masses, but rather nominated by their respective political parties, they remain dependent and answerable to male party leadership instead of being genuine representatives of the masses with grassroots level infiltration.\textsuperscript{11}

**Women as Party Member and Campaigner**

Most political parties have women’s wings that mobilize women to vote during elections. Whether these increase women’s involvement with party politics is another matter. Women’s wings allow parties to “ghettoize” women and women’s issues. Women’s political activism has been an important source of energy for political parties. Women’s closer connections with civil society at grass roots level have been proved important for organizing and mobilizing resources for political parties in particular during election times. But their role is usually viewed instrumentally: as a means of raising political support for them. The Political parties sometimes indulge in rhetoric in favor of gender equality while avoiding any active commitment to achieve it. Gender equality has been promoted in the manifestos and programs of a number of political parties in the states; however, women’s political potential has rarely been recognized by leadership and decision-making structures. The self-interested nature of political parties’ with women is manifested in the way they deal with female candidatures.\textsuperscript{12}

**Party Manifestos and Rights of Women in Politics:**

Manifestos of all political parties are tentatively attractive and interesting. Though, there is a shortage of women in the committees even preparing manifestos. While, women have been performing a main function, however, they have always been unnoticed in the decision making procedures. In foremost party matters, merely a few political parties provide representation to women; occupying significant positions, e.g. Pakistan People’s Party and Awami National Party. The Presidents of women’s wings are marginalized and under-resourced as compared to men officeholders even though the women’s wings play a decisive role in the mobilization of women’s votes. Due to cultural and social norms and values, women from some political parties remained contented as separate wing. There is a divergence in women's representation in the Central Executive Committee (CEC) in the parties. Less than five percent women are members of the CEC.

The structure of comparative representation, experience of women’s reserved seats in two assemblies (2002 and 2008), has provided evidence of the weak position of
women occupying in the parliament. The system of proportional representation is entirely different from mainstream direct elections. It does not permit women to deal with the electorate straightforwardly as they do not have a constituency. The women occupy the margin in the political dominion and have symbolic representation in the political parties. It hindered their energetic participation in the decision making process in parliament and yet in their own political party. One leading male party member in the parliament, said that reserved seats are dipped out as “charity calling them “Khairati seats “Absence of geographical electoral areas and precise vote depository decrease their probability of challenging elections on the general seats, consent to alone wining. The current system does not guarantee geographical reporting of the country and women come on the basis of recommendation by the party important persons. Consequentially, about seventy percentage women do not interrelate with constituencies due to geographical constraint and separate from community.

**Male Parliamentarians and Party Members’s Vision Regarding Women’s Participation:**

Male Parliamentarians have different views on women’s position and added worth in the parliament. They distinguish between sober women legislators, with core competencies, and non-serious women legislators. According to the statement of Atizaz Ahsan (PPP) that approach toward women on gender basis are changing: “he believed that principally when the allocation of seats was given to women, they were not taken seriously. Yet women who joined on general seats took women on gender quota as less significant parliamentarians. There was a superciliousness of being chosen directly. Over the years, the state of affairs has changed. Women became active on reserved seats. They have neither an edging nor lighthearted. The Parties have also enhanced the representation on quota seats. There is a better mix on gender quota seats now. There will always be a political compulsion to accommodate the spouses of hard central part cadre of the party. The Political parties always use these seats this way, but as he mentioned that mix in the quality of women on gender quota has improved”. Male parliamentarians referred to the fact that several women MNAs did not participate in any form of parliamentary business over the last three years. At the same time, however, as they admitted that a small number of women lawmakers played an extremely active and important role. Women’s high levels of turnout in parliamentary meetings is also viewed unenthusiastically by some of them, even though that the Parliament is facade with a reliable lack of interest and low attendance of male lawmakers. On several occasions during the last three years, the speaker had to prorogue the National Assembly session due to lack of quorum. The quorum requirement of a minimum of 86 Parliamentarians to proceed the parliamentary session is regularly met due to the presence of women lawmakers in the National Assembly. Male MNAs(Member of National Assembly) analysis on women’s presence in the parliament, which is follows as: “Women Parliamentarians have loads of time at hand. They don’t use to go for constituency work. It is painless for them to go out of home and come and sit in the relaxed surroundings of the
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assembly. They enjoy the position of being parliamentarians however, do not have to do any hard work like us. They have nothing to do at home, so they get prepared and come to the assembly, whereas men have to mostly spend their time in their constituency and community”.

Financial Issues
The Women in politics believe in lack of finances as one of the most important deterrents to their entering politics. Not only do women endeavor to increase the funds required to run a campaign, other than that they commonly collect unpretentious or no financial support from their political parties. It is principally complicated for women to raise “untimely money,” the financing obligatory to initiate a movement for choosing office. Therefore, actions that parties and civil society organizations can obtain to assist women raise the funds essential for a political movement include: instituting fundraising networks, which are mainly significant where there is no public financial support and candidates have to move up private finances to compete an election. The creation of finances within the party are besieged to hold women candidates and providing subsidy to women candidates. There are several examples where a strong women’s wing has been an effective mechanism for pressuring the party to enact reforms and increase the participation of women in high-level party affairs, for enacting internal quotas, for creating training programs and offering support to women candidates. However, care needs to be taken to ensure that gender issues do not become a ‘silo’ in the women’s wing, or that the wing is marginal in the party. One method to avoid this would be to make certain that the Secretary or Chair of the women’s wing has a seat and vote in the main mechanism of the party.

Furthermore, in Pakistan and elsewhere, women’s issues and the social sectors are commonly measured as less prominent than other political fields such as defense, home affairs, finance, etc. Therefore a female MNA, elected in 2002 and 2008 was convinced that the women were deliberately given “unimportant committees” and kept out of “serious” committees, particularly in the 12th legislature (2002-2007). In this legislature, women comprised 50% members of the Health Standing Committee, 72% of the members of the Women’s Development Committee, but only 6% of the members of the Home and Defense Standing Committees. During the same period, only 12% of the seats of “major committees” were betrothed by women, against 38% of the seats in “feminine” or “soft committees”. This did not imitate the preferences of women, because many had inquired for “major committees” however did not acquire them. When it comes to assigning responsibilities, in the National Assembly, connecting one fifth and one fourth of the committees’ chairmen were women, which equivalent to the proportion of women within parliament. Although they had less prospects in the Senate (only 11% of the chairpersons were women in 2009) and in committees common in both chambers. Lastly, at the commencement of the 12th legislature, out of 15% of the parliamentary secretaries twenty were women, in the acknowledgment of committees was a development from which women were debarred; certainly, in spite of different protests, there was no woman seated in the particular Committee
appointed in 2009 to achieve an agreement on the legitimate changes. The situation changed in the 13th legislature. First, the new ruling party (the PPPP) was keen to be seen as a promoter of women’s rights, and consequently took action.

**Gender Disparities hindered the process of national integration**

Gender disparities in society are often attributed to women’s lack of power and participation in the decision making bodies at all levels: family, community and the state. Women’s exclusion in politics and government has been globally perceived as a major obstacle in the way of national integration. Women’s inclusion in institutional structures has been argued through the use of instrumental and intrinsic rationale. Women’s rights organization and activists challenged the male domination and masculine culture of institutions within a human rights framework and argued for greater women’s participation and representation for democratic system and more equitable development outcomes. Whereas the other standpoint that used an instrumentalist rationale for women’s inclusion believed that women had a distinct perspective in politics, which bring many differences in politics and institutions because of their caring nature. It is also argued that women have different needs, concerns and interests and only women representatives could segregate and represent women’s collective interests. Gender bias on the part of the electorate is usually presented as one of the main reasons for the fact that political parties resist selecting female candidates. But actually, this is not an important factor in explaining the low numbers of women in politics in Pakistan.

**Conclusion:**

Nation-building or solidarity is a complex phenomenon, but its essential means must be political representation and accommodation of all groups and segments of society. In conclusion, it must be stressed that ruling elites are far from avoiding the elements of gender discrimination. In the decisions and policies they make, the general strategies they follow, they influence the development of male dominated society group consciousness which ultimately enhanced the conflicts. In Pakistan, during civilian rule, the government made crucial decisions which affected the women participation. Political Parties are the primary vehicles for strengthening the process of national integration, inclusion of women perspective and their active participation in politics are perquisites for growth of democracy and will autonamically create the national solidarity. It can be politically and financially advantageous for political parties to encourage women’s empowerment proposal actively throughout the electoral cycle. By openly and formally supporting women’s participation through reforms, political parties can change public view, make new basis, draw new members, boost the flow of community financial support to the party, and develop their position with other countries, amongst other political and sensible paybacks.

In conclusion, women’s political participation is not only about increasing their numbers, but also their effectiveness and impact. Women should be able to participate in open, transparent, accountable decision-making processes of policy
making institutions and mechanisms not as beneficiaries and objects of development programs but as agents or subjects of developmental change. Their effectiveness is indicated by the extent to which they are able to influence institutional rules, norms and practices and consequently shape the policy agenda and decisions about the use and allocation of resources. Their impact on the other hand will be seen in the entitlements, capabilities and rights they are able to secure for women to redress gender disparities and change their lives, especially for poor women.
Notes and References

2 Kazuki Iwanaga (edt) *Women’s Political and representation in Asia: Obstacles and Challenges*, (Denmark: NIAS, 2008), 7.
5 ***Tehmina Daultana, MNA, PML-N.***
10 Tehmina Daultana, MNA, PML-N.
11 Interview on Live Talk show, Mubahissa, at AAJ Tv, 4:00, pm. 11-3-2017.
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