



THE ASIAN BULLETIN OF GREEN MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULAR ECONOMY

ISSN (online): 2959-0035

<http://abgmce.com/> 10.62019/abgmce. v5i2.167

ISSN (Print): 2959-0027

Damaging Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Pakistan

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Chronicle

Article history

Received: Sept 23, 2025

Received in the revised format: Oct 22, 2025

Accepted: Nov 17, 2025

Available online: Nov 28, 2025

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Abstract

The fundamental argument of this study is that the patriarchal social order is the primary obstruction preventing women from attaining equal political representation and this approach allows for a deeper understanding of the subjective and structural barriers impeding women's participation. The study offers a comprehensive examination of the multi-layered obstacles faced by women in political sphere. One of the most pressing issues identified in the research is the pervasive class discrimination that dictates political mobility in Pakistan (Butt & Zia, 2012). Women from established political families have far greater access to resources and opportunities compared to those without such backgrounds. This systemic inequality ensures that political representation remains limited to elite women while excluding grassroots female activists who lack financial and social capital (Naz, 2014). Unfortunately, reserved seats for women are often allocated to relatives of influential male leaders rather than to competent, experienced female candidates (Bano, 2009). The research also highlights the psychological barriers that deter women from entering politics (Sanchita, 2014). Low self-esteem, fear of character assassination, and the lack of institutional support mechanisms contribute to the reluctance of many women to actively engage in political life (UNDP, 2005). Several female respondents expressed concerns over the negative perceptions attached to politically active women, with some noting that they were frequently subjected to character defamation and moral policing (Abdullah et al., 2015). Such societal attitudes create a hostile environment that discourages women from asserting themselves in the political sphere. This study employs an interpretive qualitative methodology, which is particularly effective in capturing the lived experiences of women involved in politics (Creswell, 2007).

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Keywords: Pakistan Elections, Women Participation, Damaging Barriers, Patriarchal system.

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INTRODUCTION

Women's political participation is crucial in Pakistan's social structure of gender equality and a fundamental pillar of democratic governance. The active involvement of women in political processes whether as voters, candidates, elected officials, or policymakers not only strengthens democracy but also ensures that governance structures are representative and inclusive. However, across the globe, women continue to face numerous challenges that limit their political engagement, particularly in countries where deep rooted patriarchal structures and socio-cultural norms restrict their mobility and access to political platforms. In the case of Pakistan, women's political participation has remained constrained despite constitutional guarantees of gender equality and affirmative action policies. Although Pakistan has witnessed some progress such as the reservation of seats for women in legislatures, increasing female voter turnout in recent elections, and the emergence of women in key political roles women remain significantly underrepresented in political leadership.

This underrepresentation is not due to a lack of political aspirations among women but rather the result of deeply ingrained barriers that hinder their participation at various levels.

Historical Context of Women's Political Participation in Pakistan

Historically, women's political engagement has been a critical indicator of democratic development. While many countries have introduced constitutional and legal reforms to promote gender inclusivity, systemic hurdles persist in different societies due to cultural, economic, and religious variations (Asghar & Akhtar, 2012; Shvedova, 2005). According to global statistics, women constitute only 15% of decision-making bodies, and only a handful of nations have successfully implemented policies ensuring at least 33% female representation in legislatures (UNDP, 2005). Despite comprising over 50% of Pakistan's population, women remain significantly underrepresented in political and governance structures (Weiss, 2012). This research aims to dissect the factors responsible for the marginalization of women in politics and analyze the impact of electoral policies implemented by major political parties in Lahore.

The struggle for women's political rights in Pakistan is historically linked to broader socio-political movements. Before independence in 1947, women were active in nationalist movements, particularly in the All-India Muslim League, where figures like Fatima Jinnah played significant roles. However, after independence, despite women's contributions to the country's founding, their political participation remained marginal, largely confined to elite women from politically influential families. During the early years of Pakistan's political development, the role of women in governance was limited, though some progress was made in securing voting rights and representation in legislative bodies. The 1956 Constitution recognized women's right to vote and run for office, but their representation remained symbolic rather than substantive. The political and military upheavals of subsequent decades further shaped the nature of women's participation in politics.

A major setback occurred during General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime (1977–1988), when regressive laws such as the Hudood Ordinances and the Law of Evidence marginalized women's legal status and reinforced their exclusion from public life. Political restrictions, combined with religiously motivated policies, significantly curtailed women's roles in politics. However, during the democratic transitions of the 1990s, women's participation in politics gained renewed attention, particularly with the election of Benazir Bhutto as Pakistan's first female Prime Minister. In the 2000s, under General Pervez Musharraf's rule, reforms were introduced to enhance women's representation in local governments and national legislatures. The reservation of 17% of seats for women in the National and Provincial Assemblies and 33% in local governments marked a significant step toward political inclusivity. However, despite these affirmative measures, women's political agency remained limited, with their roles often confined to token representation rather than meaningful decision-making positions.

The participation of women in politics has been a subject of intense academic and policy discussions worldwide, particularly in developing countries like Pakistan, where socio-cultural norms continue to pose significant barriers (Sharif & Hina, 2018). This study provides an interpretive qualitative analysis of the challenges that hinder women from engaging in political activities and evaluates the approaches adopted by different political parties, particularly Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Pakistan

Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), to enhance women's political involvement. The research sheds light on the complexities surrounding the political landscape for women and highlights the existing disparities in party strategies. Although individual perspectives on gender equality vary, the broader societal mindset remains deeply patriarchal, limiting women's access to political participation and leadership roles (Walby, 1990).

Cultural and Social Barriers to Women's Political Participation

One of the most significant challenges to women's political participation in Pakistan stems from cultural and social barriers deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions. In many regions, particularly in rural and conservative areas, women are discouraged or outright barred from engaging in political activities. Societal expectations dictate that women's primary roles are confined to domestic responsibilities, and those who challenge these norms by stepping into political arenas often face resistance from their families and communities.

The political landscape in Pakistan is heavily influenced by patriarchal norms, restrictive socio-cultural attitudes, and institutional barriers, which prevent women from fully exercising their political rights. Although Pakistan has reserved seats for women in the National and Provincial Assemblies, these mechanisms have not translated into substantive political agency for women. Many female politicians occupy these seats in a symbolic capacity, often serving under male-dominated party structures that limit their decision-making power. The dominance of elite and dynastic politics further restricts women's entry into the political arena, as party leadership and candidate selection processes remain controlled by male political elites.

Electoral politics are controlled by influential families and tribal or feudal systems. Women who wish to contest elections often lack the social capital and political backing needed to compete effectively against male candidates who benefit from entrenched power structures. Additionally, many political parties in Pakistan have been criticized for not providing adequate support to female candidates, often fielding women in elections only to fulfill quota requirements rather than as serious contenders for leadership roles. Women who do enter politics frequently face gender-based violence and harassment, both working and down. Female politicians and activists are subjected to character assassination, social stigma, and in extreme cases, physical threats, deterring many women from pursuing political careers. The absence of strict safeties against gender-based political violence further intensifies this issue, making politics a hostile environment for women.

A major impediment to women's political engagement in Pakistan is its entrenched patriarchal structure. Derived from radical second-wave feminist theories, patriarchy is defined as a system where men dominate, oppress, and exploit women in all spheres of society (Walby, 1990). This structural inequality restricts women's rights, confining them to secondary roles in both private and public domains. Within this framework, political decision-making remains overwhelmingly male-dominated, reinforcing systemic biases that discourage female participation in electoral processes. Even when women possess the capabilities to contest elections, they frequently face opposition and social stigmatization, which dissuades them from actively pursuing political careers (Khan, 2011). Mobility restrictions also play a crucial role in limiting women's participation in politics (Shaheed & Zia, 2009). Due to societal expectations and traditional gender roles, women are often discouraged or outright prohibited

from traveling alone, especially for campaign purposes (Saleem, 2013). Many female political workers reported that they required the accompaniment of male relatives to attend political events, which severely restricted their ability to operate independently within the political arena (Khan, 2011). Even within political party meetings, women's voices are frequently overlooked, and their contributions are often undervalued (Bano, 2009).

Institutional and Legal Barriers

Although Pakistan's constitution upholds gender equality and provides women with political rights, institutional and legal barriers continue to hinder their participation. While reserved seats have ensured a minimum level of representation, they have not translated into increased political influence for women. The political system remains male-dominated, and decision-making positions are overwhelmingly controlled by men. Legal obstacles also play a role in limiting women's political engagement. For example, discriminatory inheritance laws and financial dependency reduce women's access to economic resources, which in turn affects their ability to fund political campaigns. Running for office in Pakistan is expensive, requiring significant financial investment for campaign activities, advertising, and outreach. Since many women are economically dependent on male family members, they often lack the resources needed to compete in elections effectively.

Electoral laws, while appearing gender-neutral on the surface, fail to account for the structural disadvantages women face in politics. For instance, political parties are not mandated to allocate a specific percentage of party tickets to female candidates in general elections, meaning that male candidates continue to dominate key electoral races. The absence of internal democracy within political parties further marginalizes women, as party leadership is usually inherited or controlled by male power brokers.

Economic Barriers

Women's political participation is also heavily impacted by economic constraints. In a country where female labor force participation remains low, financial dependence on male guardians' limits women's ability to engage in politics. Running for office requires campaign funds, networking, and resources that many women do not have access to, further reinforcing gender disparities in political representation. Economic constraints further compound the barriers to women's political participation. Given Pakistan's gendered economic structure, women often lack the financial independence required to sustain political campaigns (Abdullah & Aziz, 2012). Women face financial constraints, as they often lack independent economic resources to fund electoral campaigns.

The high cost of running for office, coupled with the absence of mandatory political party quotas for women in general elections, means that female candidates are at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, institutional weaknesses, such as gender-biased electoral laws and a lack of enforcement mechanisms for women's political rights, continue to hinder progress. Election is an expensive endeavor, requiring significant financial backing, which is often unavailable to female candidates (Akhtar & Asghar, 2012). Some interviewees even reported selling personal assets to finance their campaigns, underscoring the economic hardship faced by politically ambitious women (Amjad, Munawar & Usman, 2013). Furthermore, despite the commitments made by political parties to empower women economically through vocational training and skills development

programs, these initiatives have largely failed to translate into meaningful political empowerment (Qudratullah, 2012).

Security Barriers

Security concerns also deter women from political engagement. In several parts of Pakistan, particularly in conflict-affected areas, political violence and intimidation are widespread. Women politicians, activists, and voters face threats from extremist groups, making electoral participation dangerous. There have been instances where women were explicitly prevented from voting or contesting elections due to threats from local power groups. The security situation in Pakistan also acts as a deterrent to women's political participation. Many female politicians, activists, and voters face threats, intimidation, and violence, particularly in conservative and conflict-affected regions. In some instances, women have been explicitly barred from voting or contesting elections due to societal opposition or extremist threats. The lack of state protection and the weak enforcement of laws against political violence create an environment in which women's political engagement becomes not only difficult but dangerous.

CONCLUSION

Women's political participation is a fundamental component of a functioning democracy, ensuring that governance structures are inclusive and representative of diverse societal perspectives. However, despite constitutional provisions and affirmative action measures, women in Pakistan continue to face significant barriers that limit their active engagement in electoral politics. The underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles is not merely a numerical issue reflects deep-seated structural, cultural, economic, and institutional constraints that collectively marginalize women from the political sphere. This persistent exclusion undermines democratic governance, weakens policy responsiveness to gender-related issues, and reinforces existing gender disparities in the country.

In conclusion, this study reaffirms that while individual attitudes toward women's political participation may be evolving, the collective societal mindset remains resistant to change (Weiss, 2012). The deeply embedded patriarchal structure continues to limit women's access to political leadership and decision-making roles (Walby 1990). However, with sustained policy interventions, economic empowerment, and institutional support, significant progress can be made in bridging the gender gap in Pakistani politics (FAFEN, 2013). The study's findings provide a foundation for future policy recommendations aimed at fostering a more inclusive and equitable political system (Sharif & Hina, 2018).

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