



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Conundrum of Women Political Participation in Pakistan:  
Impediments and Opportunities**

Musharaf Rubab<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ghulam Mustafa<sup>2</sup> Adnan Nawaz<sup>3</sup>

1. Ph. D scholar, Department of Political Science & International Relations, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science & International Relations, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Ph. D Scholar, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University Melbourne Australia

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**ABSTRACT**

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**Corresponding**

**Author:**  
ghulammustafa@g  
cuf.edu.pk

Throughout the historical kaleidoscope of Pakistan politics, it is evident that women role has not been substantial irrespective of their population size. This article highlights the historical political situation of women role along with challenges and opportunities in their participation and representation in Pakistan's politics. It is evident that their decreased descriptive participation reciprocated into lower substantive contribution in the Pakistan politics. The voting turnout used to be lower as compare to the male counterpart during all the elections in Pakistan. Through qualitative investigation and the data of the elections, it is observed that the situation is gradually transforming in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and it is improved as compare to the earlier status. The patriarchal society, poverty, religious dogma etc, are the main stumbling blocks towards women political emancipation. Increased educational status, economic wellbeing and enhanced role in decision making bodies will serve as an antidote to all the issues.

**Introduction**

Women are about the 50 percent of the population and play significant role in all affairs of the society. Women's role in political affairs is negligible while seeing their population size. The role of women in politics is negligible as compared to their size in population. According to the UNDP report of 2005, there is only 15% women representation throughout the globe. There are two major perspectives in this regards. One is substantive and the other is descriptive. Descriptive perspective depends upon number of women elected as representatives in legislature. It simply means the number of women in the parliament. The substantive perspective points out that both men and women have different issues while participating in politics. It

makes a substantive difference because men and women have different experiences, interests and attitudes. Both perspectives depend upon each other, when more women will be elected, definitely more concerned will be shifted to the issues of women (Iwanaga, 2008). Increased representation of women in politics in the last century can depict a bright picture for the near future but ground realities elaborate that the equality of men and women in political arena has not yet achieved (Paxton, 2014).

While analyzing the women state of political affairs before independence of sub continent, Muslim women took active part in the rallies and processions of Muslim league. In the election of 1945-1946, a lot of women participated in the elections by casting their vote. Religious leaders and ulemas criticized Quaid-e-Azam and the Muslim League for the public role of women in politics. After independence, there had been different political systems in Pakistan and women participations in all the political systems. It varied from time to time but as a whole the participation remained low before 21<sup>st</sup> century (Awan, 2016). Pakistan's constitution allows women to participate in political affairs. The political parties have established women wings to ensure women participation in politics (Elashi,2014).

As far as Pakistan is concerned, women represent 48% of the population but they are still in minority in Pakistan's political processes because of the gender discrimination and patriarchal system. However, the quota system has given more representation to the women in the parliament yet it is the need of the day that there must be proper plans and measures to be taken for empowering women and to enhance their participation in politics of Pakistan. The ceremonial positions of women will lead towards their weak decisions in political processes. The descriptive perspective of women participation will ultimately lead towards substantive perspective as male parliamentarian will be less focused to make laws regarding gender based violence, women economic security and their equal representation in politics and in society. But Pakistan is a developing country and has to go far ahead in terms of political participation of women. We have many examples of successful and influential women politicians who had been targeted, threatened and they were defamed for their participation in politics of Pakistan. For example, Fatima Jinnah had to face severe opposition by her opponents and by Ayub Khan, the military dictator in presidential elections of 1965. Similarly, when Benazir Bhutto became Prime Minister of Pakistan in 1988, prominent Islamic clerics issued a series of fatwa's (religious edicts) against her that in Islam, there is no place for a woman to be the head of a state. Her altered pictures in swimsuit were circulated to defame her as a westernized woman who is not able morally to run the country according to the Islamic rules and laws and would led to the defamation of the country as well (Muhammad,2018). Benazir Bhutto was the 1<sup>st</sup> women Prime Minister in 1988 and also the 1<sup>st</sup> Muslim woman Prime Minister in Muslim countries. She gained the office of Prime Minister two times. She was unable to do any measure to enhance women participation in the parliamentary affairs or any reforms to motivate women to take part in politics or to decrease

threats for women taking part in elections. Perhaps she, herself, struggled hard for her own legitimacy and it was difficult for her to introduced reforms in a male dominated society. In Punjab, Zille Huma, the minister of social welfare, was killed being a female politician in 2007 and it was reported by the authorities that she was killed because she was not dressed properly according to the religion. Many women politician received threats of life from the rival parties at the cost of being withdrawn from the general elections (Mahmood, 2018). Dr. Fehmida Mirza became speaker of national assembly in the Parliament in 2008. In the Muslim world; she was the first woman to gain such an esteemed position. In contrary to it, Zubaida begum was killed for breaking the tradition and taking part in the elections in 2013 (Rapila, 2013). Quota system was introduced for women representation in legislation. It was a temporary measure to eradicate the barriers of women participation in politics in Pakistan (Bano, 2009). Recently, Pakistan has seventeen percent reserved seats for women. Nepal has 33% in its parliament whereas Afghanistan has 27% women in parliament. India has 33% seats at panchayat level (Nizamani, 2018).

### **Feminists Studies on Women Political Participation**

Feminists have diverse views with wavering degree while enunciating their research on women representation in politics. One group, unequivocally, is engaged in debates such as women's legislature behavior and policy formulation for women. Most of the members of the cohort agree that only women can represent themselves in legal issues. Simultaneously, many feminists explicitly share the idea about having no practical or theoretical proof for women representatives to share any issues with women. As such, most of the feminists in the group prefer to explain that females are likely to "hit the target" for females even as not denying that female legislatures may still be "shooting in the dark" (Phillip, 1995).

These arguments are empirically validated by observing the behavioral disparities between women and male officeholders (Celis, 2008). The studies found that the male and female officeholders underpin distinct policies in the pipeline (Swers, 1998). Many women parliamentarians are found to state that they feel sense of responsibility toward women to represent them (Kahn, 2001). They demonstrate the same views as women voters (Diaz, 2006) and feminist activists (Lovenduski, 1997). With reference to women's attitudes, researchers find that females are deemed to be different from their male counterparts for lawmaking and offering new bills pertaining to females (Bratton, 2004). Moreover, the existence of women has bearing on political discussions (Grey, 2002). However, the group also agrees on the fact that merely enhancing the female number in parliament does not ensure automatic translation of political gains for women. Instead, they consider it important to have a critical actor who can usher policies on its own or spur others to embark policies for women (Childs and Krook, 2006). In fact, women might not be the critical actors; men can also play an important role for driving forward women's concerns (Tamerius, 2010).

The second group of feminist deals explicitly with the legal issues pertaining to them and gives importance to two substitute approaches for policy change. One is the feminist's movements that deal with the feminist ideas about their influence in the policy matters and the second one is state agencies that deal with the affairs related to them. The state feminists conjoins these two approaches seeking the extent to which feminists actors echoes women's movements while deliberating social and economic policies in favor of females (Chappell, 2002). The effectiveness of these state agencies is always advisable to be empirically checked. Therefore, the researchers have conducted studies exploring either they have been succeeded in raising female's issues (Kantola & Outshoorn, 2007). Many a researchers found that these agencies have effective roles in establishing link between movements and state in several issues such as abortion, domestic violence (Weldon, 2002), whoring and political representation (Lovenduski et al. 2005). Simultaneously, these studies also attach several moderating factors for their achievement such as resources and locations (Rai, 2003).

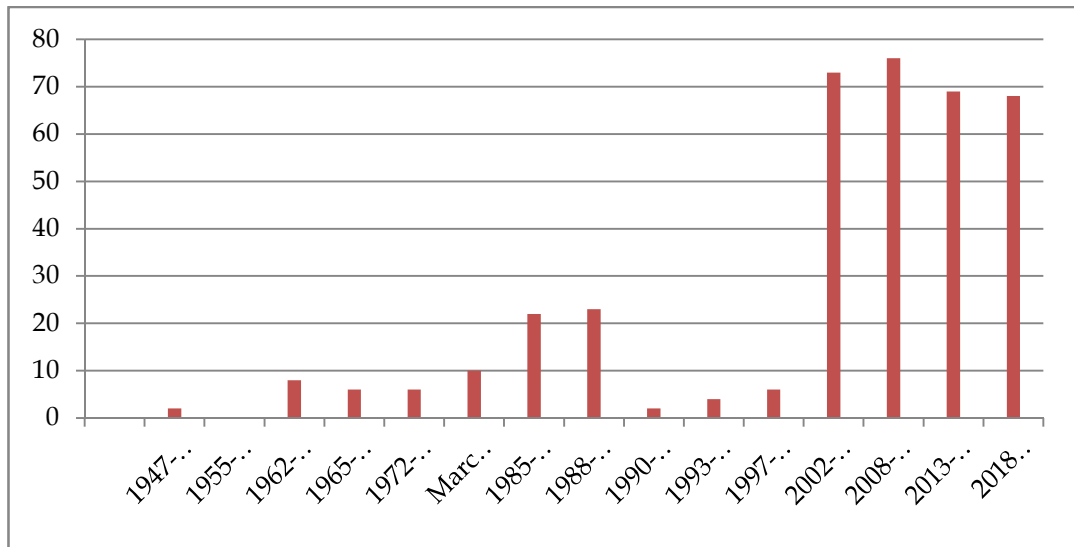
### **History of Women Participation in Legislature in Pakistan**

In legislature of Pakistan, there were a few women soon after independence. Women have struggled hard to mobilize and process the Muslim personal Law of Shariat of 1948 that allowed them to have share in inheritance. They also achieved success in having reforms in laws of marriage and divorce. In the 1<sup>st</sup> legislative assembly, there were only two women members and after that in the constitutions of 1956, 1962 and 1973, there was very less share for women representation in political affairs. There were only 10 seats for females that were given to them as a constitutional right in 1956. In 1962 constitution, only six seats for women were reserved and it was very less. Their participation in political affairs was waned in the early 1960's. Bhutto also advocated the women empowerment but it had a little practical significance in increasing the strength of women in politics (Weiss, 1999).

In 1973 constitution, the quota of women representation increased from 3.8 to 4.7% in national assembly and in the senate there was no representation of women. When Zia took over the charge and abrogated the constitution of 1973, he raised the number of women in parliament and 20 women were inducted in the house yet they had no role in the legislation. After Zia 's death, 1973's constitution was revived and women quota was enhanced. The era of 1990 to 1997 was considered as the marginal representation of females in parliamentary affairs. There were no women in senate. Only 3% women were having their appearance in the national assembly. There was a drastic change of women representation in parliament after 2000. Pervaiz Musharraf and his team introduced legal frame work order in 2002 which allowed 17% seats for females in provincial and national level by intruding "Political parties order 2002". Sixty seats were given to the females in the lower house of the parliament. There were 17 females in senate, 66 women out of 371 in Punjab assembly. There were 29 women out of 168 in Sindh Assembly. There were twenty two out of 124 in KPK and eleven women out of 65 in Baluchistan (PILDAT, 2004). And it was the highest ever quota for females in the

parliament. The parties got reserved seats for women by the proportion of the total occupied seats in national assembly. But it could not be useful for the women specially in KPK and Baluchistan due to their specific cultural and social barriers.

In election of 2013, 419 women candidates took part in the electoral competition on their prescribed seats. Pakistan people’s party issued highest number of tickets to females both in national and in provincial assembly of Sindh (Nizamani, 2018). The elections of 2018 also witness the same result. Women got 8 seats while contesting general seats in election of 2018 along with 60 reserved seats as shown in the graph.

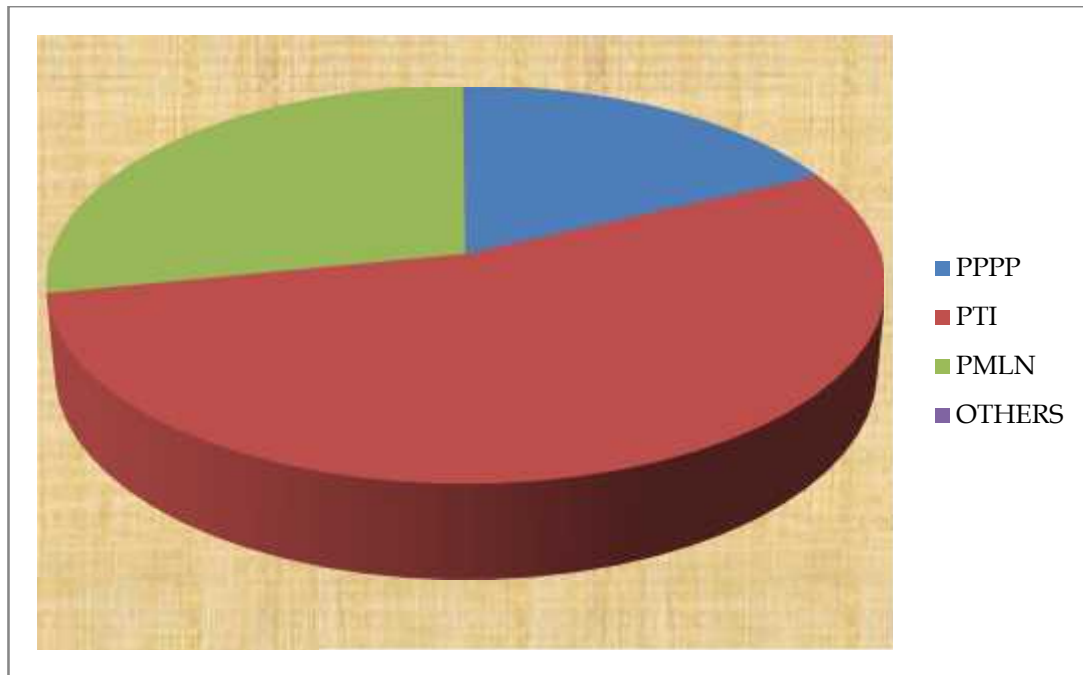


(Noreen, 2019). Women representation in legislature from 1947-to date

According to FAFEN report of 2018 elections the number of women in National assembly of Pakistan is:

Party Name	General	Reserved	Total	%
PPPP	03	08	11	16%
PTI	03	29	32	48%
PMLN	01	16	17	25%
OTHERS	01	07	08	12%

This can be shown through pie graph



(Women party position in election 2018 in national assembly)

A report by UN on Women delineates aggression to women in politics is escalating in Pakistan, India and Nepal. Several factors were identified such as poor law enforcement, being deficient in support from police & judiciary and severe social and economic inequality. This report also shows religious extremism and its implementation for social divisions are worth to be bear in mind while understanding violence against women in politics particularly in Pakistan (Violence Against Women, 2014).

Yasmeen Rehman who was a woman parliamentarian in lower house in Pakistan states that there is no rocket science in politics and is not as difficult as it is posed to be. Aurat Foundation evaluated the performance of women parliamentarians in 2002 - 2007 and stated their performance commendable. In 2008, women parliamentarians counted to 21.6% of the total members that was not only better than many other Asian countries where average women participation was 17% but also better than global average where women participation was 18% in 2008 (Ebrahim, 2009). Weiss (1999) claimed that women have disciplined themselves into political groups which are important for the development of the civil society in Pakistan. Importantly, national action plan was formed in response to Beijing action platform for decentralize the planning process that encouraged regional and NGOs to put their efforts. Mustafa (2017) quoted that reforms in Pakistani law made it mandatory that every political party must allocate 5% of their tickets to the women. Pakistan's constitution guarantees women seats in the Parliament through quota system. Many studies show favorable outcome for having reserved seats for women. But women are perceived to be weak because of lack of voters' support.

In right vision news (2014), it was stated that a study by Inter-parliamentary union (IPU) predicts the share of women in legislatures would be equal in 20 years if the pace of progress is maintained over the years. The study also indicates that the women participation is highest at present with continuing growth over the years. Women role in politics by the party of Pakistan Muslim League (N) is evident since the creation of Pakistan to the progressive Pakistan of today where they are having significant number in the legislative assembly of Pakistan. The women has already demonstrated splendid role in Pakistan from the creation of country to the formation of present status. A woman parliamentarian said that women had played significant role in general elections as well as local body elections specifically in the province of Sindh (*Right Vision News*, 2015). The constitution of Pakistan provides confirmed seats for the women by quota system in the parliament of Pakistan. There are sixty seats in the national assembly of Pakistan which are allocated to the female politicians and 137 seats in the provincial assemblies are reserved for them. The number of female politicians has increased considerably with the passage of time in the parliament of Pakistan but their active participation need to be improved. The bright scenario of having the quantitative increase is a good omen for the female politicians in Pakistan (*Asia News Monitor*, 2017).

The percentage of women member of Parliament is 21.6% in Pakistan. It was 21.1 percent in 2002. Although it is not the best participation but the numbers are favorable while comparing with rest of the Asian countries where the figures are lower than Pakistan as indicated by the Inter Parliamentary Union of Geneva. It was pointed out to be 17.8 % in rest of the Asia while the global average was 18.3%. Aurat Foundation studied the role of female politicians in the assembly from 2002-2007 by stating that 27% of total questions were moved by the female member of assemblies. 24% of the total resolutions were initiated by the women parliamentary members. The bill on Karo-Kari (honour killing) was a real success story of the female parliamentary members in 2004. Female politicians also raised voices in approval of the women rights bill of 2006 (Ebrahim, 2009).

### **Turnout of male and females in General Election 2008 and 13**

The average turnout of voters during election of 2008 was 44.6 percent. The data was gathered by different sources i.e., FAFEN calculated the turnout of 48.2 percent which was based on 174 constituencies in Pakistan. There were also possibilities of fraud or anomaly in 23 percent of the constituencies as the turnout was 100 percent or even more than that. Even though the security situation was not remarkable and in the presence of various anomalies; the turnout of voters during the 2008 elections was highly remarkable. The voting turnout was different in different types of polling stations based on genders i.e., combined or single gender (male or female) polling stations. The female polling stations were reported with a low turnout i.e., 39.7 percent as compared to the male polling stations i.e., 49.8 percent. The striking feature was the lowest female turnout in FATA and NWFP i.e., now KPK.

Although ECP (Election Commission of Pakistan) did not publish turnout data of general elections, there are many other sources that have published statistics which showed the average turnover to be 44.6%. FAFEN provides its estimation to be 48.2% that is based on 174 constituencies. FAFEN also reported that about 23% constituencies reported turnout more than 100% that shows mishandling or irregularities. Irrespective of such irregularities, turnout of such a level is noteworthy. FAFEN also shows significant difference in turnout between male and female voters. The turnout of male voters is 49.8% and that of female voters is 39.7%. Such a decline is mainly due to poor turnout of female voters in FATA and KPK.

The turnout of the mixed gender polling stations was greater than single gender polling stations. The low turnout of female voters in the election also corresponds to the lower level of women participation in public offices. There were only 25 female candidates who gained success during the election of 2008 on the general seats. With some exceptions, there were a few females who remained in the higher hierarchy of political leadership. The senior role in the government was given to the male dominant factor of society and in the political parties, the female leadership was scarce. Moreover, turnout showed in combined stations was greater as compared to gender based ones. Lower women participation in politics matches their participation in many other aspects of social and economic life where their participation is lower than their male counterparts. Moreover, with the exception of a few high ranked women who are among pioneers of their respective parties, no women have key position in their parties.

In 2008 general elections, total turn out of male was 49.8% while it was 39.7% at female polling stations. Female turnout was lower in FATA and KPK where it was 12.4% and 23.3% respectively. The turnout of election of 2013 was greater 53.62 percent that was greater to election of 2018 in which the turnout was 51.99 percent.

### **Turnout of male and females in General Election 2018**

The turnout of female voters was also lower in the general elections of 2018 as compared to male voter's turnout. The ratio of women voter's turnout was 46.89% in general elections of national assembly whereas male turnout was 56.07%. In Punjab, female turnout was 40.03% as compared to male turnout of 48.87%. In Sindh, turnout of female and male voter turnout was 42.46% and 50.87% respectively. KPK reported much difference in voter turnout which was 51.77% for male voter turnout and 32.96% for female voters. Baluchistan reported female voter's turnout was 40.03% and male voter's turnout was 48.87% (Fafen ,2018). Almost all constituencies observed more than 5% of female voter turnout in general elections of 2018. But it was reported that three constituencies result was declared null and void due to the female voter turn was less than 10%. (Khan, 2019)



	Men	Women
Punjab	48.87%	40.03%
Sindh	50.87%	42.46%
KPK	51.77%	32.97%
Baluchistan	47.87%	40.03%
ICT	62.91%	53.71%

(<https://fafen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/FAFEN%E2%80%99S-Analysis-of-Voter-Turnout-in-GE-2018.pdf>) (Fafen, 2018)

### **Hurdles and their remedial measures for Women participation in Politics**

There are several obstacles that hinder women participation in politics e.g., social, economic & religious factors which contribute in their less participation. Pakistani society is not homogenous. Uneven socio economic development causes variation in the status of women along class, regional and urban-rural division. Moreover, gender is the main organizing principle in Pakistan society. The strong patriarchal culture assumes that women are not suitable for politics (Bari,2000). There exist various kinds of discrepancies on spiritual, racial, ideological, social and economic issues for women while taking part in politics.

The society in Pakistan is patriarchal which has its part in increasing the issues of violence against women in various affairs of life. Mental torture and denial of the equal opportunities and rights of the women in Pakistani society is evident. The barbarity in the form of rape and honor killing is also a gloomy picture of women situation. The situation of women in prisons is also very bad and requires improvement. There was no specific quota for women till 2001 in the Constitution of Pakistan. The women in the villages are also barred from voting and taking part in the political affairs. The situation is gradually improving but there are a number of lacunas that require to be filled while giving the political and socio-economic emancipation of women on practical grounds (Kayser, 2013).

Women of Pakistan have to face lot of hurdles while taking part in politics in male dominated society. Mainly women of political background get a chance to have representation in parliament. According to Fleschenberg (2012), female household members have little role in managing the affairs and the male family members are dominating in Pakistan. Different factors which are responsible for the violence against women include flaws in execution of legal procedures, inadequate help from law enforcement agencies and the judiciary; and the bleak socio-economic condition of women in Pakistan. While the religious set-up and power structure of male dominated society can never be overlooked in studying the women emancipation in various arenas of life like politics (*Right Vision News*, 2014)

Pakistani society has embedded patriarchal traditions and the social issues are emanating from it. The customs and traditional set-up is difficult to change. The health and literacy rate in Pakistan are one of the lowest in the whole world. Only 21 percent of the female population has opportunity to go to school in the rural

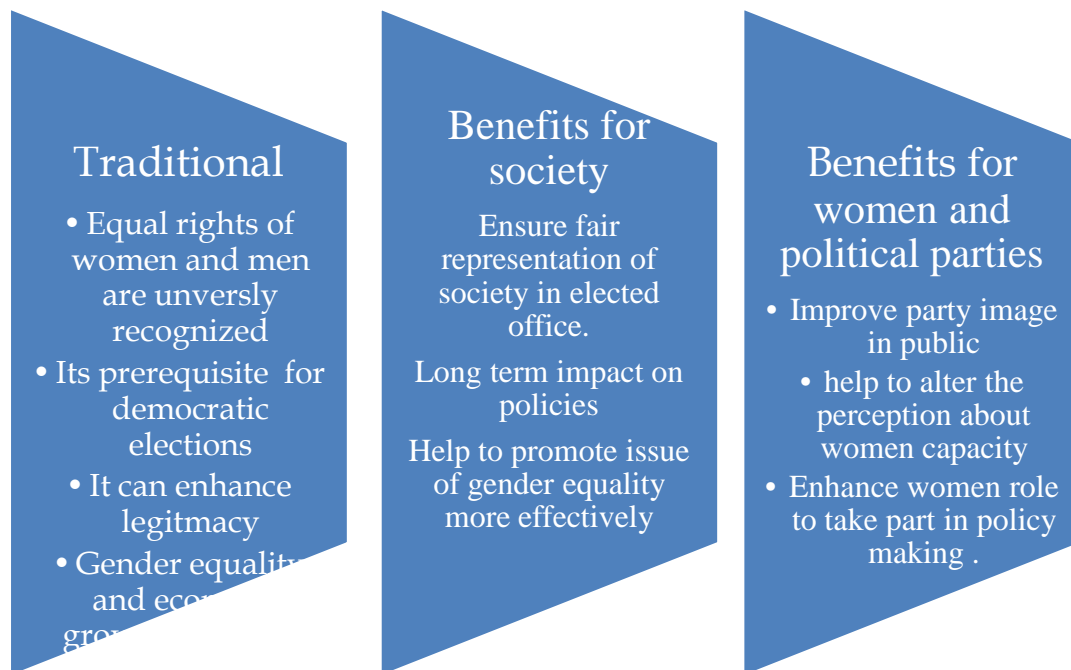
areas. The strict customs and traditions prove to be a hurdle in political and social emancipation of women in Pakistan (Rehmatullah, 2002). Different factors include:

- Unequal distribution of resources is one of the main causes of the women minimum presentation in parliament. In Pakistan, 24.3% of the population is living under poverty line([https://www.adb.org/countries.2015](https://www.adb.org/countries/2015)). Politics is a million dollar game in developing countries and it cannot allow the poor to take part in elections. Election campaign demands a lot of financial recourses.
- Our patriarchal and male dominated society is also one of the main factors for women's less representation in parliament. Here women are assumed to play traditional role i.e., their responsibilities at home and family related responsibilities. It becomes a challenge for them to balance their domestic life with their professional life. Literacy rate in women has also very low. In 2017-2018 the literacy rate of men in Pakistan was 72.5% for men and 51.8% for women (Yousifzai,2019). The low literacy rate of women in Pakistan shows that gender gap still exists here. Women are not yet empowered to be independent in various matters of life.
- Religious dogmas also become hurdle for women to take active part in the politics. Maududi, who shaped Jamat e Islami was a famous writer and he wrote more than 200 books in which he discussed the mutual relationship between men and women and its complexities. He stated that the nature of any society can best be determined by the appropriate behavior of women. The role, he defined, for a woman was to serve as guardian of the sanctity of Islamic traditions. And she can go out of the house only when quite necessary and women are not allowed to interact with men in any social situation (Siddique,2010). Women role is very limited in right wing parties in Pakistan.
- Left wing parties like PPPP (Pakistan Peoples' Party Parliamentarians) and other moderate parties have allowed women and also established women wings in their parties. In the tribal areas of Pakistan, women are not allowed to take part in elections due to their cultural traditions (Mustafa, 2017).
- The women progress in political arena of Asia is very incremental. Incremental track model is used to judge the women increasing representation of politics in Asia. It is gradualist approach in attaining gender equality in political representation. It enlists and includes various forms of gender quota to enhance representation of women (Iwanaga, 2008). But some argue that quota system itself is dangerous to the women political representation and their empowerment as political parties just fill the seats with influential political family's women without assigning major responsibilities and powers to women parliamentarian who cannot help to solve women issues and pave the way for empowerment of women in

political arena. The genuine female political workers have never got a chance to play their role in politics.

- Women position in political parties is not very specified as most of them are from feudal families with specific culture of them. They have no participation in decision making which makes the decision making process imperfect. In millennium development goals, it is observed that for empowerment of women and to ensure gender equality, they must participate in the politic (Dutoya,2013).

#### Arguments supporting women political participation



Handbook on Promoting Women's Participation in Political Parties(OSCE, 2014)

#### Conclusion

Women representation in political affairs has gradually improved in Pakistan in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The main reason is the increased reserved seat of the women in legislature but it is also point to ponder that most of these women are having strong political background. But one notable thing is that power is being transferred from father to daughter instead of sons only and it is a great political development in the patriarchal and male dominated society of Pakistan. The female participation of women in politics requires continuous and serious steps to be taken in order to enhance not only their representation but also their role as elected Member of Parliament. Rashida Yasmin, Zartaj Gul Wazeer, Maryam Aurangzeb, Sherry Rehman, Marvi Memon, Shehla Raza, Fehmida Mirza, Fozia Qusori, are some prominent women parliamentarians. Unfortunately, examples like Jacinda Ardern

from New Zealand, Angela Merkel from Germany and Julia Gillard from Australia are hard to find in Pakistan. Females having strong political families are having more roles in political affairs while women with no political backup are not having their steps into political arena in Pakistan. For example, Mehnaz Aziz is wife of former federal minister i.e., Daniyal Aziz. Similarly, Ghulam Bibi Bhrwana is granddaughter of Ghulam Haider Bhrwana who is former member of national assembly. She has been elected thrice because her family has strong hold of politics in Jhang city. Shazia Marri, Nafeesa Shah, Fehmida Mirza etc., all belong to very strong political families. Although current situation is not ideal, yet it is quite satisfactory when one compares it with the whole world and especially with the Muslim world. More women must be elected directly rather than reserved seats. It will enhance their confidence level and the social structure of our society also must accept the change and diverse role of them. Election commission of Pakistan's gender specific policies must be appreciated. Election commission of Pakistan has adopted gender specific policies like fixation of female voter turnout for legitimacy of elections. But it is the need of the day to develop a political culture that supports women. Political parties must take initiative to involve more women in politics and enhance their role without taking pressure of religious clerics.

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