



Power in the Halls: Evaluating the Political Impact of Women in Local Councils

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The participation of women in Pakistani politics becomes apparent when examining the application of democratic concepts and institutions across various political administrations. This study delves into the realm of local governance, focusing specifically on evaluating the political impact and influence wielded by women within local councils. Amidst global efforts towards gender inclusivity in political spheres, this research aims to scrutinize the extent to which women holding positions in local governance structures effectuate substantive change and influence decision-making processes. Pakistan's political landscape is often tumultuous, blurring the lines between political acts and socio-religious influences. In such an environment, women face heightened marginalization compared to men within the competitive socio-political framework. Patriarchy assigns them the responsibility of managing social and political matters but in an unequal manner. The investigation focuses on elucidating the challenges faced, strategies employed, and the actual impact generated by women in local governance roles. It endeavors to dissect the intricate dynamics between gender representation, policy formulation, community engagement, and the resultant changes in the socio-political landscape within these local governing bodies. Moreover, this research aims to highlight success stories and identify barriers hindering the effective participation of women in local councils. By examining case studies and gathering empirical evidence, this study seeks to provide valuable insights into the ways in which women in such positions navigate power structures, advocate for diverse community needs, and contribute to inclusive decision-making processes. Empowerment involves enabling individuals or groups to take control of their lives and make decisions that impact them, often requiring the redistribution of power and resources to marginalized groups to overcome systemic barriers.

Keywords: Political Administrations, Democratic Concepts, Social and Political Matters, Local Councils.

Introduction:

In the corridors of local governance, the presence and impact of women in positions of political authority have emerged as a focal point of discussion and scrutiny. The arena of local councils often considered the bedrock of community representation and decision-making, offers a unique vantage point to evaluate the transformative potential of women's participation in political spheres. Against the backdrop of global movements advocating for gender equality and increased women's representation in leadership roles, this study delves into the intricate dynamics of women's political influence within local councils. The pursuit of gender parity and inclusivity in political governance has propelled this inquiry into the roles, contributions, and challenges faced by women occupying these pivotal positions. Local councils, as vital organs of grassroots governance, hold immense power to shape policies and initiatives that directly impact communities [1].

The representation of diverse voices within these councils, especially women, is perceived as instrumental in fostering more inclusive, responsive, and equitable governance structures. The fundamental importance of women's empowerment, encompassing their active participation in decision-making and access to power across societal domains, is recognized as pivotal for achieving equality, development, and peace. Numerous global and Pakistan-centric studies have scrutinized women's empowerment. Gender disparity remains a global issue, prevalent in nearly every country, varying in nature and extent across societies. Notably, countries like Iceland, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, despite their advanced status, exhibit gender gaps of 14.06%, 15.47%, 16.26%, and 18.35%, respectively. As Per researcher [1] states, discrepancies in opportunities and resource accessibility between genders persist worldwide, particularly pronounced in economically disadvantaged nations. In recent years, the discourse surrounding women's political empowerment has gained momentum, particularly in the context of local governance. Multan, a city historically entrenched in tradition, presents an intriguing landscape to examine the realities of women councilors' political empowerment.

Understanding women's political empowerment requires a contextual examination within the political framework of the state, backed by empirical evidence and experiential validation. This empirical analysis provides vital insights into comprehending the concept of women's political empowerment, encompassing sociocultural factors. In Pakistan, women navigate various socio-cultural norms that shape their societal roles [2]. These norms often segregate women from men, especially in political spheres, where clear distinctions persist. Politics, traditionally seen as a male-dominated domain, is influenced by cultural norms that limit women's participation. Assessing women's political involvement involves evaluating their ability to break free from societal constraints and effectively utilize their skills and capabilities. Moreover, politics stands as a genuine academic discipline in this exploration [3].

This study seeks to deepen our understanding of women's societal positioning within the context of political engagement, highlighting historical barriers that have excluded them from active participation. It aims to unravel the social constructs influencing women's roles in politics and shed light on traditional practices that limit their involvement in the public sphere. Additionally, it delves into the subordination of women within Pakistan's societal fabric, shaped by internal and external forces [4]. These influences, whether tangible or abstract, profoundly shape perceptions and drive societal adaptations. Conventional norms have historically enshrined women as symbols of honor and sanctity, bolstered by religious interpretations. This societal framework often partitions individuals' lives into discrete public and private realms, a division strongly influenced by patriarchal ideals [5].

Critelli highlighted the influential role of the patriarch in defining societal expectations and women's roles, especially within the context of Pakistan. In rural and tribal settings, patriarchal traditions prevail, cementing male dominance and exerting control over women's lives to the extent that women might face commodification and transactional practices. Despite these challenges, the political arena in traditional Pakistani society has provided a platform for women, enabling their economic and social empowerment. Notably, female leaders like Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan and Khalida Zia and Hasina Wajid in Bangladesh, who served as Prime Ministers, symbolized modernity within their nations. Quaid-e-Azam M. Ali Jinnah, the revered leader of Pakistan, underscored the pivotal role of women in national progress, stating that no nation can achieve greatness unless its women stand alongside its men [6].

The confinement of women to domestic spheres amounts to a violation of human rights and implicates broader issues tantamount to crimes against humanity. In 1944, M Ali Jinnah highlighted the absence of official acknowledgment or support for the deplorable conditions under which women in our society are constrained to live. Jinnah exhibited a keen understanding of the benefits linked to women's participation in politics and the Pakistani movement. At the League's Annual Session in 1938, he underscored the idea that a nation's progress hinges on the

collaborative engagement of its female population. The author proposes that if Muslim women were to mirror the historical support they extended to their male counterparts during the time of the Prophet of Islam, it could hasten the achievement of our collective goals [7].

The portrayal of women in Pakistan has shown signs of progressiveness, as seen by the views of the country's founding fathers. This challenges several misconceptions regarding the state's position on women's involvement in socio-political matters. Despite constitutional reforms, the legal landscape fails to adequately address the escalating security issues that disproportionately impact women. Educational disparities persist with significantly lower enrollment rates of girls in primary schools compared to boys, a gap that widens in secondary and higher education. Access to reproductive health services remains limited, contributing to persistently high maternal mortality rates. Women's labor force participation is impeded by lower education levels, societal norms restricting mobility, and subsequently limited employment opportunities and lower wages [8].

Political participation stands as a crucial facet of women's empowerment, recognized by the government of Pakistan as a means to address community issues and to empower women socially, economically, and politically. Women's equal participation in politics is not only a right but a means to address their concerns. The local government reforms implemented in 2000 aimed at fostering greater political participation at the grassroots level, devolving political power, decentralizing administrative and financial authority, ensuring effective service delivery, and enhancing transparency in decision-making processes. Notably, a significant aspect of these reforms was the reservation of 33% of seats for women and other marginalized sections of society. The timeline of women's suffrage across nations reflects a gradual yet transformative journey toward political equality. New Zealand set the precedent in 1893, followed by the United States in 1916 and the United Kingdom in 1928. The Subcontinent witnessed the grant of voting rights in 1928, albeit with certain limitations. Notably, during the drafting of the 1935 Act, Indian women were invited to England to contribute their perspectives, leading to a conditional acknowledgment of their suffrage rights, which were fully realized without conditions in 1946 [9].

Pakistan's political landscape, shaped by its colonial past, underwent significant shifts in urban centers due to advancements in technology, industrialization, communication networks, and the rise of consumerism. This shift in societal norms not only cultivated a new awareness but also triggered the displacement of Indigenous communities, consequently amplifying women's involvement in the labor force. The migration of women, tied to colonial influences, began to assume a normalized status, underlining a growing acceptability. This observation challenges the traditional perception of women's societal roles as inherently divine and suggests that such beliefs pose a substantial barrier to progress [9]. The engagement of women in Pakistani politics becomes clearer when we delve into the operation of democratic values and institutions. Pakistan's political landscape is marked by a turbulent process, featuring government dismissals and frequent ministerial changes, hinting at an immature and unstable democratic structure. This instability seems to blur the line between political actions and socio-religious activities, a characterization akin to what Lucian Pye defines as dispersed political behavior [10]. The existing state of democracy in Pakistan has led its leaders to recognize the nation's inherent limitations in aligning with the ideals of a democratic system. Some advocate for a controlled democracy, departing from the consensus-driven model of functional democracy. This approach prioritizes formal democracy over substantive democratic values. In Pakistan, women have been subject to a nominal democratic system that restricts their involvement in governance, overlooking their developmental needs in the process [11].

In the current scenario, women in Pakistan face multifaceted challenges, particularly in shaping their own identities. This urgency has led them to seek a substantive role in political decision-making, affirming their unique identities and active engagement as political entities.

The legitimacy of democratic institutions relies on the inclusive involvement of all individuals, devoid of discrimination, in decision-making processes. Democracy hinges on nurturing consensus on diverse issues, ensuring the right of every individual to contribute to collective agreements. The democratic process establishes an enabling environment where participation, starting from mass voting, evolves across various levels, from the electorate to elected representatives [12].

Following this, those elected actively participate in decision-making, aiming to enhance communal welfare. Democracy theorists emphasize that establishing the fundamental tenets of a democratic process necessitates ensuring the active participation of all adults, irrespective of gender. This implies granting equal and impactful involvement in self-governance, extending this participation equitably to all adult citizens [13]. Hence, in a democratic society, the exclusion of gender-based discrimination from political participation is essential. While Pakistan's constitution upholds equality for all, the practical attainment of gender parity poses significant challenges, requiring the overcoming of multiple obstacles to enable opportunities for women [14]. Exploring Cultural Realities: Pakistani Women's Position in Academic Discourse Pakistan, while professing democratic values, trails behind more progressive nations in its political evolution. Despite constituting half the population, the deliberate marginalization of women in politics is apparent. The root causes lie in religious interpretations, and clashing cultural and political norms. Women in Pakistan face the denial of basic human rights due to structural disparities rooted in customs, values, rituals, and societal stereotypes [15]. Present-Day Gender Rights and the Imperative for Structural Change Discriminatory norms and practices in society confer visible rights to men, creating a structural imbalance perpetuating inequality. To rectify this, structural adjustments are essential, prioritizing women's political participation to foster an inclusive environment where their voices can be heard and opinions valued [16].

Upholding Gender Equality in Institutional Representation and Religious Influence:

The Context of Women's Participation in Pakistani Politics The advancement of gender equality in institutional representation stands challenged by religious influences, notably shaping the limited participation of women in Pakistan's political landscape. Religious interpretations, particularly by the clerical class, have significantly constrained women's active involvement in politics, illustrating the societal position of women as influenced by religious doctrines and their interpretations [17].

Religious Influence on Women's Status in Pakistani Society:

A Historical Perspective The historical influence of religious interpretations, notably from the clergy, has perpetuated unequal treatment of women, confining them to domestic roles while justifying this restriction through notions of sanctity and honor. Encouragement for women to remain in the private sphere was common, supported by beliefs barring them from active participation in the public domain due to concerns about unrestricted interaction. Practices such as veiling also hindered women's political engagement, especially in the initial years following independence. The complex interplay between custom, religion, and law has significantly shaped the rights and roles of women within familial and societal contexts [1][18].

Challenges Persist for Women:

Navigating Marriage, Divorce, and Legal Safeguards Despite Progress. Delving Into Diverse Opinions on Women's Political Engagement Multiple viewpoints aim to depict women as capable agents of change, emphasizing empowerment over passivity. Initially acknowledged as economic contributors entitled to global advantages, women still grapple with region-specific customs, varied interpretations of Islamic law, and insufficient legal enforcement impacting their rights in marriage and divorce [19].

Shattering Barriers:

Women's Quest for Inclusive Representation and Political Empowerment. In the latter 20th century, the call for dismantling the 'glass ceiling' emerged, urging women to actively engage

in transformative efforts. Advocacy for women's empowerment in politics gained global traction, epitomized by the slogan 'personal is political,' highlighting the nexus between personal experiences and political involvement. Suffragists not only amplified their participation but also leveraged this platform to demand meaningful representation [20].

Strategic Shift

Achieving Equitable Political Representation for Women. The 'critical mass' concept, indicating the need for substantial representation of women in decision-making bodies, has gained traction. Pakistan acknowledges this significance by incrementally enhancing women's quotas in political roles. This notion underscores not just the presence (descriptive representation) but also the influence and impact (substantive representation) of women in policymaking. The critical mass hypothesis posits that a substantial female presence in legislatures can catalyze and legitimize women's participation, fostering increased selection for such pivotal roles [21] [22].

Highlighting the Significance of Women as a Political Critical Mass:

Beyond rectifying historical inequities or acknowledging equal citizenship, contemporary efforts to involve more women in politics aim to introduce a unique, explicitly female perspective and garner female voter support. Whether driven by principles of equality or recognizing gender distinctions, this surge in female political presence presents a unique opportunity. Women can profoundly influence decision-making, broadening the spectrum of policy choices available to global policymakers [23].

The Bold Initiative: Quotas as a Path to Achieving Critical Mass in Women's Representation. In 2001, the Musharaf regime implemented a strategic policy allocating a specific quota for women in municipal governance. To adhere to the critical mass concept, a local-level policy ensured a minimum of 33% women representation. This measure addressed potential obstacles from conservative ideologies and cultural norms, showcasing Pakistan's commitment to international norms for women's empowerment through structural reforms [24].

Strategies for Women's Inclusion in Pakistan's Democratic Framework:

Navigating Tradition and Progress. Pakistan, a democratic nation, ratified CEDAW in 1996 and adopted the Beijing Platform of Action in 1995. Initiatives integrating women into politics enhanced its progressive image. The 2001 Local Government Ordinance established a 33% quota locally and 17% nationally/provincially. Various perspectives converge to assess women's position in Pakistani society. Collaboration with entities in women's empowerment requires recognizing the value of democratization, human rights, and egalitarianism frameworks [25][26].

Understanding Women's Empowerment and Political Participation:

Cultural Influence on Women's Decision:

Evaluation of women's empowerment in political realms becomes apparent when considering the influence of sociocultural factors. These factors shape women's roles, often confining them due to societal expectations. Political engagement, therefore, becomes a less explored territory due to these limitations.

Patriarchy and Male Dominance:

Examining women's political empowerment requires acknowledging the traditional framework that dictates their role as agents of change. Patriarchy, a significant aspect of male dominance, shapes societal expectations for women, affecting their socio-political experiences.

Patriarchy in South Asian Context:

In South Asian societies like Pakistan, patriarchy underscores male dominance, relegating women to domestic roles and limiting their public presence. The concept assigns men a dominant societal position, affecting women's exclusion from public life.

Impact of Governance Structures on Women's Empowerment: Political involvement plays a pivotal role in women's pursuit of equal rights within the state. To establish their identity and

empower them, women must have a substantial role in politics, requiring a grassroots approach beyond mere leadership positions.

Legal Framework and Women's Representation:

Constitutional Safeguards for Women:

Pakistan's constitution guarantees equal rights for women, emphasizing protection from sex-based discrimination and advocating measures for their welfare and inclusion in societal activities.

Role of Gender Quotas and Political Representation:

Gender quotas serve as mechanisms to enhance women's presence in political realms, notably seen in Pakistan's reservation of seats, enabling greater representation for women in governance.

Empowerment via Local Governance and Gender Quotas:

The introduction of a quota system in Pakistan's Devolution of Power Plan increased women's representation, marking a significant stride in political history and upholding constitutional provisions for women's participation.

Women's Priority Issues and Decision-Making Influence:

Examining Women's Focus on Social Issues:

Female councilors demonstrate a heightened focus on socioeconomic matters, reflecting a higher political acumen compared to their male counterparts. Their initiatives address healthcare, education, and social welfare.

Societal Impact on Women's Political Engagement:

Women's active involvement in politics challenges traditional power dynamics, albeit facing resistance. Prevailing cultural norms perpetuate female dependency on male counterparts, shaping societal perceptions of their roles.

Research Methodology and Empowerment Analysis:

Research Design:

We chose a research design that allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the empowerment of women councilors. This involved qualitative methods like interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic studies to capture the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by women councilors in the political landscape. Quantitative methods like surveys or statistical analysis were used to gather data on the changes in representation and its effects.

Sampling Strategy:

A representative sample of women councilors from various regions, political affiliations, and backgrounds ensured diversity in the study. This can help in providing a nuanced understanding of how different factors influence their empowerment.

Data Collection and Analysis:

Data was collected through interviews, surveys, observations, and document analysis. Interviews with women councilors, political leaders, community members, and stakeholders provided insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by women in politics. The collected data was analyzed using appropriate qualitative and quantitative analysis methods. Qualitative data involved thematic analysis to identify recurring themes in women's experiences, while quantitative data analysis included statistical comparisons before and after the increased representation of women in local councils.

Connection Between Women's Presence in Politics and Development:

The enduring presence of women within local government has exhibited a consistent average of 42% across the last three legislative periods, signifying a resolute dedication to achieving gender parity. Concurrently, the development in the opposition's representation (FEOP) has shown positive strides, albeit with a marginally lower average of 38% compared to the governing team. This discrepancy potentially arises from the opposition fulfilling legal

obligations without prioritizing women's placement on electoral lists, resulting in a dearth of women in prominent positions and subsequently diminishing female representation within opposition parties.

On Schemes and Development in Pakistan:

Insights from statements provide a glimpse into Pakistan's development. There's a direct link between women's political presence, access to education, employment, healthcare, and overall development. Women clearly understood the significance of financial empowerment for social advancement.

Role of Local Government in Decision-Making and Financial Sustainability:

The core principle of Local Government involves enhancing individual agency through decision-making. Its self-sustaining financial mechanism, relying on taxation, faces limitations due to minimal economic activity and tax revenue.

Quotas, Political Empowerment, and Societal Dynamics:

Equitable Representation and Male Dominance:

The analysis aimed to explore equitable representation of women in politics, revealing societal implications of male dominance. Quota regulations under CEDAW have been advocated for to enhance women's political empowerment.

Views of Female and Male Voters on Women's Political Engagement:

Data suggests women have confidence in their and other women's abilities for community participation, while male voters hold contrary opinions. Male councilors' responses underscore persisting socioeconomic and gender discrimination.

Support for Women's Inclusion in Governance:

A majority of Nazims expressed support for gender parity in representation, aligning with the promotion of women's empowerment. Key figures like Fouzia Waqar advocated for increased women's engagement at the grassroots level within local government systems.

Musharraf Era's Impact on Women's Political Participation:

Positive Measures and Women's Participation:

During the Musharraf era, proactive measures, including a 33% quota for women, aimed to encourage a new generation of women in politics and ensure their equal representation. Respondents' feedback provides insights into women's inclination towards political engagement and the system's role in fostering it.

Impact of Political Initiatives on Women's Empowerment:

This framework significantly enhanced women's status and empowerment, increasing their awareness of political entitlements. It allowed for comprehensive understanding and engagement, particularly in issues relevant to local development. Table 1 represents the responses from women councilors regarding their decision-making process in elections, the influence of family or community members on their decisions, and the perception of male voters regarding women's influences in politics.

The question of awareness arises regarding the proficiency of female councilors in local governments. Their training was crucial to grasp the functions and duties of local self-government. When discussing the limitations faced by women, it's important to recognize that their involvement was significantly restricted. This limitation isn't imposed by one individual but by the systemic structure, confining their influence to varying degrees. At times, this constraint is attributed to the underlying framework itself. The visible organizational structure shows women's absence from the Nazim's office, positioning them as subordinates under the Nazim's authority. The current role of the individual overseeing Union Council affairs places women in a subordinate position, heavily reliant on the Nazim's decisions. Support from institutions, society, and Union Councils for women in political positions is crucial. Bureaucratic structures also hinder women's political participation. These factors contribute to limited female

representation in politics. Despite the system granting limited powers to women councilors, it marked the start of a new political framework. Women must take significant steps to gain a deeper understanding of their role in politics to exert substantial influence on local political matters and challenges.

Table 1. Responses of women councilors regarding the electoral process.

Aspect	Question	Response	Frequency	Percent
Women Councilor Decision-Making	Did you ever opt for politics as your first career choice?	Yes	10	31.25%
		No	22	68.75%
Influence on Women Councilors' Decision-Making	Did the family and members of your locality influence your decision of candidature?	Yes	17	53.13%
		No	15	46.88%
Male Voter Perception of Women's Influence	Are women influenced by their family or community pressure?	Yes	25	78.13%
		No	7	21.88%

Conclusion:

The involvement of women in Pakistani politics is deeply influenced by historical norms and religious interpretations, limiting their roles to domestic spheres. Despite progress, societal expectations hinder women's active engagement. Initiatives like the 2001 quota system showcase Pakistan's commitment to women's empowerment, yet challenges persist due to entrenched patriarchal structures. Our research highlighted the complex interplay of sociocultural factors and systemic barriers impeding women councilors' influence. Overcoming these challenges demands dismantling entrenched norms, amplifying women's voices, and fostering an inclusive political environment. In conclusion, Pakistan's journey toward gender-inclusive politics requires concerted efforts to transcend historical constraints, empower women politically, and create a landscape where their voices shape policy decisions. Collaboration between institutions and society is crucial for meaningful progress.

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