

# WOMEN IN PAKISTAN: HISTORICAL PROBLEMS OF PARTICIPATION IN LEGISLATION

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## *Abstract*

*Women have historically been an integral part of decision making in politics in South Asia, and throughout the formative years of Pakistan's history, from 1947 onwards. Despite this, the representation of women in the political arenas has been abysmal. This paper aims to look at the participation of women historically in Pakistan, and understand the problems that are hampering the progress of women representatives in the legislative assemblies of Pakistan. This problem can be broken down into two parts, i.e. the marginalization of women in society, reflected in the low literacy rate for women, and the lack of interest of political leaders in increasing women's participation in the politics.*

## Introduction

Historically, women in the Indian Sub-Continent have never been extended equal status in society (Saiyid, 1998). When Pakistan came into being in 1947, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan made it a point to include women in the political process through the Muslim Student Federation (ibid.). According to Qadeer (2006), Jinnah went so far as to mention numerous times during his public speeches that the emancipation of Muslims was impossible without involvement of Muslim women in the independence movement.

This was undoubtedly a social and psychological revolution for Muslims in South Asia. In a society where women were not even allowed to go out of their homes, it was now possible for them to be directly involved in a nation-wide political movement. Given the involvement of women in Pakistani politics beyond that point, it is deplorable that the current underrepresentation of women that exists in Pakistani governance is tolerated. From 1935 till 1972 numerous Pakistani women have been involved directly in legislation in Pakistan, in both the lower and the upper houses of parliament (Mumtaz, 2005).

While it is evident that women have played an important role in the politics of Pakistan, and have often taken the lead for numerous ministries and political parties, their level of current participation remains limited at best. The select few who have managed to achieve political seniority and representation in the parliament have come from the elite, upper strata of society (Saiyid, 2001). They are often daughters of senior political leaders, who use them as rubberstamp 'women's emancipation' symbols for popularity. Although more research needs to be done on the issue, however on the face of it there is little resistance on ground level to electing women leaders, even from socially conservative provinces in Pakistan, such as Sindh, which hailed Benazir Bhutto, twice Prime Minister of Pakistan, and Begum Nasim Wali Khan from Khyber-Pakhtoonkhawa. In most cases, even religious conservatives have had no problems with women

politicians (Ibid.).

Despite these encouraging statistics, the representation of women in governance and legislation is negligible at best. In this paper, some reasons will be highlighted that will explain the lack of participation of women despite all complimentary laws being in place.

## Under-Registration

Historically, one of the biggest problems is under-registration for voting. In the 1950's the registration difference between men and women was 20%. After the adult franchise was adopted in the 1950's, this figure dropped significantly to 12% in the 1970's. There was a further reduction of 4% on this figure in the 1988 elections (Mhatre, 2009). This difference increased to 10% between 1993 and 1997. Although the rest of the country was somewhat progressive, a major problem existed in the Khyber-Pakhtoonkhawa province, especially in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in the north of Pakistan. The very right to vote was given to women as late as 1997 (Mumtaz and Shaheed, 1987), and even then the voting of women was frowned upon in the tribal areas (Saiyid, 2001).

The lack of women participation in the voting process is mainly because of the centuries old bias against women's participation in public affairs. The concept of women taking decisions relating to matters outside the house is still an unwelcome concept in rural Pakistan (Dahlerup, 2006). Typical patriarchs feel it an insult that their women need go out of the house, reveal their names to male electoral officers, and in general participate in matters that are considered typically 'male'.

Another problem is the low voter turnout. Not only are women restricted from leaving their homes by husbands and parents, they face numerous problems, such as sexual harassment, biasness in getting leave from offices, and general discrimination during the voting process, become deterrents for women who want to vote (Raza, 2007). Needless to say another



issue is the psychological indoctrination of women, who take little interest in politics since it's considered to be out of their domain (ibid.). As a result, political leaders, electoral administrative officers, and other government officers involved in the electoral process often come to an agreement with tribal elders in rural areas and men vote instead of women of their household (Porta and Caiani, 2010).

Another reason for low turnout of women is the national identity card (NIC) that is required for voting. Not only is the process of acquiring the Pakistani NIC tedious and immensely bureaucratic, it requires women to visit offices, deal with male government agents, and have a photograph taken, all of which are dogmatically opposed to the narrow-mindedness of men in rural societies (Saiyid, 2001).

### General Seats and Reserved Seats

Prior to 1970, women were not allowed to contest on general (non-quota) seats in the parliament. Besides, neither of the two winning political parties had a single woman candidate for election (Inayatullah, 1999), and had it not been for the nine independent candidates, not a single woman would have been a candidate in the national elections. Since then, over 100 women have participated in the elections as candidates, yet less than quarters have been successful (Birner et. al., 2006). Considering there are more women in Pakistan than men (Population Census Organization, 1998), this figure is abysmal.

In order to solve the problem of low representation of women in the parliament, a quota system was developed, whereby certain seats were especially reserved for women. Unfortunately, every time seats were reserved, the effective legislation expired without much interest. No seats were reserved for women between 1990 and 2002, despite the fact that Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan's twice prime minister and the first woman head of state of any Muslim country, held office during this time. The National Reconstruction Bureau, in 2002, set a 33 percent quota for women in local and provincial level elections; however, reserved

seats at national level were still only 17 percent for the senate and 18 percent for the national assembly (Reyes, 2003).

According to Mehmood (1997), women in Pakistan have been unable to successfully represent themselves as legislators on the national and provincial levels. Therefore he suggests that there is a need for greater and sustained affirmative action. Despite numerous attempts by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and government bodies, the female voter turnout was pathetic in many rural areas of the country, to the extent that less than 40 out of 6,600 registered women voters turned up in the Khyber Agency, a Pakhtoon dominated area in the northern areas of Pakistan (Commission of Inquiry for Women of Pakistan, 1997).

After the elections in 1997, a survey was conducted by researchers in which numerous problems were highlighted province wise (Inayatullah, 2000). Among the numerous problems listed relevant to this study include, inadequate arrangements for women, lack of awareness of voting procedures, inadequate arrangements for segregation of men and women, male staff in women's areas, and women not allowed to vote by staff.

### Devolution and the Participation of Women

In 1999, the democratic government fell and a military regime began in Pakistan. Irrespective of how it fared politically, it succeeded in bringing women forward into the political arena. 33% seats were awarded to women at the district level, which was unprecedented until then. Also, women contested in the election not as separate constituencies, but from the general, the same as men. Although conservative elements pushed hard against this, numerous women's rights' groups fought hard and successfully got the legislation approved. Especially in the northern areas, numerous movements were started advocating violence against women who filed their nomination papers. Some religious backing from mosques in villages and small cities also helped build the pressure. However as it

turned out, the results were overwhelming. London.

At the end of the first phase of elections, in December 2000, nearly 5000 women were elected from nearly a thousand district councils (Aurat Foundation).

## Conclusion

Historically Pakistan has not been the ideal breeding ground for women in politics. However, over time certain problems have emerged as patterns, such as permission from family, inadequate arrangements at polling stations, male staff serving women at polling stations, social backwardness and lack of awareness of women, etc. Because of these reasons, and others elaborated above, women have traditionally been in the background when it came to politics, despite reserved seats. Those who did contest has strong family ties, and influential family members, and even then they depended upon the male politicians in their families for direction, support and protection (Dahlerup, 2006). Even the first female prime minister of any Muslim nation in the world did not make any but a marginal difference in the representation of women in legislation in Pakistan (Saiyid, 2001).

The recent literacy rate for women according to UNICEF (2010) is a little more than half of that of men. With this in mind it is evident that there are problems of low registration count (under-registration), low turnout at elections, difficulties at polling stations, and others continue to distance women from elections. Even with the devolution plan presented by the military government in 2001, there was only a marginal increase in women's representation at the national level. However, it was a step in the right direction, and further research may provide with answers that will help more women representatives become legislators at the national level.

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