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Sindhi Women's Leadership in Pakistan's Federal Landscape: A Gender-Based Analysis on Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract: *This study aims to address the role of women as leaders in Pakistan's federal landscape. Since the inception of Pakistan, women have been playing a dynamic role in the federal unit of Pakistan. Women like Fatima Jinnah, Begum Shaista Ikramullah, and Begum Rana Liaqat Ali Khan had initially participated in the federal landscape of the country. Later, federal leaders such as Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto remained a famous political leader of the federating unit in Pakistan. Currently, Sindhi women such as Shazia Marri, Nafeesa Shah, Shagufta Jumani, Musarrat Naz Baloch, Nusrat Bhutto, Abida Hussain, and Fahmida Mirza, Shahida Rehmani are just a few mentions from Sindh province who served as federal ministers in Pakistan. However, the participation of women in the federal unit involves a range of hurdles associated with culture, society, and other factors in Pakistan, particularly in Sindh. Women in Sindh have always been underrepresented in policymaking in Pakistan. Therefore, the study seeks to address a gendered approach to Sindhi women's political participation at the federal level coupled with the obstacles and possibilities for Sindhi women's political participation in federal Pakistan, as well as the implications of such participation on women's well-being.*

Key Words: Federalism, Gender, Politics, Leadership, Political participation, Women Empowerment

Introduction

Pakistan is a patriarchal country where women's political engagement is frequently discouraged or prohibited in some parts of the country (Nasreen et al., 2016). There have, however, been significant anomalies, including Fatima Jinnah, Benazir Bhutto, Nusrat Bhutto, Abida Hussain, and Fahmida Mirza. These women have all contributed significantly to Pakistani politics, but they have also experienced tremendous hurdles. Women were substantially underrepresented in Pakistan's National Assembly during its early years of independence. Women had only 3% of the seats in Pakistan's Constituent Assembly, which ran from 1947 to 1954. The figure dropped under the military dictatorships of Ayub Khan (1955–1958) and Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) (Haleem, 2001). The increase in representation of women's representation within the National Assembly has increased gradually since Zia-ul-Haq's death. The death of Zia-ul-Haq led to an increase in the number of female representatives elected to the National Assembly during the 2002 elections. In 2000, however, the quota for women in the National Assembly was raised from 0% to 17%. However, this is still a low quota, and women remain under-represented in the National Assembly. In Sindh, politics are not easy for women. One big hurdle is that society follows a patriarchal system (Awan, 2016). In a patriarchal culture, men are regarded as household heads and main decision-makers. This can make it harder for women to participate in politics because they are expected to prioritize their families and homes. Another issue is a lack of financial resources. Political campaigns in Pakistan can be quite costly, and women frequently do not have the same financial means as men. Women may find it difficult to run for office because of this. Despite these obstacles, a lot of women are actively interested in Sindh politics. These ladies have been engaged in the political system since their elders.

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Research Questions

The following questions have been investigated in this study:

- i. What are the obstacles to women's political participation in Sindh?
- ii. How can women influence policy that addresses women's issues within the province of Sindh?

Literature Review

To address the gendered approach of challenges and opportunities associated with the political participation of Sindhi women in a federating unit of Pakistan, the study has reviewed the existing literature of renowned academicians such as Dr. Farzana Bari, Imran Sharif Chaudhry, Farhana Nosheen, and Muhammad Idrees Lodhi, Mufti & Jalalzai, and Dr. Parveen. The review of the literature helped to address literature gaps. Therefore, the review of the following literature helps to address the statement of this research:

Dr. Farzana Bari, a Pakistani scholar who publishes and advocates for women's rights, has done a great deal of study on women's empowerment. For instance, women are experiencing social pressure in Pakistan, which is a barrier to their political participation. The first female Muslim Prime Minister, Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto, is among the few notable exceptions to this rule. However, when it comes to women's empowerment in Pakistan on the whole, things are not much better, especially in the rural areas. This may be attributed to a mix of religious and cultural factors (Bari, 2003). Therefore, this study provides a link with this research enterprise in terms of addressing some notable women's political leadership in Pakistan.

The work of Imran Sharif Chaudhry, Farhana Nosheen, and Muhammad Idrees Lodhi also provides a deep understating of the participation of Sindhi women in the federal landscape of Pakistan. The work of these academicians has tackled the issue of women's empowerment in Sindh as well. They found that various elements, such as education, employment, and access to resources, contribute towards women's empowerment. It is important to stress that Islam is a religion that cherishes and respects womenfolk. Qur'an uses the word "dress of each other" for partners. The status of the mother in Islam is greater. It is said that paradise lies under the feet of the mother (Khan, 2022).

The work of Mufti and Jalalzai provides a comprehensive overview of women's participation in federal bodies in Pakistan. The study mentions female federal leaders of Pakistan, such as Begum Rana Liaquat Ali Khan, Begum Shaista Ikram Ullah, and Miss Fatima Jinnah. The study addresses these women as the crucial and active members of the federal history of Pakistan (Mufti & Jalalzai, 2021). Moreover, the study also addresses Sindhi women's leadership in the federal body of Pakistan. The names of these Sindhi women include Fahmida Mirza, Sherry Rehman, Hina Rabbani Khar, Marvi Memon, Sassi Palejo, Maryam Nawaz, Maryam Aurangzeb, Firdous Ashiq Awan, Shehla Raza, and Shazia Marri, who are among the many women who hold public office in Pakistan today (Mufti & Jalalzai, 2021). These females have demonstrated that women can compete with men in any field. Most Pakistani political women come from influential political families or parties. They frequently enter politics when their male family members are ineligible, and they are viewed as a means of preserving the family's political dominance. Women are frequently used by political parties to enhance their vote banks, but they are not given genuine influence. Women's political wings are rarely active and are sometimes regarded as showpieces.

The work of Abbasi (2023) also presents a dynamic overview of women's participation in Pakistan's federal unit. According to Abbasi, women represent half of the global population; however, women are underrepresented in politics. This is especially true in Pakistan, where women confront a variety of entry barriers, including societal and economic obstacles. Furthermore, cultural conventions and customs frequently prohibit women from freely engaging in politics (Abbasi et al., 2023).

The work of Afkhami (1995) also offers a considerable understanding of the hardships faced by women on their way to becoming political leaders in the federal unit of the country. The study addresses the view that though women in Pakistan – particularly in Sindh – have been actively participating in the federal landscape of Pakistan, multiple variables contribute to their underrepresentation in Pakistani politics (Afkhami, 1995). These variables include ideological and political biases and social and economic hardships (Afkhami, 1995). He also pinpoints in the paper that women seek to create Pakistan a more just and equal



society by fighting for women's rights and empowerment (Afkhami, 1995). Islam also advocates for women's rights and empowerment. However, some people misunderstand Islamic beliefs to justify female subjugation (Afkhami, 1995). Furthermore, (Obermeyer, 1992) some cultural standards that are incompatible with Islam are utilized to excuse women's marginalization. More research is required to fully comprehend the relationship between Islamic teachings and women's empowerment. Islam, on the other hand, clearly encourages women's full participation in all parts of life, including politics (Obermeyer, 1992). To sum up, with the help of existing literature, the study has addressed the scope of this research venture and identified the gap that needs to be addressed. Therefore, this paper has tried to address the said gap in the academic world.

Research Methodology

Qualitative Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach, which means it collected and analyzed non-numerical data. Data was gathered through interviews with a representative sample of the population of interest. Secondary sources were also used, including books, journals, newspapers, the Internet, and private media outlets. In other words, this study has used interviews to gather information about the experiences, viewpoints, and opinions of women in Pakistani politics. After that, the data has been evaluated to uncover patterns and themes. Secondary sources were also used to supplement the context and content.

Sampling

Sample Technique

This research study has employed the convenient sampling method to collect primary sources of data. The most accessible and convenient participants were contacted through email address, phone, telephone, and in-person meetings.

Sample Size

The size of this research venture includes 20 participants. The size of the sample is based on the time and financial resources. The views of these samples were generalized to the entire population of women working in the federal unit in Pakistan.

Sample Age

The age of the participants was selected in terms of their experience of working in the federal units in the country. The age criterion started from 30 years to 60 years.

Sample Gender

Since the research is based on the empowerment of women, only female participants were selected to carry out this research.

Case Study

The Sindhi female federal ministers working in the federating unit of Pakistan have been selected as the case study for this research enterprise. The experiences, hardships, and opportunities were the fundamental parts of this study. The female Sindhi leaders working in federal units in Pakistan were interviewed while focusing on the challenges they have encountered and opportunities they have been provided to achieve this milestone in their lives.

Methods of Data Collection

Interviews

Interviews have been conducted with 20 Sindhi female participants working in the federal unit of Pakistan. The tools used to interview the participants included different sources of communication such as telephone, mobile phone, and email to facilitate the interviews. The in-person interviews were also conducted with several participants. However, before the interviews were conducted, the participants were

informed of the consent letter, the name of the topic, the option of withdrawing from their opinion and keeping anonymity.

Focus Group Discussions

The open-ended discussions were arranged with participants. Engaging with participants made the research immersive and more elaborate. This method also helped the participants to openly contribute to the study.

Analysis of Data

Thematic Analysis

This study has employed a thematic data analysis process. This method is useful for the maintenance and analysis of data using themes and coding schemes of the primary data extracted from the interviews.

Discussions and Findings

Status of Women in Sindh

Women constitute almost half of the population of Sindh (Wasim et al., 2008). Yet women confront several barriers in political engagements in Sindh. The situation is particularly dire in Sindh, where practices like "Karo Kari" persist. This forces women into working in fields and other household chores without respite. Nevertheless, amidst challenges, women in Sindh are gradually asserting their rights. They are becoming more involved in education and employment opportunities compared to times past, and in Sindh, a child marriage protection bill has also been passed for the protection of women. Sindh is the only province in Pakistan where under 18 marriage is prohibited (Perveen, 2016). Furthermore, there is a growing interest among them in politics; however, representation in positions of power is yet to be achieved. Women constitute almost half of Sindh's population, yet women confront several barriers to political engagement. Gender inequality remains a challenge in both urban areas of Sindh. (Agha, 2021) Distorted interpretations of teachings, cultural norms, and beliefs further contribute to the issue. Despite the efforts made by groups and individuals, the situation for women in Sindh has shown improvement over time. They continue to face a lack of self-respect, decision-making power, and freedom to choose their paths. Regrettably, they are often treated as possessions within their families, and their voices are silenced.

Political Challenges

In terms of political engagement, women in Sindh confront several obstacles, including:

Gender discrimination

Women are frequently perceived as inferior to men, and they are not afforded the same opportunity to participate in politics as men. Traditional cultural conventions and beliefs frequently restrict women from participating in public life.

Manipulation of Islamic teachings

Some people use Islamic teachings to justify women's subjugation.

Lack of knowledge and awareness

Many women in Sindh do not have the education or awareness necessary to understand their rights and engage in politics.

Lack of financial resources

Politics may be costly, and many women do not have the funds to run for office. Men frequently use violence and intimidation against women who participate in politics. Despite these difficulties, a lot of women in Sindh are attempting to overcome them and participate in politics. They are aiming to make Sindh a more just and equitable society by fighting for women's rights and empowerment.



According to official records, violence against women is frequent in Sindh. Women face a high crime rate despite having a low literacy rate. Women confront suspicion from family members, particularly men, who are always skeptical of their character. Women are readily murdered for the sake of honor. In our society, talking to males is considered unethical, and if a woman is found to have contact with a guy, she is held accountable and punished, even if she has done nothing wrong. Men always have the upper hand, and they can take advantage of women and make customs their laws.

Men's mindsets are not ready for change. There is no room for women in such a mindset. Men follow in the footsteps of their forefathers. Women experience humiliation in the form of sexual abuse, rape, decreased family standing, and a lack of legal rights. They are so used to these actions that they no longer regard them to be crimes.

Pakistan is an Islamic Republic, with Islamic laws and customs dominating society. However, it is paradoxical since their behaviors are contrary to Islamic beliefs (Alavi, 1988). There is a significant distinction between customs and religious doctrines. Islam plainly stipulates that women should be respected in society, but men refuse to obey Islam and instead insist on following their ideas and beliefs.

Impact of Religious and Social Values

In terms of cultural values, religion and social background play a crucial role. Religion is extremely essential in our society, and people will die for it (Inglehart et al., 1998). However, when asked to obey their religion's principles, many people refuse and act against them. Men and women enjoy equal rights in Islam throughout their lives, and women are granted a higher position as mothers. However, the way women are treated in our culture frequently contradicts Islamic principles. This is due to the population's lack of awareness and grasp of religion and law. Instead, people frequently adhere to their cultural standards and beliefs. Rural areas are home to the majority of the population, and they are often thought to be more religious than metropolitan areas. Many of the beliefs and customs they adhere to, however, are founded on misconceptions about Islam. We have core norms, a way of life, information about our rights, and all the essential laws we need to live in peace as Muslims (Mayer, 1993). Islam advises on all aspects of life, including responsibilities, rights, festivals, education, and festivities. The issue emerges when women are treated according to local men's conventions and values rather than according to religion and law. As a result, in a male-dominated culture, women face discrimination and unfairness. Women's empowerment is useless in this situation. We need to modify men's attitudes (Sen et al., 2007).

Discrimination Accusations against Women Elected to Special Seats vs. against Women elected to Regular Seats

The quota system for women in parliament has boosted the number of women in parliament, but it has also proved controversial. Some claim that it provides an unfair advantage to a specific set of individuals. The quota system is meant to equalize males' and women's representation in the legislative process; however, it does not solve the underlying issues completely. The presence of these women appears to be primarily symbolic, with little real authority or power to effect substantial change. Furthermore, these women are frequently constrained by the judgments of their respective parties. Women and men elected in general elections each have their constituencies, which serve as their power basis. Women who are elected through the quota system have no real influence, but those who are directly elected do. They are only present to demonstrate that the celebration is inclusive. Some women's organizations have spoken out against the quota system for women in parliament. They say that the Election Commission should make reserving seats for women in general elections mandatory.

Balancing Parental Responsibilities and a Political Position in Pakistan

Women in Pakistan are expected to be primary in taking care of their families. This can be difficult to reconcile with a busy and time-consuming political career (Fazal et al., 2019). Women are expected to prioritize their families by society, and political involvement is thought to hurt family life. While balancing a career and a family is difficult for anyone, it is especially difficult for women in Pakistan.

Sindhi Women's Role in Politics

Despite the existence of many female politicians at the grassroots level, women in Sindh are underrepresented in politics. This is due to a variety of causes, including cultural taboos, poverty, and feudal families' domination. There is a strong consensus in upper Sindh, where three diverse cultures collide, that women should not participate in politics or public life (Shahid, 2012). This is most likely owing to the region's poverty and lack of basic amenities, which have helped to preserve traditional beliefs and conventions.

Babar Lund, a member of Sindh's ruling PPP party, has declared that his party aims to empower women but that he cannot allow his female relatives to join in parliamentary politics due to family norms and values. Given that the PPP was formerly led by Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto, a woman who served as Prime Minister of Pakistan, this statement is ironic and inconsistent. Marvi Memon, a well-known female politician from Sindh, has stated that working in politics at the grassroots level is extremely tough for women. She also believes that gaining reserved seats makes it simpler for women to participate in politics. Despite the difficulties, several prominent Sindhi women have made substantial contributions to national and international affairs. Fatima Jinnah, Begum Rana Liaquat Ali Khan, Fauzia Wahab, Begum Nusrat Bhutto, and Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto are among them. These women suffered discrimination and criticism from society, but they persisted and achieved great things.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper focused on the participation of women in the federating unit in Pakistan with particular emphasis on the Sindhi women in Parliament. The study also focused on women's empowerment and the challenges and opportunities associated with women as female legislators in Pakistan. The findings of the study reflect the view that a turning point for Sindhi women in Pakistan's federating unit was the era of the 2002 and 2008 elections, especially in 2002 when a significant number of Sindhi women were elected to Parliament. This is an indication of the importance of Sindhi women's political participation in changing their lives as well as transforming society. When General Pervez Musharraf allocated sixty seats to women in the National Assembly in 2002, it gave them a platform to talk about gender discrimination and violence against women's rights. It was an essential step taken towards making women part of politics and allowing them to fight for their rights. The Sindhi society has shifted its views on women over the years, introducing new concepts. Women are increasingly taking up new roles and contributing to change through legislation. This is evident when you look at those who have recently joined legislative politics, such as ladies from modest backgrounds. For instance, Krishna Kumari, a low-caste Hindu woman, received a senate ticket from PPP and is now a senator. She vigorously fights for the rights of ordinary women, and her experience of rural areas provides her with an insight that can shape her work within the Senate. Conversely, the role of Sindhi women in Parliament is still restricted for various reasons. These reasons include ideological, political, social, and traditional factors. The influence of patriarchy and male dominance in Sindhi society still prevents the participation of women in the political arena in Pakistan – particularly in the federation. Overall, the evidence given in this study emphasizes that with challenges, there are more opportunities for Sindhi women to expand their reach to Pakistan's parliament. The promotion of education and grass-rooted politics can play a vital role in this regard. To sum up, the participation of Sindhi women in parliament has been offered a critical role that could be used to promote other females' access to legislation to foster women's empowerment and make society a more just and equitable place for all.

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