

WOMEN'S POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT IN SOUTH ASIA: A STUDY OF PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Women empowerment is the freedom of women from the vicious grips of various social, political, economic, and cultural discriminations. Empowering women refers to capacity building to manage a more rewarding and enriched life on their own behalf. The current article has focused on political empowerment of women with the specific reference of Pakistan. Political empowerment was taken as independent variable which is measured by women's representation in national, provincial and local legislative bodies while using the following indicators; Women's representational ratio in parliament, women's representational ratio in presidency and premiership, women's representational ratio in ministership at national as well as at provincial level, and the women's representational ratio in local governance. In Pakistan, the women representation in the electoral and legislative process has been very marginal since its inception. In recent general elections of 2018, election commission of Pakistan in election Act 2017, made it mandatory to allocate at least 5% tickets to the women candidates of all the political parties as well as 10% women votes in every constituency for the validation of election. This should be appreciated; however, women representation in its true and complete sense is still lacked behind.

Key Words: Women Empowerment, Elections, Under-representation, Electoral process

Introduction

“Unless women are engendered, they will be endangered”

Human Development Report, 1995

Women's empowerment is an emerging and multi-dimensional concept which is continually being defined, redefined, described and exemplified by social scientists across the whole globe. Generally, the concept is correlated and inter-connected with the principle of gender parity and non-discrimination in all the affairs of life (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002). It is frequently associated with the structural transformation of society by labor reforms, equal access to various resources, granting the right of decision making, educational and economic opportunities. Empowering women has been a neglected dimension since centuries; however, at the moment the concept is being rightly recognized as one of the paramount policy goals. It is imperative just not for women cause only, rather for the progress and socio economic development of the whole society. In the Asian continent, among the eight South Asian states, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka have high ranking in terms of socio economic development as compared to others (Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Nepal and Bangladesh). Human Development Index (HDI) reports indicated that women empowerment wasn't satisfactory in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Afghanistan (Dutta, 2014).

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Women’s empowerment brings dynamic changes in the decision making process that has a direct and significant impact on societal development (Steffen, 2014). Although, women have become very active recently yet their representation in the power sharing structure of the states is very less as compared to their ratio in population (Somani, 2012). Most widely, three dimensions are studied to evaluate the level of women empowerment, such as; social empowerment, economic empowerment and political empowerment (Aregbesola, 20116; Dutta, 2014; Kamal, 2011; Wiklander, 2010). However, in this research paper women’s political empowerment has been assessed with reference to Pakistan. To measure political empowerment, following three indicators at three tiers of government have been employed;

1. Women’s representational ratio in elected bodies (in national government and provincial governments)
2. Women’s representational ratio in federal and provincial cabinets
3. Women’s representational ratio in local self-governments

The paper has been organized into three sections, section one deals with the conceptual framework of the term “Women’s empowerment”. The proceeding section discusses women’s political empowerment status in Pakistan and also explains the issues involved in the empowerment process. The last section explores some policy measures which could expedite women’s political empowerment and concludes the study findings.

Women’s Empowerment; A Tool of Human Development

Unequal women’s political participation had remained visible even in western industrialized democracies. Albeit their claims of gender equality, women constitute only 24.0% of the total membership of national legislatures all over the globe (IPU, 2018) in spite of being 50.0% of the total world population. In some parts of the world, women’s political participation ratio is higher relatively to some other parts. Fig: 01 shows women’s representational ratio across the various regions of the world.

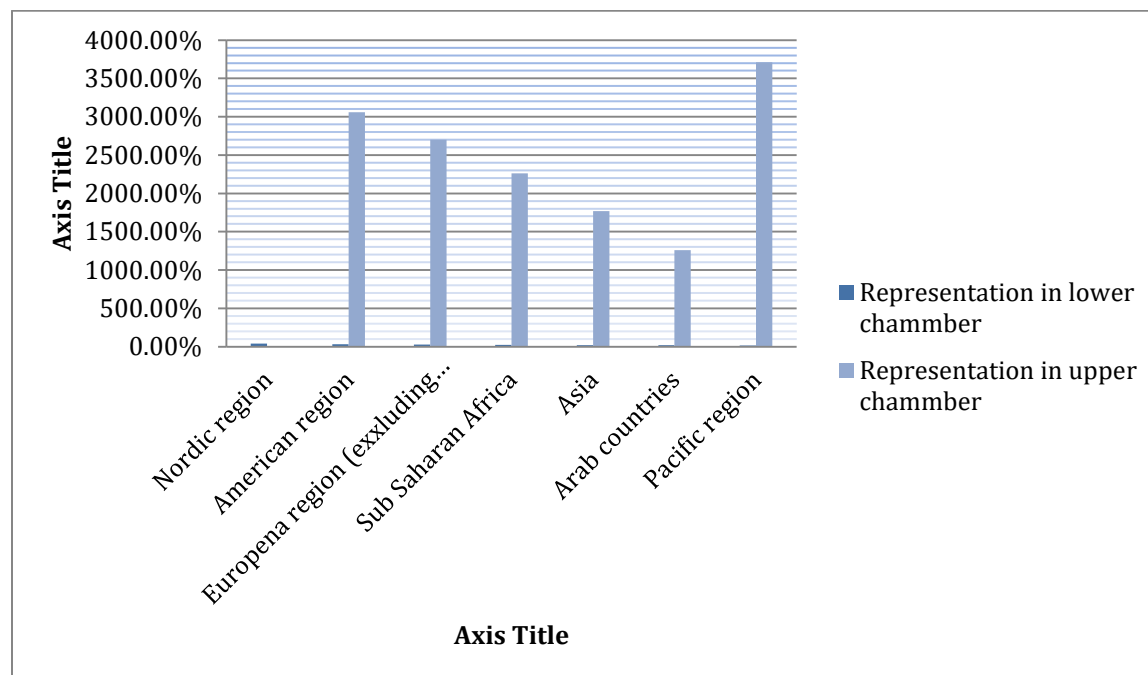


Fig: 01 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, <https://www.ipu.org/>)

Asia is the most populace continent of the earth planet that is divided into various regions such as; south East Asia, South Asia, Northern Asia and Central Asia. South Asia is comprised of eight sovereign states (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan) and is a place of nearly 1/5th earth planet's population. Women's political representation in the national legislature across South Asian states varies with great difference. The figure: 02 depicts this variation clearly.

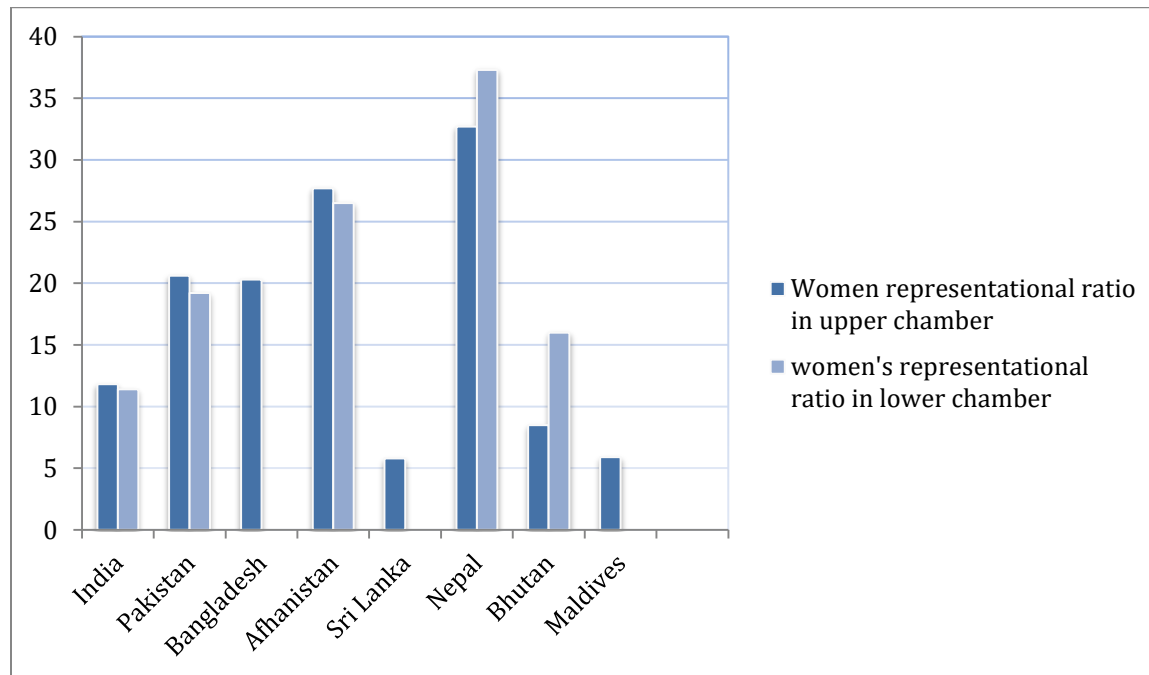


Fig: 02 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, <https://www.ipu.org/>)

In South Asian states of Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, women had held top political offices of the presidency and premiership for several times. The below given table: 01 depicts its reflections (PILDAT, 2004).

State	Name of Office Bearer	Nomenclature of Office	Era
Pakistan	Benazir Bhutto	Prime Minister	1988-1990 1993-1996 Two Terms
India	Indira Gandhi	Prime Minister	1966-1977 1980-1984 Two Terms
Nepal	Bidhya Devi	Presidnet	2015-Incumbent
Sri Lanka	Chandrika Kumaratunga Sisimavo Bandaranayake	President Prime Minister	1994-2005 1960-1965 1972-1977 1994-2000 Three Terms
Bangladesh	Khalida Zia Khalida Zia Sheikh Haseena Sheikh Haseena	Prime Minister	1991-1996 2001-2006 1996-2001 2006-Incumbent Two Terms Two Terms

Table: 01 (Official websites of Parliaments of India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh)

Women's Political Empowerment: A Study of Pakistan

Pakistan is primarily located in the southern region of Asia and hence come under the umbrella of South Asia. It shares geographical borders with the two other south Asian states; People's Republic of India and the Islamic republic of Afghanistan. Women constitute 48.78% of the Pakistani state's total population, but their share in the political institutions is very minimal in accordance to their ratio in population.

I. Women's Representation in National Legislature:

The below given tables: 02 and 03 portray the share of women's representation in elected bodies in national government. Maximum representation remained 22% and remained 19% in the lower and upper chamber respectively since the inception of Pakistan in 1947, which is very less than the ratio of women in total population that is about 49%.

Women's Representation in Lower Chamber (National Assembly) of National Legislature of Pakistan

Year	Total No of Seats of National Legislature (in lower house)	Seats Hold by Women Against General Seats	Reserved Seats for Women	Percentage of Seats Hold by Women
1947-1955	79	2	0	3%
1955	80	0	0	0%
1956	310	0	10	3%
1962	156	2	6	5%
1965	156	0	6	4%
1970	313	1	13	4%
1972	144	0	6	4%
1977	210	2	10	6%
1985	237	4	20	10%
1988	237	4	20	10%
1990	210	2	0	1%
1993	217	4	0	2%
1997	217	7	0	3%
2002	342	14	60	22%
2008	342	16	60	22%
2013	342	9	60	20%
2018	342	8	60	19.88%

Table: 02 (Official website of National Assembly of Pakistan, <http://www.na.gov.pk/en/index.php>)

Women's Representation in Upper Chamber (Senate) of National Legislature of Pakistan

Year	Total No of Seats in Senate	Seats Hold by Women Against General Seats	Reserved Seats for Women	Percentage of Total Seats Hold by Women
1973	45	1	0	2%
1975	45	1	0	2%
1977	63	0	0	0%
1985	87	0	0	0%

1988	87	1	0	1%
1994	87	2	0	2%
1999	87	0	0	0%
2003	100	1	17	18%
2006	100	0	17	17%
2009	100	0	17	17%
2012	100	0	17	17%
2015	104	0	17	16%
2018	104	3	17	19%

Table: 03 (Official website of Senate of Pakistan, <http://www.senate.gov.pk>)

Since the creation of Pakistan, there have been twenty speakers and eighteen deputy speakers of the lower chamber, but only one woman speaker and one woman was selected as deputy speaker twice throughout the political history of state. The below given table: 04 explains the representational ratio of women. Same is the case with the upper chamber; there had been seven chairmen and eleven deputy chairmen, but not a single woman was elected for chairmanship or deputy chairmanship.

Women Speakers and Deputy Speakers of National Legislature of Pakistan

Name	Office Type	Tenure
Fahmida Mirza	Speaker of National Assembly (NA)	2008-2013
Ashraf Khatoon	Deputy Speaker of NA	1973-1977
Ashraf Khatoon	Deputy Speaker of NA	1988-1990

Table: 04 (Official website of National Assembly of Pakistan, <http://www.na.gov.pk/en/index.php>)

Women are also under-represented in the federal cabinet, where their highest representation remained 13% under the current Prime Minister Imran Khan and before general elections of 2018, their representation remained very less or not a single female minister was taken in many premiers' era such as; Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Muhammad Khan Junejo and Nawaz Sharif. The table: 05 has depicted this scenario very clearly.

Women's Representation in Federal Cabinet

PM Name	Total Cabinet Members	Women Ministers	Women's ratio
Imran Khan	24	3	13%
Shahid Khaqan Abbasi	32	3	9%
Nawaz Sharif	20	0	0%
Raja Pervaiz Ashraf	36	4	11%
Yousaf Raza Gillani	56	4	7%
Soukat Aziz	34	1	3%
Shujat Hussain	20	1	5%
Mohammad Nawaz Shareef	19	1	5%
Banazir Bhutto	20	0	0%
Mohammad Nawaz Shareef	29	0	0%
Banazir Bhutto	22	2	9%
Mohammad Khan Junejo	19	0	0%

Z.A Bhutto	13	0	0%
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Table: 05 (Official website of Cabinet Division of Pakistan, <http://www.cabinet.gov.pk/>)

II. Women's Representation in Provincial Legislatures

Effective governance demands equal participation and representation of both men and women. It is identified as an essential prerequisite for the sustained development all over the globe. Capabilities of developmental infrastructures are enhanced by balanced gender representation (UNDP, 2008). It is universally accepted phenomenon that by women exclusion that constitutes almost half of the earth planet's population in the national governance, human development at its optimum level can't be obtained (Kamal, 2000). This can be ratified by the statement of former United Nation's secretary; Kofi Annan, "by segregating against half of the humans, the achievement of objectives is near to impossible" (Kofi Annan, 2006 in DFID, 2007). Quota for women's representation in provincial legislatures has been specified. Table: 06 presents the ratio of women's representation in each provincial legislature of Pakistan.

Women's Representation in Provincial Legislatures

Province	Total Seats	Seats Reserved for women	Percentage of Women's Representation
Punjab	371	66	17.8%
Sindh	168	29	17.3%
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	124	22	17.7%
Balochistan	65	11	16.9%
Total	728	128	17.6%

Although certain portfolios had have been assigned to women as provincial ministers, yet their number is very less or equal to zero. Table: 07 highlights the composition of provincial cabinets and women's percentage in them.

Women's Representation in Provincial Cabinets

Provincial Cabinet	Total no of provincial ministries	Women Ministers	Percentage of ministries hold by women
Punjab	34	02	5.88%
Sindh	16	02	12.5%
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	11	00	00%
Balochistan	14	00	00%
Total	75	04	5.33%

Table: 07 (Provincial Assemblies' official websites)

III. Women's Representation in Local Legislatures

To foster women's political participation, an effective plan has been introduced under the tutelage of Devolution of Power Plan 2000, according to which the women were granted 33% representation of the total seats in local legislature. This plan enhanced the socio political role of women in the different affairs of local governance that surely elevated women's political empowerment (Haroon, 2010). Table: 08 contemplate the women's representation since the inception of Pakistan to date.

Women's Representation in Local Legislature

Time period	Regime Type	Women Representational Ratio
1958-68	General Ayub Khan (Military)	No representation under basic democracy ordinance 1959
1971-77	Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (Civilian)	No special representation was ensured
1977 - 85	Zia-ul-Haq (Military)	2 seats at Union Council level and 10% for other tiers except NWFP (KP)
1988-90	Benazir Bhutto (Civilian)	Local government elections couldn't be held
1990-93	Nawaz Sharif (Civilian)	10.4%
1993-96	Benazir Bhutto (Civilian)	Local government elections couldn't be held
1997-99	Nawaz Sharif (Civilian)	12.7% in Punjab, 25.8% in Balochistan, 2.9% in NWFP and 23% in Sindh
1999-2008	General Pervez Musharraf	33% at all the three levels (district/tehsil/ union)

Table: 08 (PILDAT)

Challenges and Impediments

This section elaborates the challenges and impediments that Pakistani women have to face in the electoral process to be elected in national, provincial and local legislatures. There are several factors that hinder women's effective and equal representation in the political sphere. Although, women participation has enlarged recently yet it seems not that much significant as it should be. The challenges which impede the way of emphatic women's political empowerment, has been construed under the following heads.

1. Systemic Barriers

Systemic barriers refer to institutional, legal, structural, political, and cultural and policy based hindrances in the way of women's effective political participation (Cunaman, 2018). Although, the constitution of Pakistan ensures equal access to women and men to political rights and development opportunities, yet the practice is totally contrary to it due to patriarchal society (Jabeen & Jadoon, 2008). Several norms, values and traditions are present which hinder gender equality and restrict the opportunities for women in the public arena. Women's right to vote, right to form political association, freedom to speak, right to choose the favorite profession and freedom of movement often violated with the name of religious, societal and cultural interpretations (Rasul, 2014). Political awareness dearth, unavailability of gender friendly environment and political instability has also been playing an important role to hinder women to participate in political activities at large scale (Paterson, 2010). The political affairs in Pakistan are considered as a sloppy practice that is related to corruption, favoritism, discrimination, antipathy, clashes as well as violence (Bhattacharya, 2014). Additionally, it has been led by the primitive mindsets and genetic systems according to which the political opportunities can only be provided to the elite class and ignore ordinary citizens along with women specifically from politics. European Union Election Observation Mission – 2018's final report testifies this contradiction. There were 105,955,407 total registered voters for general elections 2018, out of which 46,731,145 were female voters, constituting 44.10% of the total number of voters. However, the women voter turnout remained very less in many constituencies such as; in (PK-23 Shangla-I) women turnout was under 10%. Female candidates were to a large degree invisible in the media and were rarely quoted in the news. On average, broadcast media devoted only 13% of time to female candidates. Neither One hundred and eighty one political parties nor the media encouraged the equality of women's participation in elections (Mission, 2018). In Pakistani society, women are primarily dogged through the cultural values, traditions, and customized attitude and a clear line has been drawn between the positions of men and women. Generally,

women are placed on subordinate positions. Such gender stereotypes are developed in any society once becomes a challenge to eradicate.

2. Organizational Barriers

The organizational factors which impede women's effective political participation include patriarchal socio-political structure, slender political training opportunities and insufficient ratio of women in elected bodies (Och & Shames, 2018). Women's fewer representation in elected institutions and almost exclusion from policy making bodies has negative implication for their effective participation in affairs of state. Insufficient representations in these important forums make it hard for women to raise concerns about the plight of female population in Pakistan. This situation is depriving females to play their due role in administration of state. It is the wastage of talent and energies of almost half of the country's population. It is at the same time cause as well as effect of male dominant governing structure and gender inequalities (Bushra & Wajiha, 2013). Ratio of women's representation in the parliament up till 2003 never exceeded the limits of 3.2% and 2.3% for the National Assembly and Senate of Pakistan respectively. The situation was much worse at provincial level as only 0.4% women were being elected for the provincial assemblies of KP, Balochistan, Sindh and Punjab. The situation hasn't been better at the level of local bodies' institutions. Male dominancy is so common in Pakistan that despite 33% of female representation in local governments' elected institutions they are seldom occupying prominent administrative positions in various projects and programs managed by local governments. Gender imbalance in terms of male-female representation in important organizations at all levels has resulted in under-representation of women's problems and considerations.

The training facilities to equip women with skills which are required for useful participation in development of society are visibly insufficient in Pakistan. The new local government system provided significant representation to female members of society. There was a need to launch a comprehensive program of training for women councilors for enhancing their capabilities as political workers. It would have contributed for more useful participation of women through elected bodies as they will have a better understanding of their role for resolution of problems faced by general public. Some training programs are offered for females but are not executed properly. These programs are conducted by civil society organization as well as by government agencies. These programs failed to provide the required level of training. Lack of planning and intent are basic obstacles in achievement of avowed objectives. The authors visited the venue of one such training program organized for women councilors and discovered certain inconsistencies. The participants were selected by making contacts on individual basis rather than through Tehsil Management Authority (TMA). The women councilors who were participating in that program of training expressed various reservations. In their opinion the difficulties faced by them were greater as compare to the advantages of participation in that program. The content of training wasn't compatible with proclaimed objectives. Participants weren't comfortable regarding venue and duration of the program. Lack of any financial incentive like TA/DA was also a cause of participants' disappointment. Lack of policies to promote balance in representation of both genders is unfortunate. Meager representation of women can be attributed to lack of earnest on part of government to devise women friendly policies. Women have some other responsibilities which generally men are not obliged to perform. They have to look after their family and children. Training for women should be scheduled in such a way that it should be easy for them to participate without surrendering their

household responsibilities. The other hurdles that prevent women participation in such programs are lack of day care centers and supportive behavior of family or society. All of these are formidable obstacles hindering women's involvement in governance. The women in Pakistan are dejected about non-supportive attitude of men. Mostly this abusive working environment due to males' haughty behavior is discouraging for females. The society in Pakistan, most of the time is insensible towards aspirations of women. These factors have negative implications for women participation in electoral politics, governance and political affairs of state.

3. Personal Barriers

Women have to face many challenges at the personal level. They have to surmount several impediments. Pakistan's traditional social culture isn't in favor of women's involvement in all those activities which are conducted outside the boundary wall of family house (Jabeen & Jadoon, 2008). The females who wished to become working-women normally face antagonistic responses of family and society. The other problems faced by women at personal level include unfriendly environment at workplace, dual responsibilities of home and profession. All such factors negatively influence their confidence and spirit to actively participate in politics and governance. Education is the key indicator of human development. In Pakistan most of people are more concerned about the education of sons compare to their daughters. Most of the available monetary resources of families are utilized for education of male wards and meager amount is allocated for daughters' education. Consequently, women's share in employment is less. Personal factors are also a major cause for under-representation of women because they are obliged to play several roles in their lives and to play those roles effeciently women usually ignore their own needs or requirements (Bushra & Wajiha, 2013). These factors affect the self-confident, inspiration and motivation of women and woman councilors have to overcome these barriers in order to move forward. It caused under-representation of females in the process of decision making and the electoral system as well. The other factor is the electoral system of Pakistan. Education is the main key to progress and success for individuals. Access to the educational facilities is directly associated with the socio political- milieu. Women in Pakistani society unfortunately do not have favorable environment. This has deprived women from this basic element for progress. This situation is quite contrasting if one compares it with the opportunities of education offered for male members of society. Benefited by this preferential treatment, male members of Pakistani society have been able to gain better education as well as prominent positions in governance. It has been recorded through an economy survey that the overall literacy rate in Pakistan is 44% while the female literacy rate is lower than 30% which shows the poor access of women to education in Pakistani society. As mentioned above women have to play various roles in her life regarding family (PILDAT, 2004). The women councilors also expressed that lack of family support, jealous behavior of professional colleagues; economic dependency on male family members deprived the females of their due role in electoral politics. There are also most of the females that are young enough and their responsibilities for children as well as duties of household prevent them from active involvement in outside practices. There are also findings that despite passage of ordinance for payment of honorarium worth Rs.5000 to councilors in addition to transportation allowance of worth Rs.300, two third of the females councilors got nothing.

There are so many evidences of discrimination being perpetrated against women in Pakistan. The above discussion clearly manifested that numerous organizational, systemic and personal

factors are restraining women from participation in the governance of Pakistan. Participation of both genders is a prerequisite for rapid development and judicious utilization of resources therefore it is necessary to take necessary action for achievement of this goal.

Measures to be taken to Strengthen Women's Empowerment

To enhance women's political empowerment, holistic approach must be adopted by state. It would enhance women's capabilities to confront the diverse structural, organizational and psychological challenges. Despite their recognized constitutional, legal and religious rights, the status of women remained insecure. To enable them to contribute actively in the socio-economic development, their protection, well-being, empowerment and participation will have to be further encouraged.

Conducive and gender friendly political environment should be provided as it will not only accelerate their political participation, rather will bump up their involvement in social and economic affairs of society and state. It will ultimately lead to improvement of the level of human development. National, provincial and local government policies ought to be re-evaluated to secure gender equality or at least to ensure minimum 33% representation of females. Nationwide campaign should be launched for equal representation of women and men in decision making institutions and civil society organizations.

Regular development should be introduced at all the three levels of governance to build systemic capacity to adjust new entrants according to their unique skills and attitudinal preferences. Proper training sessions are needed to be arranged to impart them the required knowledge and skills of political governance, administrative, legislative and professional affairs. It would boost their confidence and polish hidden abilities. Women's under representation in decision making bodies, monitoring committees and important meetings is the cause as well as the effect of their low political participation. Affirmative action and quota may improve their representation at initial level but women participation would not be of any significance unless they are given due representation at influential decision making forums. A parity principle should be introduced to enhance women's representation in local government commission, public safety commission, finance, management and monitoring committees. Women's presence at such forums will have a buffering effect to counter gender biased attitudes in important decision making policies and processes.

Conclusion

It can be inferred that women's empowerment and human development is interlinked with each other. The promotion of women participation in social, economic and political spheres is a prerequisite for sustained societal development. Women's political representation and participation had increased in Pakistan since 2002, as currently they hold 17.54% and 16.34% of seats in upper and lower chambers of the national legislature respectively. For provincial assemblies of Punjab, Sindh, KP and Balochistan, the ratio of reserved seats for women is 17.78%, 17.26%, 17.74% and 16.92% respectively. In local bodies elected institutions 33% of seats have been reserved for women. Palpable gender disparity still exists despite all these efforts. Women have very nominal share in federal as well as in provincial cabinets. It is evident that only enhancement in numerical representation is not enough, rather the impact and effectiveness of women's political participation should also be ensured through open and gender friendly policies. They should not only be the beneficiaries of the policies formulated by men but should be given the status of policy makers. They ought to be motivated and trained for that

purpose. Women must be encouraged and supported to play the role of trend setters for socio-political change.

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