

Factors Affecting Women Participation in Local Bodies' Election in Pakistan

Abstract

Women's participation in political process is essential for their political empowerment. This paper analyses factors that affect women participation in the electoral process in Pakistan. Although, in Pakistan, local Bodies elections have been conducted by the government a few times, but women's participation in the electoral process remained remarkably low due to people's perception that it violates the prevalent norms and values of the society. The study is based on the analysis of secondary data regarding socio-cultural, political and administrative constraints to women participation in the Local Bodies' election in Pakistan. The study concludes that misinterpretation of religion, male dominancy, patriarchal society, illiteracy, Purdah and lack of support from political parties are a few factors which affects women participation in local bodies' elections. Furthermore, poor management, lack of security and confusing polling process also hamper women participation in the electoral process. The study recommends that for ensuring women participation in the local body's election, separate polling stations/booths should be established, security personnel should be provided to the women polling stations, informal agreements of the Jirga/Punchayat and workers of political parties for barring women should be discouraged. Formal and informal education of the masses and the role of media are also important for creating awareness regarding women political rights.

Key Words: *Women, Participation, Local Government, Constraints, Empowerment, Pakistan*

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INTRODUCTION

Political participation involves wide range of activities and is not just limited to voting. Political participation, according to UN includes “*the freedom to speak out, assemble and associate; the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs; and the opportunity to register as a candidate, to campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all levels of government*” (United Nations, 2005:33). Similarly, Jahan (2014) held that women political participation means the ability of women to equally take part with men at all the levels in those decisions which affect them (Jahan, 2014). Women’s political participation is considered a landmark in women’s empowerment. Women’s political empowerment means their ability and freedom to exercise their choice and freedom to vote, participate as candidates in elections, participation in political demonstrations and say in decision making (Ibrahim, 2012).

Although half of the World’s population is women, but due to discrimination they are lagging behind men in all spheres of life (Rahman & Naoroze, 2007). Despite the fact that women play a crucial role in national development, they are still denied advantaged position and are deprived of their political rights due to various socio-culture and political factors (Hakim & Aziz, 1998). The current political landscape upheld by recent elections, however, presents an encouraging picture of women political empowerment whereby the number of reserved seats for women has been increased as well occupied by women folk from the provinces of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Another breakthrough in the same line of efforts has been the Peshawar Chief Justice order that commanded to stop results of constituencies i.e. NA-5 Nowshehra and NA 25 Lakki Marwat in which women were barred from exercising their right to vote. Women in Pakistan are fighting a fierce battle for political representation. While years of hard struggle by women advocacy groups has led the political spectrum become broader to include more women, there are however, still areas in the country specially Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where women cannot cast vote.

A large segment of women folk is therefore prevented from getting into the mainstream politics because they don’t have identity cards and are not registered voters. In case they cross these hurdles, community elders and local officials bar them from casting their votes under the garb of cultural or traditions violation (Saleem, 2013). Women in Pakistan were bestowed the suffrage in 1947 (Lewis, 2007), and their right to vote was reaffirmed in the national elections in 1956 under the interim constitution (Britanica, 2007). In the constitution of Pakistan from 1956 to 1973, reservation of seats for women has been guaranteed but this remains true in theory only and has not been translated into practice. Pakistan has been ranked 146 out of

187 countries by UNDP's Human development Index 2013 due to unsatisfactory human development indicators in comparison to other countries of the region. In addition Pakistan's could not achieve the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets like education, health, human rights employment and gender equality (UNDP 2014). Over the last three decades, the development process has also passed through remarkable changes throughout the world (Jabeen & Iqbal, 2010) stressing the need for the increased involvement of women in political process. In line with these international efforts, since 1980s Pakistan has also introduced various reforms in the form of liberalization, decentralization, devolution and democratization which demand greater citizen participation in decision making and political process (Chhetri, 2013). This new approach towards governance emphasizes people's involvement in the development process, irrespective of their bio-physical being (UNDP Gender Equality, 2008). It is now thoroughly acknowledged that the goal of balanced development will remain elusive without the active involvement of women in the political processes (Kamal, 2000). In this regard Kofi Annan Secretary General of the United Nations stated that "*realizing our goals while discriminating against half of the human population is almost impossible*" (DFID, 2007, p.1.). In the context of Pakistan also, women political participation is considered marginalized. In this connection, the government of Pakistan has taken initiatives for framing supportive policy measures in order to push women in the mainstream political process at the grassroots level. These efforts are enumerated below.

Women throughout the world have struggled for their political rights. With a clear exception of Saudi Arabia, no country on the global landscape exists which doesn't acknowledge or grant women the right to participation and representation in politics both at national and local level (Ottaway, 2004). The International Community made commitments in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Aurat Foundation, 2012), Beijing Platform of Action (BPFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to provide equal opportunities through the provision of quota in politics (Government of Pakistan, 2006). So far, 99 countries have adopted various measures to attain gender equality in politics. In Pakistan women were given the right to vote and representation since its inception in 1947, while the Constitution of Pakistan (1973) assures full citizenship rights to women (Shaban, Shah & Naeem, 2014). In almost all the previous constitutions of Pakistan, seats were reserved for women 1956 (10 seats), 1962 (6 seats) and 1973 (10 seats) both at the provincial and national level. But so far as local body's elections are concerned, women were denied representation in the era of Ayub Khan in the 1959 election. However, they got their representation in the Local Government Ordinance Punjab (1979), NWFP (1979), Sindh (1979) and Baluchistan (1980) as seats were again reserved for them (McCarthy & Sultana, 2004).

Like other countries, Pakistan has also ratified the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Beijing Platform of Action (BPFA) for ensuring gender equality in all spheres of life (UNDP, 2008). While at the national level, the situation is also conducive for involvement of women in governance. At present, various constitutional and legal provisions provide a conducive environment for women's participation in the political process as well strengthening the system of governance at the local level in the country (Kabeer, 2003). Article 32 of the Constitution of Pakistan 1973 states that *"The State shall encourage local Government institutions composed of elected representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions special representation will be given to peasants, workers and women"*. While according to Article 37 *"The State shall- (i) Decentralize the Government administration so as to facilitate expeditious disposal of its business to meet the convenience and requirement of the public"* (Khattak, 1996). Article 140-A. *"Local Government – Each Province shall, by law, establish a local government system and devolve political, administrative and financial responsibility and authority to the elected representatives of the local government"* (Farooq & Mittha, 2012).

Similarly, Local Government Ordinance 2001 ensures the participation of marginalized sections of the society such as women and peasants or workers by the allocation or reservation of 33 and 20 percent seats respectively (Bari, 2000). Moreover, the National Policy on Women's Empowerment is principally geared toward achieving the goal of gender parity in all social, economic and political fields. Additionally, The Gender Reform Action Plan (GRAP) being in action on both national and provincial level mainly aims at the capacity building of institutions for ensuring women involvement in political process (Zahid, 2004). Furthermore, gender mainstreaming has been given high priority in development planning to deal with gender inequality at the institutional level and to incorporate gender perspective in policy and practice as well (Javed & Khan, 2006). In the year 2000, the then Army Chief General Pervez Musharaf introduced Devolution of Power Plan (2000) and took a bold decision, reserving 33% seats for women in the local government (Saleem, 2006). In this context, 36106 women counselors were brought into the system by the first ever local government election held under the local government ordinance 2001.

Similarly, within a total of 36,066 seats being reserved for women in 6,022 union councils, 32,222 were filled through direct election while 3,898 were filled at the tehsil and district level through indirect method of election. Later, the representation of women was reduced considerably by lowering down the number of women

counselors from twenty one to only thirteen through an amendment in the Local Government Ordinance (LGO). According to Patthan (2006), this resulted in lowering down the number of women counselors from 36,066 to 24,528 putting negative impacts on the system (Pattan, 2006). After Musharaf's rule came to an end in 2008, the 18th Amendment was made to the Constitution, in the light of which the provincial assembly of Baluchistan passed the Local Government Act in 2010, whereas the provincial assemblies of Punjab, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa passed their LG Acts in 2013 (Ali, 2013) seats are . Only two seats are allotted to women in the guaranteed seats in the village/neighborhood councils as per this Act. Women will have 20% representation if the total membership of the village/neighborhood is 10. However this is further reduced to about 13 percent if their membership is 15 in total (Democracy Reporting International, 2013). This representation to the women in local government is an attempt to provide opportunities to the Pakistani women for participation in political process (ADB, 2008) which will lead to their social, economic and political empowerment (World Bank, 2005).

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to investigate the socio-cultural, political and administrative constraints to women participation in Local Bodies' election in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) Pakistan.

This paper discusses women's participation in local bodies' elections in the framework of the developmental theory of gender roles. This theory is based on the assumption that segregated gender roles are prominent in the traditional societies, and such segregation spreads to a number of spheres, leaving influence on almost all the aspects of women's lives (Shvedova 2005). Gender differences in electoral process has been one of the most discussed topics in political science (Tingsten 1937 in Inglehart & Noris 2000). Pakistan, being one of the developing countries with traditional social structures, is one of those countries where women's voting behavior has been constrained by different social, political, religious and cultural factors. In the light of the developmental theory of gender roles, it becomes evident that women's segregation from electoral process has remained and still remains one of the significant issues faced by women in Pakistan. As a result of which, women are disempowered not only politically but also in other spheres of life. Education (both male and female) remains the main sphere(s) influenced by the constraints, which not only limits their participation in the electoral process, but also leads to the lack of awareness among the masses, particularly women. Furthermore, the socio-cultural, administrative, religious, political, and security issues are also important factors that limit women's participation in the electoral process, at the local level in particular,

and at the provincial and national levels in general. A holistic approach is needed to address the variety of concerns and to ensure women's participation at various levels.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on secondary analysis of socio-cultural, political, administrative and security constraints on women participation in local body's election in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A methodical review of relevant literature was carried out with the help of books, articles and journals. Relevant material was also searched with the help of internet. There are a number of causes for lack of women participation in Local Bodies Election in Pakistan which are discussed as under:

The history of local government in Pakistan reveals that the first two military rulers were less interested in involvement of women in local bodies' elections (Khattak, 1996). In addition, the political parties also showed little interest in facilitating women in the political process (Yousaf, 2013). In Local Bodies election held on May 30, 2015, the local activists of different political parties stopped women from casting vote in different union councils of District Swat and Lower Dir of Malakand Division. Similar situation was observed in Dara Pezu, and Khero Khellakki Marawat District and in Janikhel area of Bannu where women neither contested elections nor were allowed to cast vote due to a verbal agreement between the local political leaders and elders of the area (Sadia & Shah, 2015). *In this regard women of a few Union Council in Timergara Dir Lower protested in front of press club Timergara and demanded re-election in those union councils where women were stopped from casting votes in Local Bodies Election 2015* (Daily Aaj, 2015). The religious parties also left no stone unturned in keeping the women away from contesting poles and casting votes. In district Sawabi and Malakand Division, the religious leaders declared that the Nikah, Namaaz-I-Janaza and all other religious rituals of women candidates and voters would be boycotted (Mooraj, 2004).

Similarly in 2005 local bodies' election, the opposition of religious parties to women voting resulted in loss of approximately 650 seats in different union councils throughout NWFP (KPK) (Bano, 2009). Furthermore in rural areas of Pakistan, the religious leaders have a say in the affairs of the people and they can easily mold public opinions against or in favor of particular issue. The religious leaders created hurdles in participation of women in local government election leading to their political disempowerment. The position of women is susceptible in Pakistani society especially in rural areas where their role is limited to domestic chores (Afza & Rashid, 2009). Girl's education is considered of least importance in these areas and is considered violation of the norms and values of society (Memon, 2007). According

to United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Pakistan ranked 123 out of 148 countries in 2012 Gender Inequality Index (GII) including education (UNDP, 2013). It further implied that only four in 10 of Pakistani women at the age of 15 could read and write, as compared to 70% of men. This alarming educational disadvantage is attributed to inequality in education system (Global Campaign for Education 2012). Research studies also conclude that lack of educational facilities especially in rural areas' restricts the role of women to the household activities (Awan, 2012). In addition, lack of education leads them to ignorance and hinders their participation in the electoral process (Kazmi 2005: 94; Sheikh, 2009).

Furthermore, due to illiteracy the women lack information about the importance of political participation or the balloting process which further disengages women from public life (Gine & Mansuri, 2011). Due to illiteracy, the elected counselors are also unable to show exemplary performance to pave the road for women's participation in politics. According to Jabeen (2004) almost 95 % of the women councilors lacked literacy, were unaware about their duties, rights, and their main objective was to get honorarium (Khattak, 1996). Similarly, Bari (1996) in her research study of the Punjab concludes that due to illiteracy even the women counselors often do not know the contents of the document they sign. In such a situation, we cannot expect Pakistani women especially the rural women to exercise their right to vote or contest local bodies election. The constraints to women's equal participation in local bodies election is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural setup of South Asian Countries in general and Pakistan in particular (Omvedt, 2005).

Due to patriarchal structure, male dominancy and strict pro-men cultural values, women cannot go out of their homes for casting their vote or for contesting elections (NCSW, 2010). Similarly, men's perception of the role of women is also one of the responsible factors in prohibiting women from participation in political activities (Isran & Isran, 2012; Tisdell, 2002). In some areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan and Punjab, rural women are dependent on men due to which most of the time they do not cast vote at all (Butt & Shahida, 2012). In addition, in local bodies election of 2001, thousands of women seats remained uncontested due to opposition of the male and no females were allowed to contest election in districts like Kohistan, Lower Dir and Battagram in N.W.F-P (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and Dera Bugti in Baluchistan (Qureshi, 2006). Consequently due to rigid patriarchal structure in rural areas of Pakistan, the women cannot participate in local government election which is used as a platform for entering mainstream politics (Farooq, 2003-04). Pakistan is a traditional society and the roles are assigned on the basis of sex. Home management is considered women's responsibility while man's domain is outside home (Shaban, Shah & Naeem, 2014). This demarcation between public and

private, inside and outside worlds is maintained through the notion of *Purdah* in Pakistan (Asian Development Bank, 2000). The only distinctive feature between private and public life in Pakistan is the notion of *Purdah*. The custom of *purdah* is shaped by cultural practices and is a barrier in the way of social mobility which leads women to dependency and marginalizes their special status (Sharma, 2014). In rural areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh and Baluchistan, due to the observance of *purdah*, the male members of the family do not allow the women to go out of their houses particularly to public places like polling stations (Kabeer, 2003). The problems becomes more sever in those areas where there is no separate polling stations for women or the staff of the polling stations is male only (UNDP 2005). Furthermore, due to strict norms and observance of *purdah*, deadly feud explodes on a mere doubt that strange males would dishonor the family by squinting at the family woman or electoral staff may touch the woman's hand through assisting her in vote casting or simply by checking her CNIC (Yazdani, 2004). Hence in rural areas, due to strict *Purdah* system the women cannot exercise their right to vote or contesting elections which leads to their political disempowerment.

Women in rising democracies like Pakistan are unable to participate in political process due to the security threats, particularly the women candidates who visit their constituencies (Ballington & Karam, 2005). In addition, the women voters also avoid visiting polling station for casting vote due to the potential security threats (Gine & Mansuri, 2011). In Pakistan, in Local Government Elections of 2015, violent clashes occurred in all districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. District Wasabi of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was reported to have high number of incidents followed by *Upper Dir* (9), *Lakki Marwat* (8) *Shangla & Mardan* (7 each) (FAFEN, 2015). Due to these poor security arrangements across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, polling at various polling stations was suspended while many people injured when masked men opened fire on women polling stations in union councils of district Peshawar (Akbar, 2015). Furthermore, due to lack of security personnel women were also barred from entering police stations for casting vote (Saeed, 2015). Poor security arrangement led to low participation of women and as a result the ratio of women voting was far less as compared to those areas where proper security arrangements were made.

Women in some parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province could not cast their votes due to institutional and administrative problems including female polling personnel non availability and absence, the existence, presence and unnecessary interference of male polling staff, nonexistence of female polling stations/booths and men and women sharing the same booth (FAFEN, 2015). In addition owing to administrative mismanagement, delays were observed in starting polls at women polling stations while the voting process was also confusing and slow (Casey, 2015). Research

studies also confirmed lack of participation of elected women councilors in their respective councils during the first period of local government system (Yazdani, 2002-03). The women councilors were not informed in time regarding the meetings of their respective councils and only 50 percent of them attended that meeting which was called for the election of chairman (Ballington & Karam 2005). Furthermore, the CIET Social Audit Report (2004-2006), confirmed that only 1/3 of the elected women attended meetings of the council (Jabeen & Iqbal 2010). Similarly, Alam (2004) noted that in Baluchistan province, only one third of women councilors received timely notification of council meetings and only 13% attended the meetings of their respective councils. In addition, in some parts of KPK province, male members of the elected women councilors attended the council meetings on their behalf (Bano, 2009).

CONCLUSION

Participation of women in the political process is very essential for their empowerment. Since the independence of Pakistan, local government election has been held from time to time but women participation in the electoral process remained very discouraging. Pakistan has ratified various international and national agreements for ensuring women participation in political process. The Constitution of Pakistan also guarantees women participation in local government elections. Although women participation in the political process at the grass roots level is on the top of the agenda of the government as well as civil society organizations, yet there are various political, social and cultural hurdles which hamper their involvement in the electoral process both as voters as well as candidates. In the past the rulers both military and democratic were not in favor to allow women to take part in local government elections.

The study concludes that the religious leaders are also responsible for restricting women in the political process. Some of the religious leaders are misinterpreting the teachings of religion and put hurdles in the way of women to take part in the political activities. In addition, due to illiteracy and ignorance, the women are unaware about the importance of their participation in the local government elections. The study also summarizes that due to male dominancy and men's perception of women, their women role is restricted to the household activities only and the women cannot go out of their private spheres for casting vote or contesting elections. The situation has further been worsen by the custom of *Purdah*, which do not allow women to visit polling station, show her hand to the male staff for putting edible ink and cast vote in combined polling stations. Security issues are also limiting the women participation both in urban and rural areas. In the local bodies' election of 2015, various women

polling stations were attacked and people received injuries as well. Administrative mismanagement (e.g. confusing and slow voting process, interference of male staff in the women polling stations /booths, shared polling booths and delay in starting polls) seriously hampered women's endeavors to contest election or cast votes.

The study on the basis of findings recommends that for ensuring women participation in the local government elections, election commission should be made independent and strict laws should be framed and implemented for punishing workers of political parties and religious organizations who are involved in stopping women from participating in local government elections. Media both print and electronic should be used for creating awareness about women's political rights and importance of casting vote in elections. Formal and informal education of women is very crucial for creating awareness and motivating women to participate in local government elections both as voters and candidates. Political parties should maintain gender balance as far as women representation is concerned. Women should be allowed to take part in the decision making process of their political parties at the local, provincial as well as national levels. In this way they will be able to raise voices for their political rights.

The study also recommends that Election Commission of Pakistan should make proper arrangement for establishing separate polling stations or separate polling booths for women. Women polling staff should be deputed for supervising the women in voting process. Strict security should be provided in the premises of the women polling station so that the women can cast their votes in peaceful environment. Male polling staff should not be appointed in women polling stations. In addition, interference of men in women polling stations should be discouraged. The district administration in each district should keep a check on the informal agreement of Jirga/Punchayat for barring women from casting vote in the local bodies' election.

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