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## **Bloodlines and Barriers: Political Dynasties and Women's Political Participation in South Asia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

South Asia presents a paradox: the region has produced some of the world's longest-serving female leaders, yet women's overall political participation remains dismally low. This article examines the impact of dynastic politics on women's political participation in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Drawing on a feminist institutionalist framework, it argues that dynastic succession, sustained by clientelism and corruption, functions as an informal institutional nexus that simultaneously enables and constrains women's participation. Dynasties provide women from elite families entry into politics, particularly in moments of crisis or the absence of male heirs. Yet the same networks marginalise non-dynastic women, capture quota seats, and confine women to symbolic rather than substantive roles. By comparing Pakistan and Bangladesh, this article demonstrates how the dynasty–clientelism–corruption nexus sustains patriarchal political orders, producing descriptive but not substantive representation for women.

**Keywords:** Political dynasties, women's political participation, clientelism, corruption, Feminist Institutionalism, South Asia, Pakistan, Bangladesh

### **Introduction**

South Asia presents a striking paradox in the politics of gender. The region has produced some of the most prominent female leaders in the world, including Indira Gandhi in India, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, and Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia in Bangladesh. These leaders have collectively ruled their respective countries for decades, giving South Asia the rare distinction of being led by women for longer periods than many parts of the developed world.<sup>1</sup> Yet beyond these exceptional cases, women's overall political participation in the region remains dismally low. In Pakistan, women currently hold around 20% of seats in the National Assembly, with the overwhelming majority entering through reserved quota seats rather than through direct elections.<sup>2</sup> Historical data illustrate the challenge: in the 2018 general elections, 289 women contested in general seats, but only 8 were elected, highlighting the gap between women's willingness to participate and their actual success in securing electoral victories.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in Bangladesh, despite women occupying the office of Prime Minister for nearly three decades, women still account for only around 21% of parliamentarians. Here too, reserved seats have been

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<sup>1</sup> Farida Jalalzai and Farida Jalalzai, *Shattered, Cracked, or Firmly Intact?: Women and the Executive Glass Ceiling Worldwide* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Farida Jalalzai and Meg Rincker, "Blut Ist Dicker Als Wasser. Familienbindungen Und Weltweite Politische Machtbeziehungen Blood Is Thicker than Water: Family Ties to Political Power Worldwide," *Historical Social Research* 43 (2018): 5472, <https://doi.org/10.12759/HSR.43.2018.4.54-72>.

<sup>2</sup> Farzana Bari, "Women Parliamentarians: Challenging the Frontiers of Politics in Pakistan," *Gender, Technology and Development* 14, no. 3 (2010): 363–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/097185241001400304>.

<sup>3</sup> "Election Commission of Pakistan," accessed March 20, 2024, <https://ecp.gov.pk/general-elections#>.



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the primary mechanism for female representation, while direct electoral success remains limited.<sup>4</sup> These figures reflect a broader regional pattern: women are present in parliaments numerically but are seldom able to shape policy agendas or challenge patriarchal structures in meaningful ways.

This raises a central puzzle: why has the rise of women through dynastic channels not translated into greater substantive empowerment for women as a group? Political dynasties in Pakistan and Bangladesh have undeniably opened pathways for women. In patriarchal contexts where female leadership often meets resistance, dynastic lineage provides legitimacy and visibility. For example, Benazir Bhutto's electoral victories in 1988 and 1993 were made possible largely by her family legacy as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's daughter.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Sheikh Hasina inherited leadership of the Awami League following the assassination of her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and Khaleda Zia entered politics after the assassination of her husband, General Ziaur Rahman.<sup>6</sup> In each case, dynastic ties allowed women to overcome social and institutional barriers to political entry.

Yet, while dynasties facilitate descriptive representation, they simultaneously constrain women's substantive agency. Women from political families are often regarded as "male proxies," inheriting legitimacy rather than cultivating independent constituencies.<sup>7</sup> Their careers remain tied to family ideology and clientelist networks, leaving little room for independent advocacy on women's rights or broader reforms. Moreover, dynastic politics in South Asia operate within an entrenched system of clientelism and corruption, where family-based patronage networks shape electoral competition and governance.<sup>8</sup> These networks are profoundly gendered: while male family members are groomed as natural successors, women typically step into leadership only in the absence of male heirs or in moments of dynastic crisis.

This article hypothesizes that the dynasty–clientelism–corruption nexus functions as an informal institutional arrangement that constrains women's political participation in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Drawing on the lens of Feminist Institutionalism, the article argues that informal rules are as significant as formal rules in shaping political outcomes. Formal mechanisms such as gender quotas may increase the number of women in legislatures, but the dominance of dynasties, clientelist networks, and corruption reproduces male privilege and limits women's ability to act as substantive representatives.<sup>9</sup> In other words, dynasties open the door for women but simultaneously dictate the terms of their participation.

By comparing the cases of Pakistan and Bangladesh, the article sheds light on how dynastic

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<sup>4</sup> Silja Paasilinna, "Women's Reserved Seats in Bangladesh: A Systemic Analysis of Meaningful Representation | IFES - The International Foundation for Electoral Systems," March 27, 2024, <https://www.ifes.org/publications/womens-reserved-seats-bangladesh-systemic-analysis-meaningful-representation>; "A Silver Lining: Women in Reserved Seats in Local Government in Bangladesh - Nazneen - 2010 - IDS Bulletin - Wiley Online Library," accessed August 18, 2025, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2010.00164.x>.

<sup>5</sup> Anita Weiss, "Moving Forward with the Legal Empowerment of Women in Pakistan," United States Institute of Peace, accessed August 31, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2012/05/moving-forward-legal-empowerment-women-pakistan>.

<sup>6</sup> F. Chowdhury, "Problems of Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh: An Empirical Study," 2004, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Problems-of-Women%27s-Political-Participation-in-An-Chowdhury/3addac43fdd874b2b729b790fa2ca414e395199b>.

<sup>7</sup> Jalalzai and Rincker, "Blut Ist Dicker Als Wasser. Familienbindungen Und Weltweite Politische Machtbeziehungen Blood Is Thicker than Water."

<sup>8</sup> Kanchan Chandra, *Democratic Dynasties: State, Party and Family in Contemporary Indian Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Fiona Mackay and Mona Lena Krook, eds., *Gender, Politics and Institutions: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism*, Gender and Politics (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); E. Bjarnegård, *Gender, Informal Institutions and Political Recruitment: Explaining Male Dominance in Parliamentary Representation* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013); Sally J. Kenney, "New Research on Gendered Political Institutions," *Political Research Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (1996): 445–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/106591299604900211>.



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politics produces a gendered paradox: enabling women's symbolic visibility at the highest levels while structurally undermining their collective empowerment. In doing so, the study contributes to debates on women's political participation in South Asia and enriches the broader feminist institutionalist literature on how informal rules intersect with formal mechanisms to shape gendered political outcomes.

### Literature Review

#### Political Dynasties in South Asia

Political dynasties are a defining feature of South Asian politics. From the Nehru–Gandhis in India to the Bhuttos in Pakistan and the Sheikh and Zia families in Bangladesh, family-based succession has been central to party leadership and electoral politics.<sup>10</sup> Dynastic candidates are considered “electables,” relying on name recognition, kinship networks, and inherited legitimacy to secure victory.<sup>11</sup> Scholars argue that dynasties persist where parties are weakly institutionalized and electoral volatility is high.<sup>12</sup>

#### Gender and Dynastic Politics

Dynasties paradoxically create both openings and obstacles for women. Women leaders in South Asia typically emerge through dynastic families, often during crises of succession.<sup>13</sup> Benazir Bhutto's ascent after Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's execution and Sheikh Hasina's leadership following Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination exemplify this dynamic. Baturu and Gray (2018) find that women political leaders worldwide are as educated and experienced as men, but disproportionately reliant on family ties for entry.<sup>14</sup> Yet dynastic pathways limit women's substantive agency: dynastic women are often cast as symbolic heirs or male proxies rather than independent leaders.<sup>15</sup>

#### Feminist Institutionalism and Informal Rules

Feminist Institutionalism highlights the gendered effects of both formal and informal “rules of the game”.<sup>16</sup> Formal rules, such as constitutions and quotas, interact with informal norms such as dynasties, clientelism, corruption to shape political outcomes.<sup>17</sup> Research in Latin America shows that informal rules often undermine quotas by reinforcing male privilege.<sup>18</sup> In South Asia, dynastic networks similarly adapt to reforms, ensuring continuity of family dominance.

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<sup>10</sup> Chandra, *Democratic Dynasties*.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald U. Mendoza et al., “Term Limits and Political Dynasties: Unpacking the Links,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, ahead of print, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3356437>.

<sup>12</sup> Mark R. Thompson, “Dynasties’ Daughters and Martyrs’ Widows: Female Leaders and Gender Inequality in Asia,” *Disruptive Asia*, February 22, 2022, <https://disruptiveasia.asiasociety.org/dynasties-daughters-and-martyrs-widows-female-leaders-and-gender-inequality-in-asia>.

<sup>13</sup> Jalalzai and Jalalzai, *Shattered, Cracked, or Firmly Intact?*; Jalalzai and Rincker, “Blut Ist Dicker Als Wasser. Familienbindungen Und Weltweite Politische Machtbeziehungen Blood Is Thicker than Water.”

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Baturu and Julia Gray, “When Do Family Ties Matter? The Duration of Female Suffrage and Women's Path to High Political Office,” *Political Research Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2018): 695–709, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912918759438>.

<sup>15</sup> Weiss, “Moving Forward with the Legal Empowerment of Women in Pakistan”; “A Silver Lining: Women in Reserved Seats in Local Government in Bangladesh - Nazneen - 2010 - IDS Bulletin - Wiley Online Library.”

<sup>16</sup> Mackay and Krook, *Gender, Politics and Institutions*.

<sup>17</sup> Bjarnegård, *Gender, Informal Institutions and Political Recruitment*; Kenney, “New Research on Gendered Political Institutions.”

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer M. Piscopo, “Rethinking Descriptive Representation: Rendering Women in Legislative Debates,” *PARLIAMENTARY AFFAIRS* 64, no. 3 (2011): 448–72, <https://doi.org/10.3316/agispt.20200813034948>.

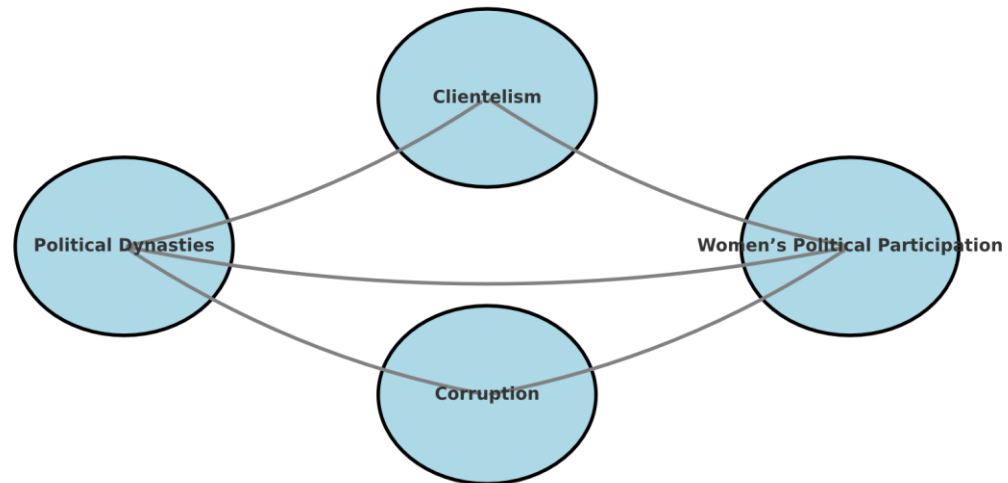


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### Gaps in the Literature

Existing scholarship explores dynastic politics and women's leadership via family ties, but less attention is paid to the intersection of dynasties, clientelism, and corruption as a nexus constraining women's participation in Pakistan and Bangladesh.<sup>19</sup>

#### Dynasty-Clientelism-Corruption Nexus and Its Impact on Women's Political Participation



Most studies focus on quotas, with limited analysis of how informal institutions undermine them.<sup>20</sup> This article fills that gap.

### Theoretical Framework

#### Feminist Institutionalism and the “Rules of the Game”

Feminist Institutionalism argues that both formal and informal institutions are gendered and interact to shape political outcomes.<sup>21</sup> Formal rules include constitutions, quotas, and electoral laws, while informal rules include dynastic succession, clientelist exchanges, and corruption networks. These informal rules are often unwritten but are deeply embedded in political practice, reproducing male privilege even when formal provisions appear gender-neutral.<sup>22</sup>

In South Asia, this perspective is particularly useful because institutions are formally democratic but function within entrenched patriarchal structures. Reserved seats in Pakistan and Bangladesh, for example, were introduced to enhance women's descriptive representation. However, the actual process of selection places women at the mercy of male party leaders, who allocate quota seats strategically to loyal family members or proxies.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the very design of the quota system interacts with informal dynastic norms to constrain women's autonomy.

<sup>19</sup> Chandra, *Democratic Dynasties*; Baturo and Gray, “When Do Family Ties Matter?”; Jalalzai and Jalalzai, *Shattered, Cracked, or Firmly Intact?*

<sup>20</sup> Bari, “Women Parliamentarians”; “A Silver Lining: Women in Reserved Seats in Local Government in Bangladesh - Nazneen - 2010 - IDS Bulletin - Wiley Online Library.”

<sup>21</sup> Mackay and Krook, *Gender, Politics and Institutions*.

<sup>22</sup> Meryl Kenny, *Gender and Political Recruitment: Theorizing Institutional Change* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Bjarnegård, *Gender, Informal Institutions and Political Recruitment*.

<sup>23</sup> Bari, “Women Parliamentarians”; Sohela Nazneen and Simeen Mahmud, “Gendered Politics of Securing Inclusive Development,” SSRN Scholarly Paper no. 2386614 (Social Science Research Network, September 28, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2386614>.



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### **Dynastic Politics as an Informal Institution**

In both Pakistan and Bangladesh, political dynasties function as a parallel system alongside formal electoral rule. Dynastic families adapt to institutional changes, ensuring their dominance across regimes. For example, when General Pervez Musharraf introduced the graduation requirement for candidates in Pakistan in 2002, several underqualified male politicians were replaced by female family members who had university degrees. This reform unintentionally boosted women's descriptive presence but did not create independent female politicians it merely reinforced dynastic reproduction.<sup>24</sup>

In Bangladesh, the dominance of the Awami League under Sheikh Hasina and the BNP under Khaleda Zia illustrates how dynastic leadership monopolises party structures. Women in these dynasties are accepted as leaders not because of gender equality but because of filiation, which is the belief that political legitimacy can be inherited through bloodline.<sup>25</sup> This creates a paradox: dynasties provide women visibility at the very top but discourage broader inclusion of women outside elite families.

### **Clientelism and Patronage as Gendered Networks**

Clientelism, defined as the exchange of resources for political support, is central to sustaining dynasties in South Asia.<sup>26</sup> In Pakistan, dynastic families such as the Bhuttos and Sharifs maintain local patronage networks that deliver votes in rural constituencies, where political loyalty is often tied to kinship and landholding structures.<sup>27</sup> Women within these families inherit access to these networks but seldom control them hence clientelism remains dominated by male brokers who mobilize resources and votes.

In Bangladesh, similar dynamics prevail. A study shows that women entering politics through reserved seats rarely build clientelist ties of their own, making them heavily dependent on party leadership for survival.<sup>28</sup> Even when women from dynasties secure general seats, they inherit pre-existing networks rather than create autonomous bases of support. This limits their ability to act as substantive representatives, as their political survival depends on reproducing family and party interests rather than advancing gendered agendas.

### **Corruption and the Gendered Cost of Politics**

The dynasty–clientelism nexus is further reinforced by corruption, understood here not only as financial misconduct but as the abuse of public office for private or family gain. Election campaigns in both Pakistan and Bangladesh are expensive, and dynastic families use wealth, name recognition, and state patronage to sustain their dominance.<sup>29</sup> Research suggests that voters may forgive corruption more readily when it involves dynastic politicians, due to their perception as “family elders”.<sup>30</sup>

For women, this creates a double bind. Dynastic women gain entry through family resources but remain constrained by the patriarchal bargains of their families. Independent women without dynastic backing face steep barriers, as they lack the financial and patronage resources required to compete. This explains why, despite high numbers of women contesting general seats in

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<sup>24</sup> Jalalzai and Jalalzai, *Shattered, Cracked, or Firmly Intact?*

<sup>25</sup> Olle Folke et al., “Gender and Dynastic Political Selection,” *Comparative Political Studies* 54, no. 2 (2021): 339–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414020938089>.

<sup>26</sup> Chandra, *Democratic Dynasties*.

<sup>27</sup> Ayesha Khan, *The Women's Movement in Pakistan: Activism, Islam and Democracy*, Paperback edition (I.B. Tauris, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> “A Silver Lining: Women in Reserved Seats in Local Government in Bangladesh - Nazneen - 2010 - IDS Bulletin - Wiley Online Library.”

<sup>29</sup> Taishi Muraoka, “Political Dynasties and Particularistic Campaigns,” *Political Research Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2018): 453–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912917745163>.

<sup>30</sup> Satendra Kumar, “The Family Way: Manhood and Dabangai in the Making of a Dynasty in Uttar Pradesh,” *Studies in Indian Politics* 6, no. 2 (2018): 180–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2321023018797414>.





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Pakistan (289 in 2018), very few succeeded.<sup>31</sup> Corruption-driven political financing structures disadvantage newcomers, particularly women, who are excluded from male-dominated patronage webs.

### The Gendered Paradox

Taken together, the dynasty–clientelism–corruption nexus operates as a gendered informal institution in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Dynasties offer women symbolic opportunities for leadership, especially during crises of succession, but this visibility does not dismantle patriarchal political cultures. Instead, dynastic women are incorporated into pre-existing male-dominated patronage and corruption networks, limiting their substantive representation. Women outside these dynastic families are further marginalised, as parties prefer candidates with family backing who can guarantee electoral success.

This paradox is particularly striking in South Asia: two countries that have been led by female prime ministers for decades (Bangladesh and Pakistan) still rank among the lowest globally in terms of gender equality and women’s political participation.<sup>32</sup> Feminist Institutionalism thus provides a powerful lens to explain why formal mechanisms (like quotas) and symbolic female leadership fail to produce structural change: informal rules reproduce male dominance under the guise of dynastic continuity.

### Political Dynasties in Pakistan and Bangladesh

#### Pakistan

Dynastic politics have been a defining feature of Pakistan since independence. From the founding elites of the Muslim League to the Bhuttos and Sharifs of today, political families have dominated parliamentary representation.<sup>33</sup> Dynastic candidates are considered “electables” individuals who can secure victory on the strength of their family name and networks, often without significant party support.<sup>34</sup>

The Bhutto family illustrates the persistence of dynastic politics. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, founder of the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), was executed in 1979, after which his daughter Benazir Bhutto became the symbolic head of the party. Despite exile and assassination threats, she twice served as prime minister (1988–90, 1993–96). Following her assassination in 2007, leadership passed to her widower Asif Ali Zardari and her son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. Similarly, the Sharif family has maintained control of the Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N), with Nawaz Sharif serving multiple terms as prime minister and his daughter Maryam Nawaz emerging as the political heir.<sup>35</sup> Table 1 displays the statistics regarding dynastic politicians from 2000–2020 in the National Assembly of Pakistan.

Year	Total Dynastic Parliamentarians	Male	Female	Percentage of Dynastic Parliamentarians
2003	150	135	15	50
2008	180	160	20	65
2013	200	175	25	70

<sup>31</sup> “Election Commission of Pakistan.”

<sup>32</sup> “Global Gender Gap Report 2024,” World Economic Forum, accessed September 22, 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/digest/>.

<sup>33</sup> Marufa Akter, : : *Inclusive Democracy: Engendering Political Parties* (2024).

<sup>34</sup> “Dynastic Politics in Punjab: Facts, Myths, and Their Implications,” *Ideas*, n.d., accessed September 5, 2025, <https://ideasdev.org/publications/dynastic-politics-in-punjab-facts-myths-and-their-implications/>.

<sup>35</sup> Mohammad Waseem, “2. The Operational Dynamics of Political Parties in Pakistan,” in *Pakistan at the Crossroads: Domestic Dynamics and External Pressures*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot (Columbia University Press, 2016), <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.7312/jaff17306-004/html>.



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2018	250	225	25	75
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Table 1 The data for this table is retrieved from the National Assembly website<sup>36</sup>. The MNAs were cross-referenced. Only MNAs with biological ties and marital ties were identified as dynastic politicians.

Empirical data confirms the entrenchment of dynasticism. Between 2003 and 2018, the share of dynastic parliamentarians in the National Assembly grew from 50% to 75%, but only 10–12% of these dynasts were women. Interestingly, 90–95% of women parliamentarians in Pakistan entered on reserved seats, and roughly half of them came from dynastic families. Thus, even mechanisms designed to diversify representation (quotas) were captured by dynastic politics.

Dynasties are also sustained by socio-economic inequalities. Rural constituencies with high poverty and low literacy rates are more prone to elect dynastic elites, who are viewed as patrons capable of delivering services.<sup>37</sup> This system sidelines women outside dynastic families, as electoral success requires not only resources but also entrenched kinship networks that women rarely command independently.

### Bangladesh

Bangladesh presents an even sharper picture of dynastic dominance. Since 1991, two women Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League and Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have alternated as prime ministers, symbolizing what scholars call the “battle of the begums”.<sup>38</sup> Their leadership illustrates how dynastic politics has provided women with unprecedented visibility in a Muslim-majority country, yet also entrenched a bipolar and highly personalised political system.

Sheikh Hasina inherited the Awami League after her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh’s founding leader, was assassinated in 1975. Khaleda Zia entered politics following the assassination of her husband, General Ziaur Rahman, founder of the BNP. A third dynasty, the Ershads, has also played a role through the Jatiya Party, led by the widow of former military ruler H.M. Ershad.<sup>39</sup> Table 2 displays the statistics regarding dynastic politicians from 2000-2020 in the Jatiya Parishad Bangladesh.

Year	Total Dynastic Parliamentarians	Male	Female	Percentage of Dynastic Parliamentarians
2001	140	120	20	45
2008	160	140	20	55
2014	180	160	20	60
2018	200	180	20	65

Table 2 The data for this table was retrieved from the Jatiya Parishad website of Bangladesh.<sup>40</sup> Mirroring the Pakistani dynastic table, MPs were cross-referenced. Only MPs sharing blood ties and marital ties were chosen.

Legislative data shows that dynastic politicians in Bangladesh have increased steadily from 45% in 2001 to 65% in 2018.

However, unlike in Pakistan, the number of dynastic women in parliament has remained

<sup>36</sup> “National Assembly of Pakistan,” accessed April 23, 2024, <https://na.gov.pk/en/composition.php>.

<sup>37</sup> Iftikhar A. Khan, “Record Number of 171 Women in the Run for NA General Seats,” DAWN.COM, 06:06:42+05:00, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1418269>.

<sup>38</sup> Chowdhury, “Problems of Women’s Political Participation in Bangladesh.”

<sup>39</sup> Mohammad Waseem, “2. The Operational Dynamics of Political Parties in Pakistan,” in *Pakistan at the Crossroads: Domestic Dynamics and External Pressures*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot (Columbia University Press, 2016), <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.7312/jaff17306-004/html>.

<sup>40</sup> <https://parliament.portal.gov.bd/> accessed on 23 September 2024



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relatively constant, with many serving multiple terms for example, Sheikh Hasina, her sister Sheikh Rehana, and MPs such as Waseqa Ayesha Khan. Reserved seats (currently 50, or 14% of parliament) remain the main avenue for most female MPs, but dynastic women continue to dominate leadership positions.

Bangladesh's secular constitution and stronger integration of women into the labor force have facilitated higher direct election of women compared to Pakistan.<sup>41</sup> Yet the persistence of dynastic politics has limited this broader inclusion: women outside elite families struggle to compete for party nominations or build independent constituencies.<sup>42</sup>

### Comparative Insights

**Similarities:** In both countries, dynastic families monopolise political power and shape party structures. Women's political entry is overwhelmingly tied to dynastic succession, often in moments of crisis or the absence of male heirs. Quotas, while increasing numerical representation, have reinforced dynastic capture.

### Differences:

Pakistan shows a higher reliance on quota women, with dynastic women capturing many reserved seats rather than general ones.

Bangladesh has allowed more women to be directly elected, partly due to its secular legal framework and economic shifts, yet it still relies on dynasties for top leadership.

The share of dynastic parliamentarians is higher in Pakistan, but Bangladesh has had longer periods of female executive leadership, both outcomes shaped by dynastic inheritance rather than democratisation of access.

Overall, dynastic politics in both Pakistan and Bangladesh illustrates the central paradox of women's political participation in South Asia: dynasties facilitate women's descriptive representation at the highest levels but simultaneously constrain their substantive agency by tying them to patriarchal patronage networks.

### Clientelism and Corruption Nexus

#### Clientelism as a Facilitator of Dynastic Politics

Clientelism, understood as the exchange of material benefits for political loyalty, is a defining feature of electoral politics in South Asia.<sup>43</sup> Political families deploy vast patronage networks to secure votes, particularly in rural areas where kinship and economic dependence shape political choices. In Pakistan, dynastic politicians often command *biradari* (kinship) networks that mobilise voters through obligations of loyalty and reciprocal support.<sup>44</sup> In Bangladesh, political patronage extends from national leaders down to local-level brokers, binding voters to parties and families through resource distribution and personal ties.<sup>45</sup>

For dynasties, clientelism is not just a strategy but a survival mechanism. As Azari and Smith (2012) argue, informal institutions like clientelism consolidate family power by ensuring that electoral victories are reproduced across generations. Wealthy political families leverage both financial capital and social networks to dominate local politics, portraying themselves as indispensable patrons.<sup>46</sup> This arrangement marginalises women outside dynastic circles, as they lack access to the same networks of patronage and resource distribution.

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<sup>41</sup> Paasilinna, "Women's Reserved Seats in Bangladesh."

<sup>42</sup> "A Silver Lining: Women in Reserved Seats in Local Government in Bangladesh - Nazneen - 2010 - IDS Bulletin - Wiley Online Library."

<sup>43</sup> Chandra, *Democratic Dynasties*.

<sup>44</sup> "Dynastic Politics in Punjab."

<sup>45</sup> Nazneen and Mahmud, "Gendered Politics of Securing Inclusive Development."

<sup>46</sup> Julia R. Azari and Jennifer K. Smith, "Unwritten Rules: Informal Institutions in Established Democracies," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 1 (2012): 37–55.





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### **Corruption as the Nexus Between Dynasty and Clientelism**

Corruption intertwines with clientelism, sustaining dynasties by financing electoral campaigns, rewarding loyalists, and reinforcing networks of dependency. In both Pakistan and Bangladesh, electioneering is prohibitively expensive, with candidates expected to spend vast sums on rallies, voter mobilization, and informal “vote buying” practices.<sup>47</sup> Dynastic families, already wealthy, are uniquely positioned to shoulder these costs.

Importantly, corruption in this context is not perceived solely as theft of public funds but as the abuse of office for family consolidation. For example, the Bhutto family in Pakistan and the Sheikh and Zia families in Bangladesh have all faced allegations of large-scale corruption. Yet despite these charges, their electoral bases have remained resilient. Scholars note that voters often forgive or overlook corruption by dynastic politicians because they are perceived as “family elders” responsible for the constituency’s welfare.<sup>48</sup>

This creates a deeply gendered dynamic:

**Dynastic women** benefit from inherited patronage and corruption networks but are not autonomous actors within them. Their role is symbolic, tied to family name and legitimacy rather than independent resource distribution.

**Non-dynastic women** are effectively excluded, as they lack both the wealth and the networks necessary to compete in patronage-based politics.

### **Gendered Effects of the Nexus**

The dynasty–clientelism–corruption nexus produces several gendered outcomes:

**Women as Substitutes, Not Equals.** In Pakistan, when Musharraf’s 2002 graduation requirement disqualified undereducated male politicians, dynastic families nominated educated women relatives as substitutes.<sup>49</sup> These women gained seats but remained constrained by family loyalties, reinforcing the idea of women as “reserve heirs.”

**Quota Capture.** Both Pakistan and Bangladesh use reserved seats to enhance women’s representation, but clientelist parties nominate women from loyal or dynastic families. Since reserved seat MPs lack constituencies, they remain dependent on party leaders for their survival.<sup>50</sup> This limits their autonomy and reduces quotas to tools of elite family consolidation rather than democratization.

**Vulnerability to Sexist Backlash.** Dynastic women face disproportionate gendered hostility, often couched in moral or personal attacks rather than policy critique. Benazir Bhutto in the 1980s was targeted through doctored images and slurs, while more recently Maryam Nawaz in Pakistan and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh have faced sexist rhetoric from political opponents. These attacks delegitimise women not based on governance but on gendered stereotypes, reinforcing male-dominated norms.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Arshad Ali, “Vote-Buying Allegations: ECP Serves Notice to Atta Tarar, PPP Leader,” Samaa TV, February 4, 2024, <https://www.samaa.tv/208739244-vote-buying-allegations-ecp-serves-notice-to-atta-tarar-ppp-leader>; Ali, “Vote-Buying Allegations: ECP Serves Notice to Atta Tarar, PPP Leader.”

<sup>48</sup> Kumar, “The Family Way”; Pranab Kumar Panday, *Women’s Political Participation in Bangladesh: Institutional Reforms, Actors and Outcomes* (Springer, 2013); Mendoza et al., “Term Limits and Political Dynasties.”

<sup>49</sup> Bari, “Women Parliamentarians.”

<sup>50</sup> “A Silver Lining: Women in Reserved Seats in Local Government in Bangladesh - Nazneen - 2010 - IDS Bulletin - Wiley Online Library.”

<sup>51</sup> Weiss, “Moving Forward with the Legal Empowerment of Women in Pakistan.”



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**Corruption as a Gendered Cost Barrier.** Because political survival in both countries requires access to illicit or informal resources, women outside dynastic families are doubly disadvantaged: they lack both patrimonial wealth and access to corruption networks dominated by men. The high financial cost of politics thus entrenches dynastic reproduction and narrows opportunities for independent female politicians.<sup>52</sup>

### **Pakistan and Bangladesh Compared**

In Pakistan, clientelist politics is heavily tied to kinship and *biradari* networks in rural Punjab and Sindh. Dynasties like the Bhuttos and Sharifs mobilize these networks through patronage, ensuring that women's entry remains tied to family legacy rather than merit or popular support.

In Bangladesh, patronage is mediated more through centralized party structures (Awami League, BNP), but the result is the same: dynastic women dominate, while non-dynastic women struggle to secure nominations or resources. The "battle of the begums" reflects not women's empowerment but the personalization of party politics around two dynastic families.

### **Impact on Women's Political Participation**

#### **Descriptive vs. Substantive Representation**

The rise of dynastic women in Pakistan and Bangladesh has often been celebrated as a breakthrough in patriarchal societies. The election of Benazir Bhutto as the first female prime minister of a Muslim-majority country in 1988, or Sheikh Hasina's long incumbency in Bangladesh, are frequently cited as milestones in global gender politics.<sup>53</sup> Yet feminist institutionalist scholarship urges caution in equating descriptive representation, the numerical presence of women, with substantive representation, defined as women influencing policy agendas and outcomes.<sup>54</sup>

Empirical evidence shows that in both Pakistan and Bangladesh, women's descriptive presence has grown largely through quotas and dynastic inheritance, but their substantive impact remains constrained. For example, women in Pakistan currently hold 20% of National Assembly seats, but less than 5% have been elected directly on general seats.<sup>55</sup> In Bangladesh, women occupy around 21% of parliament seats, but most enter through reserved quotas, with very few successfully competing in open constituencies.<sup>56</sup>

### **Dynasties as Gateways and Gatekeepers**

Dynasties act as both enablers and constraints. On one hand, dynastic ties allow women to enter politics in contexts where independent female candidates face cultural and institutional resistance. On the other hand, dynastic women are seldom autonomous actors. Their roles are circumscribed by family ideology and patriarchal bargains that prioritise family continuity over gender equality.<sup>57</sup>

For instance:

Benazir Bhutto's legacy is tied as much to her father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as to her own political skill. Her legitimacy as prime minister was constantly questioned, and she was

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<sup>52</sup> "Dynastic Politics in Punjab."

<sup>53</sup> Jalalzai and Rincker, "Blut Ist Dicker Als Wasser. Familienbindungen Und Weltweite Politische Machtbeziehungen Blood Is Thicker than Water."

<sup>54</sup> Piscopo, "Rethinking Descriptive Representation"; Mackay and Krook, *Gender, Politics and Institutions*.

<sup>55</sup> "Election Commission of Pakistan."

<sup>56</sup> Paasilinna, "Women's Reserved Seats in Bangladesh."

<sup>57</sup> Weiss, "Moving Forward with the Legal Empowerment of Women in Pakistan"; Nazneen and Mahmud, "Gendered Politics of Securing Inclusive Development."



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subjected to sexist smear campaigns, including the circulation of doctored images and public slurs by opponents.<sup>58</sup>

Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia in Bangladesh are widely perceived as heirs to their fathers' and husbands' legacies, not as independent political entrepreneurs. Their prolonged rivalry has entrenched dynastic polarization rather than widened the space for ordinary women to participate.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, dynasties open the door for women's entry but simultaneously act as gatekeepers, confining women's political participation to elite families.

### **Quotas and the Capture of Reserved Seats**

Reserved seats in both countries were intended to broaden women's political inclusion. Yet quota systems have been co-opted by dynasties and clientelist parties. Because reserved seats are allocated proportionally to party strength, women are nominated by party leadership rather than directly elected. In practice, this means male leaders often nominate wives, daughters, or sisters of loyal party members, reinforcing dynastic capture.<sup>60</sup>

This arrangement produces a cycle of dependence: quota women lack constituencies, electoral bases, or independent networks. They rely on male party leadership for renomination, which discourages them from advancing gender-focused agendas that might challenge patriarchal norms. Instead, they function as symbolic representatives, increasing numbers without transforming outcomes.

### **Symbolic Leadership, Structural Exclusion**

The paradox of South Asian women's political participation lies in its symbolism: the region has had some of the most visible female leaders globally, yet ordinary women remain marginalized. Bangladesh's decades of female prime ministers have not translated into stronger institutional pathways for women outside dynasties. Pakistan's first female prime minister did not usher in a feminist transformation of politics but instead reinforced the dominance of dynastic families.

This paradox is explained by Feminist Institutionalism: formal rules such as quotas provide entry points, but informal rules such as dynasties, clientelism, and corruption structure women's roles in gendered ways. Women gain visibility but not voice; seats but not influence; representation but not power.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis confirms the central hypothesis: the dynasty–clientelism–corruption nexus operates as a gendered informal institution that constrains women's political participation in Pakistan and Bangladesh. While dynasties facilitate women's entry into politics in patriarchal societies, this entry is limited to elite families and is mediated by male-dominated patronage and corruption networks. Women who enter politics through dynasties often serve as symbolic figures or proxies rather than autonomous representatives, while non-dynastic women remain excluded from meaningful participation due to a lack of resources and networks.

Feminist Institutionalism provides a useful lens to explain this paradox. Formal rules such as quotas increase descriptive representation, but informal rules such as dynastic succession, clientelism, and corruption structure political participation in ways that reproduce male privilege. As a result, women in Pakistan and Bangladesh gain visibility without substantive influence.

The comparative evidence underscores a broader lesson for South Asia: female leadership through dynasties does not necessarily translate into structural empowerment for women. Without reforms that democratize party structures, reduce clientelist dependence, and provide women with independent access to constituencies and resources, quotas and dynastic succession

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<sup>58</sup> Weiss, "Moving Forward with the Legal Empowerment of Women in Pakistan."

<sup>59</sup> Chowdhury, "Problems of Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh."

<sup>60</sup> Bari, "Women Parliamentarians"; "A Silver Lining: Women in Reserved Seats in Local Government in Bangladesh - Nazneen - 2010 - IDS Bulletin - Wiley Online Library."



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will continue to produce symbolic representation rather than substantive change.

This study contributes to the literature by situating women's political participation in Pakistan and Bangladesh within the broader dynamics of informal institutions. It demonstrates that dynastic politics, while offering individual women a pathway to power, ultimately sustains patriarchal political orders that constrain women's collective empowerment. The paradox of South Asian women in politics is thus one of visibility without voice, leaders at the top, but limited agency at the grassroots.