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RESEARCH PAPER

Socio Economic Barriers Restricting Women Participation in Local Government System in District Bahawalpur

Muhammad Asghar Shaheen [1] Aisha Shoukat[2] Muhammad Jafar[3]

1. Ph. D Scholar, Department of Social Work, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan
3. Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan

PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
	The current study sets out for investigating socio-economic barriers restricting women participation in local government system in District Bahawalpur. Women are actively participating in all fields of life in developed nations which is source of motivation for women in developing countries. Bahawalpur is a former princely state which has its distinctive socio-cultural values and demographic conditions. A quantitative study was undertaken to achieve study objectives. A structured questionnaire was employed as tool for data collection from respondents who were elected as councilor on women quota. Total 124 respondents were recruited as sample through simple random sampling technique. The findings show that 61% of the respondents were unaware about local government system. Likewise, 65% of the respondents met opposition from political opponents. In addition, 36% of respondents reported economic problems due to huge expenditures on elections. The study concludes that women are facing numerous socio-economic hindrances and structural barriers for participation in local government system.

Introduction

No nation can rise to the height of glory unless their women are side by side with them…It is crime against humanity that our women are shut up with in the four walls of the houses as prisoners. There is no sanction anywhere for the deplorable condition in which our women have to live.... Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Father of the Nation (As cited by Bhattacharya, 2014).

Local government institution means sub units at the local level to which government gives some administrative powers in order to address local community problems through utilization of locally available resources (Saleem & Ahmed, 2012). The objective of the local government under the British rule in the subcontinent was to co-opt the local elites by appointing them representatives of local bodies. By that

time, members were not elected but nominated by British rulers. The British controlled Local Government System was not enacted on the demands of people rather by the Government itself for certain vested interests. It was introduced as a result of central government initiative and was supposed to perform its functioning under the supervision of bureaucracy. With the rise of nationalist movement, the focus shifted towards provincial and central level politics. This trend shifted the focus away from local government (Cheema et al., 2006).

The history of women participation in politics goes back to pre-partition era of sub-continent, when women of political families played decisive role in Pakistan movement and contributed for women's participation in politics and empowerment. After creation of Pakistan, first step towards women empowerment was enactment of 1961 Family Laws Ordinance, which later served as an instrument for women empowerment (Weiss, 1999).

Involvement and representation of women in political activities is one important aspect of women empowerment. The Government of Pakistan has utilized women participation in local government system as an instrument for addressing women related community problems and transforming their social status as equally empowered citizens. In addition to it, involvement of women in politics is important because they have equal right to do the same. The Local Government Reforms (also known as Devolution Plan) was introduced in 2000 in order to ensure equal participation of women in the political process. Among other purposes of Devolution Plan, it aimed at reservation of 33% seats for women and other vulnerable segments of the Pakistani society (National Reconstruction Bureau, 2006).

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Literature Review

Globally, there is variation in the concept of women's participation and access to formal political structures. In the developed countries, there is growing trend of women participation in political activities whereas situation is not much encouraging in case of developing countries where women have lower social status than men (Bari, 2005). The socio-economic development of a country is subject to optimal utilization of its total human resource including men and women. The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees same rights to both sexes, however practically speaking, women are hardly equal to men (SDPI, 2008). Population wise, women constitute half of the country,

however, they have poor social status nearly in all spheres of life, especially of those living in rural areas. Based on given social status, it may be stated that women in Pakistan are vulnerable, disadvantaged and deprived segment of the society (Shah, Aziz & Ahmad, 2015).

Generally, one of the major motivational factors for participation in political activities is gaining empowerment which includes multiple dimensions. By concept, empowerment means giving power to people, groups and communities for addressing concerns and issues which they feel important in their life. When marginalized and disadvantaged individuals and groups are empowered, they become part of solution of various socio-economic problems being faced by them (Muhammad &Yasin 2011 & National Reconstruction Bureau, 2006).

There are multiple factors responsible for lower social status of women in Pakistan. Major among them are lack of education, poor health and lower participation in formal workforce leaving the women vulnerable and disadvantaged. Lower status of women limits chances of women for tapping their full potential and becoming empowered for decision making by themselves. These conditions lead towards marginalization of women at political and legislative forums. That is why laws and policies devised at these forums do not serve women's interest in adequate manner. Deliberately equal participation to women in all walks of life including politics would be helpful in breaking this vicious circle (Tabassum, (2016).

The involvement of both genders in decision making process will create gender sensitive politics. The communities where women's role as politicians and decision makers is not appreciated, women face cultural barriers entering into politics. Political parties where male dominated politics exists, discourage women entry into local level politics. It is widely accepted that community participation and community empowerment are the basic elements which enhance capacity for improving the quality of life, poverty reduction and initiation of social change at local level (Ahmad & Abu Talib, 2015).

Alexander and Welzel (2007) summarized literature stating that rising gender equality is promoting overall women empowerment. The authors identified following factors that have contribute towards this phenomenon; (1) rising gender-egalitarian attitudes that transform economic development into a cultural process of human development, (2) socio-economic development, (3) historical legacies which originate from socio-cultural and political traditions of a society and (4) institutional design factors. However, the literature lacks response about the query whether each of these factors does have the same effect on all aspects of gender equality.

Local Government System in Pakistan

Zaidi (1996) asserted that the history of local government in the subcontinent expands over many centuries. The East Indian Company established first Municipal Corporation in Madras in 1688. The Conservancy Act paved way for the formation of sanitary committees. It was the first measure which was applied to the Bengal Presidency. Historically, the Board of Conservancy in Karachi was established in 1846 while the Municipal Act for Lahore and Rawalpindi was passed in 1867. History of Local Government in Pakistan starts with the regime of Ayub Khan. In 1959, Local Bodies "Basic Democracies" elections were held. But this system was destined to less represent people and more supportive of bureaucracy. Some reforms were introduced by General Zia-ul-Haq. However, current Local Government System of Pakistan has been dreamed and introduced by National Reconstruction Bureau (NRB). The new system supports empowering the people to the lowest tier, guarantee affordable and swift justice to the doorstep and fiscal autonomy (Anjum & Ahmad, 2001).

National Reconstruction Bureau was set up under Local Government Ordinance, 2001. Devolution of Power was the key component of the newly framed Local Government System (Saleem & Ahmed, 2012). The main objective of Local Government System is to empower people and to give them the opportunity for participation through process of decentralization (Muhammad & Yasin, 2011).

The new Local Government System aims at ensuring 33% representation to women at all tiers which have never been witnessed in the history of Local Government System in Pakistan (Anjum & Ahmad, 2001). The regime of Pervez Musharraf introduced the new Local Government System increasing the representation of women up to 1/3 of total seats. Under this system, a high number of women councilors were elected in the local bodies elections held in 2001. It was a big achievement for women participation in politics and especially in local government system (Ranjha et al., , 2011).

There are two main types of quotas (1) candidate quotas and (2) reserved seats. The former seeks to affect the supply of candidates ensuring that a proportion of candidates presented for election are women. The later quota ensures that a certain proportion of seats must be awarded to women (Ballington et al., 2012).

Women Participation in Local Government System

Women have been shelved in the field of politics since ages because of political notions defined by cultural values. United Nations Organization recommends 30% of seats reserved for women legislatures. Under the patronage of Pervaiz Musharraf, Pakistan took bold decision and reserved 33% quota for women in local bodies elections and 17% reserved seats for provincial and national assemblies and Senate.

As a result of this historical step, about 40,000 women took part in local government elections in 2000-01 and this number reached to 55,000 in local body elections of 2005. However, despite all these robust steps, women still face number of structural impediments and they have little role in policy making. According to Ranjha et al., (2011), as a human being, everyone has right to take part in all walks of life according to his/her potentialities and capabilities as it has been enshrined in the Constitution of Pakistan. It is well documented that women's participation in government affairs is mandatory for ensuring true democratic system and sustainable socio-economic development. The Local Government System of Pakistan has 3 tiers named as district, tehsil and union council. In the case of Punjab province, a huge proportion of women are housewives and some of them are working women. That is why only a small number of them take part in political activities. Local Government System is provincial subject in Pakistan and is mainly controlled by civil bureaucracy. During reign of Pervaiz Musharraf, women actively took part in local bodies elections and were elected in Local Government System. However, socio-cultural values influenced participation of women with letter and spirit. That is why large number of women took part in local bodies elections of 2001, however their actual representation remained low (Jabeen, 2019).

Political Culture and Local Government System

The type of political activities in a society has central role in determining women participation in this process. It is generally believed that restriction on women for participating at public places, like men do, is one of the tactics of discouraging women from politics and desiring them to perform domestic chores. The structure of political parties which is often male dominated and facilitating to men as compared to women is another factor which hinders women entering in politics. Liberal political structure provides more space to women as compared to one where religious orthodoxy shaping politics (Bari, 2005). Men dominate the political arena. They formulate the standards and rules of politics. Ballington and Karam (2005) identified serval factors putting restrictions on women's participation in politics. These factors include male dominancy, social exclusion of women, masculine model of politics, perception of politics as a dirty game and nature of electoral laws and, type of electoral system (Ballington & Karam, 2005).

Political Parties and Local Government System

Tomsa (2008) and Slater (2004) ascertained that lack of financial support from political parties poses one of the restrictions for women participation in political process in Indonesia. Generally, candidates contesting elections are expected to spend huge funds from their own pocket. According to Indonesian electoral rules, women

cannot take part in elections as an independent candidate, they need endorsement form any of the existing registered political party.

The participation of women in politics is not a simple job because it is not only she who has to make her mind but she is supposed to convince her family members including husband/father and children. Once this phase has been completed, then she has to face propaganda and social pressure from men contesting for party ticket and elections as well. When list of candidates applying for party ticket is placed before party head/chairperson, s/he would prefer men because they do not want o 'lose' seat by nominating a women from their party platform (Shvedova, 2005).

Socio-cultural Factors and Women in Politics

Certain gender features have been a hurdle of female participation in politics as masculinity is traditionally associated with leadership and femininity with weakness. As the family work is rarely equal shared between male and female, the latter are the most disadvantaged group. From conceiving of pregnancy to the deeply involvement in the care of children women face time constraints in taking part in other activities like politics (Shames, 2015). The socio-cultural dependence of women is another factor which hinders women to participate in political domain. Females are generally valued less due to their reproductive role and economic dependence. Women also find it difficult to spare time for political activities owing to their roles working as mothers and wives and looking after the domestic (Bari, 2005). Women have to spend more time at home for childcare and other domestic responsibilities than men. That is why women have less time for taking part in out of home activities including politics. Moreover, negative propaganda during electoral campaign adds to the difficulties of women for participation in political activities (Shames, 2015).

Ranjha et. Al., (2011) found that women councilors encounter more social and political hurdles than men. Major reasons of this discrimination include male dominance, women's social and economic dependence on men and lack of social capital at the disposal of women. Drage (2001) as cited Ranjha et., al (2011) noted major obstacles in the way of smooth women participation in pollical process as following; structural inequality, destabilized political and economic situation, gender-based discrimination, pro-male environment of politics and huge expenditures on taking part in election process. Yazdani (2004) added further socio-economic barriers such as lack of education, cultural and familial barriers, domestic or office related responsibilities and difficulties in free mobility.

Hora (2014) highlighted some other relevant factors creating hurdles for women participation in women politics. These factors include no previous experience of public decision making, massive domestic and children related responsibilities, poor leadership qualities and lack of precedents and role models of women in this

field. Likewise, Bhalotra, Clots-Figueras and Iyer (2018) noted that one of barriers restricting participation of new women in the politics is higher number of women incumbents re-contest election than men.

The mainstream media is also gender biased as it gives no or poor coverage to the events organized by or of direct interest for women. In addition, media is hardly playing its due role to raise awareness about rights of women as a person and an equal citizen. At global level, media has yet to realize that women are more prone to socio-economic and political changes, and they are generally excluded from process of political decision making. The mass has to acknowledge equality of women and men and both hold and deserve equal dignity (Ballington & Karam, 2005).

Material and Methods

This quantitative study aimed at investigation of socio-economic barriers restricting participation of women in local government system. The respondents of current study were women aged 18-60 years who were elected as local councilors on women quota. Using quantitative approach, data were collected from 124 respondents who were selected through stratified sampling technique from both urban and rural areas of District Bahawalpur. A questionnaire was constructed for collecting data from respondents. The data were collected by researchers through face-to-face interviews and information given by respondents were recoded using pen and paper method. The data were analyzed through SPSS. The results were displayed in the form of simple tables showing percentages and frequencies.

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Awareness about the Functions of Local Government System

Description	Frequency	Percent
Yes	48	39
No	76	61
Total	124	100

The Table 1 contains information on awareness about the functions of local government system. According to Table, 61% respondents were not aware about functions of local government whereas 39% respondents had awareness about it.

Table 2
Nature of Barriers Hindering Participation in Local Government System

Description	Frequency	Percent
Lack of awareness about local government system	64	52
Pressure from other prominent political leaders	36	29
Less importance on political forums	24	19
Total	124	100

The Table 2 unveils nature of barriers hindering participation of respondents in local government system. According to the Table, 52% respondents stated lack of awareness about local government system and its procedures. Similarly, 29% respondents faced pressure from prominent political leaders. According to 19% respondents, they felt themselves less important on various political forums.

Table 3
Individuals/Groups Opposing Election Campaign

Description	Frequency	Percent
Parents	1	1
Children	2	2
Relatives	33	26
Community people	7	6
Political opponents	81	65
Total	124	100

The Table 3 contains information about individuals and groups which opposed participation of respondents in local government system. According to findings, 65% respondents were opposed by political opponents whereas 26% of them meet resistance from relative.

Table 4
Effect on Household Life Due to Involvement in Politics

Description	Frequency	Percent
Cannot focus on family issues	50	40
Effects on social life	30	24
Not contributing financially	20	16
Less time for family members	7	6

Health related problems	7	6
Not facing any problem(s)	10	8
Total	124	100

The Table **Error! No text of specified style in document.** shows effects on household life of women councilors due to involvement in local government system. The figures divulge that 40% respondents stated that they could not focus on family issues due to involvement in politics. Likewise, 24% respondents reported effects on their social life. Similarly, 16% respondents described that they could not contribute financially due to involvement in politics.

Table 5
Economic Problems Due to Involvement in Local Government System

Description	Frequency	Percent
Heavy expenses on political activities	45	36
No economic support from local government system	40	32
Not faced any problem(s)	32	26
No economic support from relatives	7	6
Total	124	100

The Table 5 carries information about economic problems faced by respondents due to their participation in local government system. 36% of the respondents stated that they faced economic problems due to big expenditures on political activities. Whereas 32% respondents did not receive any economic support from local government system. However, 26% respondents reported that they did not meet any economic problem.

Table 6
Decision Making Regarding Political/Developmental Matters

Description	Frequency	Percent
To very high degree	28	23
To a fairly high degree	44	35
To a small degree	40	32
Not at all	12	10
Total	124	100

The Table 6 reveals freedom of decision making regarding political matters.

The Table shows that 23% respondents reported to have a very high degree of freedom regarding decision making on political matters. Likewise, 35% respondents stated a fairly high degree of freedom. Similarly, 32% respondents had such freedom on small degree. According to 10% respondents, they did not feel free to make their decisions regarding political matters

Discussion

The study aimed at examining socio-economic barriers restricting women participation in local government system in District Bahawalpur. The findings of the study reflect that a vast majority of women councilors faced multidimensional problems during election and political process due to lack of awareness about new local government system. Furthermore, a majority of women faced opposition from their political opponents who did not want women to be their political contestant. One third of the women faced resistance from their relatives instead of close family members which were in the favour of women councilors. However, a very small number of women faced opposition from their parents and children. Although, globalization and influx of information technology has drastically changed/replaced traditional practices, yet participation of women in public activities is disliked and discouraged by some sections of the society. This reflects that parents of women councilors were in the support of their daughters during election campaign despite criticism and stigmatization. Besides, some of women participating in local government elections faced economic problems due to huge expenditures on political activities. There is no formal support mechanism of financial aid for economically disadvantaged contestants. Majority of the women councilors faced hurdles in performing their political role because they were unaware about local government system and related rules and regulations. That is why, there is male dominance in decision making regarding disbursement of funds, approval of developmental schemes and other matters related to local government system.

Interestingly, some of the women councilors were not allowed to take part in the decision making process of local government because of their gender. This is reflection of deeply embedded gender discrimination in Pakistani society where women equality is not being liked at community level. Similarly, majority of women were not independent in casting their vote for tehsil and district level. As a matter of fact, many political families allow women for participation in politics but decision making lies with the men who work in the background and keep hold on socio-political matters.

Conclusions and Way Forward

The study concludes that women councilors meet socio-economic challenges when they took part in local government system. A record number of women

contested for local government system which reflects their empowerment and urge for playing active role for socio-economic development. There is little economic support from community for women contesting local government elections. That is why, they were suffering from financial problems which limited their role in the local community development process. Majority of women elected as local councilors were from agricultural/landlord background and were house wives. This is indication of hold and hegemony of landlords in the politics of Pakistan. Women councilors were given lowest positions in political hierarchy because of their gender. After getting elected as councilor, women were pressured by their family members and party leadership regarding political matters and decision-making process which was subject to advice from either family members or party top brass. Women councilors have to compromise on family life because of their engagement in local government activities. The women should continue to take part in local government system so that they may serve to illiterate, marginalized, deprived and socially excluded women and may become source of socio-economic support for them.

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