

## **Empowerment and Political Mobilization of Women in Pakistan: A Descriptive Discourse of Perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

*The importance of women's political participation and mobilization for a viable Democratic Polity is being increasingly realized in all corners of the world. Women constitute 48% of the Pakistan's population that is not being utilized in the national development due to their low skill, less education and less empowerment in the realm of politics. Any democratic system cannot run successfully with just half of the population and other half is marginalized. The traditional norms regarding women's activities as noted by different theorists have been carried generation to generation unquestioningly. The general assumption is that the political activities belong to the "Public Sphere" and women by nature belong to the "Private Sphere" and "Politics" is something 'alien' to their nature. This article will explore the underlying constraints which have hampered the growth of equal opportunities for women to play their role as an active agent of society.*

**Keywords:** Political Mobilization; Empowerment; Political Participation; Patriarchal Society

### **Assumptive Statements**

In this paper these important points are being discussed to know the patterns of cultural context which provide the support to the mobility of women in capturing the social sphere to realize themselves as agent of change.

- i) Historical and structural analyses of women political mobilization pre and post-independence Pakistan;
- ii) Understanding the women's empowerment through political mobilization;
- iii) The question of women empowerment through state policies and its impact on women status;
- iv) The delivering capacity of the political institutions of Pakistan at grassroots level to evaluate the issue of governance in Pakistan;

### **I. Introduction**

Empowerment is defined as a 'social action process that promotes participation of people, organizations, and communities in gaining control over their lives in their community and larger societies. With this perspective, empowerment is not characterized as an achieving power to dominate others, but rather power to act with others to effect

change' (Jane Stein, 1997, p.7). In this way, empowerment challenges the political and social theory to address the problems of welfare state and democracy *denovo*. In Pakistan, the situation of women empowerment is not better in spite of quantitative increase which had not affected the lives of the women qualitatively. This point is under focus of this study that how far the reforms of 2000s had changed the political configuration of the political institutions to paddle up the reforms in the social and economic structures of the society for providing the equal opportunities to all without any discrimination on the bases of sex and sect.

Part of the problem stems from the unidentified interests of the women due to their under representation in the political institutions which marked their low level of mobilization and as well of their empowerment. It is generally said that mobilization of women depends on their identification of interests which may vary due to class structures of the society, but on the other hand autonomous state apparatus had provided a space for the mobility to both privileged and under-privileged to get their targets. Maxine Molyneux identifies the interests of women as gender interests by which identities are formulated to mobilize their social groups to target them. She further stated that practical gender interests... are seen to be driving many third world women's movements... [and] ...third world 'grassroots women's politics is practical' (R. Ray and A.C. Korteweg, 1999, p.49). Now the question is that how far women became active agent in the socio-political ambit of the society of Pakistan to become the members of the union council through quota system to address the societal malaise which had hampered the role of women. It will also be tried to see the impact of social taboos over the mobility of women of Pakistan, and granted her a non-permanent role in the public sphere of the society in which she is seemingly not in authority to improve her lot.

## **II. The Cultural and Perceptual Context of the Issue**

The issue of empowerment is being conceived in the perspective of gender related development which has been checked due to inequality in the socio-cultural patterns of the society and it inherited some of the cultural constraints before partition. Cynthia Nelson and Shahnaz Rouse also noted in the Indian environment before partition that '[women were] engaged in a quest for self-expression and representation' (Cynthia Nelson and Shahnaz Rouse, 2000, p.98). Here the role of some of the women is worth mentioning in the perspective of their mobility which developed some dents in the socio-political structures of the society. This description will throw light on the structural constraints which had checked the movement of ordinary women for her right. Before partition some of the Muslim women were active in social sphere and they led the movement of social reformism. The efforts of Begum Shah Nawaz were indeed worth mentioning. She was an active member in many organizations including the All India Women's Conference (This organization was formed in 1926. Margaret Cousins, who was also a founding member of the Women's Indian Association (WIA) was also the force behind this move. According to Jahanara, Cousins sent the circular argued for its constitution on the ground that there was a need for an organization that could achieve and safeguard the rights of the women and ... work for their general advancement. Shahnaz Rosue, 2006, p.85). She on the platform of women's Indian Association demanded the 10% quota for women in the legislative assembly but 3% was accepted in the franchise committee in 1935 (Sultana Samar, 2008, p.89). The same kind of quota of seats was also accepted for women in 1954 at the last meeting of constituent assembly on the basis of charter of women rights presented by Begum Shah Nawaz. In 1935 Begum

Shah Nawaz was the part of the discussion of second and third round table conferences and to its joint select committee in 1934, on behalf of women and minorities (She was elected as member of the Punjab legislative assembly, and was appointed parliamentary secretary education, medical relief, and public health. In 1942 she was expelled from Muslim League. However she was allowed back in and once again elected member Punjab assembly. She was elected to the constituent assembly in 1946. She was one of the two Muslim women to serve in this capacity. Shahnaz Rouse,2006,p.86). It was her dynamic personality that took the responsibility of women's rights in India, and furthered the cause of the community in general after the death of Bi-Amma. Begum Shah Nawaz presented women's rights at international level in 1931 when she was invited to attend the League of Nations session in Geneva, and later at the International Labour Organization in 1935(Bi-Amma—mother of Ali Brothers— worked as political activist after the imprisonment of Muslim leadership during the Khilafat Movement. Bi-Amma attracted more women to their struggle and prepare them for participation in the movement. Public participation generated in educated women an awareness of wider problems. A series of meetings was organized by all India Muslim ladies Conference—the first association of Muslim ladies started by the begum of Bohawal in 1915—to recommend the management of social problems, concerning the status of Muslim women. Sabeeha Hafiz,1981,p.xv). After independence, elite Muslim women in Pakistan continued to advocate women's political empowerment through legal reforms. They mobilized the support that led to the passage of the Muslim Personal Law of Sharia in 1948, which recognized a woman's right to inherit all forms of property. Begum Shah Nawaz and Begum Shaista Ikramullah represented women in Pakistan's first constitution-making body—the constituent assembly. In 1956 constitution, universal suffrage and reservation of special seats in the legislature were accorded to women on the basis of direct female suffrage(Sabeeha Hafiz,1981,p.xvii).

They were also behind the futile attempt to have the government include a Charter of Women's Rights in the 1956 constitution. The 1961 Muslim Family Laws Ordinance covering marriage and divorce, the most important sociological reform that they supported, is still widely regarded as empowering to women (Sabeeha Hafiz,1981). Another organization—APWA (All Pakistan Women Association) was also effective in projecting the cause of women that was founded by Begum Liaquat Ali Khan in 1949 and soon after many other organizations sprang up all over the country (Sabeeha Hafiz, 1981). All these organizations could not become a platform for demanding the socioeconomic and political rights for Pakistani women as their base was squeezed to influence the legislative bodies, and the scope of its demands remained confined to political representation and legal rights. Women's political participation remained confined to supporting roles for their political families, while the discourse for women rights continued to be shaped by invoking religion and as an extension of their domestic role. This assumption is also being investigated in this research and it will be tried to visualize the role of new women in new political system of Pakistan.

### **III. Philosophical and Pragmatic View of the Phenomenon**

The observable fact is that women are being graded as secondary to men in their social role by many of the philosophers. Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Rousseau and many others used different arguments to arrive at the common conclusion that politics is essentially a male prerogative and women are not physically or mentally fit to participate in politics on equal terms with men (Farzana Bari,2009,p.2). It has been

found that women gained their rights through waging struggles. The suffragist movement was at the centre of the stage during the Second World War period. The observing situation is that in which the question of mobilization is of importance, for which both the gender tried to attain their representation in the echelons of power through their political participation, but the women are less in numbers and low in their category of effectiveness to change or alter the patterns of development. Both the gender if share the perspective of development then it could be possible for a nation to go ahead. Pakistan's leadership was very conscious about the role of women in the development of the country. So that is why Quaid-i-Azam appointed the central committee of the Muslim League and Fatima Jinnah headed it for the progress of the women and for the mobilization of the women in the cause of Pakistan. The Quaid-i-Azam stated on 18th April 1946, at the Muslim Convention in Delhi: "It is a matter of great happiness that Muslim women are also undergoing a revolutionary change. This change is of great importance. No nation in the world can progress until its women walk side by side with the men"(Saira Bano,2009,pp.19-35). Women have to face obstacles to their political participation. The socio-economic factors as well as existing traditional structures are considered as barriers to their advancement in all fields of life. In 2008, the rate of female representation stood at 17.7% globally and this minimal representation shows that women have to cover a long distance for the ideal parity in politics (Saira Bano, 2009, pp.19-35). There is need of full and equal participation of women in policy making in order to promote gender fair government. Efforts are being made to increase women's participation through legislative measures like gender quotas which are being implemented at a remarkable rate all over the world. Gender quotas are increasingly viewed as an important policy measure for boosting women's access to decision-making bodies. The basic purpose of a quota system is to recruit women into a political position in order to limit their isolation in politics.

The significance of this study stems from the fact that women's political presence is influenced by domestic vis-à-vis global trends. The political uplift of women lacks economic bases because of their low level of literacy. It was 45.2 per cent for females in 2009-10 as compared to men which stood at 69.5 % (The Express Tribune, Feb, 15, 2011). Women have their fewer shares in labour force as compared to men due to their non-professional experience and skill which further relegated their position in the social arena. They are going to constitute 21% of the labour force while men have 71% participation rate (The Nation, October 22, 2011; Their share was very marginal in 1960 which was 4.32% and in 1985 it was 9.84%. Sabeeha Hafiz, 1981, p.38). Women are present at different levels of their representation like that of Union Council, Provincial assembly and the Parliament. Seemingly it is being realized that they have little power to achieve change due to the non-supportive structure of the bureaucracy and the politics. This research intends to highlight the structural constraints of the political system of Pakistan which domesticated the women more. The numerical strength of women in the Union council and the Parliament is not an indicator of quality but their impact and effectiveness makes a difference.

The study of empowerment of women in the perspective of Pakistan by the socio-political mobilization of women at the level of the union council will depict the trends of democratization. The process of democratization in Pakistan in terms of political reforms seemingly provided the space to women to realize and understand the maxim 'the personal is political' (Adriana Craciun, 2002). Karl Mannheim and as well the Edward

Shills described the process of social mobilization as an aspect of democratization in which segments of the society are exposed to new developments and behavior is going to be organized on the bases of the available patterns of development (Karl W Deutsch, 1961, p.494). So in this regard we have to analyze the basic political features of the political system of Pakistan at the union council level in which women quota was of 33%, introduced after 2001. The empowerment of women in terms of their mobilization as an aspect of political participation would be the litmus to judge that how far it has been materialized. It could be visualized that difference in the approach of gender development could be the outcome of the political patterns of the non western democracy, as stated by the Lucian W. Pye. He stated that in the Non-Western society political and non political spheres are diffused and people's mobilization is happened along with the primordial factors rather than the instrumental ones and all political behavior is strongly colored by the considerations of communal identification (Lucian W.Pye, 1958, p.471). So in this context Pakistan's politics is no exception and political ideas are not competitive ones. So the majority of the population is going to be mobilized along the traditional patterns which further relegated the position of women in the society of Pakistan in spite of getting their quotas at different level of representation.

In Pakistan, the Devolution of Power Plan (a local government plan) was adopted in March 2000, reserving 33 per cent seats for women in legislative councils at the local, tehsil, municipality and district level. In local councils, with an increase in the number of councils, about 70,000 women were gaining experience in self-government (Report on Local Self- Government: Pakistan 2000). However, members of the tehsil and district councils are indirectly elected by the elected councilors at the local level. Women in Pakistan also feel a clear benefit from the quotas. They have faced problems, including hostile male attitudes, the lack of a constituency due to the process of indirect elections, and being at the mercy of the male councilors who elect them and often assign them to committees dealing only with "women's issues" (CAPWIP, 2000). Nevertheless, they are making their presence felt. According to Farzana Bari "the fact that a huge number of women had taken active political role itself triggered social change, creating waves in the country's barnyards where traditional power structures still dominate the social and political lives of people" (Farzana Bari, 2009).

In Pakistan, the growth of a militant Islamic fundamentalism has included special forms of discrimination against women which are justified by appeals to Islamic tradition. This happened in spite of having equalitarian provisions in the constitution of Pakistan. The situation worsened dramatically with the "Islamist" regime of Zia ul-Haq. Measures dating from Zia's times include the Law of Evidence, in which a women witness has a status of half that of a male witness, and the Hudood Ordinances under which the vast majority of women in prison today have been charged. February 12 is celebrated as Pakistan Women's Day to memorialize a massive protest against the Law of Evidence in 1983 which met with state brutality. Still, at the central level, women's participation in governance has seen a very slow movement forward. Programmes of special representation have gone through several stages. The 1956, 1962 and 1973 constitutions all provided for reserved seats for women at both the provincial and national assemblies. The allotment of seats ranged from 5 to 10 per cent and was only through indirect elections by the members of the assemblies themselves. A request for a 30 per cent reservation was expressed in 1988 by the National Campaign for Restoration of Women's Reserved Seats and figured again in a "national consultation" organized by the

ministry of women and development in 2001. Eleven political parties endorsed a 30 per cent quota for women in the provincial and national assemblies. President Musharraf then presided over an act passed in 2002 which allocated 17 per cent seats in the national and provincial assemblies and the senate to women. The 60 (of 342) seats in the national assembly are three times more than the previous 20 seats they held. Women improved this quota when elections were held winning 21.2 per cent of the total seats, the highest percentage of all south Asian countries. However, the seats are allocated to the political parties in proportion to their electoral standing, and there is again a system of nomination the names are picked from the top of a list of 60 women that each party presents to the electoral authorities before the election. The electoral form, then, is doubly undemocratic first in giving male dominated political parties direct control over their nominees, and then in giving male top power holders the right to choose from the list. Women chosen under such a system cannot be called in any real sense representatives of the people (let alone a women's constituency).

The obstacles to women's equal participation in governance are deeply embedded in South Asian social and cultural patterns. The patriarchal nature of most of these countries is starkly shown by Amartya Sen's criteria of "missing women" (Gail Omvedt, 2005, p.4746). In the bureaucratic and political institutions, their participation is less than men. It was caused by some of the traditional factors like the patriarchal nature of the society. Another obstacle to women's political participation is the intensely competitive nature of politics itself. In the countries of South Asia, politics is a lucrative source of income and power which men attempt to control. In this way they were seemingly less active agent in the society and were performing the functions which were not of worth for the community development and governance and considerably the position rendered to them as 'women's place is in the home'.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In conclusion, there has been a significant and perhaps qualitative change as number of women has emerged into politics at the local level. The remarks of L C Jain quietly reflect the political situation in Pakistan. She stated that, "[the] news...is good. Women have entered in the political/electoral process in large numbers - the process is irreversible. It is no longer empowerment of women. Women have stepped into seats of power".<sup>1</sup> A review of the history of Pakistan highlights a few overlapping factors that continue to contribute to women's subordination: the cultural legacy; the class based socio-economic and political structure; the urban/rural divide; the patriarchal practices; and the role of religion in the polity.

Women activism remained, and remains, confined to legal rights, demanding rights based on religion and their domestic role and not as citizens of Pakistan; the issues revolve around representation in the parliament or various bodies formed by the state. These state sponsored efforts (official commissions on women in 1955, 1976, 1985, 2001) were confined to urban women, effectively restricting participation to urban activists with a moderate agenda along with the representatives of conservative and modernist Islamists. The demand for fair allocation of resources in the urban/rural or class context or a challenge to the existing structural hierarchies can potentially rupture their superior status and deny class-based advantages. Any possible unity based on class

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p.4750.

is disrupted by gender differences, while shared womanhood is fractured by differences in the socio-economic location of women. This had a damaging effect on expanding the role and representation of lower and lower-middle-class working women from rural and urban areas. This urban focus of the policy makers, in socio-economic and political arenas, not only ignores and excludes the living realities of rural lower- and middle-class women but also fails to acknowledge alternative ways of examining the women question and female subjectivity.

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