DIALOGUE SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW

Barriers to Women's Political Empowerment in Pakistan and Recommendations for the Way Forward

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Abstract

Women's political empowerment in Pakistan remains constrained by structural, cultural, and institutional barriers despite constitutional guarantees and the provision of reserved seats. Low representation in directly elected positions, gender gaps in voter registration, entrenched patriarchal norms, limited access to financial and political resources, and the prevalence of harassment and intimidation continue to restrict women's effective participation. Political parties often reinforce these barriers by marginalizing women within leadership hierarchies and limiting their access to winnable constituencies. While institutional mechanisms such as the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) provide a framework for gender inclusion, weak implementation and lack of accountability dilute their effectiveness. To address these challenges, a multi-pronged strategy is required: strengthening voter registration drives, providing financial and training support to women candidates, enforcing party-level nomination quotas, reforming reserved-seat mechanisms, and enhancing legal protections against harassment. Such reforms, coupled with community-level awareness campaigns and stronger institutional monitoring, are essential to foster meaningful political inclusion. Advancing women's political empowerment is not only a matter of gender equality but also a prerequisite for deepening democracy and achieving sustainable development in Pakistan.
Keywords: Women's Political Empowerment, Gender and Politics, Political Participation, Reserved Seats, Patriarchy and Social Norms

Introduction

Women's political empowerment is a cornerstone of inclusive governance and sustainable democracy. Globally, efforts to increase women's participation in decision-making have gained momentum, yet in many developing countries—including Pakistan—progress remains uneven and constrained by deeply rooted social, cultural, and institutional barriers. Pakistan, despite being the first Muslim-majority country to elect a female Prime Minister, has consistently struggled to translate constitutional guarantees of equality into substantive political participation for women.

Females make up almost 50% of the population of Pakistan, but majority of them are not being facilitated by any opportunity in power structure, their active involvement in political, social and economic areas is remarkably more important but they continue to face challenges to obtain equal opportunities in sharing responsibilities in leadership (W. Ali et al., 2010)

Over the past thirty years, it has been realized that without empowering women's status in community, the development of a society is impossible. According to 1995 of the United Nations International Conference on women and reduce gender inequality. The most important objective of the third millennium

Development Goal is women empowerment and gender equality. According to the world Bank (2001), women empowerment means "the liberty of choices and actions" which strengthens women's power regarding decision making process and having authority to control over resources (M. Ali & Noman, 2015).

Methodology
This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach to examine the barriers to women's political empowerment in Pakistan. Secondary data was collected from academic journal articles, government reports, policy documents, and publications of organizations such as the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW), and civil society groups working on gender and democracy. Relevant statistics on women's voter registration, representation, and participation in electoral politics were also reviewed to support the analysis. The study employs a thematic analysis framework, categorizing barriers into structural, cultural, economic, political, and institutional dimensions, in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges women face. Based on this analysis, policy recommendations are proposed to strengthen women's inclusion in Pakistan's political landscape.

Literature review
A large body of literature identifies deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, and family gatekeeping as foundational constraints on women's entry into politics. Social expectations about "appropriate" gender roles restrict mobility, public speech, and political activism, especially in rural and conservative regions; women who attempt public leadership can face stigma and family pressure. These cultural barriers limit both the supply of female candidates and women's capacity to sustain political careers.

According to the Global Gender Gap Report (2024), in terms of gender gap Pakistan stands on 145th position out of 146 countries with a gender parity score of 0.57, just ahead of Sudan only. In Pakistan there is the highest barrier in political empowerment of women having a parity of only 0.122 which puts Pakistan to 112th position out of 146 countries. As noted in the report, Pakistan ranks at the bottom in specific areas, such as it ranks on 139th position in educational attainment with a parity of 0.836, pertaining to economic participation and opportunity, Pakistan's standing is at 143rd position with a parity of only 0.36. Further findings of the report show that Pakistan lies in bottom five in the area of economic parity and in terms of income generated by females Pakistan has a huge gender gap of 70%. The report reveals that Labour force parity rate is less than 50%. It is further asserted in the report that there is a complete underrepresentation of feminine in any senior roles (WEF, 2024).

In the past 50 years women worldwide have succeed to make significant strides advance in their respective workplaces in the intermediate level positions of management but the highest level positions are still dominated by males. Women are being overlooked in higher roles of management, in political sphere and also in the government (Schwanke, 2013). The FAFEN report (2024) reveals that the turnout of female voters has declined in the 2024 general elections of Pakistan to 47.6% whereas the turnout was 52% in general elections of 2018. The report further suggests that in the general election 2018, there were 58

constituencies out of total 849 (of both National and Provincial) where the turnout of females was more than the male turnout but unfortunately the number of such constituencies has declined to 27 in general election 2024 (FAFEN, 2024). Many doubts exit about role of females in Pakistani politics. General Musharraf allocated a highest number of reserved seats for women at local level, federal level and also in the provincial level, which is why 60 women were selected on allocated quota seats of national assembly and 12 were elected on general seats. For the first time in history of Pakistan the national assembly had a strength of 72 women. One more important thing in this story is this surprising fact that is all the conservative parties also had their women members in parliament, previously these parties including Jamaat-Islamia and Muttahida-Majlis-e-Amal had questioned the inclusion of women in political field. Benazir Bhutto who became prime minister twice is a symbol of resilience for Pakistani women. She nominated females for significant roles such as speaker, deputy speaker and even federal ministries (Nawaz Shahzad et al., 2022).

The literature indicates that boosting women's political empowerment in Pakistan requires integrated interventions addressing social norms, economic independence, security, and party/institutional reform. Quotas and reserved seats are necessary but insufficient: turning descriptive gains into substantive power needs training, resources, safer participation environments, and party-level democratization so women can win and represent constituencies effectively

Findings / Analysis
Barriers to Women's Political Empowerment in Pakistan
Women's political empowerment in Pakistan faces persistent challenges rooted in socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers. Deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and restrictive gender roles continue to limit women's mobility, political visibility, and participation in leadership positions (Shirazi, 2020). Economic inequalities, particularly women's limited access to financial resources and campaign funding, further hinder their ability to compete with male counterparts (Khan, 2019). Political parties often treat women as symbolic representatives by confining them to reserved seats rather than supporting them in general constituencies, thereby restricting their substantive influence in policymaking (Zia & Bari, 2017). Moreover, structural issues such as voter registration gaps, low literacy rates, and weak enforcement of pro-women electoral reforms exacerbate exclusion (Election Commission of Pakistan [ECP], 2021). The prevalence of harassment, political violence, and weak institutional accountability also discourage women from active engagement (UN Women, 2020). Collectively, these barriers highlight that women's descriptive representation in Pakistan has not yet translated into substantive empowerment, undermining both gender equality and democratic development.

Despite constitutional guarantees and international commitments to gender equality, women in Pakistan continue to face multiple barriers that restrict their full participation in politics. These obstacles are structural, cultural, economic, and institutional in nature, and they collectively undermine women's political agency. The major barriers include:

Low Representation in General Seats
Although reserved seats have increased the numerical presence of women in

legislative bodies, women rarely contest or win general seats. Their dependence on reserved seats limits political autonomy, visibility, and influence within legislative processes. Despite the constitutional quota system, women in Pakistan remain severely underrepresented in general seats, where real political power and decision-making authority largely reside. Most female legislators enter parliament through reserved seats rather than winning competitive elections, which limits their legitimacy and political influence (Zia & Bari, 2017). Political parties often nominate women in constituencies where they have little chance of success, reflecting a lack of genuine commitment to gender inclusion (Jaffar, 2020). This practice reinforces women's dependence on party patronage and curtails their ability to build independent political constituencies (Shirazi, 2020). As a result, women's participation in general seats remains minimal, undermining their substantive empowerment and weakening the democratic principle of equal representation.

Gender Gaps in Voter Registration and Turnout
Large disparities persist in the electoral rolls, with millions of women either unregistered or unable to vote due to cultural restrictions, logistical challenges, and limited access to national identity documents. This undermines women's electoral strength and collective bargaining power. Gender gaps in voter registration and turnout remain a persistent challenge to women's political empowerment in Pakistan. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, women are systematically under-registered compared to men, with estimates suggesting millions of eligible women lack computerized national identity cards (CNICs), a prerequisite for voter registration (Election Commission of Pakistan [ECP], 2021). This exclusion is often rooted in patriarchal family structures, bureaucratic hurdles, and socio-cultural constraints that discourage or delay women from obtaining CNICs (Khan & Naqvi, 2020). Even when registered, women's turnout tends to be lower, especially in rural and conservative areas, where mobility restrictions, security concerns, and male-dominated local power structures often prevent them from voting (Cheema, Khan, & Myerson, 2022). Studies also reveal instances where women are deliberately barred from voting through informal agreements among local leaders, further institutionalizing disenfranchisement (Zia, 2021). Bridging this gender gap requires targeted reforms, including mass CNIC registration drives, gender-sensitive electoral policies, and community-level awareness campaigns to ensure women's full and equal participation in the democratic process.

Patriarchal Norms and Cultural Constraints
Deeply rooted patriarchal traditions restrict women's mobility, discourage their public participation, and reinforce stereotypes that politics is a male domain. In many rural areas, women are either discouraged from voting or forced to vote as directed by male family members. Patriarchal norms and cultural constraints constitute one of the most significant barriers to women's political empowerment in Pakistan. Deeply entrenched patriarchal structures reinforce the perception that politics is a male domain, limiting women's participation both as voters and as candidates (Bari, 2019). In many rural and conservative communities, women's mobility is restricted by family or community elders, who often decide whether they can vote or contest elections (Zia, 2021). These cultural constraints

are further reinforced by practices such *as* Jirga *or* panchayat decisions that discourage women from engaging in political activity, as well as religiously framed narratives that confine women to domestic roles (Critelli, 2019). As a result, even when women access reserved seats, their political agency is often curtailed by male party leaders and kinship-based networks, reducing their ability to exercise independent decision-making (Krook & O'Brien, 2012). Addressing these cultural barriers requires not only legal reforms but also long-term social change through education, media representation, and community engagement that challenge gender stereotypes and promote women's equal role in governance.

Political Party Discrimination
Political parties are reluctant to nominate women in winnable constituencies, often relegating them to symbolic positions. Within party structures, women struggle to access leadership roles and decision-making forums, which further marginalizes their influence. Political party discrimination is a critical obstacle to women's political empowerment in Pakistan, as parties act as key gatekeepers to electoral competition and leadership positions. Although women are guaranteed reserved seats in national and provincial assemblies, the selection process is often controlled by male-dominated party elites, who nominate women based on kinship, loyalty, or elite status rather than merit or grassroots support (Jalalzai & Krook, 2010). This practice results in tokenism, where women legislators lack real influence and are sidelined in policymaking processes (Bari, 2019). Furthermore, women are rarely nominated to contest general seats, which are considered more politically significant and competitive, perpetuating their exclusion from constituency-based politics (Shvedova, 2020). Even within party structures, women's wings often operate with limited resources and authority, reinforcing hierarchical gendered divisions (Saeed, 2018). Consequently, political parties reproduce patriarchal power structures that marginalize women, restricting both their descriptive and substantive representation. Overcoming this discrimination requires institutional reforms, such as transparent nomination processes, gender quotas within party leadership, and capacity-building initiatives that enable women to contest general seats on equal terms with men.

Economic and Financial Barriers
Running an election campaign requires substantial financial resources, networks, and patronage. Most women lack independent access to funds, and systemic inequalities in employment and property ownership make it difficult for them to finance political careers. Economic and financial barriers significantly restrict women's political participation and representation in Pakistan. Political campaigning requires substantial financial resources for activities such as mobilization, advertising, and constituency services, yet women often lack independent income, property ownership, or access to credit due to structural economic inequalities (World Bank, 2024). This financial dependency on male family members or party elites reduces women's ability to compete effectively in elections, particularly for general seats, where resource-intensive campaigning is critical (Bari, 2019). Furthermore, parties are less likely to allocate funds to female candidates, reinforcing a cycle of exclusion and limiting their chances of

winning competitive constituencies (Jalalzai & Krook, 2010). Studies also show that economic marginalization intersects with class and rural–urban divides, leaving poor women further disadvantaged in political spaces (Critelli, 2019). Without financial autonomy, women's political roles are often reduced to symbolic representation through reserved seats, undermining their substantive influence. Addressing these barriers requires targeted financial support measures such as public funding for female candidates, microfinance programs linked to civic participation, and gender-sensitive party financing reforms.

Harassment, Intimidation, and Security Concerns
Women politicians and candidates face harassment—both online and offline—along with threats to personal safety. Such hostility discourages women from contesting elections and creates a hostile political environment. Harassment, intimidation, and security concerns remain major impediments to women's political empowerment in Pakistan. Female politicians and voters frequently encounter gender-based violence, ranging from verbal abuse and character assassination to physical threats and electoral intimidation, which discourage women from active participation in politics (Bari, 2019). During election campaigns, women candidates often face harassment from rivals and within their own parties, while women voters in conservative areas are sometimes prevented from casting ballots through coercion or informal agreements among male elders (Zia, 2021). In addition, online harassment has emerged as a significant challenge, with female politicians disproportionately targeted by hate speech and cyberbullying, undermining their confidence and public visibility (Nabi et al., 2022). These threats not only limit women's access to political spaces but also reinforce patriarchal narratives that politics is unsafe or inappropriate for women. Addressing such barriers requires comprehensive measures, including stronger enforcement of electoral laws, gender-sensitive policing, secure voting arrangements, and digital safety initiatives that protect women from both physical and online violence.

Weak Institutional Implementation
Although institutions such as the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) have frameworks for women's participation, weak enforcement of gender quotas, limited monitoring, and lack of accountability reduce their effectiveness. Weak institutional implementation further undermines women's political empowerment in Pakistan, as progressive legal frameworks and gender quotas often fail to translate into substantive representation due to poor enforcement and institutional inefficiencies. While Pakistan has reserved seats for women in national and provincial assemblies, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and other institutions lack effective monitoring mechanisms to ensure women's meaningful participation beyond token representation (Shvedova, 2020). Similarly, weak enforcement of laws against electoral violence, harassment, and voter suppression leaves women vulnerable to intimidation, discouraging their active involvement (Bari, 2019). Institutional bodies often operate within patriarchal structures, where male dominance in political parties, bureaucracies, and law enforcement agencies diminishes women's access to justice and protection (Critelli, 2019). Furthermore, gaps in gender-disaggregated data collection and

policy evaluation prevent evidence-based reforms and accountability (UN Women, 2020). As a result, despite the presence of formal commitments to gender equality, the lack of strong institutional capacity and accountability mechanisms perpetuates women's marginalization in political life. Strengthening institutional enforcement, gender-responsive policymaking, and monitoring systems is therefore essential to bridge the gap between law and practice.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight that women's political empowerment in Pakistan is constrained by structural, cultural, and institutional barriers, which aligns with existing literature and feminist theoretical perspectives. Feminist theory, particularly liberal feminism, argues that unequal access to resources and political institutions perpetuates gender inequality (Tong, 2018). In the Pakistani context, this manifests in the form of patriarchal norms, voter registration gaps, and discriminatory party structures that systematically limit women's agency.

The dependence on reserved seats illustrates both progress and limitation. While quotas have increased descriptive representation, they have not translated into substantive empowerment, as women remain excluded from leadership and decision-making positions within parties and legislatures (Khattak & Arshad, 2023). Rahim (2024) similarly argues that patriarchal political culture reduces women's presence in elected assemblies to symbolic participation rather than genuine influence. This confirms the feminist critique that institutional reforms without structural change fail to transform power relations.

Cultural and social barriers, such as restrictions on women's mobility and the dominance of male family members in political decision-making, further validate intersectional feminist insights, which emphasize that gender inequality intersects with class, culture, and geography (Crenshaw, 1991). Studies such as Gul, Taj, and Zaman (2023) also stress that cultural norms in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and rural Punjab continue to limit women's visibility in political spaces, reflecting how patriarchy is reinforced by local traditions.

Financial and economic barriers remain a decisive factor. Campaigning requires substantial resources, yet women's limited property ownership and financial autonomy exclude them from competitive politics. This resonates with resource mobilization theory, which underscores that access to material and organizational resources is crucial for effective political participation (Jenkins, 1983). Research by Afridi (2023) similarly shows that women in ex-FATA lacked independent access to campaign financing, forcing them to rely on male intermediaries.

Finally, weak institutional enforcement of pro-women laws reflects institutionalist theories of politics, which argue that formal rules are insufficient without effective implementation (North, 1990). Although the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) provide frameworks for inclusion, the lack of monitoring and accountability undermines their effectiveness (Sharif & Gull-i-Hina, 2023).

In sum, the findings reinforce the argument that women's political empowerment in Pakistan requires not only legal reforms but also structural transformation in political parties, social norms, and resource distribution. Without addressing these systemic inequalities, women's participation risks remaining symbolic rather than substantive.

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Implications for Democracy, Governance, and Gender Equality

The barriers to women's political empowerment in Pakistan have far-reaching implications for the country's democratic development, governance structures, and pursuit of gender equality.

For democracy, the underrepresentation of women weakens the principle of inclusivity, which is central to democratic legitimacy. A democracy that fails to reflect the voices of half of its population risks being unresponsive and unrepresentative. As Rahim (2024) argues, when women's political participation is reduced to tokenism through reserved seats, the democratic process becomes procedural rather than substantive, undermining citizen trust in political institutions.

For governance, women's absence in decision-making bodies limits the diversity of perspectives in policymaking. Studies show that women legislators often prioritize issues such as health, education, and social protection—areas that are critical to sustainable development but often overlooked in male-dominated assemblies (Khattak & Arshad, 2023). Without women's active involvement, governance remains skewed toward elite and patriarchal interests, perpetuating policy blind spots that disproportionately affect marginalized groups.

For gender equality, persistent barriers to political participation reinforce broader patterns of discrimination across society. Limited access to political power restricts women's ability to influence laws on gender-based violence, labor rights, and property ownership. This cyclical exclusion not only diminishes women's status but also hampers Pakistan's progress toward international commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5: Gender Equality and SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). As Gul, Taj, and Zaman (2023) note, meaningful political inclusion is not only a matter of justice but also a driver of social transformation.

In sum, addressing barriers to women's political empowerment is critical for strengthening democratic legitimacy, improving governance outcomes, and advancing gender equality. Without structural reforms in political parties, electoral processes, and social norms, Pakistan risks perpetuating a system where democracy exists in form but not in substance.

Recommendations / the Way Forward

To overcome the barriers identified, Pakistan requires a multi-dimensional approach that combines institutional reforms, political will, and societal transformation. The following recommendations provide a roadmap for strengthening women's political empowerment:

Strengthen Electoral Participation

The Launch targeted voter registration drives in constituencies with large gender gaps by deploying mobile NADRA teams and female outreach workers. Ensure strict enforcement of Section 47 of the Elections Act, which mandates re-polling in constituencies where women's turnout is below 10%.

Reform Political Party Practices

To introduce binding requirements for political parties to allocate a minimum percentage of tickets to women in winnable constituencies, rather than relegating

them to reserved seats. Promote women's inclusion in party leadership structures, manifestos, and decision-making committees.

Enhance Reserved Seat Mechanisms
Reform the system of reserved seats by adopting transparent selection processes such as intra-party elections or merit-based shortlists, ensuring women legislators are accountable to constituencies rather than solely to party leadership.

Provide Financial and Institutional Support
Establish public or donor-funded grants to support women candidates' election campaigns, complemented by training in fundraising, campaign management, and digital outreach. Strengthen parliamentary caucuses of women legislators to build cross-party alliances and amplify women's legislative influence.

Address Security and Harassment Issues
Create gender-sensitive security arrangements during election campaigns, including female police units for protection at rallies and polling stations. Expand enforcement of anti-harassment laws to address online and offline intimidation targeting women politicians.

Promote Societal Change and Awareness
The Launch media and community-based campaigns to challenge patriarchal stereotypes and highlight women's contributions to governance. Engage male allies—religious leaders, teachers, and community elders—in advocating for women's equal political participation.

Institutionalize Gender Audits and Accountability
Mandate the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) to conduct regular gender audits of electoral processes and party structures. Tie party compliance with gender inclusion requirements to eligibility for state resources and electoral symbols.

Conclusion
The barriers to women's political empowerment in Pakistan and highlighted the structural, cultural, economic, and institutional factors that continue to restrict women's meaningful participation in politics. The findings reveal that while reserved seats and constitutional provisions have increased women's descriptive representation, substantive empowerment remains limited due to patriarchal norms, discriminatory party practices, financial inequalities, voter registration gaps, and persistent harassment. Weak institutional enforcement further undermines progress, leaving women politically marginalized.

Women's empowerment is not only a question of gender equality but also a cornerstone of democratic consolidation. A democracy that excludes half of its population cannot claim full legitimacy. Increasing women's participation enhances governance outcomes by diversifying policy agendas and addressing issues such as health, education, and social protection that are often neglected in male-dominated legislatures. Thus, empowering women politically strengthens the responsiveness, inclusivity, and accountability of Pakistan's democratic

system.
Women's empowerment is integral to the very essence of democracy. A political system that sidelines nearly half of its population cannot achieve legitimacy, inclusivity, or sustainable progress. By ensuring women's equal participation, democracy becomes more representative and reflective of the diverse needs of society. Women's voices in political processes bring greater attention to social justice, education, healthcare, and human development—areas often overlooked in male-dominated governance. Moreover, women's empowerment enhances accountability, transparency, and responsiveness in institutions, making democracy stronger and more resilient. In the case of Pakistan, meaningful empowerment of women is not only a matter of gender equality but also a prerequisite for deepening democratic governance and securing long-term stability.

Future research should explore women's empowerment through a comparative lens by examining successful models from other South Asian countries, assessing the role of digital platforms in mobilizing female political participation, and investigating the long-term impacts of women legislators on policy outcomes. Such studies would provide deeper insights into both cha the analysis highlights that women in Pakistan continue to face multiple barriers to political empowerment, despite constitutional guarantees and reserved seats in legislative bodies. Structural obstacles such as patriarchal traditions, restrictive gender norms, and limited mobility significantly hinder women's political participation. Economic constraints, including income disparities and lack of financial resources for campaigning, further limit their ability to contest elections independently. Institutional weaknesses, such as ineffective enforcement of gender quotas, weak party commitment to women's inclusion, and inadequate protection against harassment, reinforce systemic exclusion. Additionally, gaps in voter registration, political awareness, and education restrict women's ability to participate fully in electoral processes. Although progress has been made in increasing women's representation numerically, their substantive influence on decision-making and policy outcomes remains limited.

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