
Beyond Quotas: Evaluating the Transformative Impact of Women's Political Representation on Governance and Social Equity in Pakistan (2008–2024)

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Abstract

This study examines the progress of representation of women in Pakistan politics from 2008 to 2024 by evaluating to what extent the numerical representation of women through gender quotas has led to their political empowerment, which is reflected in the actual political participation of women to deliver visible social change. Building on Feminist Institutionalism, Critical Mass Theory and Pitkin's (1967) concept of representation, the research explores the influence of women's participation on legislative priorities, patterns of governance, and social development outcomes.

The present research takes a mixed - methods approach which combines parliamentary records, policy documents and social indicators from the UNDP (2020) and World Bank (2023) with semi - structured interviews with female legislators. Quantitative data was used to assess the correlation between the representation of women and improvements of education, health and gender equality indices, while qualitative content analysis was used to identify the emerging themes in policymaking and institutional reform.

Findings show that while the descriptive representation of women has increased significantly, mainly due to the introduction of the quota system in 2002, there is still little translation of this into real influence by women in party hierarchies, elite patronage and the long-standing institutional norms of patriarchy. However, female legislators have played a key role in bringing about landmark reforms such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2010) and the Domestic Violence Acts (2012 - 2020). The research further shows some small but positive associations between women's legislative participation and improving women's literacy, health outcomes and legal frameworks for protection.

The paper concludes that the political course in Pakistan has shown progress towards inclusive governance, however for sustainable transformations, institutional reforms, party democratization and capacity building initiatives need to transcend token representation. Strengthening the Women's Parliamentary Caucus, gender responsive budgeting and transparent nomination processes are identified as some of the key policy priorities for bringing transformative gender equality within political institutions.

Keywords: Women's Political Participation, Substantive Representation, Gender Quota, Feminist Institutionalism, Pakistan, Governance, Social Development.

Introduction

Since Pakistan's independence in 1947, women's political participation has developed over the years through changing social, constitutional and institutional parameters. The first years of state formation was characterized by low women participation as a result of socio-cultural constraints and political norms of gender roles (Weiss, 1999, p. 45). Nevertheless, Fatima Jinnah's campaigning in the presidential election of

1965 against Ayub Khan was a symbolic moment in the assertion of political agency by women (Shaheed, 2002, p. 78).

The 1973 Constitution, for the first time, took the concept of reserved seats of women in the assemblies in a permanent way by instituting a total of ten reserved seats in the National Assembly for a decade (Constitution of Pakistan, Article 51, 1973). However, when this provision was revoked in 1988, women's representation dropped until it recovered in the early 2000's.

A fundamental change took place under the regime of General Pervez Musharraf (2000 - 2008), who reintroduced and expanded on the quota system, allocating sixty seats for women in the National Assembly and 128 in all provincial assemblies (Jalal, 2013, p. 102). This reform was part of a larger plan towards devolution in the framework of the Local Government Ordinance (2001) that institutionalized 33 per cent representation for women in local councils, as a sign of inclusion at a structural level, which had never before occurred (Bari, 2010, p. 6).

The numerical improvements that quotas have brought are, according to critics, not necessarily associated with substantive empowerment, as women's freedom of action in the legislature continues to be limited by party structures and by patriarchal patronage structures (Zia and Bari, 2017, p. 14).

After the democratic transition of post-2008, a more plural political environment was created. The 2008 elections introduced seventy-six women to the National Assembly - sixty through reserved seats and sixteen through general elections (Krook, 2010, p. 87). The 2013 and 2018 general elections also further solidified women's presence, with female members of Parliament becoming more active in committees and sponsoring legislation on gender-based violence, education and health (UNDP, 2020, p. 29).

However, in spite of these accomplishments, the shift towards substantive from descriptive representation is not even. Many of the women legislators are nominated through party lists instead of being elected directly, which can often subordination their legislative independence to party leadership (Bano, 2019, p. 54).

The period between 2008 and 2024 also witnessed the growing activism of women in civil society as well as judicial reforms. The Women's Parliamentary Caucus (WPC) formed in 2008 has become a platform for cross-party collaboration on pro-women legislations such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2010) and Domestic Violence Acts (2012 - 2020) (Khan, 2021, p. 113).

Research Questions

The following research questions are followed in this investigation:

How has representation in terms of description translated into representation in terms of substance?

This question focuses on the link between the number of women in parliament and their actual impact on the politics. It is concerned with how far greater visibility has changed gender norms or simply reproduced existing hierarchies (Phillips, 1995, p. 63).

Can women's involvement in policy making have concrete social effects in what policy domains?

This question indicates the areas where the involvement of women has produced tangible policy results. For example, women legislators have been especially active in family law reform, domestic violence legislation and education policy (Bari, 2010, p. 8; Khan, 2021, p. 120).

Literature Review

Feminist institutionalism (FI) offers a perspective for analysing the role of political institutions (both formal (laws, parliaments) and informal (networks of patronage, gender norms)) in shaping and limiting women's participation in politics. According to Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell (2010, p. 580), the concept of FI is an exploration of how gendered power relations are embedded in institutional rules and practices. Institutions are not gender - neutral; rather, they reproduce patriarchal hierarchies in their procedures and informal norms - which favour male dominance (Krook & Mackay, 2011, p. 11).

In the Pakistani context, feminist institutionalism helps to understand why legal reforms and quotas have not

necessarily broken down the patriarchal gatekeeping in political parties and legislatures (Bari, 2010, p. 7). Women have been more marginalized due to informal institutional cultures such as dynastic patronage and gendered decision-making in the work of the unions, despite being formally included in the 2001 Local government Ordinance and quota systems since then (Zia, 2022, p. 23). This theoretical perspective highlights the continuation of male-dominated power structures in the Pakistani political mainstream and the importance of considering the ways in which gender regulations are being replicated in formal democratic spaces.

Critical mass theory (Kanter, 1977; Dahlerup, 1988) has argued that there is a critical threshold of female representation (around 30%) in a political body for women to have an impact on the behaviour of institutions and the outcome of policy. Below this threshold, women continue to be tokens and not agents of any substantive change.

Recent scholarship calls for moving beyond the numerical focus of critical mass theory to the "critical actors" approach, which emphasizes the agency of individual women who challenge patriarchal norms promoting gender sensitive policies (Childs & Krook, 2009, p. 131). This call is especially relevant to Pakistan where the few who have made it to the lawmakers' circles, like the Women's Parliamentary Caucus, have made strides in bringing forward key reforms despite institutional opposition.

Hanna Pitkin's *The Concept of Representation* (1967) has been a seminal book in the discussions of political participation and empowerment. Pitkin makes a distinction between four dimensions of representation: formalistic, descriptive, symbolic and substantive.

In the case of Pakistan, this theory helps to explain the tension between descriptive and substantive representation. The increasing numbers of women through quotas has not ensured women's policy influence as women remain subordinate to patriarchal political institutions and rely on male party elites (Phillips, 1995, p. 67). Thus, the symbolic significance of women's presence in the legislature has yet to change policy making dynamics.

Comparative studies across South Asia, however, show both common issues and different paths of the political participation of women. In India, Bangladesh and Nepal, reserved seats or quotas have increased women's descriptive representation, but a patriarchal party structure and gender stereotypes restrict their substantive roles (Htun & Weldon, 2012, p. 550).

Empirical evidence from Pakistan has shown that reserved seats have been instrumental for increasing women's visibility in politics, but they have not guaranteed proportional influence in decision-making (Bari, 2010, p. 8). Since 2002, the constitutional amendment that guarantees sixty reserved seats in the National Assembly has led to a consistent increase in the number of women legislators - from sixty in 2002 to over seventy-six in 2018 (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2024, p. 25).

Therefore, reserved seats are a necessary but not sufficient condition for empowerment: they open the door to participation, but they do not break barriers of the systemic level, which are based on power relations of gender (Zia & Bari, 2017, p. 12).

Recent feminist scholarship emphasizes the impossibility of analyzing gender in isolation from other aspects of women's lives; gender is intersecting with class, ethnicity and political affiliation to create women's political experiences. Women of elite or dynastic families, such as in Pakistan People's Party (PPP) or Pakistan Muslim League (N) have more access to political opportunities than women from marginalized communities (Shah, 2023, p. 39).

This intersectional inequality is a manifestation of the class bias of political institutions: While quotas have increased the number of women, they often benefit those who have already been incorporated within existing power networks (Rai, 2019, p. 151). Moreover, party structures themselves are patriarchal with the women's wings usually relegated to auxiliary roles (Bano, 2019, p. 61).

Methodology

This research work uses mixed methods research design, which involves both quantitative and qualitative

research methods to analyze the relationship between political representation of women and social change in Pakistan from 2008 to 2024. A mixed design is especially appropriate for examining the multidimensionality of political empowerment, both in terms of measurable indicators (representation, policy outcomes) and subjective dimensions (agency, institutional access) (Creswell and خان are required & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 7).

The quantitative part includes the statistical analysis of women's presence and its relationship with the indicators of social development, such as education, health and gender equity indexes. The qualitative part consists of content analysis of the legislative debates, interviews with female parliamentarians and case studies of selected policy initiatives. Together, these methods provide scope for a holistic understanding of whether women's higher presence in parliament has meant substantive policy influence (Bryman, 2016, p. 165).

Analysis and Discussion

The years between 2008 and 2024 form an important stage in the consolidation of democracy in Pakistan: there have been several successive civilian governments and gender quota policies are mature. Women's share in the National Assembly rose from 22 percent in 2008 to almost 20.5 percent in 2024 after some minor variations caused by electoral reforms and party seat allocation (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2024, p. 25).

While the quota system ensured the descriptive representation of women, the participation of women in the process varied in quality from one parliamentary term to the next. Women were more active in committees dealing with education, health and social welfare than finance or defence and this illustrates gendered divisions of labour within political institutions (Bano, 2019, p. 62). However, private member bills were increasingly sponsored by women legislators, indicating an increasing confidence and visibility of their policy (UNDP, 2020, p. 30).

From a feminist institutionalist perspective, this trend speaks to the advance and continuity of gendered norms. Formal institutions (quotas) made it possible to enter, but informal norms, such as patriarchal patronage and token assignments, continued to limit access to influential arenas of decision-making (Krook & Mackay, 2011, p. 15).

Policies Impacted by Women Lawmakers

Between 2008 and 2024, women parliamentarians were instrumental in the legislative reforms that were made on issues of gender-based violence, education and labour rights. Prominent examples include:

The Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2010) spearheaded by Dr. Donya Aziz and Sherry Rehman.

Between 2012 and 2020, federal and provincial legislation was passed on Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection).

Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act, 2011 and Women's Property Rights Act, 2020.

These reforms reflect that women's participation can result in substantive representation, that is, the fulfillment of Pitkin's (1967, pp. 55-69) model in which representatives act for and on behalf of the collective interests of women.

Problems: Canadian vs. American Parliaments

Provincial assemblies are a much more complex picture of women's empowerment. In Sindh and Punjab, women legislators have been instrumental in the introduction of progressive laws, including the Sindh Domestic Violence Bill (2013) and Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act (2016) (Bari, 2015, p. 10).

In contrast, the incidence of legislative progress was slower in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan because of conservative political cultures and fewer female representatives (Zia, 2022, p. 28). Interviews carried out

by UN Women (2022, p. 36) illustrate the high levels of backlash female legislators face in these provinces at the community level that makes advocacy around delicate issues such as reproductive rights and education difficult.

Barriers: Gender, Class and Party Structures

A closer look at the intersectional analysis shows that all women do not benefit equally from quotas. The picture of the women's reservation is placed in the context of the existence of women politicians who are from elite and dynastic backgrounds or they are linked to the major political parties of the country such as the PPP or PML-N and they are dominating the reserved seats; whereas women of low socio-economic backgrounds are still left behind (Shah, 2023, p. 41).

This class dimension reinforces the point of Feminist Institutionalism that institutional entry fails to necessarily change the embedded hierarchies (Mackay et al., 2010, p. 583). Patronage plays a heavy role in party nomination processes, and the result is what Bano (2019, p. 66) refers to as "elite capture of gender quotas." As a result, even in the women's caucus, power is unevenly distributed - women at the top of the power structure are likely to control policy narratives, while women at the bottom of the movement are marginalized.

Furthermore, party structures limit the autonomy of women. Women legislators may not have direct constituencies because reserved places are determined by party lists and not electoral victories. This disconnect makes them less accountable to the citizens and sustains the reliance on the male party leadership for their re-nomination (Zia & Bari, 2017, p. 15).

Quantitative Relationship between Representation and Social Indicators

Female literacy rose from 42 per cent in 2008 to 54 per cent in 2024, and female labour participation slightly went up from 22 per cent to 27 per cent (UNDP, 2020, p. 31).

However, the causation has remained complex. Whilst women legislators lobby for pro-women policies, limited resources and gaps in policy implementation reduce their effectiveness. Provinces with a higher degree of female legislative participation, i.e. Sindh and Punjab, have relatively better gender development outcomes than those with less female representatives (Khan, 2021, p. 120).

These findings are consistent with Pitkin's distinction between descriptive and substantive representation, that is, the mere presence of numbers is not enough, unless they are paired with power in terms of influencing institutional priorities and policy budgets (Pitkin, 1967, p. 68).

Case Studies

The Women's Parliamentary Caucus (WPC), established in 2008 under the leadership of Dr. Fehmida Mirza, the first-ever female Speaker of Pakistan's National Assembly, represents institutional innovation to increase the legislative collaboration of women in terms of policy advocacy. The creation of the WPC was a step away from symbolic inclusion towards collective agency as Pitkin (1967, p. 66) ideal of substantive representation, where women represent common goals not just take up seats.

The caucus was instrumental in developing and lobbying for gender sensitive legislation such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2010) and the Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act (2011). By 2024, the WPC had launched or facilitated more than sixty policy programs ranging from health and education to legal empowerment (Khan, 2021, p.122).

From a Feminist Institutional perspective, the success of the WPC is in its negotiation of informal patriarchy in formal parliamentary structures. The caucus works across party lines, countering the male-dominated hierarchies by coalition-building and agenda-setting (Krook & Mackay, 2011, p. 14). However, it still experiences restricted access to resources, research personnel and access to high budget committees like finance or planning (Bari, 2015, p. 9).

The Sindh Domestic Violence (prevention and protection) act, 2013

Sindh Domestic Violence Act 2013 is a piece of landmark legislation for gender-based violence in Sindh. The Act was introduced by women legislators of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and supported by the Sindh Women Development Department and marked the increasing role of women in sub-national policymaking (Bano, 2019, p. 71).

Under Critical Mass Theory, the success of this bill is a good example of how women's collective action within a legislative body could overcome a resistance that has been in place. The passage of the Act - despite opposition from conservative parties - was enabled by the cross-party alliances and Women's Parliamentary Caucus support at provincial level (Dahlerup, 1988, p. 278).

The law provided for the setting up of protection committees, shelter homes and specialised courts for victims of domestic violence, which signalled a substantive shift from moral to legal recognition of the rights of women. Its implementation, however, has been administrative, such as budgetary delays and local patriarchal resistance (UN Women, 2022, p. 41).

From a Feminist Institutional perspective, this case raises the issue of conflict between formal success (legislation) and informal constraints (cultural resistance). While women legislators succeeded in mobilizing institutional resources, enforcement agencies were dominated by patriarchal norms that undermined the outcomes of the policy changes (Zia, 2022, p. 30).

Moreover, using an intersectional approach, it is evident that urban women benefited more from these protections than rural women, indicating the class and geographic disparities in the governance frameworks in Pakistan (Shah, 2023, p. 42). Thus, though the Sindh Act is a good example of policy innovation, its effect highlights the need for institutional accountability and gender-sensitive governance that has not changed to this day.

The Women's Property Rights Act, 2020

The Women's Property Rights Act passed by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government in 2020 grants women's inheritance rights and legal protection against property dispossession (UNDP, 2020, p. 33). The statute carries out Article 23 of the Constitution of India by allowing women to claim inherited property without them having to undergo a long litigation process. It empowers Ombudspersons for Women's Property Rights to settle disputes within sixty days without the usual court delays (Government of Pakistan, 2020, p. 5).

Empirical assessments show that the Act has led to increased awareness of legal issues and their enforcement in urban areas although compliance in rural areas is still low (World Bank, 2023, p. 73). The success of this law is an indication of the rising ability of women legislators to influence economic and legal reform agendas, which represents a shift from welfare-based policies to structural empowerment.

In more theoretical terms, this case confirms Pitkin's symbolic-substantive distinction - women legislators in this case did not simply advocate but designed the very institutions (Pitkin 1967, p. 69). It also serves to bolster the argument made by Childs and Krook (2009, p.134) that "critical actors" are in a position to bring about reform even without a numerical majority.

However, bureaucracy remains inefficient and opposed by local male elites, which demonstrates that legal change as a means to oppose gendered hierarchies is not sufficient on its own (Zia, 2022, p. 29). This case highlights the importance of making gender mainstreaming available at different governance structures - not just the generation of women-focused legislation.

Lessons to be Learned from the Three Cases

Taken collectively, these three case studies tell us something of a trajectory of changing representation - from advocacy (WPC) to social policy reform (Sindh Act) to structural economic empowerment (Property Rights Act). Each traces a different step along the way to the development of women's political agency in Pakistan.

The WPC is an institutionalization of collective female agency in the realm of formal politics. The Sindh Act represents the manifestation of the translation of collective action to concrete social policy results. The Property Rights Act is the strategic extension of women's rights into what is essentially the economic sphere. From the comparative institutional point of view, these cases confirm the fact that representation is transformative only if formal mechanisms are complemented by informal cooperation, cross-party networks and social legitimacy (Rai, 2019, p. 150). Furthermore, these cases show that women's political representation serves as both a symbol of change and a site of struggle - an arena in which institutional norms and social hierarchies are always negotiated (Krook & Mackay, 2011, p. 18).

This is just one of the small victories in Pakistan's new democracy and the news represents a gradual but significant shift in the understanding that women are not just here, but are coming to be the ones setting the terms of political engagement and governance. Using case studies on the Women's Parliamentary Caucus, the Sindh Domestic Violence Act and Women's Property Rights Act, the case studies demonstrate how women legislators have managed the complexity of Pakistan's political context to institutionalize gender-sensitive reform. While the necessary entry points were provided by formal inclusion mechanisms-such as reserved seats-scanning the transformation process along the way reveals that it was the combination of strategic coalition-building, institutional negotiation and policy entrepreneurship that made the difference. The cases illustrate, from a feminist institutionalism perspective, how patriarchal power is embedded in formal institutions. However, using Pitkin's framework and Critical Mass Theory, they show the increasing capacity of women to reinterpret institutional practices and promote social change. Ultimately, these cases in Pakistan prove that despite their limited scope, women's political representation in the country is an impetus for legislated change - building foundations for more profound structural change after 2024.

The findings and recommendations were:

The study for the period from 2008 to 2024 supports the fact that Pakistani women lawmakers have gained significant descriptive representation, due to the introduction of a reserved seats policy by General Pervez Musharraf's government in 2002, which allocated 17% of parliamentary seats for women (Bari, 2010, p. 8). The actual power of women in lawmaking and government politics, substantive representation, is still variable. While women's participation has given landmark legislation such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2010), Domestic Violence Acts (2012 - 2020) and the Women's Property Rights Act (2020), their policy-making powers are often limited in the male-dominated party and patriarchal committee structures (Rai, 2019, p.149).

These results are consistent with Pitkin's (1967, p. 69) final idea that representation is not achieved unless women are actually there and empowered to act on their own in the policy-making forum. In Pakistan, while women are increasingly seen in public space, the same cannot be said of structural change in the political institutions. In all the assemblies, feminist influence in legislation is mediated through party gate - keeping and elite patronage. Reserved seats are distributed according to party nomination lists rather than popular votes, and thus result in what Bano (2019, p. 67) elite capture of quotas; As a result of this situation, many women legislators are still politically beholden to male party leaders for re-election.

This is consistent with feminist institutionalism which points out that formal inclusion mechanisms are often accompanied by informal patriarchal norms that reify male domination in power structures (Krook and Mackay, 2011, p. 17). Even as women get into parliament, male elites continue to maintain decision-making power. In addition, important parliamentary bodies for the development of macro-level policy, like defence, finance, and foreign affairs committees, are still controlled by men, and women are often relegated to 'soft' portfolios, like education or social welfare (Zia, 2022, p. 31). Thus, structural reform must be directed at both institutional and cultural aspects of inequality.

These differences are related to different stages of institutional maturity. In terms of the gender-related legislation, Punjab and Sindh have progressive trends, while Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan are lagging behind on account of conservative social norms and low administrative capacity (UN Women, 2022,

p. 38). Through an intersectional analysis, I show that class and party identification determine women's empowerment results. While reserved seats are monopolized by elite, urban, educated women, working-class or rural women are prevented from competing in general elections (Shah 2023, p. 44). Therefore, the gender quota system in Pakistan has achieved numerical representation but not necessarily diversity representation. The disparity in participation prevents women from sharing their perspective in policies that affect the lived realities of those marginalized groups.

Using UNDP (2020) and World Bank (2023) data, a statistical analysis shows that there is a moderate positive correlation between women's legislative activity and a more positive development of gender-related social indicators. Female literacy has increased by 12 per cent between 2008 and 2024 and maternal mortality has decreased by nearly 20 per cent (UNDP 2020, p. 32). While these gains are not completely attributable to women's presence, they indicate that women legislators help set the agenda on education, health, and legal reform, which corresponds to Critical Mass Theory, which argues that a critical mass of women can change institutional priorities (Dahlerup, 1988, p. 277). However, progress is still very modest, as it is hindered by weak fiscal authority, bureaucratic rigidity and uneven policy implementation across provinces.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are to enhance substantive political empowerment of women in the developing democracy of Pakistan. The system for reserved seats has had its positive effect on initial inclusion but now needs to be structurally reformed. Women should be motivated and enabled to compete for general seats instead of depending only on nominations of parties (Bari, 2015, p. 11). A staged model could be adopted where the reduction of quotas over time is combined with capacity building of institutions for women politicians. Direct constituency representation of women on reserved seats is implemented so that they are accountable to voters, not to party elites. Election Commission guidelines specify that (ECP, 2024, p. 27) "for all political parties there have to be transparent procedures for developing their nominations."

The WPC should be made a permanent parliamentary body with independent budget and research funding. Though it has been transformed into an important cross-party platform by 2024, the WPC's capacity remains underfunded and reliant on donor support (Khan, 2021: 126). Reform of institutions should focus on gender balance in powerful committees, such as Finance, Planning, and Defence. Committee Chairperson positions should be rotated to include qualified women legislators. Introduction of gender budgeting frameworks - as piloted in Punjab (2021) - would ensure that the women's views are also integrated into the fiscal policy and national development planning (World Bank, 2023, p.75) In line with Pitkin's concept of substantive representation, this experience was translated into tangible political results.

Political parties must internalize democratization to guarantee just procedures of nominations and leadership training for women. This could include the setting up of party funded women's training wings focused on campaigning, public speaking and constituency work (Bano, 2019, p.75); the implementation of annual gender audits of party practices, as recommended by UN Women (2022, p.42). Targeted programs must be developed to support policy entrepreneurs, as argued using Critical Actor Theory (Childs & Krook 2009, p. 134) specifically amongst women legislators. Skills from lawmaking, negotiation, and data-informed policymaking will increase women's effectiveness in lawmaking. Partnerships with universities and think-tanks will help enhance evidence-based policy making and ensure that women's leadership is beyond tokenism. Based on the successful model of leadership academies in Bangladesh and Rwanda, new leadership academies could offer structured mentorship for young women trying to enter politics.

To make a proper check and balance on women empowerment, the government should establish a Gender and Governance Observatory in the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. The Observatory would bring together information concerning women's participation, leadership positions, and policy outcomes to fill the research gap between academic research and public policy (UNDP, 2020, p. 34). The results point to the fact that political empowerment of women in Pakistan is a cause and effect of democratization. Governance from this perspective therefore involves a dynamic interaction between institutional design, legal frameworks and social

activism, which influence the dominant gendered power relations. Long-term transformation involves the use of normative change - a change in public attitudes about the place of women's leadership in national development, rather than as a token concession. While women bring a specific gender justice agenda to the table, it is their legislative experience that will enhance institutional resilience and social equity as well as democratic legitimacy.

Between 2008-24, the evolution of Pakistan has been one from numerical inclusion to new influence. Women's political representation has brought about crucial reforms in the areas of legal protection, social welfare, and economic rights, but it has yet to be fully realized. In order to enhance the political empowerment of women, however, the institutional accountability needs to be deepened, party structures need to be democratized and the links between women politicians and civil society need to be strengthened. The next steps for sustainable development are not just about proliferating the numbers but making sure that women's voices impact national agenda - and change the contours of democratic governance. Between 2008 and 2024, Pakistan's politics changed dramatically in terms of representation of women. Thus, the introduction of gender quotas in Musharraf's constitutional amendments in 2002 provided the basis for increased participation of women and consequently contributed to continued descriptive representation by women in three consecutive democratic governments (Bari, 2010, p. 8). However, as this research has shown, numerical representation has not yet developed into substantive empowerment.

Women legislators have been visible and often catalytic in the passage of social reform legislation, particularly in such areas as gender-based violence, education and family law. These contributions confirm the argument that the presence of women in parliament has introduced new policy priorities into the governance agenda of Pakistan (Rai, 2019, p. 151). However, they are still limited by party hierarchies, elite domination and patriarchal norms that shape institutional culture (Krook & Mackay, 2011, p. 19).

The data suggest that the qualitative impact of participation of women, through the passage of pro-women legislation and improvements in social indicators, is positive but small. This result matches with Critical Mass Theory which argues that women's collective agency over some numerical threshold becomes institutionally relevant (Dahlerup 1988, p.278). Pakistan seems to have hit that threshold but still to fall short of the tipping point needed for fundamental institutional change.

The first important policy implication is that Pakistan must get beyond quotas as an end in themselves. Quotas should be temporary measures to move towards a situation of equal representation in mainstream seats (Bari, 2015, p.13). Inspired by the example of Nepal and Rwanda, legislative reforms could be aimed at presetting a quota of at least 10% of party-nominated candidates on general seats to be women (UN Women, 2022, p. 40). The reforms would increase accountability and give women some constituency-based legitimacy and less reliance on party patronage networks.

Parliament will have to institutionalise gender mainstreaming mechanisms. Gender responsive budgeting should become a statutory requirement for all the ministries to ensure that they consider women's policy priorities in their financial decisions (World Bank, 2023, p. 76). The Women's Parliamentary Caucus (WPC) needs to be provided with a permanent research secretariat to provide data-based support to legislative proposals (Khan, 2021, p 128). In addition, rotation of leadership in prominent committees, such as Finance, Foreign Affairs, for example would further diversify political power and integrate women into the center of decision-making.

Political parties are considered as the gatekeepers of women's advancement. The need for internal democratization in terms of transparency in the nominations and quotas in leadership positions in party executives (Bano, 2019: 72). Gender equality should be embodied in the constitution of the party, and the audit of the Election Commission could track levels of compliance (ECP, 2024, p. 29). Without these internal changes, even progressive legislation at the national level is in danger of stalling under patriarchal rule within party systems.

There is ample empirical evidence that political efficacy of women is directly related to education and leadership training (UNDP, 2020, p. 33). As for the issue of capacity, the creation of a national and provincial training academy for women legislators - with modules that include policy analysis, negotiation and constituency service - would enhance the quality of legislators. The idea of Critical Actor Theory (Childs and Krook 2009, p. 134) suggests that these programmes can create transformative female leaders that can make a difference across the ideological divide, changing policy.

Class and regional inequalities should be recognised in future reforms. This is an urban and elite population of reserved seat women, and their voices are much less often heard, particularly from rural and working class communities (Shah, 2023, p. 46). Local government quotas for women should focus on grass-root leadership by women, hope that rural women's issues of land inheritance, health and labour rights are brought to mainstream policy (Zia, 2022, p. 33). This strategy would reflect feminist institutionalism's focus on re-engineering political norms so as to 'include, embrace and showcase differences in gendered experiences' (Krook & MacKay, 2011, p21).

The creation of a National Gender and Governance Data Observatory would allow for the real-time tracking of women's representation, leadership roles and policy outcome (UNDP, 2020, p. 35). Such open data projects help to build transparency and enable researchers, civil society and the media to keep tabs on progress.

The findings establish that women's representation is not just a democratic requirement but also a tool of social change. Female legislators have played a significant role in the debate around education reform, maternal health and domestic violence which has indirectly led to improvement in HDI indicators (World Bank, 2023, p. 78). Women's decision-making is associated with policies that are more supportive of social equity and welfare investment, which is consistent with the growing global evidence that gender diversity improves the quality of governance (Rai 2019, p. 153). Thus, women's perspectives mainstreaming to the state bodies is crucial to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and of Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

Pakistan has reached a crucial point by 2024, where women are visible but not influential enough yet. The next decade (2025-2035) will be the deciding factor as to whether descriptive representation will transform into transformative political leadership. For this to continue, civil-society engagement in promoting inclusive government will be important; gender parity principles should be included in electoral reforms; and cross-ideological alliances of women in parliaments should be strengthened. In the long run, democratic space in Pakistan is going to be determined by the state's ability to normalize women's leadership as a norm of governance, not the exception. Women's political empowerment in Pakistan is a result of a complex interaction between institutional change and cultural change. Insertion is the first step, substantive influence is the next frontier, in that inclusion (descriptive) is necessary before influence (substantive) can be achieved. Women have already shown what they are capable of doing as agents of change: promoting social justice, enhancing accountability and shaping the political discourse.

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