

Women's political participation in the socio-cultural environment of Pakistan: A critical review of mainstream political parties (2018-2022)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21107/sml.v6i2.22741>

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

political parties

Pakistan

women

representations

electoral politics

female

participation

ABSTRACT

Although women make up half of Pakistan's population, their participation in politics has historically been limited. While women today are more politically active and articulate than in the past, their involvement is still hindered by various factors, including patriarchal structures, a gender-biased socio-cultural environment, and a conservative interpretation of Islam. This study utilizes qualitative methods to assess the participation of women as voters and candidates by examining the roles of far-right (Jamaat-e-Islami), central (Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf) and left (Pakistan People Party Parliamentarian) political parties in the 2008, 2013, and 2018 elections. Relevant secondary sources, including the selected parties' manifestos, have been analyzed through content analysis to establish the appropriate context. The research findings indicate that although regulatory efforts aim to increase women's representation, political parties frequently prioritize female candidates with preexisting political backgrounds. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the parties' ideological positions significantly impact their dedication to female political participation and representation. Although political parties have made some progress in improving women's representation and participation in elections, it is clear that a significant and ongoing dedication is necessary to close the gender gap in political engagement.

Citation suggestion:

Awan, S. Z. (2023). Women's political participation in the socio-cultural environment of Pakistan: A critical review of mainstream political parties (2018-2022). *Simulacra*, 6(2), 277–292. <https://doi.org/10.21107/sml.v6i2.22741>

Received 25 October 2023; Received in revised form 29 October 2023; Accepted 1 November 2023; Published online 25 November 2023.

Introduction

The 75 years of Pakistan's political history were marked by sporadic elections, unfinished democratic terms, and military coups. In 1970, the country held its first-ever direct election, which saw a significant number of people, particularly women, voting based on ideology and issues instead of caste and parochial affiliation. At that time, many female voters participated in light of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which represented marginalized groups, including women (Khan, 2018).

During that time, the PPP established a women's wing to encourage their participation in local, provincial, and national politics. As stated by Mumtaz (1998), the 1970 elections ignited women's political engagement across various parties. The PML had a longstanding women's wing, and the PPP followed suit. By the mid-

1970s, JI had also created a women's wing. However, the mobilization of women as voters did not result in significant increases in their legislative representation. This implies that the main objective of women's wings in political parties was to secure a larger share of the female vote. During the period of military dictatorship led by Zia-ul-Haq between 1977 and 1988, the political process in Pakistan was severely disrupted due to the ban on political parties.

During the 12-year period of incomplete democratic governance by the PPP and PMLN parties, the women's reserved seat quota for the national legislature remained inactive, resulting in few women being able to secure seats in the national and provincial legislatures. However, in 1999, following General Pervez Musharraf's assumption of power as a military ruler, several pro-women legislations, which included a 17% reserved quota for women in the national

Table 1. *Political Parties and Female Representation in 2008, 2013, and 2018 Elections*

Parties	2008 Elections			
	Women on Reserved Seats in National Assembly	Women on General Seats in National Assembly	Senate	Women Electoral Turn-out
PPP	23	8	2	39.7%
PMLN	17	3	1	
JUI	1	0	3	
PTI	0	0	0	
2013 Elections				
	Women on Reserved Seats in National Assembly	Women on General Seats in National Assembly	Senate	Women Electoral Turn-out
PPP	8	5	8	40%
PMLN	35	4	2	
Ji	1	0	0	
PTI	6	0	0	
2018 Elections				
	Women on Reserved Seats in National Assembly	Women on General Seats in National Assembly	Senate	Women Electoral Turn-out
PPP	9	3	5	40%
PMLN	16	3	0	
Ji	0	0	0	
PTI	27	2	2	

and provincial legislature and 33% in local government, were introduced. The sole political party that criticized this measure was Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), which arranged a nationwide demonstration (Citizens' Report, 2001; Awan, 2020).

The expanded women's quota in all legislative bodies has proven to be a significant milestone for women, specifically at the grassroots level. From December 2000 to August 2001, several women competed and emerged victorious in various positions, such as Nazim and Naib Nazim, in union, tehsil, and district councils. Women have been able to secure 36,187 seats out of the 40,049 reserved seats for them in local councils. Furthermore, eleven union council Nazim roles, one Naib Nazim, and two district Nazim positions were filled by women in the election, as reported by Reyes and Azizah (2002).

Table 1 displays the representation of women in the National Assembly and Senate for the four political parties under study, encompassing both reserved and general seats during the 2008, 2013, and 2018 general elections, along with the female voter turnout respectively. It is noteworthy that Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), founded by cricket star and philanthropist in 1996, participated for the first time in the 2002 elections and secured only one seat.

Table 1 displays party-wise women's representation in Parliament on both reserved and general seats. Notably, on reserved seats, the number of seats a party holds in the assembly influences its capacity to nominate women. In the last three elections, PMLN nominated 68 women, PPP had 40, PTI had 33, and JI had 2 on reserved seats. On general seats from 2008 to 2018, PPP had 16 women, PMLN had 10, PTI had 2, and JI had 0. In the Senate, PPP had the highest female representation with 15, followed by PML-N and JI with 3 each, and PTI with 2.

PTI boycotted the 2008 elections as Imran Khan launched an anti-corruption campaign against PM Nawaz Sharif of PMLN. In Parliament, PMLN had the highest women representation, followed by PPP, PTI, and JI. However, the number of women contestants exceeded the won candidates. In the 2018 elections, out of 171 women contestants for NA general seats, only 8 won (The News, 2018).

This paper examines the correlation between the ideological spectrum of four Pakistani political parties (far-right, central, and left-leaning) and their manifestos' stances on gender, socio-economic, and political issues. It also critically assesses these parties' roles in mobilizing and selecting women as voters and candidates in the 2008, 2013, and 2018 elections. The study aims to understand how party ideologies influence female political participation and representation.

Method

This paper employs a qualitative research approach to investigate the role of political parties in mobilizing women in Pakistan's politics, both as voters and candidates. Qualitative methodology is most fitting for political researchers who utilize various sources, including books, research articles, statistics reports, government and non-government documents, policy papers, manifestos, speeches, and news reports (Wesley, 2010), to address the study's research questions and objectives.

Data analysis involves the systematic examination and synthesis of information from these diverse sources to draw meaningful insights into the dynamics of women's political participation in Pakistan and how the ideological stances of selected parties influence their commitment to female political involvement. In this context, content analysis, originating from media

research (Berelson, 1952) and encompassing various aspects of political communication (Lazarsfeld, 1968), has been widely employed in studying political symbols (McDiarmid, 1937), political propaganda (Lasswell & Leites, 1949), and related topics, making it a valuable tool for political researchers.

The content analysis aims to reveal patterns in findings and arguments regarding political party strategies for involving women as voters and candidates in Pakistan. This approach offers a comprehensive understanding of women's political involvement (Halperin & Heath, 2020). The study's primary objective is to examine how mainstream political parties in Pakistan promote women's political participation and understand their challenges.

The data is categorized into three segments: the first delves into the history of women's participation in electoral politics through political party women's wings, the second segment examines the ideological spectrum of political parties and their manifesto commitments related to women, and the third explores the obstacles encountered by political parties in fostering gender-inclusive politics. The study also identifies the challenges women face in politics, such as deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms, patriarchal influences, and conservative interpretations of Islam. The research findings contribute to a discussion on the dynamics of women's political engagement in Pakistan and how the selected parties' ideologies shape their commitment to women's political involvement.

Results and Discussion

History of electoral politics, women wings & political parties in Pakistan

The issue of marginal female representation in the legislative assemblies of Pakistan has a long-standing history.

During the first Pakistan legislative assembly (1947-58), only 2 out of 30 seats were held by women. In the subsequent assembly (1955-58), there were no women elected among the 80 seats available (Awan, 2016). This trend of under-representation continued for a prolonged period for various reasons. Through elections, women can attain political representation in federal and provincial legislatures via two routes: reserved quotas and general seats. (Krook & O'Brien, 2010). This was noted during the first general elections in the country, which took place in 1970, when political parties formed women's wings.

The PML maintains a longstanding tradition of a women's division, which was also upheld by the PPP. By the mid-1970s, the Jamiat-e-Ulema Pakistan (JUP) and JI had also established their own women's wings. However, it was when JI's female activists shifted from education to active engagement in electoral politics that issues arose (Allauddin & Rind, 2020). Regrettably, these women's wings functioned primarily to mobilize female voters rather than increase their representation in legislative chambers.

When assessing the efficacy of women's wings as a disadvantage rather than an advantage for women, Sahi (2015) referenced a female parliamentarian from PMLN who stated that women in her party are relegated to secondary or tertiary status. By contrast, women in PPP are more influential than their PMLN counterparts. Nonetheless, inefficiency in women's wings is not the only problem. Even if women are elected to the assembly, development funds are not allocated to female members. Additionally, only outspoken women are favored within political parties. A comparison of all parties in Pakistan reveals that the women's wing of JI is more active and structured than others in terms of their dedication to women's political representation.

The primary reason is that JI operates at the central, provincial, and district levels. The officials are elected for two years, with a maximum of two terms in office (Jamal, 2013). They have a separate charter for women's rights and a budget, unlike the PPP, which lacks a separate budget for its women's wing. Another party with elected office-bearers is the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-MQM.

In the 1973 constitution, ten seats were designated for women in the National Assembly for ten years. Between 1977 and 1988, 24 women joined Zia-ul-Haq's handpicked National Assembly, with four being directly elected and 20 occupying reserved seats. The reserved quota expired after the 1988 elections. From 1988 to 1999, both PMLN and PPP did not attempt to reinstate the lapsed female reserved seat quota, despite twice taking turns in power, which led to the lowest female representation in parliament.

Although Benazir Bhutto led the PPP at that time, women's representation in all legislatures across Pakistan remained below 3% from 1970 to 1999, with all elected officials coming from influential backgrounds or being close relatives of notables. The country was once again under military rule from 1999 to 2008, with General Pervez Musharraf serving as the leader for nine years. In 2002, as previously mentioned, Musharraf increased the percentage of women's representation in all legislative bodies through the Legal Framework Order-LFO.

When assessing the rise in female candidates in elections, it is essential to acknowledge the impact of the mandatory bachelor's degree requirement imposed on candidates in 2002. This requirement caused many male candidates to be disqualified, thereby creating an opportunity for educated female family members of influential backgrounds to contest the elections. Furthermore, prior to 2002, only elite women

from political families participated in elections. Consequently, from 2002 onwards, women's participation in politics increased due to circumstance, rather than a genuine desire for representation (Batoool, 2019).

A concise history of electoral politics, women's wings, and political parties reveals a persistent weakness in women's representation in legislative chambers, on general and reserved seats, with minimal change post-Pervaiz Musharraf's era. Exploring the ideological stances and the approaches outlined in their manifestos towards women by these parties will be a crucial aspect covered in the forthcoming section.

Political ideologies, party manifestos, and women in Pakistan

The definition of political ideology is based on specific beliefs, norms, and principles that outline how individuals, groups, or institutions should be structured, performed, and perceived by society. Ideologies are complex political concepts that create stable patterns (Freedman, 2003) and act as tools for establishing and maintaining power positions. The relevance of these ideologies is shaped by specific economic, social, and political contexts. In contemporary times, political ideology aligns closely with political order and state power, as noted by Harrison and Boyd (2003).

Various political parties today are rooted in different ideologies, which shape their manifestos, campaigns, and policies in power. In this context, we will explore the ideological stances of the PPP, PML-N, JI, and PTI and analyze their manifestos in the last three elections. These parties broadly align themselves with three essential political spectrums.

The ideology of left-leaning political parties centers on political concepts that promote social equality and a secular

approach, directed towards ameliorating the socioeconomically disadvantaged, including women, by exposing underlying societal disparities and injustices (Bobbio & Allan, 1997; Ball, 2005; Thompson, 1997). Furthermore, they advocate for state governance over political and economic establishments. The term "left" was coined in the 1790s when socialist representatives of the French revolutionary parliament sat to the left of the presiding officer and expressed criticism of the traditional elites by supporting the working class and promoting social welfare as a primary objective of the government (Knapp & Wright, 2006).

Clark (2016), a left-leaning economics professor, argues that capitalism disregards non-commercial preferences and suppresses individual desires. Progress can be made by reducing extreme disparities in status, power, and wealth. Additionally, Rodulfo (2020) emphasizes that the left aims to combat inequality, hierarchies, and various forms of bigotry. Another observation is that left-leaning parties prioritize securing women's rights more than other parties on the political spectrum. This makes it particularly relevant to analyze the left-leaning parties in Pakistan as they are theoretically expected to provide more rights and representation for women.

The central political spectrum parties position themselves at the midpoint of the traditional left-right spectrum and advocate for the maintenance of the current situation. However, they work alongside both liberals and conservatives with slight modifications (Woshinsky, 2008). In line with the left-wing political traits, the Pakistan People's Party-PPP, under the leadership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, participated in its first elections in 1970. Presently, the PPP identifies as a center-left party. Although the PPP has mostly abandoned its socialist rhetoric from the 1960s and 1970s, it still identifies as a left-leaning party (Ghaffar, 2008). The party champions progressive, liberal, and secular

views and advocates for underprivileged social groups, including women and minorities, in Pakistan.

Therefore, in the 1970 elections, a substantial number of women voted, displaying a clear preference for the PPP over the choices of their male family members. This inclination was attributed to the party's explicit focus on addressing women's issues in its manifesto (Saiyid, 2001). The same support of women voters continued for Benazir Bhutto when she took over the party as a chairperson and contested the 1988 general elections.

Two primary factors account for women's robust backing of Benazir's bid for Prime Minister. First, following a ten-year stretch of non-female-friendly policies during Zia's reign, Benazir, as the initial female Prime Minister, brought women hope that she would revoke gender-biased regulations. Second, the PPP's platform specifically targeted women's concerns, distinguishing it from other political factions. From 1988 to 1999, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) under Benazir Bhutto was victorious in three elections. The party's manifesto outlined its perspective on gender issues and its aim to address them once in power (Awan, 2016). Regrettably, these commitments were not fulfilled. After the assassination of Benazir in 2008, the PPP participated in three elections under the leadership of her spouse, Asif Ali Zardari. In each election, the party presented their manifesto outlining their vision for the socio-economic and political standing of women in the country. Refer to the table below for the PPP manifesto in the most recent three elections.

Table 2 demonstrates PPP's comprehensive plan for women's political participation. The 2018 election manifesto was more specific concerning women's representation in parliament, promising to boost it from 17% to 33% in national and provincial legislatures, and offering merit-

Table 2. *Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Manifesto*

Manifestos			Analysis
2008	2013	2018	
Economic: - 10% job Quota Social: - legislation against honour killing. Judiciary: - Right of Child Custody Political: - Ministry of Women Development	Economic: - Benazir Income Support Program - Fair Job Policy Political: - Increased reserved Quota - Representation in Public and Sector Board Social: - Basic Rights - Social Welfare Programme Judiciary: - Laws for Prevention of Acid Crime	Economic: - First Women's Bank - Presence of Women in the Corporate Sector - Women Business Council Political: - Increased of seats from 17% to 33% in Senate and Provisional Assemblies. - Allocation of funds and tickets for women contesting on general seats - Merit-based selection of Women	The manifestos comprehensively focused on women's economic well-being, their increased political representation on reserved seats, and lobbying for legislation against anti-women socio-cultural practices.

based tickets to women for general seats and selection for reserved seats.

Although the 2013 election manifesto addressed the need to increase women's quota in parliament and their representation in public offices, categorical mentions were avoided. This contradicts the left ideology, known for its sensitivity towards underprivileged and traditionally marginalized segments of society, including

women (Caul, 1999; Norris, 1993). The support for the women's movement in any given society is strongly backed by left-leaning political parties (Matland & Studler, 1996; Jensen, 1995).

An additional center-left political party is Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), whose past three election manifestos reveal promising trends. Furthermore, PTI, PMLN, and JI refrained from participating in the 2008

Table 3. *Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Manifesto*

Parties	Manifestos			Analysis
	2008	2013	2018	
PTI	-----	Justice: - 20% government office quota. - Restoration Of Ministries. - Reproductive Health program. Economies - Providing housing. - Transport facilities. Education - Free education up to matric - Scholarships at higher level. - Remove of stereotype gender biases from the textbook. - Free uniform	Economics: - Micro-finance - Residential facilities - Women's inheritance Justice: - Process of prosecution - Procedure for sexual offenses - Posting of female police officers	The manifestos detailed their agenda with mention of different measures through which they intended to achieve those objectives like micro-financing, health care, and firm implementation of harassment laws.

Table 4. *Pakistan Muslim League-(Nawaz) Manifestos*

Parties	Manifestos			Analysis
	2008	2013	2018	
PMLN	-	<p>Education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vocational Training Institute <p>Health:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Safe Motherhood - Advancing maternal and child health programs <p>Political Participation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Commitment to gender equity <p>Social Justice:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unislamic customary practices e.g., <i>karo kari, vani, swara</i>, criminalized through law - No violence against women - Speedy Justice Action Plan - Prevent forced and child marriages - Women Protection Centers 	<p>Legislation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Protection against Harassment - Sound System Regulation Act - 33% representation in public sector organizations <p>Education & curriculum:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gender-sensitive curriculum implementation - Educate women about their fundamental rights. <p>Political:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More women in Cabinet positions <p>Social:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women-on-Wheels - Maternity leaves - Daycare canters - Anti-harassment Cell - Family planning - End child marriages - Anonymity of sexual violence victims - Safe public transport <p>Economic:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Entrepreneurship financing schemes - Eradicate the gender wage gap <p>Justice:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Violence Against Women Centres (VAWCs) - Amendment of Pakistan Penal Code to reduce forced marriages 	The manifestos addressed gender discrimination in social, economic, and political domains. The 2018 document emphasized past achievements rather than outlining future.

election, subsequently rendering their manifesto for this year's elections unavailable for discussion. However, Table 3 outlines the key aspects of PTI's vision as articulated in its manifestos for the 2013 and 2018 elections.

In both the 2013 and 2018 elections, the PTI campaigned on a platform focusing on increasing the participation of women in all aspects of society, with a particular emphasis on politics. The party pledged to raise the quota for women in government jobs, and implement measures aimed at improving

their health and education. Their manifesto outlined the specific actions they intended to take to deliver on these promises.

By examining the Pakistan Muslim League-(Nawaz) as a center-right political party, which has held power three times from 1988 to 2008, we can conclude that like the PPPP, it was unable to reinstate the female quota in parliament. Table 4 displays the PMLN's manifesto for the 2013 and 2018 elections.

As shown in Table 4, the PMLN manifesto for the 2013 elections emphasized social aspects of women's lives, such as education, health, and social justice.

It is noteworthy that the PTI formed its government in the Center once, unlike PPP and PMLN, but its incomplete tenure faced many challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic that slowed down its progress. However, in comparing its manifesto to those of the PPP and PMLN parties, it can be concluded that its commitments are more substantial. PMLN, despite being a major political party, fails to mention solid steps or a vision for gender in its manifesto for the future (Javed & Malik, 2021).

Since Pakistan is a predominantly religious society, although parties with Islamic ideological leanings are not always successful in elections, they still have a significant number of followers, including women. Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) is one such traditional religious party with a right-wing political ideology, founded by Syed Abul Ala Maududi in 1941. The fundamental aspect of the right-wing political spectrum is the preservation of old traditions and institutions through conservatism.

Right-wing political parties frequently support welfare programs for the masses. Although JI failed to form a government at the federal level, the party's structural

effectiveness was noteworthy. During the 1960s and 70s, Jamaat's influence on the urban middle class was significant. Even JI's opponents acknowledged it as the best-organized party nationwide. Crucially, the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) has remained the primary ideological influencer for right-wing parties attempting to counteract the increasing influence of left-wing politics (Kamran, 2019).

The JI's focus on education, poverty, and disaster management skills through its welfare agenda has allowed the party to gain traction and win substantial support from various groups, including middle-class urban women (Bano, 2012). The table presented below displays the JI's manifesto pledges for the last two elections, which were also upheld as their obligations to furnish necessities post-election victory.

In 2018, JI ran for election under the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) platform. According to Table 5, although the party aimed to improve women's status in their manifesto, they made little mention of women's political representation. Despite the higher level of female activity and influence within the JI, the party appears to lack a strong commitment to women running for office as candidates. However, JI women have transformed women's roles within the Islamic State by supporting their

Table 5. *Jamaat-i-Islami Manifestos*

Parties	Manifestos			Analysis
	2008	2013	2018	
JI	-	<p>Education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Secure environment for education - Primary level teaching - Education institutions near home - Separate universities for women <p>Health:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 4 months of maternity leaves <p>Jobs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Secure working environment 	---	The manifesto focused on separate academic institutions for women with better chances of jobs and secure environment.

involvement as workers within the party (Jamal, 2013).

The analysis of the manifestos of four selected political parties highlights two significant trends. First, it reveals that the promises made by these parties in their manifestos do not always fully align with their actual political positions. Second, despite winning elections, these parties often struggle to fully implement their manifesto commitments, especially in the context of policies promoting political inclusivity for women.

The PPP has successfully advocated for pro-women legislation, including the passage of important bills such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act and the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices (Criminal Law Amendment) Act. Notably, the PML-N government's significant achievement during its tenure was the 'Women on Wheels' program, which was primarily limited to the province of Punjab. The initiative distributed pink scooters, or small motorbikes, to female students to facilitate their mobility.

Additionally, female government employees were granted extended paid maternity leaves. However, these policies had restricted coverage. The PTI administration, which was in power for only a brief period, launched the 'Ehsaas Program' with the objective of poverty reduction and promotion of social inclusion. Within this program, targeted initiatives were implemented to bolster women's empowerment, including the 'Kifalat' program that provides cash transfers to deserving women, as well as the 'Nashonuma' program that prioritizes maternal and child nutrition.

PTI initiated a new trend by providing separate inclusions for female participants in their political rallies. These arrangements were not only well-secured but also efficiently managed. Notably, the analysis emphasizes that political representation and participation

for women have not been central focuses for any of the mentioned parties (Aziz & Abdullah, 2012). The subsequent segment will delve into the challenges these political parties face while mobilizing women voters and allocating female members' tickets to general seats.

Key obstacles faced by political parties in achieving gender-inclusive politics

Political parties in Pakistan face numerous challenges in fulfilling their commitment to achieving gender-inclusive politics, be it the low turnout of female voters or their negligible representation in legislative chambers. First is Patriarchy, which ensures male dominance in politics, making the participation of women contingent upon the male perception of gender roles (Latif et al., 2015). This has conditioned political parties to consistently secure the presence of women as voters, driven more by the need to involve half of the population, which is female, rather than ideological considerations.

In rural areas where a considerable number of people live, the Baradari System is identified as the most damaging factor, worsened by patriarchy, whereby the head of the household typically controls the voting behavior of their kin (Bano, 2009; Awan, 2022). Consequently, political parties and their nominees make substantial endeavors to influence voters, especially female ones. In such circumstances, the patriarch's verdict usually takes precedence. Political parties and their candidates often neglect female voters, prioritizing their male constituents.

During the 2002 general election, 46.11% of registered voters were women, but this percentage decreased to around 44% in 2008 before increasing to 46.62% in 2013. Despite this improvement, 10 million Pakistani women were still unregistered to vote during the 2013 elections, resulting in their exclusion from the polling process (Mushtaq

& Adnan, 2022). In 2017, the percentage of registered female voters declined to 43.73%, according to estimations. The representation of women in legislative chambers after the 2008 and 2013 elections included 76 and 70 female members, respectively, in the National Assembly, as documented by Khan (2020), Mehboob (2017), and Yousuf (2013). Table 1 above presents the party-wise details.

After the 2013 elections, a total of 228 women were elected to the National and Provincial legislatures in Pakistan. Of these, 205 secured reserved seats, 21 won general seats, and 2 were elected on reserved seats for minorities. While the PPP and the PML (Quaid-e-Azam) did not increase the number of party tickets given to women compared to the 2008 elections, the PML-N and the MQM considered allocating more tickets to women in the 2013 elections. On the other hand, the Awami National Party (ANP) and PTI allocated only 2 and 5 out of 45 and 241 tickets, respectively, for women seeking general National Assembly seats (Wagha, 2013). It is crucial to note the Election Commission of Pakistan-ECP Act 2017 before evaluating women's representation after the 2018 elections, as it mandated all political parties to allocate 5% of their tickets to female candidates.

In the 2018 elections, the PTI allocated 5.7%, the PML(N) 4%, and the PPP 6.8% of their tickets to women in general seats (The Express Tribune, 2023). However, ticket allocation to female candidates improved in these elections compared to previous polls. PTI garnered praise for not only distributing tickets to new female candidates like Flight Lt. Mussarat Shah but also for selecting women in some of the most conservative and demanding constituencies, including Upper Dir and Larkana.

In addition to the socio-cultural factors discussed earlier, religious orthodoxy leaders also play a role in the low voter turnout and subsequent underrepresentation of

women (Rubab et al., 2020). In 2015, a Jirga composed of 40 religious scholars and five elders unanimously made the decision to disenfranchise women during a by-poll in Gilgit Baltistan (The Express Tribune, 2015). Similarly, in 2017, religious orthodoxy in the Lower Dir District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa forcefully prevented women from exercising their right to vote (Asian Human Rights Commission, 2015). Moreover, during the 2018 elections in Punjab, women were barred from voting in various National Assembly constituencies, namely NA-152, NA-178, NA-175, NA-174, and NA-145. Notably, in villages like Jahan Khan and Mohripur in Punjab, women have been deprived of their voting rights since 1947 (New Delhi Television -NDTV, 2018).

In addition to socio-cultural and religious factors, another significant reason affecting female voters is their lower literacy rate than men. This often leads to limited exposure and a weak understanding of the procedural formalities related to the voting process. This lack of awareness is particularly relevant for uneducated rural women. Consequently, it results in the wastage of cast votes, as numerous ballot papers are rejected due to incompleteness (Dawn, May 31, 2015).

Considering the issue of women voters, when we assess the role of political parties, we realize that nearly all political parties in Pakistan focus on women voters not to promote their equal participation but rather to gain numerical strength in polls, resulting in what could be considered 'participation by default'. These parties recognize that electoral success is improbable without garnering the votes of half the population (Naseer & Kalsoom, 2019). Comparing the efforts of political parties in mobilizing women as voters from 1970 to 2013, we observe that, compared with PMLN, PPP had a stronger focus.

Two key factors influenced the female voters' support for the Pakistan People's

Party (PPP). Firstly, Benazir Bhutto, the first female Prime Minister and a socialist leader, was seen as a beacon of hope for women, especially in rural areas. Her gender resonated with them, making her a symbol of empowerment. Secondly, the PPP had a unique dual female leadership after Z.A. Bhutto's death: Benazir Bhutto and her mother. This leadership dynamic sent a powerful message about gender equality. However, with Benazir's demise, the party's popularity waned, reaching its historical low within five years. (Haider & Ali, 2018).

During this time, religious parties like JI mobilized women voters and even encouraged them to cast their votes. Despite historically taking a staunch stance against women appearing in the public domain, JI began to support their female supporters by promising to implement socio-economic reforms targeting women's health and education and lobbying for more gender-friendly family laws, starting from 1993 (Basu, 2009).

Although it did not significantly contribute to increasing the vote bank, it conveyed a message to orthodox religious elements of society that religion does not restrict women's political participation. The focus on women voters in the country further increased after Musharraf's tenure when the expanded women's quota and the rise of media and affordable internet access brought women's political roles into the debate.

Furthermore, the 2017 Election Act, discussed earlier, brought the debate on women's electoral participation in the country to the forefront. The discussion extended beyond the problems to include the role of political parties in it. Scholars at national and international forums began seriously debating this subject, focusing on the intricate dimensions of the low female voter percentage.

One topic of discussion was the gendered character of political party mobilization, where most political party members and workers tend to neglect female members and primarily interact with men from families. Furthermore, the discourse considered establishing dedicated sections for women at polling stations, increasing political awareness through exclusive campaigns, and providing a favorable environment at polling stations with improved transportation facilities. Door-to-door campaigns were initiated to encourage the participation of female voters (Dawn, 2017; Cheema et al., 2019).

The debate intensified due to many women without a Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC), particularly in *Baluchistan*. Reports revealed that women in regions like *Jaffarabad*, *Naseerabad*, and *Panigur* were disenfranchised due to their lack of a NIC, primarily due to the high associated fees. As a result, many women do not prioritize obtaining a NIC as men do. (The Express Tribune, 2018).

The absence of necessary documentation barred eligible female voters from participating in elections, despite their willingness to do so. The editorial published in Dawn newspaper (2018) highlights that in Mianwali and Gujrat, several young and senior citizens wished to cast their votes but were unable to do so since they lacked a CNIC. Additionally, during the 2013 elections, individuals possessing ID cards were still thwarted from voting due to the connivance of local elders, political parties, and non-state actors. Mainly, political parties bear responsibility for insufficiently engaging women voters during campaigns.

The sensitization through electronic, print, and social media enabled the ECP to facilitate a dialogue involving local government representatives, political parties, civil society organizations, academics, and the media, seeking timely solutions before

the 2018 elections. This media-driven approach notably encouraged political parties to focus on engaging women voters in the 2018 elections. Among all parties, PTI notably adopted a robust strategy.

While women participating in street politics is not new in Pakistan, their visibility significantly increased in 2007 during the judicial movement, marking a departure from the years of limited public presence.

A historic change emerged during the 2014 political events involving PTI and Pakistan Awami Tehreek. Women's passion and active involvement during these events, working alongside men with great intent, brought about a transformative shift in the perception of women's roles in street politics.

Remarkably, women of all ages, especially from the lower middle class, enthusiastically participated in these political events. This momentum persisted even after the removal of Imran Khan from power in 2022. However, the arrests of PTI women following the incidents on 9 May 2023 proved to be a real setback for women's political participation. It underscored the fragility of the hard-earned women's liberties crucial for their political involvement.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the study emphasizes that political parties in Pakistan often prefer women with influential political backgrounds, driven by persistent gender stereotypes that question women's competence. While the situation has improved, female candidates continue to express dissatisfaction with being placed in less competitive constituencies, prompting questions about whether voter bias or party choices are at play.

To enhance women's visibility in parliament, political parties must rethink their approach to women. Recent efforts by political parties to mobilize women in their

campaigns, protests, and rallies demonstrate a positive shift. Despite introducing women-friendly legislation, the PPP tends to favor elite landlord-class women for tickets. The PTI has excelled in mobilizing women in street politics and fielding more upper-middle-class female candidates. They actively participate in party rallies and express strong opinions. In contrast, the PMLN, despite having held power three times, still faces challenges in mobilizing women in street politics. The JI maintains an active women's wing but focuses on their women's vote bank without significant electoral participation.

Today, Women are more physically engaged in electoral and street politics, making a notable impact, albeit in an unequal ratio to men. This evolving trend is promising but requires strong support from all state institutions for full realization. This study provides fresh insights into the complex relationship between political party ideologies and their practical approaches to promoting women's participation. It sheds light on previously unexplored dimensions of gender politics in Pakistan. The study's broader implications underline the need for more comprehensive societal and institutional changes to enhance women's political participation at all levels in Pakistan.

Declaration of Ownership

This article is my original work.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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