

Beyond Quotas: Examining Patriarchal Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the complex interplay between Pakistan's patriarchal system and women's limited participation in politics. It offers a critical analysis of the cultural barriers, gender biases, and structural constraints that hinder women's active engagement in Pakistani politics. The study argues that the deeply entrenched patriarchal structure in Pakistan reinforces power imbalances, which in turn restrict women's freedom, mobility, and autonomy. Women are assigned subordinate roles within the social hierarchy, discouraging their involvement in political processes. Although reserved seats have been established to improve women's representation in national and regional legislatures, women continue to face multiple challenges in political engagement, including limited access to resources, social resistance and male-dominated institutions. Addressing the issue of women's underrepresentation in Pakistani politics necessitates comprehensive efforts that involve challenging patriarchal norms, eliminating institutional barriers, ensuring equal access to resources and opportunities, and enacting laws and policies that protect and advance women's rights.

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Introduction

The patriarchal system deeply rooted in Pakistani society creates an imbalanced power structure where men hold higher status and authority compared to women. This power imbalance perpetuates gender disparities and curtails women's autonomy, hindering their active engagement in public life. Aspiring woman politicians in Pakistan encounter numerous hurdles, primarily due to entrenched gender roles that confine them to domestic responsibilities. Expectations for women to prioritize family duties and conform to societal norms of caregiving and homemaking contribute to the scrutiny they face regarding their ability to balance familial obligations with political involvement. Additionally, concerns are often raised about women's competence in providing effective political leadership. As such, Pakistani society assigns men control over female family members, leading women to seek approval from male relatives for decisions related to education, work, or political involvement. Social norms impose an undue pressure on women

to conform, discouraging their active involvement in politics, which is often perceived as unconventional or contrary to cultural expectations. This curtails women's self-determination, preventing them from freely pursuing their political aspirations. In Pakistani culture, women are expected to be 'modest'. This makes it difficult for them to participate in electoral politics, as running a campaign typically involves gaining exposure and communicating with different people. The fear of social stigma and judgment acts as a deterrent for women to engage actively in political processes. The lack of access to education, financial resources, and leadership opportunities adds further impediments that prevent women from entering the realm of politics. To address the gender disparity in politics, reserved seats for women were introduced in legislative bodies during the early 2000s (Legal Framework Order, 2002). However, these quotas have not proven to be effective in promoting women's overall political participation. The underrepresentation of women in Pakistani politics is not merely a numerical gap in legislative seats, but a systemic issue that extends to party leadership roles and decision-making processes. Gender bias within party structures, such as preferential treatment of male candidates and the influence of political dynasties, further obstructs women's access to resources, support networks, and public exposure. These gender disparities in party leadership positions stem from deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, cultural barriers, and limited access to resources and opportunities. Addressing these challenges is crucial to promoting gender equality and empowering women to participate meaningfully in Pakistani politics.

Pakistan's Patriarchal System and Exclusion of Women

Patriarchy, as commonly understood, refers to a hierarchical structure wherein men occupy the highest positions of power in feudal societies (Walby, 1990: 19). They assume responsibility for governing household economies and extended family dynamics, serve as the head of social units such as families or tribes and act as an authoritative figure over other members of society (Barrett, 1988: 10, Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004: 93). Feminist theorists expand the understanding of patriarchy beyond its historical context, highlighting male control and dominance over women as the root cause of women's subjugation (Beechey, 1979: 66). They argue that the level of patriarchy within a society is determined by the extent to which it is "male-dominated, male-identified, and male-cantered" (Johnson, 1997: 5). The overwhelming presence of men in positions of power such as government, business, law, religion, education, military and household all point to male domination in patriarchal societies (Mitchell, 1971: 25). Prescribed gender roles shape the psychology and behaviour of both men and women, influencing their political attitudes and actions (Krauss, 1974: 1706). Liberal feminists attribute women's lack of equality in society to the conditioning of men and women into separate roles, encouraged by discrimination, prejudice and irrational behaviour (Waylen, 1996: 7). They see women's subjugation as stemming from various legal and conventional limitations that impede their achievements in the public realm (Tong, 2009: 2). The concept of 'classic patriarchy' suggests that South Asian societies witness women adapting to the patriarchal order rather than actively resisting it (Kandiyoti, 1988: 278). These understandings of patriarchy hold significant relevance when examining the situation in Pakistan, where patriarchy plays a major role in shaping the dynamics of family units, communities, and the broader social fabric. Traditional gender roles remain deeply ingrained, with men typically occupying positions of

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authority while women often find themselves in subordinate positions (Bano, 2009: 20). Women are expected to take on motherhood, providing love and care to family members, housekeeping tasks, and adopting submissive behaviour. The home is perceived as the ideal space for women while men are expected to make decisions, be independent and assertive in public spheres. In Pakistan, the social structure combines familial bonds and hierarchy, leading to women's individual identity being overshadowed by their association with male-dominated group identities. This leads to politics being largely seen as a realm reserved for men, which marginalizes women and restricts their participation in decision-making processes (Ahmad & Anwar, 2017: 82).

Pakistan adheres to a traditional patriarchal social structure, wherein the prevalent family arrangement is the joint or extended family system. This arrangement includes a married couple, their married and unmarried sons, and unmarried or divorced daughters (Weiss, 2014: 56). The joint family structure fosters interdependence among its members through extended kinship ties (Wasim et al., 2008: 30). In rural areas, families often reside in large shared homes, with one kitchen and economic resources managed by the senior male head of household. Typically, the male figure is the head of a household and his presence alone is enough to give him authority over the household (Mohiuddin, 1989: 762). Rural regions exhibit stronger patriarchal norms and are generally less egalitarian compared to urban centres. Various factors contribute to this disparity, such as limited interactions between women and socially disadvantaged groups with state institutions, which are more accessible in metropolitan areas. Furthermore, cousin-marriage is a common practice which contributes to the continuation of traditional, male-dominated power structures (Afzal et al., 1994: 665). Marriages are frequently arranged by relatives, driven by social, economic, and cultural considerations such as the well-being of nieces and nephews, family property preservation, and lineage purity (Hussain & Bittles, 1998: 273). Within this patriarchal framework, men prioritize honour and often subject women to mistreatment and control (Gazdar, 2007: 86). Strategies like *purdah* (veil) are employed to safeguard family reputation and men's honour, which largely hinges on women's chastity (Moghadam, 1993: 109). The social fabric of Pakistani society revolves around the notion of women's chastity, providing justification for their seclusion and veiling. Any minor misconduct by a woman brings disgrace upon her family, with her personal honour considered less significant. It becomes the responsibility of a woman's father and brothers to effectively protect the family's honour by closely monitoring her behaviour. To simplify this task, men find it convenient to minimize the opportunities for women to interact with individuals of the opposite sex (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987: 30 & Weiss, 2014: 13). Men assume the responsibility of upholding family pride through their dominance over women, reinforced by complex social arrangements that subordinate women. The deeply ingrained patriarchal values and practices in society contribute to the persistence of harmful customs and violence against women, including honour killings and forced marriages violence (Hadi, 2017: 208). These acts not only reinforce the subjugation of women but also create a climate of fear and intimidation, further discouraging women's participation in political activities. Men are primarily regarded as earners and providers for their families (Kamal et al., 2020: 6) and women's engagement in paid work outside the home is often discouraged to avoid implying reliance on their earnings by men.

Consequently, women are discouraged from pursuing higher education, employment, or business ventures beyond the household. Pakistan's women's workforce participation rate is extremely low, at just 20 percent, placing it among the lowest in both South Asia and the world (The World Bank, 2022). The lack of access to education, mobility constraints, and societal gender norms all contribute to limiting women's entry and retention in the formal workforce. These patriarchal structures are reflected in the political sphere, restricting women's political participation and leadership roles at both the party and state levels (UNDP, 2023). Women are typically not encouraged to have an active presence in public; rather they are mainly kept to the confines of private life. This drastically decreases their chances of obtaining and holding positions of power. Pakistan is among those countries that have an entrenched patriarchal culture, which makes it difficult for women to thrive by providing them with few opportunities in terms of health, prospects for survival, and other life choices (Kandiyoti, 1988; Moghadam, 1993; Sen, 1993).

Pakistan grapples with a deeply rooted culture of male dominance, presenting significant challenges for women to thrive and be provided equal opportunities, especially in the realm of politics. Cultural expectations and traditional gender roles limit women's access to political spaces, discouraging their pursuit of political ambitions. The success of women politicians in South Asia often relies on their familial connections to influential male politicians (Richter, 1991: 528). Pakistan follows a similar pattern, where women are deemed acceptable participants in politics when they are perceived as filling the void created by a male family member. Typically, women who engage in formal politics in Pakistan come from privileged backgrounds, such as the urban upper or upper-middle class, and often have family ties to established elites, such as landlords, military personnel, or bureaucrats. Consequently, their entry into politics is often seen as an extension of their familial responsibilities, and their presence is not seen as transformative enough to bring about substantial changes benefiting the majority of women in the country (Yazdani, 2004; Shaheed, 2010; Jabeen & Muhammad, 2021). Women in Pakistan face systemic gender-based discrimination within formal political structures, evident through biased procedures, limited access to resources and finances, and unequal opportunities for political engagement and campaigning. The issue of women's underrepresentation in formal politics originates from the entrenched patriarchal system, social barriers, internal dynamics of political parties and persistent doubts regarding their ability to effectively represent their constituents. Political parties in the country predominantly exhibit a male orientation, leading to biased decision-making and preferences favouring male candidates (Waseem, 2020: 278). Moreover, the prevalence of dynastic politics in Pakistan further marginalizes women, as party tickets and significant roles are often determined by family ties, putting female candidates without strong political networks or familial connections at a considerable disadvantage. Male politicians maintain dominant positions and decision-making authority in political parties, government institutions, and policy formation (Khan, 2020: 163). This exclusivity restricts women's participation in shaping policies that directly impact their lives, denying them the ability to form policies aligned with their needs and interests. Insufficient resources and financial support, coupled with limited media exposure and promotional opportunities, create an imbalance that significantly hinders women's ability to compete with their male counterparts. Disparities in education and employment further complicate the issue,

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contributing to the challenges faced by women. Pakistan struggles to meet gender-related benchmarks, including female literacy rates, formal education levels, fertility rates, maternal mortality rates, and female participation in the labour force. Women across all age groups face higher unemployment rates compared to men, with an added vulnerability during economic downturns when they are disproportionately affected by layoffs (Aurat Foundation, 2011: 20). Women's constrained mobility and exclusion from the public sphere contribute to limited access to education, healthcare, and formal employment opportunities. There is a marked disparity between men and women in terms of literacy, with 69 percent of men being literate compared to only 45 percent of women (ibid: 22). Moreover, women's ownership of land is notably low, with only 17 percent having ownership, and the majority (64.71 percent) inheriting land (Aurat foundation, 2018: 10).

In Pakistan, women's participation in politics is hindered by inadequate infrastructure like childcare facilities, transportation, and security measures, which are essential for their active involvement. The lack of gender-sensitive policies within political parties and electoral systems also contributes to the underrepresentation of women. Cultural attitudes, limited mobility, and gender-segregated spaces create obstacles for women in accessing political networks, building relationships, and finding mentors and support. Men often dominate networking events and debates, further impeding women's progress and limiting their ability to contribute effectively. Gender-sensitive issues such as violence against women, reproductive health, and economic empowerment are often overlooked. In 2022, Pakistan had the lowest score on the Gender Gap Index, ranking at 145 out of 146 countries surveyed; with only Afghanistan ranking lower in terms of gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2022: 10). Women in Pakistan have the lowest representation in senior, managerial, and legislative positions, accounting for only 4.5 percent of such roles. Moreover, during the 2018 polls, a staggering 60 percent of registered female voters did not participate in the election process (UNDP, 2023: 2). The Election Commission of Pakistan has the authority to invalidate election results in constituencies where female voter turnout is less than 10 percent. This provision was implemented in 2018 when the election in Lower Dir, a constituency in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, was cancelled due to zero female voter turnouts. A re-election was conducted, and this time, over 1000 female votes were cast. Nonetheless, the number of successful female candidates in the 2018 general elections did not surpass the results from 2008, with only 15 out of 272 seats being won by women (Kakar et al., 2022: 512). Gender inequality in Pakistan is predominantly rooted in the social structure and prevailing patterns of social relationships. This is especially evident in rural areas, which constitute about half of the country's population. Furthermore, the influence of elite groups in Pakistan significantly restricts women's involvement in politics. In most cases, the women who take part in politics come from privileged backgrounds or are affiliated to male politicians. Despite the implementation of quotas, patriarchal influence continues to shape electoral and political systems, hindering progress towards gender equality.

The Complexity of Women's Political Participation through Reserved Seats

The topic of gender quotas in politics is a matter of significant debate, with opposing perspectives. Opponents argue that these quotas contradict the principle of

meritocracy, as women may be selected based solely on their gender rather than their abilities and qualifications (Bacchi 2006: 33-5). Conversely, proponents see quotas as an affirmative action that addresses past discrimination toward women and promotes improved representation in political institutions. They argue that quotas effectively tackle obstacles to women's representation, including economic underdevelopment, cultural influences, and electoral systems (Tripp, 2008: 338). Around 40 countries have implemented gender quotas in their national parliaments, either through constitutional amendments or changes in electoral laws (Dahlerup, 2006: 2). Recent data suggests that over one hundred nations have adopted some form of gender quotas (Burrell, 2018: 253). The widespread adoption of gender quotas worldwide acknowledges the pressing need to rectify gender disparities in political representation and foster enhanced gender equality in decision-making processes. Gender quotas take various forms, including reserved seats for women among elected representatives, voluntary adoption of gender quotas within political party structures and candidate lists, and legislative quotas enforced through laws and legal sanctions (Krook, 2010: 6). These sanctions require political parties to nominate a specified percentage of women candidates, ensuring a more equitable representation. By implementing gender quotas, the global community recognizes the significance of diverse perspectives in decision-making, striving to promote gender equality, inclusivity, and democratic governance. Although the proponents of quota system argue that the implementation of quotas provides new opportunities for women and has the potential to increase their political representation (Dahlerup, 2006: 193). However, in the case of Pakistan, it is crucial to consider how these quotas interact with deeply ingrained patriarchal norms in the society.

Women in Pakistan have long been neglected in political institutions, like national and provincial legislative bodies. While the constitution of Pakistan does not place any restrictions on women's participation in politics, they still face significant challenges due to societal barriers and the patriarchal structure. As a result, women's participation in political activities is limited across all levels, from local to national (PILDAT, 2004). To begin with, Pakistan's first constitution, known as the 1956 Constitution, had reserved ten seats for women in the unicameral parliament (The Constitution of Pakistan, 1956). In the second constitution, the National Assembly reserved six seats for women (The Constitution of Pakistan, 1962). The number of reserved seats for women was increased to ten in the third constitution (The Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). This number was further expanded to sixty in 2002, in addition to the already existing seventeen reserved seats in the Senate of Pakistan (Legal Framework Order, 2002). Furthermore, according to the Elections Act of 2017, political parties are required to guarantee a minimum representation of five percent for women when choosing candidates for general seats (The Elections Act, 2017). In the first Constituent Assembly of Pakistan (1947-54), two female representatives were chosen among a total of sixty-nine members¹. However, in the subsequent Constituent Assembly (1955-58) with seventy-two members, no women

¹ The National Assembly of Pakistan. First Constituent Assembly from 1947-1954. Accessed in April, 2023, from <https://na.gov.pk/uploads/former-members/1st%20Constituent%20Assembly.pdf>

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were elected as representatives.² Between 1962 and 1964, the National Assembly had a total of eight women, six of whom were reserved seats while the other two were elected through general seats.³ From 1965 to 1969, there were six female politicians serving on reserved seats in the Assembly.⁴ However, from 1969 to 1971, no elections took place as martial law was enforced and the Assembly remained dissolved. In the following term from 1972 to 1977, six women held reserved seats and one woman represented minorities in the National Assembly.⁵

In the 1977 general elections, ten women were elected to reserved seats and two women secured seats through general elections.⁶ Pakistan experienced a period of military rule from 1977 to 1988. In 1985, elections were held in the country; however, they were conducted on a non-partisan basis. Between 1988 and 1990, twenty women were elected to reserved seats and four successfully secured general seats.⁷ From 1990 to 1993, however, only two women managed secure general seats, as the provisions intended to secure reserved seats had expired after three rounds of elections. In the years 1993-1996, four female politicians were elected to general positions in the National Assembly.⁸ Between 1997 and 1999, the number of female politicians in the National Assembly increased, and six of them earned general seats.⁹ In 1999, the military dictator enacted martial law, which led to the

² The National Assembly of Pakistan. Second Constituent Assembly from 1955-1958. Accessed in April, 2023, from <https://na.gov.pk/uploads/former-members/2nd%20Constituent%20Assembly.pdf>

³ The National Assembly of Pakistan. List of Members of the 3rd National Assembly of Pakistan, from 1962-1964. Accessed in April, 2023, from <https://na.gov.pk/uploads/former-members/3rd%20National%20Assembly.pdf>

⁴ List of Members of the 4th National Assembly of Pakistan, from 1965-1969. Accessed in April, 2023, from <https://na.gov.pk/uploads/former-members/4th%20National%20Assembly.pdf>

⁵ The National Assembly of Pakistan. 5th National Assembly from 1972-10th January 1977. Accessed in April, 2023, from <https://na.gov.pk/uploads/former-members/5th%20National%20Assembly.pdf>

⁶ The National Assembly of Pakistan. 6th National Assembly from 28th March 1977 to 5th JULY 1977. Accessed in April, 2023, from <https://na.gov.pk/uploads/former-members/6th%20National%20Assembly.pdf>

⁷ The National Assembly of Pakistan. 8th National Assembly from 1988 to 1990. Accessed in April, 2023, from <https://na.gov.pk/uploads/former-members/8th%20National%20Assembly.pdf>

⁸ The National Assembly of Pakistan. 10th National Assembly from 1993 to 1996. Accessed in April, 2023, from <https://na.gov.pk/uploads/former-members/10th%20National%20Assembly.pdf>

⁹ The National Assembly of Pakistan. 11th National Assembly, from 1997 to 1999. Accessed in April, 2023, from <https://na.gov.pk/uploads/former-members/12th%20National%20Assembly.pdf>

dissolution of parliament. The Parliament remained suspended until the 2002 parliamentary elections. The 2002 Constitutional Amendment enabled the implementation of electoral quotas, which increased the presence of women in legislative bodies (Legal Framework Order, 2002). The period 2002–2007 was particularly successful for women: thirteen members won parliamentary elections and sixty were placed in reserved seats.¹⁰ From 2008 to 2013, seventy-six female politicians held office; sixteen in the general seats and sixty in the seats reserved for women.¹¹ Finally, between 2013 and 2018, sixty-nine women held representative positions; nine through general seats and sixty on women’s reserved seats.¹² Also, in 1973, only one woman served in Pakistan’s first Senate from 1973 to 1975. Two women were present among the forty-five senators in 1975–1977. In the years 1985–1988, there was no female senator in the upper house. One woman served in the Senate from 1988–1991 and another from 1991–1994. In the years 1994–1997, two female senators were elected to the position. Between 1997 and 2000, there was only one female senator in the Senate.¹³ After the 2002 Constitutional Amendment, which increased the membership of the Senate of Pakistan to one hundred; seventeen new women were elected to the reserved seats for the years 2003–2006. In the years 2003–2009, twenty-one female senators served. Nineteen women were in office between 2015 and 2018; seventeen were appointed to reserved seats and two were elected as general members.¹⁴ Equal representation in decision-making processes remains difficult to achieve, unaffected by the enactment of gender quotas, mainly due to deep-rooted social norms, cultural attitudes, and institutional barriers. These deep-rooted factors serve as impediments, limiting women’s capacity to make substantial contributions to the political arena. While quotas provide a necessary initial step towards gender parity, they alone cannot dismantle the deeply rooted structures that perpetuate gender discrimination. As an example, the Election Commission of Pakistan data reveals a significant gender gap among voters, with 55 percent male (66.5 million), and 45 percent female (54.6 million) voters (The Election Commission of Pakistan, 2021). Pakistan falls significantly short of global standards in terms of women representation and political empowerment. The Inter-

¹⁰ The National Assembly of Pakistan. 12th National Assembly from 2002 to 2007. Accessed in April, 2023, from <https://na.gov.pk/uploads/former-members/11th%20National%20Assembly.pdf>

¹¹ The National Assembly of Pakistan. 13th National Assembly from 2008 to 2013. Accessed in April, 2023, from <https://na.gov.pk/uploads/former-members/13th%20National%20Assembly.pdf>

¹² The National Assembly of Pakistan. The Members of 14th National Assembly from 2013 to 2018. Accessed in April, 2023, from <https://na.gov.pk/uploads/content/All-MNAs-14th%20Assembly.pdf>

¹³ The Senate of Pakistan. Members Senate. Accessed in April, 2023, from https://senate.gov.pk/en/current_members.php?id=1&catid=261&subcatid=2&leftcatid=71&cattitle=Members%20of%20Senate?id=1&catid=261&subcatid=2&cattitle=Members%20Senate

¹⁴ *Ibid*

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Parliamentary Union has placed Pakistan at 112th out of 187 nations in terms of female representation (The Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022).

Constituent/National Assembly of Pakistan	Total Members of Assembly	Number of Women Elected (Reserved/General Seats)	Women's Representation (%)
1947 to 1954	69	2	2.89 %
1955 to 1958	72	-	-
1962 to 1964	156	8	5.1 %
1965 to 1969	156	6	3.8 %
1972 to 1977	150	7	4.6 %
1977	150	12	8 %
1988 to 1990	236	24	10.1 %
1990 to 1993	217	2	0.92 %
1993 to 1996	217	4	1.84 %
1997 to 1999	217	6	2.76 %
2002 to 2007	342	73	21.3 %
2008 to 2013	342	76	22.2 %
2013 to 2018	342	69	20.1 %

Source: Based on the data obtained from the website of the National Assembly of Pakistan <https://na.gov.pk/en/index.php>

Additionally, the Global Gender Gap Report 2022 ranks Pakistan 145th out of 146 countries because of women's underrepresentation and low participation in leadership roles (World Economic Forum, 2022). Women also have low representation in Pakistan's parliament, where only 21 percent of seats are held by females (FAFEN, 2013). If the 60 reserved seats for women are excluded, their representation decreases to approximately 3 percent in the National Assembly which has 342 members (ibid). Following the 2018 general elections, women held a mere 17 percent of ministerial positions in Pakistan's federal cabinet (The WISE, 2019). Moreover, the Central Executive Committees of the major political parties also had low female participation; for instance, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf had only one woman among its 21 members, Pakistan People's Party had 5 women out of 41 committee members, Pakistan Muslim League-N had 3 female members in their 27-member committee, and Awami National Party had two women out of their 14 committee members (ibid). The quota system in Pakistan assigns women's reserved seats to political parties depending on the number of general seats they acquire from direct elections (Khan & Naqvi, 2020: 292). Therefore, these seats are usually managed by male members of the parties that take part in the general elections, leading women elected from these seats to be viewed as lacking an individual constituency and having a lower status (Khan, 2018: 254). Moreover, candidates chosen to fill these positions often come from major cities, leading to a potential imbalance in the representation of rural areas. Besides this, the system provides parties more control over the reserved slots instead of allowing voters to possess

authority. The electoral system in Pakistan is a contributing factor to the sort of candidates selected under gender quotas and consequently impacts their conduct as legislators. Political parties in Pakistan include commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment in their manifestos (National Commission on the Status of Women, 2014). However, there is a significant gap between these promises and the actual attitudes, behaviours, and practices of party leaders towards women's rights, women voters, female party workers, and female candidates. During the 2018 general elections in Pakistan, a significant number of registered voters, around 60 percent, did not exercise their right to vote (The Election Commission of Pakistan, 2018). Out of the 172 women candidates who participated in the elections, only nine were able to secure seats. Notably, seven of these winning candidates belonged to influential political families (The National Assembly of Pakistan, 2018). Furthermore, women were allocated a limited number of seats; with only five percent of all candidates being women. This was a result of the requirement imposed by the Election Act 2017, which mandated political parties to guarantee a minimum of five percent representation for women candidates in the 2018 elections (Khan, 2020: 164). Women's low numerical representation in the electoral process can be attributed to factors such as the configuration of electoral institutions, the conduct of political parties, familial limitations, and gender bias among voters (ibid: 176). The quotas, distributed through a party-controlled system without direct involvement from voters, tend not to give powerful mandates for women's substantive representation. Women elected through reserved seats often encounter challenges, being either marginalized or expected to conform to the instructions of male party leaders. These challenges stem from entrenched patriarchal attitudes and undemocratic practices within political parties. To address these issues, it is crucial to take steps to challenge existing societal norms, enhance legal systems, and reform the mechanisms of political parties.

As such, gender quotas provide a valuable opportunity to bridge the existing gender gap in politics; however, it is essential to ensure that the selection process for reserved seats is not limited to political families but instead encompasses women from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, promoting the inclusion of women in decision-making roles within government and political parties is key to addressing existing gender imbalances. By amending the rules of procedure for the National Assembly and Senate to designate chairs of important committees to women, it would serve to enhance the policy influence of women and provide political parties with an incentive to select capable women candidates (International Crisis Group, 2015: 11). This step would not only strengthen the role of women in decision-making but also encourage greater representation and participation of women in the political process. Political parties must take proactive measures to cultivate an inclusive environment that encourages women's leadership and implement gender-sensitive policies to support women candidates. While gender quotas are valuable in enhancing women's representation in legislative bodies, they are most effective when supported by political and electoral reforms. This includes conducting regular internal elections within political parties, increasing the representation of women in decision-making bodies, and allocating a greater number of party tickets to women for general seats. To create a truly inclusive environment, it is essential to address the underlying structures and social norms that perpetuate gender inequality. This can be achieved through comprehensive strategies that challenge and transform existing gender roles and stereotypes. Education campaigns, public outreach

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initiatives, and grassroots activities are effective tools for promoting women's rights, debunking stereotypes, and fostering inclusivity. Collaboration between civil society, media, and policymakers is crucial for promoting women's political empowerment. By establishing an inclusive political system, Pakistan can unlock the full potential of women in politics.

Conclusion

The issue of women's underrepresentation in Pakistani politics is deeply intertwined with the existing patriarchal system and its associated norms, practices, and power structures. This system often marginalizes women, silences their voices, and suppresses their political ambitions. Societal expectations, discriminatory laws, and entrenched gender roles further perpetuate this marginalization by confining women primarily to domestic responsibilities. Despite the introduction of reserved seats for women in legislatures, Pakistan's patriarchal system remains a serious obstacle to women's political participation. While the reserved seats have increased visibility and representation, their effectiveness is limited by deep-rooted systemic inequalities. To make these quotas have greater impact, a broader social transformation is needed, which includes reshaping male-dominated political structures, challenging gender biases, ensuring equal access to education and resources, and mobilizing civil society to push for women's empowerment and equality. Bridging the gender gap in education and providing equal opportunities for women to acquire knowledge and skills are essential for empowering them to actively engage in political processes. Overcoming stereotypes and promoting positive narratives about women's capabilities are imperative to counter gender biases. The media can play a crucial role in advocating for women's political participation, raising awareness about gender disparity and ensuring that policymakers take responsibility for addressing gender gaps. While reserved seats may not be the ultimate solution, they can serve as a starting point to promote meaningful representation of women within political parties. It is crucial for parties to promote women's involvement in leadership positions, provide equal resources for their campaigns, introduce transparent regulations that prioritize gender equality, and include women members in the selection of candidates. Although the Constitution of Pakistan affirms equal rights for all citizens regardless of gender, the current legal system often falls short in enabling women's political empowerment. The absence of gender-responsive policies and unequal power dynamics within institutions are significant factors contributing to the exclusion of women from the political sphere. To address this issue, it is necessary to have comprehensive laws that safeguard women's rights. Although women constitute nearly half of Pakistan's population, their representation in elected bodies is disproportionately low, holding only nineteen percent of seats in the current parliament. Moreover, if we exclude women elected through reserved seats, the proportion of directly elected women falls below three percent. This underscores the importance of implementing measures to improve the representation of women in politics and to eliminate the existing gender inequality. Overcoming the male-dominated system in Pakistan will pave the way for a more inclusive political space that can benefit from the diverse perspectives and talents of women, thus helping to build a more equitable and inclusive society.

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