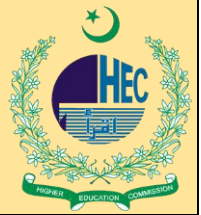




## ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 04 No. 01. July-September 2025. Page#. 2463-2476

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16876881>Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)

## Gender Quotas and Political Representation: A Comparative Evaluation Case Study of Pakistan

Adv. Rukhma Ahmad

Department of Political Science, Forman Christian College University, Lahore.

[RukhmaAhmed01@gmail.com](mailto:RukhmaAhmed01@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

*This paper critically evaluates the impact of gender quotas on the substantive political representation of women in Pakistan. It is specifically concerned with the effects of gender quotas on women's empowerment to influence policy design and legislation. Although gender quotas have undeniably enhanced the numerical representation of women in Pakistan's political institutions, the real issue is whether such quotas have translated into women's political empowerment or they are no more than tokenism that brings about no substantial change. This study uses a mixed method approach, relying not only on documenting the historical trajectory of gender quota legislation but also on comparative data from countries with similar quota provisions, as well as a grounded analysis of the impediments to women's political agency in Pakistan. Through analyzing legislative data, party dynamics, and social and cultural barriers women face in politics, this paper examines how gender quotas often fail to translate into genuine political power. Ideally, these patriarchal predispositions, political emasculation through the party-list system, and the absence of a direct electoral mandate suppress women's capacity for effective political or policy decisions or contributions. Moreover, this study contextualizes the experience of gender quotas in Pakistan and compares these in international contexts such as Rwanda, India, and Sierra Leone, where quotas, coupled with institutional reforms and vigorous enforcement, have resulted in women's empowerment through politics. More generally, the results suggest that quotas are an essential part of a strategy to enhance female political representation but are only one part of a broader whole. This approach includes reforms like direct elections to reserved seats, political party-sponsored education programs for women, and gender-inclusive parliamentary practices. With attention to both the structural and cultural dimensions of gender inequality, Pakistan can progress toward substantial gender parity in its political system. The paper ends with policy recommendations for how the working of the gender quota can be improved in Pakistan and how women can be empowered politically, economically, and socially.*

**Keywords:** Gender Quotas, Women's Political Representation, Substantive Representation, Electoral Reforms, Gender Parity.

### Introduction

There has been a global movement towards increased gender equality in political representation, with countries worldwide introducing gender quotas to address the historical marginalization of women in political decision-making. Pakistan, as is the case with many other countries, has adopted gender quotas to make up for decades of inattention to the role of women in politics. Gender quotas through reserved seats in national and provincial assemblies are designed to increase the numerical presence of women and help achieve gender balance in politics (McCann, 2013).

However, as effective as those quotas have been in making women more visible in political institutions, they raise questions about whether ways will be found to ensure that such representation is meaningful in the sense of placing women inside decision-making bodies — then empowering these women not just to occupy seats but to influence policies, shape political agendas, and promote policies that specifically address issues such as economic rights, health, and education. The distance between the formal and the substantial power shares of politics is still under observation (Kim, 2022).

In Pakistan, gender quotas have developed as part of constitutional and legislative interventions to enhance women's political representation in multi-tiered governance. Laws empowering full representation of women have gained space, but the question remains whether the quota system has helped women gain real political power or merely token representation (Kalaramadam, 2018).

This paper attempts to analyze and discuss the gender quotas implemented within Pakistan and question whether or not such quotas allow women to have 'real' political agency or whether this is symbolic representation offered to women. This study centers on the entrenched patriarchal norms, party politics, and structural hurdles that hamper the transformative potential of gender quotas in Pakistan. These elements challenge the meaning of substantive political representation, as the presence of women should not just be noticed but contribute to shaping political dialogue and policy outputs.

Based on historical analysis, comparisons, and critical analysis, the paper explores the impact of gender quotas on Pakistan's political terrain by comparing its case study to international examples from Rwanda, India, and Sierra Leone. This paper reiterates the need to deal with deeper, more systemic, and culturally related impediments to women's genuine political empowerment.

Thus, the central argument of this paper is that though gender quotas are essential mechanisms to enlarge the participation of women in political life, they are not, in themselves, the panacea for bringing about substantial political representation. Further-reaching reforms, reforms focused on removing the barriers preventing women from participating at an equal level in institutions of political governance, are needed to enable women to meaningfully participate in political life, particularly in patriarchal environments such as Pakistan where women's political agency, despite a numerical increase in legislative chambers, is still constrained.

### **Research Questions**

This study aims to evaluate the success of gender quotas in enhancing the substantive representation of women in Pakistan. This study seeks to reveal the numbers and the broader consequences of quotas on women's capacity to influence policy and participate in politics. Due to the multifaceted nature of the topic and the interaction of social, cultural, and political dynamics, the exploration is guided by the following research questions:

- I. How successful have gender quotas been in increasing the numerical presence of women in Pakistan's political structures?
- II. What has been the effect of gender quotas on women's political representation in Pakistan, and has it helped advance women's political influence over policy and legislation?
- III. What are the challenges facing achieving meaningful political representation of women in Pakistan despite having gender quotas?
- IV. How far would party systems and patriarchal structures impact the effectiveness of gender quotas in Pakistan?

## Literature Review

Gender quotas have emerged as essential to increase women's political representation worldwide. In Pakistan, gender quotas were introduced to enhance the numerical presence of women in places of power to realize gender equality. However, the quotas have been met with praise and condemnation alike. Although they have opened up political arenas for women, the literature to date argues that quotas per se have done little to overcome structural obstacles that prevent women from obtaining political representation in any meaningful way (Begum, 2023) highlights, such these structural challenges and in others would be key towards kick-starting have emerged in a has long evaded women' parity.

The effectiveness of gender quotas in bringing about substantive changes to gender representation in politics is still being debated, particularly in patriarchal societies such as Pakistan. The research highlights that the introduction of quotas in the National Assembly marked a turning point for women's engagement in politics. It increased seats from 217 to 342 and reserved 60 seats for women in the National Assembly in 2002 (Muhammad, 2019).

Gender quotas have helped increase women's representation in Pakistan's political institutions, the National Assembly, and the provincial assemblies . However, (Khan & Naqvi, 2020) contend that even though quotas are effective only to a certain extent in ensuring an equal numerical representation of women, it does not guarantee that women can influence political decision-making or address gender-based issues meaningfully. (Bari et al., 2015) also add that even though quotas compel political parties to include women, they are token primarily to the prevailing patriarchal mold that epitomizes the country's political institutions.

Quotas, as Khan (n.d.) notes, introduce a departure from the status quo in candidate selection when they force parties to designate a set of seats for women. However, the intervention is not expected to transform the deeply embedded gender biases that influence political party behavior. This means quotas will not work on their own unless they are part of a broader package of efforts to change political parties and other political institutions.

The most formidable obstacle for women to gain access to politics in Pakistan is the pervasive patriarchal cultures that permeate not only the social but also the political spheres of the society. Ghazi et al. (2020) note that these norms limit women's access to resources such as education, economic empowerment, and social capital, which are required for political participation. Women's engagement in politics is also limited by responsibilities perceived to belong to them in the family and society. As a result, they are politically sidelined in terms of visibility and against whom they choose to contest the elections.

Apart from the cultural and societal norms, Awan (2022) also refers to institutional typecasts within Pakistan's education sector that inhibit girls from aspiring for Leadership or political positions. The formal curriculum, by promoting such restrictive gender roles among its female members, merely perpetuates a pattern of non-inclusion in politics.

There are also geographical dimensions to women's political participation. Anjum et al. (2022) determine that women in highly urbanized regions, such as northern Punjab, experience less discrimination than their rural counterparts in the southern provinces. Sexism manifests in peculiar ways south of Punjab, where women suffer even greater wage disparity, harassment, and social alienation. These are also the regional bastions where women find it most challenging to be part of bottom-up politics and make it to the higher administration offices.

Regional differences are also essential to comprehend the multiple challenges women experience across such a big country as Pakistan.

The key challenge to the successful implementation of gender quotas remains the opposition of male politicians. In a male-dominated system, this took the form of threats to the strong male majority that they believed threatened their dominance. Political male actors usually oppose women's participation in politics by compromising or blocking gender-sensitive laws (Begum, 2023). This is because of the political clientelism that defines Pakistan's political system, and political power is vested in select few elite families or groups.

Khan (n.d.) and Bari et al. (2015) aptly argue that as long as the emphasis is placed solely on the mechanisms of quotas for increasing the number of women in Parliament, without a wider campaign of joining with male political leaders and challenging patriarchal culture, these women entering politics will be hampered in effecting real political change.

To overcome these barriers efficiently, researcher such as (Ali et al., 2017) writes that Pakistan needs to adopt a broader approach to the political empowerment of women. These range from non-segregated educational reforms to increased access to capital and mentoring programs, which equip women with the skills and contacts they need to move through a political system. Kebede (2019) also stresses that local political participation is crucial for involving women in regional and national decision-making. In the absence of these institutional reforms, women will be sidelined even with quotas.

### **Methodology**

The paper uses secondary data analysis to analyse effects of gender quotas on participation of women in politics in Pakistan. It employs the electoral results data from the Pakistan Election Commission (2002–2018) to analyse the women's representation in National Assembly and Provincial Assemblies. Legislative materials, constitutional amendments, and the 2017 Elections Act will be examined to track the journey of gender quotas.

It also draws on civil society reports and academic research to identify the obstacles women encounter, such as patriarchy and cultural norms. Best practice will be identified through comparison with a number of countries (Rwanda, India, Sierra Leone). Finally, data will be analyzed thematically to understand how data relate, and the extent to which gender quotas have influenced the political participation of women in Pakistan.

### **Historical and Legislative Trajectory of Gender Quotas in Pakistan**

The history of gender quotas in Pakistan is deeply intertwined with its political, cultural, and constitutional history. Quotas for gender balance have developed since the mid-20th century, yet they have not consistently translated into actual political power for women. The trajectory of these quotas has been influenced by historical, sociopolitical, and ideological movements in Pakistan's political arena.

### **Early Foundations: Colonial Legacy and Early Constitutional Amendments**

One must also remember that the idea of reserved seats for women in legislatures is not peculiar to Pakistan but came from colonial India. In the early 20th century, the British state created reserved seats for women in legislative assemblies in India. The Government of India Act of 1935 reserved nine seats in the Federal Assembly for women and later integrated them into Pakistan's political structure post-partition of 1947 (Muhammad, 2019). The early constitutional developments in Pakistan retained this legacy, reflecting an initial yet limited commitment to women's representation. It is worth noting that Muslim leaders had actively advocated for quotas for Muslim women during the British colonial era (Muhammad, 2019). Thus, the initial inclusion of reserved seats was partially a continuation of pre-existing

mechanisms and an acknowledgment of the need to ensure women's representation in the new nation.

The 1956 Constitution allocated six seats for women in the National Assembly, which was enhanced by the 1962 Constitution, which reserved ten seats for women (Khan, n.d.). These measures were significant, but the process for filling these seats was indirect, with members elected by the electoral college of the National and Provincial Assemblies. While the initial measures were a start, several experts noted a need for greater advocacy for gender equality, more direct representation, and structural reforms to ensure women's political participation in Pakistan.

However, women were under-represented in those bodies. In the early days of Pakistan, reserved seats were largely symbolic, with little, if any, political influence or power. Women holding such seats tended to be sidelined into less prominent roles, with absolute power wielded as far as it was, of course, by male elites.

#### **Post-Independence Reforms and Tokenism (1950s-1970s)**

After independence in 1947, reserved seats were also maintained in the National Assembly in the 1956 Constitution, with ten women's seats. However, these seats were often filled by the female relatives of powerful male politicians, and their influence diminished the importance of women's representation. Still, the 1954 suggestion of a five-percent quota was lowered to three percent, a sign of the gender-limiting attitude then and even more so in post-independence Pakistan.

As the nation went through its early formation phase, there was a gap between legal equality and real political power because the reserved seats did not substantially affect women's political empowerment. (Muhammad, 2019).

During the 1970s, the government again expanded the number of women, but most of the new seats were symbolic. The Pakistani Constitution reserves 10 seats for women in the National Assembly for ten years; once it finishes its term, another one must be quickly elected. However, women's impact on political processes was still limited in the face of patriarchal structures that prevailed when making political decisions. But the same shortcomings lingered into the 1980s.

#### **Zia-ul-Haq Era: Expansion of Reserved Seats (1980s)**

The quota paradigm actually changed during General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime. In 1985, Zia doubled the number of reserved seats for women in the National Assembly from 10 to 20, continuing the quota system for another decade. However, while the number of seats increased, the impact of women getting their say in legislative decisions was marginalized. Women served mostly symbolically, and the politics of Pakistan were firmly male.

Under Zia's rule, control over political decision-making continued to be exercised by the military and conservative political forces, and women's place within the polity was essentially a part of the broader patriarchal practices (Abbasi & Jaffar, 2021).

#### **Musharraf Era: A Major Turning Point (2000s)**

General Pervez Musharraf's regime significantly changed women's political representation in the early 2000s. The 2002 electoral amendments introduced an innovative arrangement that provided 17% of parliamentary seats in both the National and Provincial Assemblies to women. The 2001 local government elections also implemented a 33% reservation for women at the local level.

It was a significant leap away from increasing women's political representation in Pakistan. "Voting for women under the party list system did not automatically mean voting for power," it said. In many cases, the women elected to the reserved seats were the choice of male-

dominated political parties, and their careers were thought to be built more on a political party's patronage than on direct support from the voters. Isolated from the political power required to make an impact in the formulation of crucial laws (Dutoya, 2013).

The changes, which appear to have leveled the political playing field for women, were, however, more symbolic than substantial in terms of political empowerment. Although the law provided for women's political participation, obstacles to their full empowerment persisted, especially within the party system, where most leadership positions continued to be held by men.

### **2017 Elections Act and Recent Efforts**

The 2017 Elections Act is intended to further enhance women's representation in Pakistan's political parties. The Act said that not less than five percent of the prospects fielded by the parties going into elections should be women. This legal provision increased the number of women who contested elections for general seats in 2018. However, many of these women still felt disadvantaged when attempting to make a difference in political history.

Women's entry into the political arena has become possible through the gender quota system. However, their capacity to shape political agendas and make a difference in fields of gender equality and education is still constrained, as men dominate the economic rights discourse. The female members of Pakistan's political parties do not confront only an overtly male-dominated culture, men leaders have often neglected and even undermined the work of women in politics (Bari et al., 2015).

### **Comparative Analysis of Quota Systems and Women's Representation**

One useful way to look at Pakistan's quota system is to examine gender quotas in action, elsewhere and with differing degrees of success. A comparison across countries such as Rwanda, India or Sierra Leone has provided exceptional learning about the manner in which gender quotas can be designed to have a far more substantial impact on women's political empowerment.

### **Rwanda: A Model for Success**

When it comes to gender equality and political representation, Rwanda ranks among the world's leaders. Rwanda adopted a mandatory gender quota of 30% in the Chamber of Deputies following the 1994 genocide. Rwanda offers a striking example of the fact that when you have healthy institutions and political will, a quota system works. By 2019, women representation in the Rwandan Parliament stood at 61.3%, and is considered to be the highest in any Parliament in the world (UN Women, 2019).

Gender parity in political representation Achieving gender parity in political representation in Rwanda has been possible due to political reforms such as the adoption of a gender quota, combined with a strong commitment to women's empowerment. Women in the Rwandan parliament have had a much greater effect on policy in the country, especially regarding health, education, and women's issues. Additionally, the gender mainstreaming approach in Rwanda targets female participation in post-conflict governance with emphasis on gender-sensitive planning and decision-making at the national level of leadership (Kantengwa, 2010).

Rwanda's reforms success holds important lessons for Pakistan. It demonstrates that gender quotas when reinforced with strong enforcement measures and institutional support, can result in meaningful political empowerment of women.

### **India: Direct Elections for Reserved Seats**

India's history of gender quotas is especially remarkable at the local level. The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) in the state reserves 33% of seats for women in local elections, and the people directly elect the candidates. Research from West Bengal reveals that women elected

through the PRI system are far more powerful than women who emerge from the quota system in Pakistan (World Bank, 2015).

The direct election system results in women in Indian local government being accountable to their voters, and thus, gives them greater incentive to support gender-sensitive policy. In comparison, in Pakistan's party-list system, which works by political parties choosing women rather than them being elected directly, they also lose a politically independent and legitimized status. The direct voting system in India has resulted in greater political power for women and a greater focus on issues at the grassroots level, giving Pakistan a model for strengthening women's political involvement and pressure (Madan, 2014).

### **Sierra Leone: Challenges Despite Representation**

In 2023, the Sierra Leone government passed a 30% quota for women in Parliament. Though this quota policy has resulted in greater representation, Sierra Leone shares the same issues as Pakistan in ensuring that women's presence is not merely symbolic but counts in the legislative process. In Sierra Leone, women in Parliament encounter challenges like cultural prejudices, lack of resources, and weak (political) support structures. These challenges underscore the need for more far-reaching reforms in addition to quotas to guarantee that women in Parliament can actively participate in policymaking (Sierra Leone Parliamentary Journal, 2023). Sierra Leone's case underscores the necessity for other supportive reforms to accompany the gender quota system, including political orientation, mentoring, and the transformation in party behavior that ensures women do not simply participate in the political process but are involved directly in influencing policy and legislative agendas (Rosén, 2017).

**Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Gender Quota Systems and Women's Representation**

Country	Gender Quota in Legislature	Women's Representation (%)	Quota Implementation Year	Key Success Factor
Pakistan	Reserved seats (17%)	20%	2002	Party-list system, weak enforcement
Rwanda	30% reserved seats	61.3%	1994	Strong enforcement, institutional support
India	33% local government seats	Varies by region	1993	Direct elections for reserved seats
Mexico	Gender parity law (50/50)	42% in Chamber of Deputies	2014	Gender parity laws, direct elections
South Africa	Leadership quotas in ANC	41% in parliament	1994	Leadership quotas in political parties

### **Comparative Insights and Lessons for Pakistan**

Examples from countries such as Rwanda, India and Sierra Leone that have successfully implemented gender quotas provide important lessons for Pakistan. Though the tangible benefits of Pakistan's gender quotas have improved women's representation, they have not translated into a marked degree of political empowerment, owing to the party-list system, low degree of political autonomy and persistent patriarchal norms.

The success of Rwanda is an example that gender quotas work but only when there is political will, favourable gender-sensitive policies for women's participation and strong enforcement. Results from the direct election of India's reserved seats indicate that electoral accountability improves women's political autonomy and effectiveness, a model Pakistan could emulate. Sierra Leone's story underscores the importance of going beyond quotas to achieve (with

training, facilitation, and restructuring parties) effective political empowerment for women (Bauer 2014).

#### Challenges to Substantive Representation for Women in Pakistan's Political System

While gender-based quotas in Pakistan have increased the presence of women in political bodies, this has not translated into real political empowerment. The powerful patriarchal gender relationships and entrenched institutional censorship leave women entrapped in a narrow position that hampers their ability to alter the political landscape. Despite their growing numbers, women have faced difficulties making a real impact on the political class, revealing the gap between representation and political power.

#### **Patriarchal Norms and Cultural Barriers**

Pakistan's patriarchal culture restricts women's participation in politics, even though the introduction of gender quotas to the National and Provincial Assemblies have improved the situation. A 2020 study by UN Women showed that 68% of women parliamentarians are being discriminated on the basis of gender and have been pushed out of important discussions. Social norms oppose the gender neutrality of politics, to suppress women's doubts about the legitimacy of their occupation of political roles. According to an international 2021 IFES report, in 53% of the cases, women in parliament said that their ideas were ignored or dismissed by their male colleagues, this is another evidence of the gender bias, especially on issues that are essential to women's health, education, and gender equality. In these and other conservative areas such as South Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, there are additional restrictions on women to access education, health and participate in the political process permanently, this includes the vote registration (Gul & Sherazi, 2022).

#### **Party Dynamics and Lack of Political Autonomy**

The gender quota system in Pakistan has come under fire for promoting a party-list system that restricts the political autonomy of women. Nominated by political parties (not directly elected by the voters), they are most often there because of political patronage, not public support. It makes them less answerable to constituents, and their ability to represent their voters decreases. According to a 2019 PILDAT report, more than 85% of MNAs on reserved seats for women were seated by virtue of family relationship or political affiliation, not by winning an election. This dependence on the elites of the political class has limited their autonomy and their capacity to promote women's rights and gender reforms. Also, women elected in this manner have no direct electoral mandate and are unable to become significant national policy actors. The Asia Foundation (2021) revealed that only one third of women elected through reserved seats receive little or no support from the political party such as training and mentorship, and therefore, have restricted access to political agency or how to influence national law in a gender-responsive way (Khan & Naqvi, 2020).

#### **Resource, Training, and Support Deficiency**

The absence of resources, training, and institutions remains a major impediment to women's political representation in Pakistan. Although the quota system has increased women's representation, it has not been complemented by investment in women's political leadership or leadership development. In a 2019 survey of 50 female MPs, 45% had never received any formal training in legislative processes/public speaking, both important tools for influencing policy and advocating for gender-sensitive initiatives. Moreover, the majority of women politicians depend on male politicians for assistance, which constrains their autonomy and capacity to become advocates for gender equality and women's rights. The Asia Foundation (2021) found that 67% of women MPs elected from reserved seats had limited access to



financial support, resources and mentorship from their parties which in turn affected their capacity to engage in legislative matters effectively (Begum, 2023).

### Legislative Data Analysis

A study of legislative data from Pakistan's National Assembly and its provincial assemblies shows that despite more women MPs, their capacity to impact critical legislative decisions is practically non-existent. For example, an analysis of the 2018 legislative session revealed that women MPs were responsible for sponsoring only 3.2% of bills concerning women's rights or gender equality, while the figure for male MPs was 18% (Begum, 2023). This stark difference illustrates the gulf between counting women in the legislature and counting them when participating in policy debates.

**Table 2: Women Elected to Reserved Seats in the National Assembly (2018)**

Political Party	Number of Women Elected
Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)	16
Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)	15
Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)	6
Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM)	2
Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)	1
Balochistan Awami Party (BAP)	1
Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA)	1
Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA)	1
Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q)	1
Independent	1

**Source: Election Commission of Pakistan – General Elections 2018 – Reserved Seats Returned Candidates Notification**

Moreover, women are appointed to lower influential National Assembly and provincial assemblies committees. They are generally assigned to committees (like those that deal with social welfare, education, or health) and are considered less potent than committees (like those that deal with finance, defense, or foreign affairs). The lack of representation in these crucial adapters limits the ability of female lawmakers to advocate for change in vital sectors such as national security, defense policy, and economic development – verticals traditionally seen as male play fields.

**Table 3: Gender Representation in Pakistan's National Assembly (2002–2018)**

Period	Total Seats	Reserved Seats for Women	Women Elected on General Seats	Total Women	Percentage of Women Representation
2002–2007	342	60	13 (later 12)	73	21%
2008–2013	342	60	16	76	22.2%
2013–2018	342	60	09	60	17.5%
2018	342	60	08	68	20%

**2002-2007:** 13 women were elected on general seats, with 10 from Punjab and 3 from Sindh. Notable women elected during this period include:

Dr. Firdous Ashiq Awan, Dr. Fahmida Mirza, Samina Khalid Ghurki & Hina Rabbani Khar

**2008-2013:** 16 women were elected on general seats. Some notable women elected during this period include:

Sumaira Malik, Ghulam Bibi Bharwana, Sumaira Naz, Tahmina Daultana & Khushbakht Shujaat.

**2013-2018:** 09 women were elected on general seats. Some notable women elected during this period include:

Mehnaz Akber Aziz, Ghulam Bibi Bharwana, Zartaj Gul & Dr. Nafisa Shah.

**2018:** 08 women were elected on general seats, including:

Mehnaz Akber Aziz, Ghulam Bibi Bharwana, Zartaj Gul, Dr. Nafisa Shah, Shazia Marri, Dr. Fehmida Mirza, Shams un Nisa & Zubaida Jalal.

These women played significant roles in shaping the legislative landscape of Pakistan during their terms.

### **Opposition from Male Colleagues**

Even when women in Pakistan's National Assembly try to propose bills that are gender-sensitive, they meet stiff resistance from their male colleagues. Clientelistic politics in Pakistan drives the opposition against gender-equality bills, with male MPs opposing the bills on the grounds that they are "too radical." To illustrate, during the 2018 National Assembly, measures related to women's rights - including the issue of sexual harassment - were challenged by male parliamentarians who aimed to weaken or prevent enactment of the measures (Dutoya, 2013). The Protection of Women Against Harassment at Workplace Act of 2010 had come under criticism while attempts to amend it were made in 2019. A report from the IFES in 2021 showed that 53% of women legislators had their comments dismissed by male colleagues and 35% were discouraged from participating in policy discussions. This gendered resistance makes it difficult for women to pose and pass on meaningful legislation around our issues. For example, the Bill on the Protection of the Rights of Religious Minorities, tabled in 2020, has been obstructed by male senators such as Abdul Ghafoor Haideri of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam. Female legislators, such as Senator Krishna Kumari Kolhi (PPP), however, have bucked the trend, if highlighting the struggle that women are still facing in politics (Yusuf, 2024).

### **Mouthpiece for Male Family Members**

One of the biggest hurdles for women elected on reserved seats in Pakistan is that they are seen as spokeswomen of male political figures, be they fathers, husbands or brothers. Under a party-list system, numerous women were chosen solely for their associations with powerful men, rather than their own political abilities. 68 percent of the women elected to the reserved seats, for instance, are the daughters or wives of powerful male politicians, as Singh (2021) notes, and are elected as much on the back of their husbands' or fathers' influence as on their own merit.

Although the Election Commission of Pakistan requires parties to reserve seats for women, there is no accountability of those women to work for the issues of women, this gives rise to the notion that women serve as "face" representatives (Khan & Naqvi, 2020). These women are challenged in advocating for policies that advance gender equality or women's empowerment given their lack of independent political power. This indirect nature of public constituencies and nonterritorial representative based roles restricts their powers to bring about meaningful change strengthening the idea that women serve second to men in politics.

Exploration of the Gap Between Numerical Representation and Substantive Political Empowerment

There is such a divide between a numerical portrayal of women through gender quotas and real political clout in Pakistan. Despite the increasing number of female MPs in the National and Provincial Assemblies (from quotas), the participation of women in policy and legislative

outcomes is limited. This is attributable to political impotence, a token party-list representation and patriarchal politics. Women elected from reserved seats are not directly electorally accountable, rendered institutionally marginal and frequently sidelined from decision-making by male leaders. It suggests that despite an increase in gender-centered debates and new policies related to women's rights, with more and more women engaged in politics, policies on gender equality and women's rights have little-to-no effect (Muhammad et al., 2019).

In order for gender quotas to be translated in to real political empowerment, structural reforms are required – direct elections on reserved seats, better regulation of quota enforcement, political training and mentorship for women. Such steps will arm women with the tools, networks and confidence they need to participate in the legislative process, and assist Pakistan in achieving gender equality in politics.

#### Alternative Methods to Improve Women's Political Participation

Although gender quotas undoubtedly have enhanced women's representation in Pakistan's political institutions, they have not translated into meaningful political power for women. The representation of women in politics, as an important factor of reserved seats, has not empowered them to bring about changes and actively participate in the political machinery. So, more reforms than gender quotas are required to make political representation substantive. This section examines four alternative methods that may further achieve political participation in Pakistan, involving fresh practices and data from new examples in other countries, and also provides feasible suggestions for Pakistan.

#### Direct Elections for Reserved Seats

Pakistan's women's political representation quota is party-list based, women are selected by political parties rather than voters. This makes them less independent and accountable, because they are perceived to owe their allegiance to political leaders as opposed to the public. Direct election of women would give them legitimacy and enable them to advocate for policies that are sensitive to gender.

Mexico's measure of gender equality, which mandates a man and a woman to be alternate candidates to political parties and enabled an open vote for women candidates to local office, has promoted women's participation and representation, including in traffic and intimate partner violence (World Bank, 2015). Such an approach might help empower women politically in Pakistan.

The women parliamentarians in Pakistan usually have no training and are not in politics prior to it. This gap could be addressed by training programs as found in India (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005). The experience in Rwanda, where there are 61.3% female members in parliament (UN Women, 2019), illustrates the importance of political education. Pakistan can adopt this template to enhance the impact of women in politics.

#### Quotas for Political Party Leadership

Despite gender quotas that have led to the increased representation of women in legislatures, they are still under-represented in political party leadership positions. To make a difference, quotas for party leadership positions need to be implemented – to reserve a certain number of leadership roles for women. This would help women enter high-status party positions.

The quota system for women within the African National Congress (ANC) was also a successful example, with 30% of top ANC positions being female as of 1994 in South Africa. The results were that women were appointed to lead in top positions, for example, national government ministers, which in effect influenced policies on domestic violence, economic rights and education (South African Authorities 2005; Rosado 2013).

Pakistan might consider the introduction of analogous leadership quotas to pave the way to a more substantive role of women in party agendas that sensitise to gender issues like women's rights, education and health. This reform would enable women to lead on the issues that matter most in party politics and in the affairs of nations, and it would close the gap between the representation of men and women in political leadership.

### **Promoting Grassroots Political Engagement**

Promoting the participation of women in democratic mobilization from below is an important way to increase the political representation of women. Participation at the local level allows women to organize politically, learn governance skills, and put their issues on the list of priorities.

In India, 33% seats in the local government are reserved for women under the Panchayati Raj Act (1993) through which women can have the opportunity to acquire political experience and fight for health, sanitation and water issues for women. This quota, which was adopted in the 1993 Constitution, has resulted in a significant increase in the participation of women, especially in the more rural areas of the country (World Bank, 2015).

Uganda also reserves 30% of local government slots for women who are directly elected by people. "Ugandan women have been proactive proponents of women and child focused policies like the education and the maternal health policies" (Uganda Women's Network, 2017). In Pakistan, if women's quotas can be extended at local level, this can provide women with experience and connections, which in turn could also leverage representation and influence on the national level. It would help women to take seriously their relationship with their electorates and, subsequently, their voices would be heard in all halls of government.

### **Conclusion**

This paper makes a critical analysis of the implications of gender quotas on the substantive political representation of women in Pakistan. Although reservations have led to an increase in female representation in legislatures, this has not translated into substantial political empowerment for women. Women's political power is constrained by the persistent patriarchal matrix of domination and party biases.

The increase in the number of women in political positions (20% of National Assembly seats in 2018) does not mean greater political influence. Most of the women who are elected through quotas actually have their positions to political patronage, and 85% of female MPs in the National Assembly benefit from a kind of family or political network (PILDAT, 2019), which undermines the relationship to the voters and reduces the females capacity to influence policy. Women's political independence is cut short on reserved seats, which is the biggest problem of gender quotas in Pakistan. With no territorial mandates, women are usually beholden to party barons or male elites, diluting their capacity to advocate for women's rights. As per 2021 IFES report, 53% women legislators thwarted by male colleagues- deep rooted gender discrimination in Pakistani political culture. Patriarchy prevailing in rural areas especially in Southern Punjab also affects the participation of women in education, health and politics due to lack of access (Anjum et al., 2022).

Cases of comparisons with Rwanda, India, and Sierra Leone show that having gender quotas in place does not necessarily lead to substantive representation. In Rwanda 61.3% of its Chamber of Deputies are women this representational ratio is achieved by strong implementation and institutional support (UN Women, 2019). India's Panchayati Raj Act, which mandates 33% of all local government seats be reserved for women through direct election, demonstrates the necessity of electoral accountability as a mechanism for women's political autonomy (World Bank, 2015). Pakistan, however, continues to erode women's political agency by relying on the

party-list system which provides women with no direct electoral mandates and any impact on policy.

Reforms beyond quotas would be required for gender quotas to have a meaningful effect in Pakistan. Direct elections for reserved seats would make women responsible to the electorate they represent, lending them both greater legitimacy and clout. Political training and mentoring programs, such as those in Mexico, would provide women with the necessary tools to be effective lobbyists (National Democratic Institute, 2018). Party-wide leadership quotas, such as those observed in the ANC in South Africa, would ensure that women, as party members, also occupy leadership within parties, and ultimately at the national level to influence national policy (South African Government, 2005).

In addition, gender-sensitive parliamentary systems, including gender committees, should be established to ensure that the voice of women is raised on policy matters. In short, gender quotas will be necessary to raise women's representation in Pakistan, but they may prove to be insufficient without adequate accompanying reforms to translate into substantive political participation. These range from direct elections to quotas, to political education, and to a gendered parliamentary conduct. So long as the political system is merely symbolic of the gender equality, Pakistan will have to address the sources maintaining gender inequality, i.e., patriarchy, lack of transparency, and gender discrimination.

#### References

- Ali, M., Zafar, N., & Khan, S. (2017). *Political participation of women in Pakistan: Challenges and opportunities*. *Journal of Political Studies*.
- Anjum, R., Haider, Z., & Shah, A. (2022). *Geographical disparities in women's political participation in Pakistan*. *South Asian Politics Review*.
- Awan, M. (2022). *The role of education in shaping women's political participation in Pakistan*. *Journal of Gender Studies*.
- Bari, F., Niazi, M., & Tanveer, F. (2015). *The impact of gender quotas on political participation in Pakistan*. *Women and Politics Journal*.
- Begum, S. (2023). *Empowering women in Pakistan: Moving beyond quotas*. *Journal of Political Empowerment*.
- Ghazi, T., Hussain, K., & Ahmed, R. (2020). *Patriarchy and political participation: A study of women in Pakistan*. *Social Sciences and Gender Studies*.
- Kebede, S. (2019). *The marginalization of women in local political participation*. *Journal of Political Science and Public Policy*.
- Khan, M., & Naqvi, S. (2020). *The role of gender quotas in improving women's political representation in Pakistan*. *Journal of Democracy and Governance*.
- Shah, Z. (2023). *Gendered challenges in environmental policy formation: The case of Pakistan*. *International Environmental Politics Journal*.
- Abbasi, A. H., & Jaffar, S. (2021). Islamization of Zia Regime: An Appraisal from Gender Perspective. *Al-Duhaa*, 2(2), 17. <https://doi.org/10.51665/al-duhaa.002.02.0074>
- Bari, F., Bennett, J., & Bilal, S. (2015). Bridging the Fault Lines? Rethinking the Gender Quota Approach in Pakistan.
- Bauer, G. (2014). "A Lot of Headwraps": Innovations in a Second Wave of Electoral Gender Quotas in Sub-Saharan Africa. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.
- Begum, A. (2023). Political Participation of Female in Pakistan: Prospects and Challenges. *Unisia*, 41(1), 39. <https://doi.org/10.20885/unisia.vol41.iss1.art3>
- Cornwall, A., & Goetz, A. M. (2005). Democratizing democracy: Feminist perspectives. *Democratization*, 12(5), 783. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340500322181>

- Dutoya, V. (2013). From Women's Quota to "Women's Politics": The Impact of Gender Quotas on Political Representations and Practices in the Pakistani National Parliament. *Femina Politica Zeitschrift Für Feministische Politikwissenschaft*, 22(2), 17. <https://doi.org/10.3224/feminapolitica.v22i2.20356>
- Gul, S., & Sherazi, T. Z. (2022). Assessment of women's political participation in the 2018 Elections and its comparison with elections of 2002, 2008, and 2013. *Journal of Humanities Social and Management Sciences (JHSMS)*, 3(1), 71.
- Kalaramadam, S. (2018). Presence into Participation and Representation. *Journal of South Asian Development*, 13(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973174118757630>
- Kantengwa, M. J. (2010). The Will to Political Power: Rwandan Women in Leadership. *IDS Bulletin*, 41(5), 72. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2010.00168.x>
- Khan, A., & Naqvi, S. (2020). DILEMMAS OF REPRESENTATION: WOMEN IN PAKISTAN'S ASSEMBLIES. *Asian Affairs*, 51(2), 286.
- Khan, S. (n.d.). Women in Electoral Politics: An Account of Exclusion.
- Kim, N. K. (2022). When does women's political power matter? Women's representation and legal gender equality of economic opportunity across contexts. *European Political Science Review*, 14(4), 583. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1755773922000352>
- Madan, R. (2014). Impact of Women's Representation in Indian Politics. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2502394>
- McCann, J. (2013). Electoral quotas for women: an international overview. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2013-11/apo-nid36334.pdf>
- Muhammad, S. (2019a). Gender Quota and Women's Political Participation in Pakistan: A Case of General Elections 2002. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 3, 278.
- Muhammad, S. (2019b). Gender Quota in Pakistan: An Analytical Study. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 3, 170. [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2019\(3-ii\)03](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2019(3-ii)03)
- Muhammad, S., Bhatti, M. N., & Awan, M. W. (2019). Money, Politics and Gender Equality: An Analysis of Assets of Women Legislators in Pakistan (2002-13). *Global Regional Review*, 292.
- Parliaments and Gender Equality: Gender Mainstreaming in Legislatures. (2022). <https://www.undp.org/publications/parliaments-and-gender-equality-gender-mainstreaming-legislatures>
- rosado2068, misty. (2013). Impact of Women's Political Leadership on Democracy and Development in South Africa. Rosén, J. (2017). Gender quotas for women in national politics: A comparative analysis across development thresholds. *Social Science Research*, 66, 82.
- Yusuf, N. (2024). Senate rejects the bill. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1159268-senate-rejects-bill-seeking-public-hanging-of-rapists>