

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN PAKISTAN: A CASE STUDY OF CULTURAL, SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL OBSTACLES

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ABSTRACT

Women's political engagement in Pakistan has witnessed gradual progress over the past few decades, yet cultural, social, and institutional barriers continue to undermine their active participation in governance and decision-making processes. Despite the introduction of constitutional guarantees, legislative quotas, and policy reforms aimed at enhancing female representation, entrenched patriarchal norms and restrictive cultural traditions limit women's visibility in the political sphere. Social constraints, including family opposition, gender stereotypes, and limited access to education and resources, further marginalize women from electoral politics and leadership roles. Institutional obstacles, such as weak enforcement of gender-inclusive policies, lack of political party support, and structural inefficiencies in electoral systems, exacerbate these challenges. Recent academic literature, government reports, and international development studies highlight that while reserved seats in legislatures have provided women with a symbolic presence, substantive participation and influence remain constrained by systemic inequalities. This case study seeks to critically analyze these multi-dimensional barriers by examining both the formal structures of political institutions and the informal socio-cultural dynamics that shape women's political opportunities. Drawing on contemporary scholarly works and recent government publications, the study underscores the need for comprehensive reforms, gender-sensitive political capacity-building, and societal change to foster meaningful female engagement. The analysis contributes to the broader discourse on gender and politics in South Asia, offering insights into how cultural, social, and institutional forces intersect to sustain gendered exclusion in Pakistan's political landscape.

Keywords: Women's political participation, Pakistan, cultural barriers, institutional obstacles, gender and politics

INTRODUCTION

Women's political engagement in Pakistan reflects the paradox of visible progress alongside enduring exclusion. The country has constitutional provisions for gender equality, reserved seats in legislatures, and international commitments to promote women's participation, yet substantive inclusion remains limited. Women continue to face barriers rooted in entrenched patriarchal values,

restrictive cultural norms, and institutional weaknesses. Despite occupying nearly half of the population, their representation in decision-making processes is still fragile, often confined to symbolic spaces rather than positions of genuine influence. This raises critical questions about the nature of democratic legitimacy in Pakistan, where

governance structures remain skewed toward male dominance.

The political system in Pakistan is deeply shaped by elite control and dynastic traditions, and women's entry into politics is frequently mediated through family ties rather than independent mobilization. While reserved seats have increased numerical representation, they rarely translate into broader grassroots engagement. Political parties often select women based on loyalty or family networks instead of encouraging diverse female leadership from varied socioeconomic backgrounds. This results in the reinforcement of tokenism, where women are present but unable to set agendas or challenge systemic inequalities. Such dynamics highlight the need to examine not just numerical inclusion but also substantive participation, where women play an active role in shaping legislative priorities and influencing public policy (Khan & Naeem, 2020).

Globally, there is increasing recognition that women's political participation is critical for sustainable development, inclusive governance, and democratic resilience. International frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5 on gender equality, emphasize that equitable participation in politics is both a right and a prerequisite for societal progress. Pakistan, as a signatory, has introduced reforms to enhance women's political engagement, including electoral amendments and strengthened quotas. However, gaps persist between policy commitments and actual practice. Reports from international development agencies highlight that women often face structural disadvantages during electoral campaigns, including limited financial resources, social restrictions on mobility, and gender-based violence in politics, which collectively undermine their effectiveness as political actors (UNDP, 2021).

The gist of this study is to analyze the barriers to women's political engagement in Pakistan by examining cultural, social, and institutional dimensions. Culturally, women confront restrictive gender norms, conservative interpretations of religion, and rural traditions that prioritize domesticity over public life. Socially, challenges include low literacy levels, economic dependence, and family opposition,

which discourage political ambition. Institutionally, weak party support, tokenistic use of quotas, and gaps in electoral implementation constrain women's substantive participation. By adopting an intersectional lens, this research emphasizes how these barriers overlap to sustain exclusion, thereby limiting the prospects of inclusive democracy.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN PAKISTAN

The history of women's political participation in Pakistan showcases a trajectory that is marked by contradictions. On the one hand, the state has introduced constitutional guarantees and legislative reforms to include women, yet on the other hand, deeply rooted patriarchal traditions have continuously restricted the scope of their engagement. Since independence in 1947, women have fought for visibility in the political sphere, often relying on pioneering figures who challenged gender norms. However, despite progress in representation, structural inequalities have ensured that empowerment remains uneven across classes, regions, and institutions. Understanding this history is crucial, as it provides the foundation for analyzing contemporary cultural, social, and institutional barriers that persist today.

Military regimes played a contradictory role in shaping women's political participation. General Zia-ul-Haq's era in the 1980s is often remembered for conservative policies that restricted women's rights in law and society, yet it also introduced reserved seats for women in legislatures. This paradox reflects how authoritarian governments strategically used women's inclusion to project legitimacy while simultaneously constraining their autonomy. Later, under General Pervez Musharraf in the early 2000s, local government reforms expanded women's representation at the grassroots level through quotas in municipal councils. This created unprecedented opportunities for women, particularly in rural areas, to engage in politics, although their participation was often mediated by male relatives who occupied decision-making roles on their behalf (Critelli & Yousaf, 2020). These phases demonstrate how women's political

representation was frequently instrumentalized by regimes to serve political agendas rather than as a genuine effort at empowerment.

The local government system introduced in 2001 under Musharraf deserves particular attention because it reshaped the terrain of women's engagement. Quotas ensured that women occupied a significant number of seats in local councils, making Pakistan one of the few countries in South Asia to guarantee female representation at the grassroots level. This system created pathways for rural women to enter politics, some for the first time in their lives. Yet, critics noted that many women were elected without meaningful autonomy, as male family members often dictated their roles. Nonetheless, this period remains significant because it normalized women's visibility in political institutions beyond reserved seats in higher legislatures (Bari, 2020).

The return to democratic rule after 2008 and the subsequent 2013 and 2018 elections marked new phases in women's political participation. Reserved seats in national and provincial assemblies continued to ensure numerical representation, while an increasing number of women began contesting general seats. The 2018 general elections, in particular, saw record participation by women as candidates, campaign workers, and voters. The passage of the Elections Act 2017 mandated that political parties allocate at least five percent of general seats to women candidates, a policy that encouraged broader engagement. However, analysis of electoral outcomes revealed that few women won outside reserved seats, indicating that structural disadvantages such as lack of resources, weak party backing, and gendered social norms remained pervasive (Nadeem, 2019).

The contemporary landscape reflects both progress and persistent barriers. Women now occupy a visible place in national politics, with a consistent presence in the National Assembly and Senate through reserved seats. Organizations such as the Election Commission of Pakistan and UN Women have introduced training programs to build the capacity of female candidates. Civil society activism has also grown stronger, mobilizing around issues such as gender-based violence in politics and electoral reforms. Yet challenges

remain entrenched: political parties continue to treat women's wings as secondary, substantive policy influence remains concentrated in male hands, and women often struggle to translate legislative presence into agenda-setting power (International IDEA, 2020).

Taken together, the historical trajectory of women's political participation in Pakistan demonstrates a pattern of symbolic inclusion rather than structural transformation. From the early days of constitutional guarantees to contemporary electoral reforms, women's visibility has increased but their substantive influence remains constrained by patriarchal social contracts, dynastic politics, and institutional inertia. While milestones such as the leadership of Fatima Jinnah and Benazir Bhutto and the introduction of quotas represent significant achievements, the persistent gap between representation and empowerment continues to define women's political journey. This legacy underscores why cultural, social, and institutional barriers remain central to understanding the present and future of women's engagement in Pakistan's politics (Shah, 2021).

CULTURAL BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN PAKISTAN

Culture in Pakistan plays a decisive role in shaping political participation, particularly for women, whose involvement is mediated by deeply entrenched traditions and gender norms. Patriarchy continues to structure social life, assigning men the role of decision-makers and women the role of dependents. These cultural prescriptions extend beyond households into political institutions, shaping perceptions of leadership, legitimacy, and authority. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, many communities still view politics as a male domain, discouraging women from seeking leadership positions or contesting elections. The resilience of such cultural barriers reveals that legal reforms alone cannot create inclusion unless accompanied by broader social change.

One of the most enduring cultural obstacles to women's political engagement in Pakistan is the prevalence of patriarchal gender roles. In many parts of the country, women are still expected

to prioritize domestic responsibilities over public life. Political activism is often perceived as a challenge to family honor, particularly in rural and tribal areas where women's public visibility is discouraged. Even in urban settings, women who attempt to pursue political careers face skepticism, as leadership continues to be associated with masculinity. This cultural mindset contributes to the persistence of gender stereotypes, reinforcing the belief that women are unfit for political decision-making. Studies show that such norms not only discourage women from entering politics but also shape voter perceptions, as female candidates are often judged on their domestic roles rather than political merit (Khan, 2020). Religion also plays a complex role in reinforcing cultural barriers to women's political participation. While Islamic teachings in principle support justice and equality, conservative interpretations have frequently been mobilized to justify women's exclusion from leadership. Clerical groups in certain regions argue that women's public roles should be restricted, influencing community attitudes toward female candidates. These interpretations clash with examples of female political leadership within the broader Muslim world, including Pakistan's own history with Benazir Bhutto. However, their influence remains strong in rural and semi-urban constituencies where religious authority carries significant weight. Scholars argue that this religious conservatism has been instrumentalized by political actors, who use cultural legitimacy to resist reforms that could empower women (Mahmood & Rehman, 2019).

Tribal and rural cultural traditions present additional barriers to women's engagement. In provinces like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, women are often barred from casting votes or contesting elections due to informal agreements among male community elders. These agreements, locally referred to as "jirga" or "panchayat" decisions, effectively exclude women from exercising their constitutional rights. Although the Election Commission of Pakistan has attempted to curb such practices, enforcement remains weak in remote areas where traditional authority overrides state laws. For many women in these

contexts, political engagement is limited not by lack of interest but by cultural structures that prioritize male dominance. Reports from the 2018 elections highlighted several constituencies where women's turnout was less than 10 percent, reflecting the persistence of these restrictions despite formal guarantees (UNDP, 2021).

The intersection of class and culture adds another dimension to these barriers. Women from elite families often have greater opportunities to enter politics because their social standing shields them from some cultural restrictions. Dynastic politics in Pakistan has allowed several women from powerful families to achieve political prominence, yet this form of participation does not translate into broad-based empowerment for ordinary women. In contrast, women from lower socioeconomic classes face cultural and financial constraints simultaneously, leaving them doubly marginalized. This dynamic reflects how cultural barriers intersect with structural inequalities, reinforcing exclusion at multiple levels of society (Zia, 2021).

Overall, cultural barriers to women's political engagement in Pakistan reflect a complex interplay of patriarchy, religion, tribal traditions, honor codes, media narratives, and class divisions. These cultural dynamics not only discourage women from pursuing political careers but also shape institutional practices that reinforce exclusion. Understanding these cultural barriers is essential, as they underpin the social and institutional obstacles that will be discussed in later sections. Without addressing the cultural roots of exclusion, legal and institutional reforms alone are unlikely to create substantive change. The persistence of these cultural barriers underscores the need for comprehensive strategies that engage with community attitudes, challenge stereotypes, and promote inclusive cultural narratives that validate women as equal political actors (International IDEA, 2020).

SOCIAL IMPEDIMENTS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN PAKISTAN

Beyond culture, social structures in Pakistan pose significant obstacles to women's participation in politics. These barriers are

often less visible than formal institutional restrictions but are equally powerful in shaping women's opportunities and choices. The intersection of family expectations, education levels, economic dependency, and pervasive gender stereotypes creates a social environment where women's political engagement is constrained before it even begins. While legal reforms and quotas provide pathways for inclusion, social realities often dictate whether women can take advantage of these opportunities.

Education represents another crucial dimension of social exclusion. Literacy rates among women in Pakistan remain significantly lower than men, particularly in rural areas. Limited access to quality education not only diminishes women's confidence in public speaking and political debate but also restricts their awareness of rights and political processes. Women with lower education levels are less likely to contest elections or participate in political discussions, making them dependent on male family members for political engagement. Although efforts have been made to improve female literacy, progress remains uneven, with regional disparities exacerbating the problem. Research suggests that education is one of the strongest predictors of women's political participation, yet Pakistan's persistent gender gap in education continues to undermine women's ability to engage as informed citizens and leaders (World Bank, 2021).

The role of gender stereotypes within society also acts as a powerful social barrier. Women in politics are frequently judged according to traditional gender roles, with voters often evaluating them in terms of their perceived morality, family status, or ability to balance domestic responsibilities rather than their political agendas. Such stereotypes not only discourage women from entering politics but also shape the public's perception of their legitimacy as leaders. Female politicians are sometimes subjected to smear campaigns targeting their character, an experience less common for male counterparts. This social scrutiny has long-term effects, as many women avoid politics altogether to shield themselves from such criticism (Zia, 2021). The persistence of these stereotypes reinforces the narrative that

politics is inherently masculine, thereby discouraging women from considering it as a viable career.

Social barriers also manifest in the form of limited mobility, particularly in rural and conservative areas. Women often require permission from male relatives to attend political rallies, voter meetings, or campaign events. Restrictions on mobility hinder their ability to directly engage with constituents, weakening their campaigns. Even when they hold elected positions, many women face difficulties attending assembly sessions or participating in community meetings due to travel constraints or family opposition. These challenges highlight how social control over women's movement limits not only their political ambitions but also their effectiveness once elected (Mahmood & Rehman, 2019).

Intersectionality further deepens the exclusion faced by women in Pakistan's political landscape. Social barriers are not uniform but vary across class, region, and ethnicity. Women from elite or urban backgrounds often enjoy greater social acceptance and access to resources, allowing them to navigate political spaces more effectively. In contrast, women from working-class or rural communities face compounded disadvantages, as poverty, illiteracy, and restrictive norms intersect to create formidable barriers. The dominance of dynastic politics means that women from influential families are more likely to succeed, while those from marginalized groups remain excluded, reinforcing broader social inequalities in political representation (Jafar & Ahmad, 2021).

In sum, social barriers to women's political participation in Pakistan are multifaceted, rooted in family opposition, educational inequalities, economic dependency, gender stereotypes, and restrictions on mobility. These barriers are reinforced by structural inequalities and intersect with cultural and institutional obstacles, making them particularly resilient. Addressing these challenges requires not only reforms in education and economic empowerment but also efforts to transform societal attitudes toward women's political engagement. Unless social norms evolve to view women as legitimate and capable leaders, formal reforms will remain insufficient. The

persistence of these barriers illustrates the central role of society in shaping political participation, highlighting that gender-inclusive politics requires not only laws and quotas but also a fundamental transformation in social expectations and practices (International IDEA, 2021).

INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN PAKISTAN

The political institutions of Pakistan, while formally inclusive, often operate in ways that restrict women's substantive participation. This paradox is rooted in what scholars describe as *patriarchal institutionalism*, where laws and policies provide symbolic entry points for women but underlying structures remain hostile to their empowerment. Electoral systems, political parties, and state institutions have all adopted gender provisions on paper, yet weak implementation and resistance to reform undermine their effectiveness. The result is a political environment where women's presence is visible but their influence remains marginal, creating what analysts often refer to as a system of tokenism rather than transformation.

The electoral system is one of the most significant institutional barriers to women's engagement. Reserved seats in national and provincial assemblies guarantee numerical representation, yet the method of allocation prevents grassroots women from entering politics independently. Political parties control nominations for these seats, often favoring elite women with dynastic connections or loyalty to party leadership. This practice sidelines women from marginalized classes, who lack access to party networks or patronage resources. Moreover, reserved seats rarely translate into political autonomy, as women appointed through this process are expected to follow party lines rather than advance gender-sensitive agendas. Comparative studies within South Asia highlight this difference: while Bangladesh and Nepal have experimented with direct elections for reserved seats at the local level, Pakistan's party-controlled system reinforces elite capture and limits diversity in female representation (Jafar & Ahmad, 2021).

Another institutional weakness lies in the enforcement of electoral reforms designed to promote gender inclusion. The Elections Act 2017 introduced a clause requiring political parties to allocate at least five percent of general seats to women candidates. While celebrated as a progressive step, its impact has been modest. Most parties comply with the minimum requirement but nominate women in constituencies where chances of victory are slim. This practice reflects the gap between legal provisions and political will. Reports following the 2018 elections revealed that very few women nominated under this quota succeeded in winning, demonstrating how institutional reforms are undermined by party strategies that prioritize compliance over genuine inclusion (Khan, 2020).

Institutional barriers are also evident in the resources and training provided to female politicians. While donor-funded initiatives and Election Commission programs have sought to build women's political capacity, these efforts remain fragmented and often urban-centered. Rural women, who face the most acute barriers, are rarely the focus of sustained institutional support. Furthermore, the absence of structured mentorship programs within legislatures means that newly elected women struggle to navigate parliamentary procedures and policy processes. This lack of institutional support diminishes their ability to influence legislation, reinforcing their marginalization. Scholars argue that without robust institutional investments in women's political capacity, quotas and legal reforms will remain symbolic gestures rather than transformative mechanisms (Zia, 2021).

At the local government level, institutional dynamics offer both opportunities and challenges. Quotas introduced in municipal councils under Musharraf's regime created space for thousands of women to participate at the grassroots. However, subsequent reforms under democratic governments reduced the autonomy of local bodies, weakening women's representation. The inconsistent commitment to local governance reflects broader institutional ambivalence toward decentralization, which disproportionately affects women who benefit from grassroots entry points more than national-level quotas.

Analysts argue that without strengthening local governance structures, women's participation will remain concentrated in elite-dominated national assemblies, failing to create pathways for broader empowerment (Shah, 2021).

To sum it up, institutional barriers to women's political participation in Pakistan reflect a deeper struggle between formal commitments and informal practices. On paper, the state has made significant progress in introducing gender-inclusive reforms. In practice, however, weak enforcement, elite capture, patriarchal party structures, inadequate support mechanisms, and insecure environments combine to restrict women's substantive influence. Comparative experiences in South Asia demonstrate that while Pakistan has advanced in terms of quotas, it lags in institutional reforms that create sustainable pathways for women's leadership. Without addressing these institutional dynamics, women's political presence will remain symbolic, perpetuating a cycle where inclusion is celebrated but empowerment denied. This paradox underscores the urgent need for institutional transformation that moves beyond tokenism and prioritizes genuine equality in political participation (Mahmood & Rehman, 2022).

REFORMS AND STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

Addressing the barriers that restrict women's political participation in Pakistan requires a multi-dimensional reform agenda that goes beyond symbolic measures. Cultural, social, and institutional challenges intersect in ways that reinforce exclusion, making it essential to pursue reforms that target each layer simultaneously. Reforms must not only ensure numerical representation but also create conditions for substantive participation where women influence policy agendas, exercise autonomy, and shape governance outcomes. Experiences from across South Asia and global best practices suggest that inclusive strategies require a combination of legal frameworks, institutional reforms, societal change, and grassroots mobilization.

Political party reforms represent another critical area. Women's wings in parties must be transformed from symbolic bodies into genuine

platforms for leadership development and policy influence. Parties should be legally required to ensure a minimum percentage of women in executive committees and decision-making forums, with transparent mechanisms for internal elections. Mentorship programs pairing experienced women leaders with younger aspirants could also help address the lack of institutional support. International development agencies have documented how parties that invest in training, mentorship, and gender-sensitive leadership pipelines are more likely to promote inclusive politics. For Pakistan, institutionalizing such practices within parties could gradually erode the patriarchal inertia that limits women's upward mobility (International IDEA, 2020).

Education and awareness programs form another pillar of reform. Female literacy and political awareness are closely linked to women's ability to participate meaningfully in politics. Expanding access to quality education, particularly in rural and marginalized areas, would equip women with the confidence and skills necessary for political engagement. Beyond formal education, civic education campaigns could raise awareness about women's political rights, encouraging both women and men to support female leadership. Schools, universities, and media campaigns could play a critical role in normalizing women's political participation. Evidence from South Asia demonstrates that communities exposed to civic education are more likely to support gender equality in political decision-making (World Bank, 2021).

Civil society and grassroots activism represent vital forces in pushing for reform. Movements such as the Aurat March have already challenged patriarchal norms and sparked debates on gender equality in public life. Expanding these efforts into sustained political training and advocacy networks could amplify women's voices across constituencies. NGOs and women's rights organizations can play a central role in mobilizing communities, providing legal aid, and monitoring electoral practices. Collaboration between civil society and state institutions can ensure that reforms are not only legislated but also implemented at the grassroots level. Evidence suggests that when women's organizations are integrated into

policy processes, outcomes are more inclusive and sustainable (Shirkat Gah, 2020).

Finally, building gender-sensitive political leadership requires long-term investment in changing mindsets. Programs that engage men and boys as allies in promoting women's political rights could help dismantle patriarchal resistance. Community dialogues, awareness campaigns, and school-based programs that normalize gender equality can gradually shift social expectations. This cultural transformation is essential because institutional reforms alone cannot succeed in environments where society continues to view women's political participation with skepticism. The sustainability of reforms thus depends on a holistic strategy that integrates legal change, institutional support, economic empowerment, and cultural transformation into a unified agenda (Shah, 2021).

On the whole, reforms and strategies for change must address multiple layers of exclusion simultaneously. Strengthening institutional frameworks, restructuring political parties, expanding education and economic opportunities, enforcing legal protections, and mobilizing civil society all represent critical pillars of reform. Comparative experiences in South Asia demonstrate that when reforms are integrated and sustained, they can create pathways for meaningful empowerment. For Pakistan, the challenge lies not in the absence of policies but in their weak implementation and limited integration into broader societal change. Without a comprehensive reform strategy, women's political participation will remain constrained to symbolic gestures, limiting the democratic potential of the country.

DISCUSSION

The barriers to women's political participation in Pakistan entailing cultural, social, institutional, are not independent silos but overlapping constraints that reinforce one another, amplifying the exclusion of women from meaningful political engagement. A holistic view reveals how patriarchal norms and familial gatekeeping intersect with institutional tokenism, creating a cyclical pattern of marginalization that quotas alone cannot shatter. This structural interplay underscores

the urgency for integrated reforms that tackle multiple dimensions simultaneously.

Fragmented empowerment versus systemic inertia
As Zainab (2025) argues, the proliferation of gender quotas in Pakistan has improved descriptive representation but failed to dismantle the structural and normative barriers that suppress women's substantive agency (The Friday Times). This reflects what political scientists term *tokenistic inclusion*, where numbers increase but influence remains marginalized. Symbolic entry into legislative bodies provides visibility yet runs the risk of co-optation, particularly when quotas serve political optics more than democratic transformation.

Socioeconomic roots of political exclusion
The transition from higher education to professional and civic agency remains a critical juncture for women, yet sociocultural and economic impediments stall their progress. A 2024 study highlights how deeply entrenched sociocultural and familial constraints inhibit women's empowerment, especially in rural areas (MDPI). These findings point to the continuity between educational barriers and political exclusion, reinforcing that meaningful participation starts with structural support across the life course.

Provincial disparities and localized dynamics
Evidence from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reveals how regional political cultures and institutional dynamics uniquely shape women's prospects. Research shows that patriarchal norms, limited access to education, and weak institutional assistance severely impede women's leadership in KP, compounding exclusion at local levels (Pakistan Journal of Social Research). This localized lens illustrates the uneven geography of exclusion, calling for province-specific interventions.

Psychological and economic dimensions of exclusion
Aside from tangible barriers, psychological constraints, stemming from prejudice, harassment, and self-doubt, also stifle women's engagement. Politics is not just financially inaccessible but emotionally taxing for many female aspirants. Psychologically rooted disempowerment reduces their political ambition and resilience (bbejournal.com).

Layered, pervasive barriers in lived experience
Studies in districts like Kech and Khuzdar in

Balochistan, using qualitative narratives, emphasize how cultural, religious, and institutional barriers converge in women's everyday lives to obstruct political participation (Poverty). These stories reinforce that exclusion is not an abstract concept but a lived reality, shaped by intersecting stigmas across space.

Succinctly, the discussion illustrates that:

- **Representation without empowerment perpetuates exclusion**
Quotas have increased numbers but not influence.
- **Educational and political agency are interconnected**
Without support in education and employment, women's political paths remain fragile.
- **Regional differences demand tailored strategies**
What works in Punjab may not translate to KP or Balochistan.
- **Psychological factors matter as much as structural ones**
Confidence, safety, and social acceptance are foundational to participation.
- **Intersectionality defines the nature of barriers**
Women's experiences vary by class, region, education, and ethnicity.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The political participation of women in Pakistan remains constrained by overlapping cultural, social, and institutional barriers that collectively weaken democracy and exclude nearly half the population from meaningful governance. This research has shown that patriarchal norms, restrictive gender roles, and tribal traditions continue to limit women's visibility in politics. Social structures, including family opposition, low literacy, economic dependency, and stereotypes, reinforce these exclusions. Institutional frameworks, despite the presence of quotas and reforms, often reproduce elite capture, weak enforcement, and tokenistic inclusion rather than empowering ordinary women. Comparative perspectives from South Asia reveal that while Pakistan has made important strides in representation, it still lags in creating substantive opportunities compared to neighbours like Nepal and

Bangladesh, which have invested in grassroots empowerment and capacity-building.

Reform of Electoral Frameworks

Reserved seats should be restructured to include direct elections rather than party nominations. This would create accountability to voters rather than party elites, allowing grassroots women to access political spaces. Increasing the mandatory percentage of women on general seats beyond the current five percent would further integrate women into mainstream political competition. Evidence from Nepal's constitutional reforms demonstrates how direct elections on reserved seats enhanced legitimacy and autonomy for female candidates (Bhatta, 2021).

Restructuring Political Parties

Political parties are central gatekeepers in Pakistan's political system. To overcome elite capture, legislation should require parties to allocate a minimum share of executive committee positions to women. Women's wings should be transformed from symbolic campaign arms into platforms for leadership development, mentorship, and policy input. Internal party democracy, if strengthened, could open pathways for female leaders beyond dynastic families.

Strengthening Local Government Participation

Empowering women at the grassroots level is crucial. Local bodies should be revived with strong quotas and direct elections for women, ensuring representation in municipal councils. Research in Balochistan highlights how localized cultural and institutional barriers are especially restrictive (poverty.com.pk), which makes local government an essential site for change. Women elected at the grassroots often develop leadership skills and gradually transition to higher offices, creating long-term pipelines of female politicians.

Education and Civic Awareness

Expanding female literacy remains one of the most sustainable strategies for political empowerment. Beyond basic literacy, civic education campaigns in schools and communities can normalize women's political

rights. Public awareness programs through radio, television, and social media should be designed to counter stereotypes and present women as capable leaders. Studies demonstrate that civic awareness correlates directly with greater acceptance of women's political leadership (World Bank, 2021).

Economic Empowerment of Women in Politics

Financial dependency remains one of the most formidable obstacles to women's participation. Establishing special funds to support female candidates, particularly first-time entrants, could reduce inequalities in campaign financing. Training programs in resource mobilization and constituency management would equip women with the tools to sustain their political careers. Bangladesh's experiments with financial support schemes for female candidates provide a model that Pakistan could adapt (Nazneen, 2020).

Protection Against Gender-Based Violence in Politics

Female politicians in Pakistan face harassment, threats, and online abuse. Institutions must establish effective complaint mechanisms and rapid-response units to protect women from political violence. Strengthening cybercrime units to respond to online harassment and developing safe reporting channels would encourage more women to participate. Ali (2022) notes that the lack of institutional protection deters many women from contesting elections despite legal reforms.

Provincial and Regional Sensitivity

Policies should account for the significant provincial disparities in women's political participation. Strategies that work in Punjab or Sindh may not translate to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or Balochistan. Tailored interventions that consider local cultural and institutional dynamics are necessary. Research from KP shows that localized patriarchal norms create unique barriers (pjsr.com.pk), underscoring the importance of context-specific reforms.

Conclusion

The trajectory of women's political participation in Pakistan reveals a persistent tension between visibility and empowerment. From the symbolic presence created through reserved seats to the historic leadership of figures like Benazir Bhutto, women have been present in politics but often without the power to reshape agendas or challenge structural inequalities. This research has demonstrated that barriers to participation are multi-layered, combining cultural expectations, social hierarchies, and institutional frameworks that reinforce exclusion. These barriers do not operate independently but intersect, producing compounded disadvantages for women—particularly those from rural, lower-class, or marginalized communities.

The persistence of patriarchal norms highlights how cultural narratives about gender roles continue to dictate who can legitimately occupy public space. Social barriers such as illiteracy, family opposition, and economic dependence reinforce these narratives, making politics a difficult arena for most women. Meanwhile, institutional barriers, though framed as mechanisms of inclusion, often perpetuate tokenism by concentrating representation within elite circles. Together, these dynamics create a system where women are included in numbers but excluded in substance.

The significance of women's political participation extends beyond gender equality, it is central to democratic legitimacy and inclusive governance. Democracies that fail to reflect the diversity of their societies risk producing policies that reinforce inequalities rather than addressing them. In Pakistan, where women constitute nearly half of the population, excluding their voices undermines the representativeness of legislatures and perpetuates governance structures that do not account for the needs of all citizens. International research consistently shows that when women participate meaningfully, policies are more inclusive, governance more accountable, and development outcomes more equitable.

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