
Impediments to Women Participation in Political Development of Pakistan: A Way Forward

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The women in developing countries face a lot of hurdles in effective participation in the political, social and economic development of their countries. This is particularly true for women in Pakistan who comprise 48.54% of the total population but their contribution in political and economic development is not proportionate to their numerical strength. This research paper aims at to find out the impediments of women participation in political development of Pakistan. It also highlights the conceptual framework work under which this research paper has been written i.e.by using some of Lucian Pye's aspects of political development. The role of women participation in political development of Pakistan is being analyzed with regard to economy, mobilization/participation, democracy and modernization. Women's inadequate involvement in economic sector, the lack of their representation in legislative, executive, administrative and judicial bodies not only negatively impacts the political development but it also has an even deeper impact on the progress at familial, communities and even individual levels. The question how these impediments determine the process of political development in Pakistan has been resolved by applying qualitative method of research. The countries where females are marginalized are unlikely to modernize and capitalize on its benefits. Democracy is not workable in such countries where almost half of the population is ignorant or deprived of their due rights and duties. It is infer that there is a need to bring radical socio-cultural changes in Pakistan to empower women and put the country on the path of political development.

Key Words: Women Participation, Political Development, Modenization, Democratization, Mobilization, Economic Development

Introduction:

Women constitute about one half of the world population and over the centuries and millennia their gender has been subjected to countless injustices and atrocities. From being denied citizenship and education in ancient Greece to refusal of women suffrage in the pre-modern and even modern era, history is filled with examples of women having to fight for their basic rights. Even though these centuries long struggles bore fruit for modern women and they were able to ameliorate their circumstances yet much is still left to be desired, particularly for women in developing countries.

As compared to the females in developed countries, the women in developing countries still face a lot of hurdles in effective participation in the political, social and economic development of their countries. This is particularly true for women in Pakistan who comprise 48.54% of the whole population but their contribution in political and economic development of Pakistan is not proportionate to their numerical strength. This low input from women is attributed to the plethora of gender biases and discrimination which Pakistani women face till date.

Despite imitating the world in making policies to reduce gender disparity and ensure gender equality in access to resources, rights and voice, significant gaps still persist in these domains. The capitalist, tribal and feudal social systems have huge impacts on women's lives in Pakistan. However, the situation is not similar all over the country. Facts show that the status of women in Pakistan is not homogenous; rather it varies across different regions and social classes. For example, the situation in rural areas is worse as compared to that in urban territories. Moreover, women participation in politics is seen as an alien concept in the cultural and social context of Pakistan which serves as an impediment to their contribution in political development of the country.

A. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

In her book "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity," Judith Butler highlights the complex relationship between power, identity and gender. Butler claims that gender is a social construct i.e. it is not inherent rather ascribed to individuals at their birth.¹ It is performative i.e. it is reinforced through repeated patterns of behavior. She discusses that this gender performativity is used as a means to exert social control. Particular roles are ascribed to people based on their gender. Strict divisions are made between male and female functions. Males are taught to be strong and decisive whereas females are taught to be dependent and weak. Butler provides a theoretical analysis about social construction of gender. However, she has not explained how women can break gender norms and participate in the male-dominated areas.

Ester Boserup (1970) in her book titled as 'Women's Role in Economic Development' asserts that females are not merely passive participants in economic

activities of a country, rather throughout history their contributions to agricultural and industrial growth has remained significant. She goes on to highlight the “subsistence crisis” which might emerge with increasing population and constant food production. Boserup claims that women play a monumental role in dealing with these issues.² Though the author highlights women’s active role in their country’s economic development, she fails to highlight different kinds of issues faced by women in economic sector due to which they are unable to meet their true potential.

Lucian Pye in his book “Aspects of Political Development” has provided several aspects of political development i.e. the factors and processes that contribute to stability and development of political systems. He explains that political systems keep evolving over time. Economic development, political culture, institutions, the role of leadership, and social mobilization are some of the factors that contribute to political development.³ Some of these factors are appropriate to analyze the process of political development in Pakistan. These can be used as variables to understand the role of women participation in Pakistan’s political development.

Muhammad Ali Awan in his article “Political Participation of Women in Pakistan” highlights those historical and political dynamics that shape the structure of politics for women participation. He outlines those issues which are faced by women during participation in the political process of the country.⁴ He discusses that political participation is not limited to getting elected to legislative assemblies, rather it also consists of voting, becoming members of political parties and expressing one’s opinions etc. To understand the trends of women’s participation in political development of Pakistan, it is necessary to use these parameters to gauge women’s role in the country’s politics.

This article endeavors to fill the gaps found in the existing literature. It builds the conceptual framework by using the concepts extracted from the existing literature. The social construction of gender which leads to fixed gender roles and restrains women to private domains of household chores is critically analyzed. The necessity of women’s participation in political and economic development of a country is highlighted. Without women’s proper participation, the development of a country is highly unlikely.

Lucian Pye characterizes equality as one of the pre-requisites of development syndrome with equal and popular participation in politics by all citizens and equal application of laws on them. He has given multiple aspects of political development. Among those aspects, the following few are most relevant to the context of Pakistan:

- Political Development as prerequisite of Economic Development
- Political Development as Mobilization and Participation
- Political Development as Building of Democracy

- Political Development as Political Modernization
- Political Development as One Aspect of a Multi-dimensional Process of Social Change

Keeping these aspects of political development in consideration, the role of women participation in political development is being analyzed.

B. Hurdles to Women Participation in Political Development

Women in Pakistan face the following problems and issues which serve as a hindrance in the path of political development:

a. In Economic Development:

Majority of women in Pakistan are economically dependent on men as they cannot earn due to lack of education. They lack the prerequisites for most formal jobs i.e. literacy and numeracy. According to 2021-22 year analysis, only 51.8% women in Pakistan are literate as compared to 72.5% men. Additionally, the absence of technical skills for occupational jobs stops them from progressing towards professional markets and industries. Even those who are educated are not allowed to earn for social, cultural or religious reasons. Due to these factors, the female participation in labor force was reported 20.16% even in 2021.⁵ The gender roles assigned to women in Pakistan are of such nature that they are given a lower status than men and are socioeconomically exploited. The widespread stereotypes in society as well as the inadequate female literacy rate due to lower status assigned to females have rendered them unable to earn for themselves or reach their potential, leading to frequent economic meltdowns in Pakistan.

On the other hand, even if they are earning, they are forced to perform menial works and by large, their finances are controlled by the male members of their family. The women of 3rd world countries belonging to small cultivator households have workloads way heavier than their male counterparts. They have to contribute in the field work as well as the household chores. Their activities involve but are not limited to the strenuous acts of water carrying and firewood gathering.⁶ Due to their dual roles in the productive and reproductive sectors, their contribution to the social and economic sectors is also double; however, their participation in decision making is not as significant.

Despite being involved in productive activities, they generally do not have access to the fruit of their labor which makes this system very exploitative.⁷ Consequently, they do not have a say in the allocation of societal resources. For example, the inappropriate distribution of female inheritance is a manifestation of this phenomenon. In this patriarchal society where finances are controlled by men, even if women work, they are paid less than their male counterparts in terms of money and privileges. According to the Global Gender Pay Report from the World Economic Forum (2016), no country in the world has reached gender parity in pay.

Even in Iceland, the country at the top of gender equality indices, employed women earn 14% less than men in 2015⁸.

Their ascendancy to top-tier positions in various organizations is also a rare phenomenon. Thus, glass ceilings against women promotion to higher levels exist at both national and international levels. This male-dominant administrative set-up is another hurdle in their path to economic independence.

Moreover, women are disadvantaged in the sense that men's occupations provide them with greater expertise in areas like developing communication skills and capitalizing on substantial income which in turn serves as stepping stone for future leadership positions. Meanwhile, women cannot participate in politics due to lack of financial resources. Thus, it can be concluded that their financial dependence on men leads to social dependence as well. The inadequate government policies for women empowerment in the financial sector also do not help matters.

b. In Mobilization and Participation:

In Pakistan, there exists a conceptual distinction between the 'public' realms of politics and administration on one hand, and 'private' realms of domestic and family life on the other hand. The public realm is dominated by men and the private realm falls within the domain of women. Politics being 'public' arena is considered to be men's realm and females and politics are considered as disparate concepts. Thus, women are marginalized from administration and men hold majority of the political offices. According to Global Gender Gap Report 2020, in legislative assemblies only 20.2% of women are legislators and only 12% women are appointed at ministerial positions.

There exist some structural constraints in the political system of Pakistan which lead to lesser participation of women in politics. Firstly, the patriarchal system is designed in such a way that men have domination over women in all the aspects of life. They require permission from their male family members to get involved in any administrative or political activity which is more often than not denied on socio-cultural and religious grounds. Secondly, women in Pakistan are financially dependent on their male family members and this lack of resources leaves them struggling for basic necessities. Resultantly, they do not have the luxury to participate in politics.

Thirdly, the cultural and religious practices prevalent in Pakistan also serve as impediment in the path of women participation in governance as cultural and religious dogmas confine them to domestic sphere. Islam is often misinterpreted by narrow-minded mullahs to justify women's marginalization from politics. Even many mainstream parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) frequently accuse feminists and NGOs of promoting Western agendas and undermining Muslim culture by corrupting girls and women⁹.

Moreover, women are given a subservient position in society as a result of stereotypical gender roles where females run household errands and maintain

familial and communal ties. Still, their position in families is subservient to males. They are excluded from decision making at all levels, be it household, government or global level. Furthermore, political parties give women less tickets as compared to men resulting in their meager participation as candidates in elections. Women are also not equally funded in their political pursuit as males. They have poor public access in terms of political campaigns to effectively publicize issues.

Lastly, the political culture of Pakistan is toxic in the sense that mud-slinging and character assassination of females is common. Sometimes, women who seek to enter political arena have to face intimidation or even violence at the hands of male members of their family or the society. All these reasons have contributed to the fact that despite being 48.54% of the total population, women constitute only 20% members in Lower House and 17% in Upper House¹⁰. This disproportionate representation in decision-making fields is responsible for their reduced political power.

All these above mentioned factors are responsible for lack of women's participation in governance. Ideally good governance ensures gender equality by promoting inclusive citizenship, accountability and democracy, yet in practice, governance institutions exhibit inbuilt bias towards women. Even when they are recruited in these institutions, they are confined to 'soft' policy areas. Their marginalization in decision-making results in such governance policies which are blind to the needs of women. For example, it results in inflexible working hours which fail to accommodate women's 'double burden'.

In addition to the socio-economic fabric of the society, the family norms of the members of governance institutions also play their role in limiting women's political participation. The macro-level issues of marginalization of women in governance are a manifestation of the micro-level issues faced by women at household levels. Men who think it is alright to keep women out of decision-making at home are likely to think that women's opinion in political and administrative matters is not as astute. Hence, the efforts to mobilize them for political participation are also negligible.

c. In Political Modernization:

Modernization can contribute to gender equality by various means. Trade openness and spread of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have led to a decline in importance of physical strength and rise in significance of cognitive skills, thereby leading to increased women's access to economic opportunities. The shift from agricultural to manufacturing sectors also leads to greater female employment reflecting broader changes in global distribution of production and labor. Various aspects of modernization like globalization and increased access to information through mass media lead to international pressure on states to confirm to treaties against gender discrimination and promote egalitarian views. However, Pakistan has yet to avail itself of these benefits of modernization.

Educated women are the torchbearers of social change in any society. Through women education and political participation, both individual and countries are benefitted. They not only contribute to the national progress through social, cultural, economic and political support but also provide human capital by rearing their children into productive humans and dutiful citizens. But Pakistani society is largely a feudalistic, tribal and patriarchal society where the authority lies with men and women are considered subordinate to them. They have to ask for permission from their male family members for the decisions of their lives.

In the feudalistic setup, the women are considered as 'private property' and are left in a very vulnerable position. Any change in the role of woman is considered to be threatening to the structures of society¹¹. Their education is not considered important as they are not supposed to earn. Furthermore, their mobility is restricted as they have to wait for some male relative to show his availability to accompany them. This dependency on their male relatives makes it very unfeasible for them to get access to education or employment opportunities. The state's low level of resource investment in women also leads to their less than stellar life circumstances. For example, malnutrition in women, their poor physical and mental health, early marriages and frequent childbirth have placed lives of thousands of women at risk in Pakistan. It also displays a negative image of Pakistan at the international level.

Women are also considered less significant in decision-making by the male-dominated administrative set-up of Pakistan. Their limited access to societal resources and inability to generate capital constrain their power to influence investment decision and resource allocation in their favor at home or otherwise. This results in lack of pro-women legislation in Pakistan. The low productivity levels displayed by women due to all these factors can be realized in the sense that the potential of half of the population in Pakistan is left unrealized. This leads to high social and economic costs for the society. Gender inequality in addition to posing large costs on the health of citizens and constraining economic progress also weakens a country's governance and the effective implementation of its development policies¹².

d. In Building of Democracy:

In Pakistan, gendered nature of development and democracy are observed. In rural areas, women have to face a lot of barriers in voting for their representatives. According to Election Commission of Pakistan, in general elections of 2013, only 17% of the registered female voters cast their vote, while in 2018, the number of female voters increased to 40%, which is still far from being conducive to the standards of democracy¹³. However, democracy is not limited to merely voting. There are many other indicators to judge the nature of democracy in Pakistan. For example, protection of rights of individuals, freedom of expression, educated electorate, rule of law etc. are some of the parameters to examine the

success of democracy in a country. When these factors are examined in Pakistani context, then a dire picture is painted.

The inadequate access of females to education and health is violation of their fundamental rights. In this patriarchal setup, women's education is deemed as a threat to the male supremacy as educated women are likely to assert themselves within their families and communities. Thus, there is next to no impetus to invest in women's education resulting in gender disparity in education in Pakistan. According to the Country Fact Sheet of UN Women on Gender Data Gaps and Country Performance, 53.6% women in Pakistan are deprived of education and training for employment. Moreover, in educational attainment, Pakistan stands at 135th slot among the 146 countries evaluated by Global Gender Gap Report, 2022. When half of the electorate is uneducated and unable to appreciate the true spirit of democracy, the likelihood of a successful democratic structure in that country is null.

Similarly, the health sector also shows no improvement with issues such as lack of infrastructure, hospital staff and transport in rural areas causing malnutrition and poor health among females. Due to widespread poverty and inadequate access to resources, women show lack of interest in politics as their main focus is on survival. This is the reason behind Pakistan's 143rd position in the Health and Survival Sector in the Global Gender Gap Report, 2022. The Pakistani females do not have freedom to express their opinion in feudal and tribal setups. Moreover, women being politically and socially weak are also prone to various forms of violence.

In the Global Gender Gap Report 2022, Pakistan is ranked 95th among 153 countries in women's political empowerment. Laws, government institutions and their policies are not reflective of the needs of all citizens and do not protect women's rights. According to a study by Inter-Parliamentary Union, there is a correlation between the electoral system and levels of women's political participation¹⁴. Even though government has fixed a certain quota of seats reserved for women in the legislative assemblies of Pakistan, yet the absence of meritocracy towards this quota makes it difficult for common women to participate in politics.

Other hurdles to women's contribution in political system include illiteracy, procedural hurdles in issuing CNIC, registration and clarification of electoral candidates etc. Women's lack of political socialization leaves them unable to deal with these red tapes of administrative structures. To make matters even worse, majority of the women are ignorant of their rights which further contributes to their lower status.

e. As One Aspect of a Multi-dimensional Aspect of Social Change:

The social structure of Pakistan is such that there is widespread social stratification based on gender. Since gender is socially constructed, therefore, social institutions, norms, laws and customs of the society shape gender roles¹⁵. The gender roles assigned to females are constrained to private sphere of

household life e.g. cooking, cleaning, rearing children etc. They do not have support of their families or social circles to pursue any economic or political goals. If they prefer economic and political pursuits over household duties, then they have to face the social disapproval for neglecting the needs of the family and guilt over giving up their prescribed primary duties.

Furthermore, their socialization is done in such a way that they are 'manipulated' to be passive and have victim tendencies¹⁶. For example, their parenting, toys, labels, schooling etc. make them focus on their appearance or 'being' as compared to men whose socializing makes them focus on actions or 'doing'. Women are seen in the society as dependent, incompetent, primary caregivers, victims and sex objects. There is opposition to their education as it changes the gendered balance of power within families. Even the education system in Pakistan promotes gender socialization. Schools and colleges reproduce gender inequality and spread it over the generations.

The cultural stereotypes in Pakistani society are also a hurdle in the path of women empowerment and political participation. Marriage and motherhood are considered necessary for females resulting in early marriages and frequent childbirth. The death rate among young women due to pregnancy related issues was 30,000/year not very long ago. Islam is also misinterpreted in this sense that the 'individuality' and 'real equality' associated with women, which provides them with honor and dignity is dulled and effaced as to constitute inferiority to men¹⁷. They are not allowed to travel alone or socialize with strangers. Their safety is considered a matter of 'honor' for the whole family. Despite all these precautions, women are living in a constant state of insecurity and fear in Pakistan as crimes against them are very widespread. Dependence on male members of their family for transport leaves them with no choices of their own.

The roles assigned to their gender and lack of political socialization has made females subservient to males in Pakistani society. Moreover, the lesser political and legal power vested with females leads to gender inequality and marginalization of females and are responsible for persisting gender disparities in Pakistani society.

The role of Pakistani media in stereotypical display of women is also of paramount importance in shaping our perspectives on gender. Women are under-represented in media. An example of this is the fact that top grossing films have 70% major characters as males. Even where females are included, they are portrayed as sex objects and demeaned. They are shown clad in skimpy clothes and made to perform in item songs as a mode of entertainment. The female characters are shown preoccupied with their husbands and children. They are usually shown meek and subservient to male characters whose sole focus is housework.

The gendered advertising has further worsened the position of females in society. The advertisement agencies show women submerged in cleaning the house or cooking for their family members. They are usually engrossed in taking care of their children. The gender biases on television have further worsened the condition of females in Pakistan. It is typical of Pakistani mass media to show such an image

of women that they are categorized into good and bad kinds. The 'good' women are usually portrayed as pretty, deferential, faithful, victims, meek and martyrs, while the 'bad' women are shown as confident, disrespectful and aggressors.

The capitalist society further exploits women's insecurities by emphasizing that they need to change themselves. There are some deficiencies in their appearance and personalities which they need to improve. They are always told to improve or fix some part of themselves. Highlighting women's insecurities through mass media has contributed to their exploitation by the capitalist and patriarchal system. Even though Islam provides a distinct legal personality to a wife from her husband who is entitled to and capable of suing for infringement of her due rights (a right given to women of Europe and America, the so called pioneers of women's rights in 19th century), yet the position of wife in Pakistani households is deemed to be very subservient to her husband. This is also an aftermath of gender colonialism in this region.

Before the arrival of British colonizers, subcontinent was largely characterized by gender fluidity. The properties were communally held and the lower castes which formed the major segment of society were governed by liberal principles. They were accommodative towards women as women were involved in productive labor. But this changed when Europe's gender system¹⁸ was imposed in the Subcontinent. The Europeans placed properties under the ownership of males. They made marriage laws confirming to European Christian models. They introduced jobs entailing participation in public affairs only for males. They forcefully homogenized the previously pluralistic and diverse society with the help of powerful local elites. This also led to entry of religious elites into mainstream politics.

C. A Way Forward:

Due to the above mentioned problems or hurdles in women participation in political, social, economic and administrative fields, Pakistan is lagging behind many other countries in respect of gender equality which is a central constituent of development. Women, despite comprising almost half of the total population of Pakistan, are disproportionately represented in legislative bodies and even that too due to prescribed quota system for female seats. In short, they are kept away from decision-making both at micro-level and macro-level.

Keeping these facts in view, it is need of the hour to introduce reforms to empower women and enhance their participation in political development of Pakistan. Investing in women and girls creates a domino effect that yields multitude of benefits, not only for families, but also for communities. There is need to promote vital role of females in decision-making by evaluating previous policies and shaping new structures on the past lessons. Even though policies already exist to ensure gender equality and capacity building, yet the practical situation shows that they are not effectively and timely implemented.

There is a need to challenge the existing gender roles in development agencies. There should be greater participation of women in development programs so that the development projects can be aligned with existing social reality. The policies on science and technology, industrialization, food and agriculture and social development should all involve women. The Harvard Analytical Framework (1980) introduced “efficiency approach” which suggested that development aid projects should allocate resources to women as well as men to make development more efficient.

Women should be empowered economically by improving the already existing inadequate government policies. Women’s subordination is largely due to their exclusion from market sphere and limited access to own and control resources¹⁹. The pay gap between males and females needs to be removed. The organizations and corporations which do not provide maternity leave or unpaid maternity leave need to be harshly dealt with. Furthermore, greater loans and aids should be allocated for women to provide them with means to pursue their own businesses. The promotion to top-tier positions should be made on merit and the gender bias existing against females should be removed in different organizations all across the country.

Also, it is a known fact that the transnational corporations exploit patriarchal values rather than promoting real equality. Due to women’s material subordination, they put up with worse conditions than men as they cannot find any better alternatives. They are often working under hazardous working conditions. Government of Pakistan needs to step in and provide protection to female workers. The horizon of options for female workers needs to be broadened to bring them out of wage slavery.

By making an in-depth analysis of cultural and social context of every region, separate policies should be designed to tackle women’s issues in every area. Pakistani women do not lack rights; rather they do not have consciousness of their rights. They should be educated about their rights by holding seminars and education workshops. Vocational education camps should be arranged for females to teach them some professional skillset so as to reduce their dependency on others.

In this context, particular emphasis should be put on tapping the potential of IT sector. Government should introduce scholarships for girls of low socio-economic background. The development funds to local government representatives should be made contingent on minimum levels of girls’ enrollment and retention in each tier of education. Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) Programs can also contribute to more female enrollment in educational institutes. Partnering with development agencies such as World Bank and DFID and NGOs and CSOs should be promoted.

Moreover, print and electronic media should be positively used by holding media campaigns to encourage political participation of women. Democracy education programs should be introduced to promote gender equality in politics and train women for leadership roles. They should be trained in campaigning skills

so that the disadvantage of their poor political socialization or the lack of it can be ameliorated.

There should be socio-cultural change to empower women socially and economically. Also, there is a need to include women from all sections of society, extending beyond the urban areas and into the rural communities where women that have been traditionally marginalized should be given opportunity to raise their concerns and give voice to their opinion. Moreover, efforts should be made to bring together women from across cultural, religious, ethnic and religious lines to make inclusive networks to benefit all women of the society.

Real women empowerment, effective political participation of women in the political system, and political structure must also be improved through modifications in regulating practices at the community level and in social institutions (especially at the household level and economy) and through the furtherance of awareness of their rights. By emulating these steps in Pakistan, the condition of women can be improved which will serve as the corner-stone of development²⁰.

Conclusion:

Women play a significant role in the political, social and economic development of a nation and in a country like Pakistan where they constitute half of the total population, their role is critical in the political development. However, gender indices show that women's position in Pakistan is subservient to those of males. They are not represented proportionately to their population in the political, legal and administrative structures of the country. Their marginalization from decision-making leaves them acquiesce to policies which are not pro-women. They do not get a fair share in the allocation of societal resources.

Their marginalization in society has a deeper and long-term impact on political development of the country. Women are unable to contribute to the economic development of the country as they are not allowed to become financially independent in the patriarchal setup of Pakistan. When half of the population is not mobilized to participate in politics, their political socialization is not done properly, they are deemed to have a lower status in the society, denied the right to education, health, expression and association, then it is not possible for democracy to flourish in that country. These factors are responsible for Pakistan's lagging position in the global world as it is unable to compete with the modernized and developed countries where Human Development Index (HDI) is much better. To ensure political development of Pakistan, it is necessary to introduce effective reforms by working with political as well as civil society actors to empower women and introduce an open political culture, where not only are women given their due rights but also they are provided an equal playing field with their male counterparts to excel. Only then it can be hoped that Pakistan will be able to reach its potential and compete in the global world as not only one half rather the whole population or at least the majority of it will be contributing to its progress and development.

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