

Patriarchal Politics: Factors Limiting Women's Participation in Local Government in Pakistan

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Abstract

Active participation of women in political process is one of the key indicators of women empowerment. It has been observed that despite the 33% quota reserved for women in the local government system in Pakistan, and despite the fact that a large number of women were elected as councillors during the local bodies elections held in 2002, no substantial results were recorded with regard to women's political empowerment in the country. Using qualitative methods, this study was conducted with elected women councillors in order to explore the way women entered politics, their experiences as councillors, and the hurdles they encountered during their tenure at the union council level. The article explores a number of institutional and cultural hurdles in the way of women's political empowerment. For examples, most of the women elected through reserved quotas were usually uneducated and came from very low socio-economic backgrounds. On the other hand, some of them belonged to established political/feudal families: they were the wives, daughters and sisters or sisters-in-law of those who are already stakeholders in the power structure of the state. The representation of both kinds of these elected women is merely numerical, leaving no real impact on the lives of ordinary women.

Keywords: Women Councillor, Patriarchy, Empowerment, Local Government, Union Council

Introduction

A landmark decision made by Musharraf regime in 2002 guaranteed women's representation in the country's political structures through the reservation of 33% of seats for them in all three tiers of local government. As a result, Pakistan ranks much higher than its neighbours in terms of women's political participation (World Economic Forum, 2011). However, the strong patriarchal structure of our society creates numerous obstacles in the way of political empowerment of women. At the local level, for example, many women are kept out of the voting process because they do not have national identity cards (a pre-requisite for voter registration). Community elders and local officials of political parties also illegally bared women from voting in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Yousaf, 2013; Saleem, 2013; Bari, 2005). The electoral roll for elections held in 2013 comprised 48.6 million male and 37.6 million female voters. If we assume equal number of adult men and women in the country, the figures in electoral roll means that almost 10 million women were not registered as voters (Yousaf, 2013).

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Despite these hindrances in the way of women “more than 40,000 women were elected to the local government institutions” by 2002 (Bari, 2005). Once elected, women councillors were faced with another round of patriarchal obstacles which curtailed their effective role as councillors. This article attempts to explore the various problems faced by elected women councillor.

Literature Review

The social development of a country can be evaluated on the basis of the socio-political status of women. Women’s participation in politics cannot be understood in isolation without taking into account the general picture of women in a society. Until recently, women almost everywhere in the world remained distant from socio-political affairs. They have been discouraged from participating in political affairs. They were mostly confined to the private sphere of the household and were denied any decision-making role in the public sphere (Kumari, 2006). Generally, there were and still are different perceptions and stereotypes about women that discourage their empowerment and development. To ensure their socio-political development and change the biased perceptions regarding them, different strategies and programs were initiated in the past to ensure women’s participation in politics so that their issues could be dealt with rightly. The aim of such steps was to have a gender balanced political structure where women could realize their problems and formulate policies guaranteeing that their voices were heard. Among such measures, the “quota system” is considered as the most important one at the local and national level. Reyes (2005) believes that as it is commonly known as reservation, quota system is not new in Pakistan. She explicates that in Pakistan there was a provision of reserved seats for women in all the constitutions of Pakistan, i. e., 1956, 1962, and 1973 at both National and Provincial Assemblies. However, this allotment was very small (5 to 10%) and women were only nominated through indirect election by the members of National and Provincial Assemblies against the reserved seats. Nonetheless, this allotment did not reflect the representation of women from the grass-root level. Shvedova, (2005: 5) argues that “to empower and enable women to participate in politics, it is necessary to extend the scope of women's involvement at the grass-roots level”. Similarly, Steven (2007) stresses that women’s representation in democracy is necessary at the local and national level because local government can provide training ground for political career for both men and women. It can be considered the first stage towards women’s empowerment through which women can move further towards mainstream politics. That is probably why women in many countries have a longer history of political participation at local level rather than national level.

Despite the importance of women’s representation, the first military dictator General Ayub Khan did not give any representation in the first local bodies elections held in the country in 1959. Afterwards, General Zia-ul-Haq, who introduced local government system for the second time (1977-1988), reserved certain seats for women for the first time in the history of Pakistan. Nevertheless, this representation was little to ensure that women’s voice could be heard at the policy making level. During Zia’s regime, a provision of two seats was made in all provinces at local level except Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, previously named North West frontier Province (NWFP). The same

provision was kept for local bodies elections till the first tenure of Nawaz Sharifs's government while in his second tenure women's representation was made double. No local government elections were held in the two tenures of Benazir Bhutto (1988-1990 and 1993-1996).

However, later in March 2000, the 'devolution of power' plan was adopted by President Parvez Musharraf's government which was the result of amendments made in 1979 ordinance that provides a three-tier local government structure i.e., District, Municipality or Tehsil and Union Council. The provision of 33% quota for women was the most significant feature of the local government ordinance 2000 (Reyes, 2002). According to Mohan (2004), provision of one third quota for women in local government was an admirable step towards women empowerment but women as whole failed to take benefit from this historic chance. This article tries to find out why women could not optimally benefit from this opportunity.

Objectives of the Study

The study was conducted keeping in mind the following objectives.

1. To find out factors that encouraged or discouraged women to contest local bodies elections.
2. To map out the socio-economic and political background of women elected as councillors.
3. To explore the problems faced by elected women councillors in performing their role as union councillors.

Methodology

The universe of the study was Peshawar. According to the Local Government Ordinance 2001, District Peshawar consisted of four administrative towns, i.e., Town-I, II, III, and IV. Each town had a different number of union councils comprising a total of 93 union councils. Each council is composed of four male and four female union councillors in addition to the two male and two female representing the labour category and a representative from the religious minorities. This group of council is headed by Nazim who is assisted by Naib Nazim (National Reconstruction Bureau, 2007).

Keeping in view the number of union councils, multi-stage sampling technique was used for selection of samples. In the first stage, 16 union councils (four union councils from each of the four administrative towns) were selected randomly. In the second stage, two female union councillors from the already selected union councils were taken by using purposive sampling method. In purposive sampling people and events are deliberately selected because they are suitable rather than being representative (Payne and Payne, 2004). They are selected with specific purpose in mind, and that purpose reflects the qualities of people or events (Martyn, 2010). Due to limited time and shortage of resources, a sample size of 32 union councillors was taken from a total of 16 Union Councils. This has been shown in the table below.

Table 1 Selected Union Councils and Women Councillor in Peshawar

S. No.	Union Councils	Number of Union Councillor Selected
Town 1		
1	Khalsa-I	2
2	Sikandar Town	2
3	Sheikhabad	2
4	Lahori	2
Town 2		
5	Chamkani	2
6	Kankola	2
7	Khazana	2
8	Nahaqi	2
Town 3		
9	TehkalPayan-II	2
10	Shaheen Town	2
11	AchiniBala	2
12	Palosi	2
Town 4		
13	Sheikh Muhammadi	2
14	Maira Kachori	2
15	SulemanKhel	2
16	Masoogagar	2
Total		32

Triangulation technique was used for data collection. It is a process in which more than one method is used for the study of single phenomenon. In this study, data was collected through interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and observations in the field. The purpose of using all these three methods was to ensure holistic information so that no possible gap is left in obtaining valid results. In addition to primary data, secondary data was also utilized to ensure conclusions that are more valid.

The data collected through qualitative interviews was analysed to find out major themes. A number of themes were identified, some of which are discussed in the following section which are based on the views of the participants regarding the local government system. It highlights the way women entered politics, their experiences as councillors, and the hurdles they encountered during their tenure. The first section of the paper identifies various enabling factors which motivated and encouraged women to participate in politics. The second part of the paper examines those factors which discouraged women from actively and effectively playing their role as councillors.

Encouraging Factors for Women's Political Participation

The devolution of power ordinance in 2001 not only ensured 33% representation of women local government but also provided them with an opportunity to contest elections against both reserved and general seats. The elected women union councillors would not only represent the women constituency but the entire union council. Political participation of women depends on many factors including their own age, financial position, and education as well as the social structure and political system of the society. Some of these factors become enabling and encouraging for women's participation in politics while others discouraged their participation in politics. The enabling factors that motivated and encouraged women to participate in politics are discussed below.

Motivation by male family members and head of village

Most of the women who contested local government elections did not enter in politics by their own spirit. Rather, they were motivated to contest elections either by their husbands, fathers, and sons, or the expected Nazims of the union council. As majority of the women councillors were illiterate, their family's males supported them in all respects. These men helped them in managing all their political activities - from filling in their nomination papers to running their election campaigns. Once elected, these women councillors were 'supported' by their male relatives by acting on their behalf in the council office. Men also participated in council meetings and training on behalf of the women councillors. It was found in the study that many women never attended a council meeting during the entire period as councillors. Consequently, such women did not face any problem from their male members which could restrict them from participating in political activities. In short, men helped their women in every walk of their political activities. A female councillor from UC Achini reported that:

“Sometimes I used to become intolerant in my election campaign but my husband used to encourage me for carrying out my political activities”.

The case of UC Mairakachori, Mashookgagar and Nahaqi was interesting because in these UCs the elected women were asked by the expected Nazims to contest elections. The families (especially male members) of these female union councillor were thankful to the expected Nazims because they not only nominated them, managed their political campaigns, and bore all the expenses in support of the female councillors but also ensured them their success in the union council election. Hanif (2009) has also reported this fact in his study and has argued that these arrangements were made by the UC Nazim for the purpose to form a penal at council level which could also add to their political strength at a higher level of local government.

Despite the support and help these women acquired, even then they could not actively participate in the local government system for various reasons (see discouraging factors for details at the second part of this paper).

Joint family structure

It was found in the study that almost all of the elected female councillors came from joint family system which helped them in carrying out their political activities. They were free to carry out their political activities as they had no tension about their kids and their domestic chores in a joint family setup. A women councillor from UC Sheikh Mohammadi stated:

“Since I am living in a joint family system, that’s why my participation in the politics was easier; ... my participation in politics did not affect my domestic responsibilities and children”.

Because of the traditional role of women as house keepers in our society, women living in nuclear families found it extremely difficult to take time for participation in the public sphere of politics. On the other hand, there are usually more women in a joint family who can easily manage household chores. A women union councillor remarked:

“My sisters-in-law took care of my children whenever I remained busy in my politics. Some other women councillors who had no one else in their homes had to bring their children to the meeting. Thanks that I had full support from my family.”

In other words, women’s traditional role in the house kept women in check, while joint family structure facilitated them to contest and be elected to the union council by relieving them from their normative responsibilities as house keepers.

Old age of councillors

Age, along with gender and education, is one of the popular themes in determining political involvement. There is greater possibility of educated people especially male and older people to get involved in political activities. Young people may feel isolated and even excluded from political system because of their immaturity and financial

dependence. Usually political parties hesitate to engage young people in their parties to represent their interests (Vecchione and Caprara, 2009). This study also explored that due to cultural constraints few young women were encouraged to participate in the local bodies' elections because of their domestic, child bearing and caring responsibilities. Jennings and Markus (1988) maintains that older people take less interest in political activities because of socio-demographic variables like age, gender and marital status. Political disengagement theory (see Cumming and Henry, 1961) suggests that there is a relationship between age and political participation: as people become older, their involvement in social activities including political activities decreases.

However, this study found that old age was encouraging factor for women which helped them participate in politics. Mostly those women were allowed to participate in local government elections who were free from domestic responsibilities and were usually above fifty years of age. Old age was also an advantage for women as young women in our culture are not permitted to mingle with unrelated males. Therefore, the study found that mostly aged women participated in politics while younger women rarely contested elections.

Discouraging Factors for Women's Political Participation

Regardless of the fact that some women were encouraged and motivated to participate in politics by male members of the family, there were some barriers that discouraged their participation in politics. It was found that those who participated in politics remained passive as union councillors for most of their tenure. In fact, obstacles to women's political participation exist all over the world. These obstacles survive in the existing social and economic system as well as in the prevailing political structure. In this study, it was found that women were usually restricted by the social norms of patriarchy and lack of education and structural issues within the local bodies system. All those obstacles that prevented women from their full participation in the local governance as councillor are discussed as follows.

Patriarchal system/ male resistance

Despite the fact that women were new to electoral process as compared to male candidates, a large number of women contested direct election at the grass-root level in the history of Pakistan. Since two-third of the union councillors were male at each level of local government, it caused a problem of acceptance for women especially at union council level. Hanif (2009) has also found that the presence of women councillors were rarely tolerated and accepted by men councillors. The prevailing norms of gender segregation restricted women to attend the union council's meetings which ultimately affected their active participation in the local governance. Some women union councillor also told the researchers that their male family members did not allowed them to attend council meetings. A number of participants revealed that the Nazim conveyed them a message not to participate in the union council meeting. A female councillor from Chamkani explained that:

“When I got elected, the Nazim sent an invitation for the first meeting of union council. In the first meeting, he said “you are not required to attend meetings; you can send your male representative instead”.

These statements indicate that union councillors faced both public patriarchy and private patriarchy (Walby, 1990). In some cases like UC Achini and Palosi, where women councillor were allowed by the Nazim and their male member of the families to attend council meetings, they complained that their participation in the meeting would usually be a formality. They explained that their proposals regarding development projects were not given any importance as compared to their male counterparts and were often not approved by the Nazims. They also complained that they were unable to stay around in the Nazim's office after the meetings due to lack of physical space available to them where they could sit and perform their duties.

While trying to interview a female councillor in UC Khalisa-I, it was found that her husband was dominant to the extent that he was not letting his wife to speak. Even when the interview came to an end and the councillor was asked about any recommendations, her husband said:

“She does not know anything. I will give you some recommendations for the best functioning of the local government system because as a lawyer I have the knowledge of the system”.

When the women councillor was insisted and encouraged to speak, she said:

“I do not know what to say, whatever my husband is saying, is right”.

Hanif (2009) has found that during the earlier years when women were elected through the process of nomination against the reserved seats rather than direct elections, women in rural areas seldom attended the council meetings because they were not given the opportunity (Hanif, 2009). The same practice of inequality between men and women

union councillor is found in Bangladesh as well, where patriarchal norms and state laws kept female councillor in a lower status than men which resulted in their low self-confidence (Khan and Ara, 2006). This is the functional constraint which was systemically created by male councillor at all three tiers of government in order to discourage women to play their role in local governance.

Cultural values

Certain Pashtun values also hindered women's full participation in the local government. For example, because of the norms of gender segregation (Purdah), majority of women union councillor could not attend union councils' meetings as in Pakhtun culture; male and female are not allowed to sit together. It was also noted that sometimes councils meetings were arranged by Nazim in his *hujra*, which is a male-only space and women are culturally not allowed to enter. A female councillor complained that:

“The local council's meetings were normally conducted in Nazim's hujra rather than Union Council's office. It was very awkward for us to sit with male councillors in hujra. How could we attend such a meeting?”

Even if the meeting took place in office of the union council, it was difficult for women to feel comfortable in the presence of men. A woman councillor said that:

“It does not seem well when a purdah observing women sit with male councillors. Even if we sit, we have to hide our faces and are unable to speak a word during the entire meeting”.

Some women councillors who attended a few meetings of the union council complained that during meetings male and female councillors were used to sit separately with a curtain in between them. Even in this setting, the male councillor used to ask them to remain silent during the meeting. In short, cultural values, especially purdah were major barrier which hindered women's active participation in political activities and decision-making process.

Descriptive representation rather than substantive representation

Ideally, the aim of the local government system in Pakistan is to have a gender balanced political structure where women could realize their problems and help them formulate policies based on gender equality. The interviews conducted with the union councillors revealed that the actual situation was against the ideology of the local government system. Women who contested local government elections at union council level were neither aware of the system nor its ideology.

Almost all of the union councillor were of the view that they wanted to do something for the development of their community. To them, development meant cementing the streets, addressing the issue of electricity load shedding, and making arrangement for drainage. They were missing their own agenda for substantive representation - the promotion of women's interests. They had no concept about the development of women in the society.

Like men, they conceptualized their participation in politics that they will be working for the construction of roads and streets. Besides other constraints, women's own lack of knowledge about their roles and responsibilities and about the local government system were some factors that hindered women's effective and substantive participation in local governance.

Only few councillor reported that they wanted to open vocational centres for women but due to non-provision of funds by the head of the council they could not materialize their plans. Contrary to the situation in Pakistan, an entirely opposite picture can be seen in China where various studies (see Pharr, 1981) have confirmed that almost all of the women from the grass-root level who held public offices were engaged in women's development especially family planning and few can be seen in any other field. Hence, this research found that despite the fact that a large number of women were elected, little was done for the promotion of women's development.

Women's participation from the lower classes and castes

Elections were held on the basis of panel system and different castes and political groups fielded their complete panels for various seats in the union council and for the seats of Nazim and Naib Nazim. These panels were not only advantageous for taking political strength at the union council level but also could inspire the candidates at higher tier of local government. For this purpose, they ensured representation of women in the local level and ensured that one candidate in their constituency should be woman to secure vote in upper tier of local government. Therefore, they made concrete effort to search for a suitable female candidate (Hanif, 2009). As mentioned before, the expected Nazim not only nominated women candidates, but also submitted their nomination papers and bore all expenses in terms of running political campaigns in their support. This study explored that influential people not only encouraged women from the lower caste but also assured their success in election.

The study discovered that considerable number of female union councillor belonged to lower castes who usually have low financial and social status. These casts are termed as *Jola* (weavers) *Kolal* (potters), *Tarkaan* (carpenters) and *Qassab* (butchers). These castes have relatively relaxed norms of gender segregation and are not expected to observe *Purdah*. Women of these occupational groups usually work in people's houses at the time of marriage and death and are called *Kasabgar* or *Ostakaar* in local terms. Therefore, it was not a big challenge for these women to carry out political activities outside their homes. The study further revealed that these women were motivated by the expected Nazim of the particular union council to contest elections. An elected women union councillor from Ormar reported that:

“I had never heard the word politics or councillor but Arbab sahab (well-off person) of our village called my husband to his Hujra and told him that “your wife will contest elections from our panel”. My husband had to obey as he said that Arbab sahab has honored us by selecting us for this seat”.

Another female union councillor from UC Mashookgagar who belonged to a lower caste shared a similar story:

“When Major sahab (retired Army officer) of our village conveyed a message to my son that your mother will contest election and will become a councillor, my son was very happy. I told him that I am not educated so I cannot do politics, he said that you need not to worry; Major sahab will manage everything. So I had to agree”.

Another female councillor from UC Khazana who was also an uneducated poor *Kasabgar* woman said that:

“The [expected] Nazim conveyed a message to me for contesting elections. I refused as I could not afford the expenses for candidature but he assured me that he will bear all the expenses and he really did it”.

While it was a matter of honour for these women of lower social strata to be elected as members of the union council, their status remained low at the union council after election as well. Because of their lower socio-economic status, these women were not given their due respect even by their male and female counterparts of the same council. Therefore, they mostly remain passive during their tenure.

In short, although the heads of the village like Malik and Khan helped low caste women to be elected as councillor, they were not allowed to actually participate in any political activity. Their's was only a token representation. This shows that influential people used these women of the lower socio-economic status for their own vested interests.

Illiteracy of women councillor

Lack of education was a major problem among women councillor. Owing to lack of education they could not recognize their rights as councillor which further led to their unawareness about their roles and responsibilities as councillor. Their illiteracy was a major reason of all kinds of discriminations made against them.

This study found that majority of the union councillor were uneducated and remained unconfident to ask about their own job description and their own rights, such as participation in council's meeting, honorarium and budget for their own constituencies.

Verba et al. (1995) suggest that education is a dynamic predictor of political participation. Women are good mobilizers, campaigners and organizers. But their illiteracy or lack of education make them unconfident and make them feel inferior to actively participate in political activities. In other words, illiteracy made them passive members of the union councils. The uneducated women were not valued by the Nazim as well as by their educated women counterparts. It was observed that educated councillor

expressed feelings of disrespect for uneducated female councillor. For example, one educated woman councillor from UC Chamkani reported that:

“Uneducated women come to the workshop or trainings to eat biscuits and cookies, not to learn something. Due to lack of education they cannot concentrate properly during workshops and soon became bore and start creating disturbance in the session”.

In short, due to illiteracy and lack of education women could not understand the local government system and their rights as councillor. As a result they remained passive members of the council.

Women councillor being relatives of Nazims and Naib Nazims

Another feature of local government was that in some cases the wives of expected Nazims and Naib Nazims also contested elections and became union councillors who neither attended the UC meeting, nor opposed the decisions made by the head of the union council (their husbands). Such situations were intentionally made by the head of UC in order to make the political environment most favourable for them. This practice of ‘family based politics’ at the UC level is in fact a continuation of the political structure at the national level at South Asia, where a number of influential women politicians belong to powerful families. For example, Benazir Bhutto, Indra Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi and Sheikh Haseena Wajid all have been closely related, mostly by blood, to the ruling families in their respective countries. In short, it was found that family based politics is not only practiced at national or provincial level but also at grass-root level where the wives of Nazim and Naib Nazim are elected as union councillor. This practice of family based hereditary politics further strengthens the patriarchal politics in the country and ordinary women seldom have a chance of moving up the ladder to empowerment.

Conclusion

This study attempted to explore factors effecting women’s active political participation in local government. It was found that motivation by the male members of the family to participate in the local government election was one of the encouraging factors for women candidates. They were not only motivated by the male members of their family but also gave all kind of support during their tenure. Joint family system is another positive element of our society that facilitated women to participate in contesting elections as councillor. In joint family system the burden of domestic responsibilities does not falls upon one member only as there are other female who share the same responsibilities. Old age of the women councillor was another encouraging factor for them to participate in politics because aged women are usually exempted from household work and especially child bearing and caring responsibilities. The factors which discouraged women to participate in the local government elections were patriarchal structures. In some cases, they were restricted by male members of their family while in majority of the cases they were restricted by the Nazim of the council to participate in the council’s meetings. Another discouraging factor in way of women’s political participation was the cultural norm of purdah which did not allowed women councillors

to talk or sit with men at the UC. Women's own lack of education was also a hurdle as uneducated elected women could not carry out their political responsibilities. Most of these women councillor remained unaware about their roles and responsibilities as councillor. As a result they remained passive in their role for most of their tenure. Two extremes with regards to women political participation at union council were observed. At one extreme, a number of women from elite class were elected to the union council. At the other hand, most of the elected women belonged to lower caste and had lower socio-economic backgrounds. The representation of both kinds of these elected women was merely numerical; they seldom participated in meetings and could not guaranteed the effective representation of an average women in politics.

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