

How Pakistan still shuts women out of political power

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Nominating women to reserved legislative seats has done little for the cause of women in Pakistan. Political parties must be made to field more winning women candidates.

In Pakistan's last general election, in February 2024, Suriya Bibi became the first woman to be elected to the provincial assembly of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from Chitral, on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. She contested the election as an independent candidate with no prior history of contesting elections, though the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf (PTI), led by the former prime minister Imran Khan, backed her candidacy. She won with almost 19,000 votes, defeating a male candidate of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), a party representing the Deobandi brand of Islam, known for its ultra-conservative views on women's participation in public life. After the election, Suriya Bibi also became the deputy speaker of the provincial assembly.

In contesting the election, Suriya Bibi chose a more difficult route into politics than the one many women in Pakistan have previously taken. That route is nomination, rather than election, to the country's national assembly and provincial assemblies. As a female candidate, she worked to create a constituency among women voters, and her campaign brought more women out to vote than men for the first time in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's history. Along the way, Suriya Bibi dented some of the stereotypes in Pakistan - and beyond - about women's participation in politics as candidates and as voters. This would not have been possible if she instead sought a nomination to public office.

Suriya Bibi's victory - with a female newcomer beating out a well-established religio-political rival - was incredibly significant in the male-dominated and conservative sociopolitical context of Pakistan, and especially of Chitral and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It is also an exception to the prevailing rule of women getting into politics largely due to prior political connections - often through their families - and so reflects deeper problems in Pakistan's gendered political landscape.

As of 2023, women constituted more than 48 percent of Pakistan's total population. Yet the country's parliament is far from balanced in terms of gender representation. Out of the 336 seats in the national assembly, the country's directly elected lower house, only 60 are reserved for women. Each party gets to nominate women to these seats in proportion to the share of general (that is, not nominated) seats it wins at the polls. Only 12 women won general seats in 2024, bringing women's total strength in the house to 72 representatives - just over 21 percent of the total. Pakistan's six provincial and legislative assemblies have roughly similar proportions of women legislators, and the upper house of parliament has a stipulated minimum of 17 women among its maximum membership of 96 senators.

Studies have shown that liberal democracies are more likely to do better on gender equality than other modes of governance, and thereby have a larger presence of women in politics. Such countries have higher chances of experiencing peace, a healthy domestic security environment, and lower

levels of aggression against other states.

Pakistan was ranked 142nd out of 146 countries in the 2023 Global Gender Gap Index, published by the World Economic Forum, and slipped to 145th place, ahead of only Sudan, in the ranking for 2024. According to the 2022 Global Gender Gap report, “Pakistan is the country where women have the smallest share of senior, managerial and legislative roles,” with a mere 4.5 percent of such positions in women’s hands. With few women present in positions of power and authority, Pakistan continues to fail to narrow the gender gap, improve women’s empowerment or achieve its Sustainable Development Goals, which include gender-based equality.

MOST WOMEN WHO won general seats in the current parliament are from powerful political families – such as the Daultana family, preeminent in Punjab since colonial times, the Marri family, an old power in Sindh, and the Bhutto-Zardari families that have long political histories also in Sindh. Women from such families are able to mobilise traditional – and still predominantly male – patronage networks and vote banks established over decades when contesting general seats in their traditional constituencies.

Suriya Bibi, by contrast, had to navigate a restrictive, conservative, male-dominated political landscape largely on her own. This is all the more remarkable as women in elected office often depend on male figures even when established political families are not involved. For instance, during local elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2021, Zainab Bibi and Kulsoom Bibi, both residents of Plodhir village and married to the same man, won a reserved seat and a general seat. Their election campaigns were predominantly handled by their husband, and neither woman’s qualifications or accomplishments were mentioned in their campaign banners or pamphlets. Instead, it was information on their husband that was circulated.

When it comes to seats reserved for women, these are very often filled based on personal connections that women politicians or their families have with key party leaders, who wield more real power than the parties’ executive committees. Both male and female candidates use these avenues to power, but for women – for whom other routes to political success might be cordoned off – these connections become especially important. Shaza Fatima Khawaja, the niece of Khawaja Asif, Pakistan’s defence minister and a key member of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, first became a member of the national assembly in 2013 after being nominated to a reserved seat. She retained the seat in 2018 and again in 2024, and is now – without ever having contested an election – a minister of state for information technology.

A December 2020 report by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, a German government-funded organisation for liberal politics, found that women in reserved seats faced discrimination while trying to work because they had not contested elections and did not have public mandates. “Their status is diminished because many are seen as proxies or placeholders for their party or their families, and their main role is just seen to be holding on to power for their male leaders.” Even women elected to general seats view women on reserved seats as “privileged and undeserving of their position in the assembly.”

All of Pakistan’s parties display a broad pattern where a candidate’s financial strength and ability to contribute to party funds determines their chances of getting either an election ticket or a nomination to a reserved seat (a share of legislative seats is also reserved for religious minorities).

This is true for both men and women looking to participate in politics. Put bluntly, women's nominations as candidates for election or for reserved seats are also often open to sale.

When women enter parliament, via either reserved or general seats, they do not necessarily take up women's or gender-based issues. The Friedrich Naumann Foundation report showed that female parliamentarians introduced bills between 2018 and 2020 on issues of law, parliamentary affairs, human rights, foreign affairs and local government.

Women parliamentarians should not and need not focus only on issues related to women's rights. But, in Pakistan's male-dominated parliament, such issues continue to be sidelined despite a relative increase in women's participation over the years.

IRONICALLY, women's political representation in Pakistan received its biggest boosts during the most undemocratic periods in its history. The military regime of Zia ul-Haq increased the number of reserved seats for women in the national assembly in 1985 from 10 to 20. In 2002, the military regime of Pervez Musharraf increased the number of women's seats in the national assembly from 20 to 60.

A 2023 report by the Free and Fair Election Network, a group of civil society organisations working on electoral transparency and oversight in Pakistan, showed that women parliamentarians attend sessions and introduce agenda more frequently than their male counterparts. Still, since women parliamentarians in reserved seats, largely dependent on establishment connections, generally come from upper-class backgrounds, they tend to do little more than pay lip service to issues specifically affecting the majority of women in the country, such as the denial of inheritance rights. Quite often, women's rights only become an issue when specific episodes of violence against women are reported in the national media, and then disappear from the agenda once the attention has passed. Suriya Bibi, by contrast, has been talking about protecting women's property rights in accordance with existing laws of inheritance that are not generally followed across most of Pakistan.

Pakistan is not the only country in Southasia where women generally face such structural underrepresentation. India, for instance, has a long history of political struggle to increase the share of seats reserved for women in its parliament, which now stands at 33 percent. Nepal, when it promulgated a new constitution in 2015, also required 33-percent women's representation in its parliament.

In Sri Lanka, although women have risen to top political positions owing to the legacies of their male relatives, women [have found it difficult](#) to work their way up through party organisations from the grassroots. The country's current prime minister, Harini Amarasuriya, first entered parliament via a reserved seat.

Pakistan needs more legal reforms to ensure better representation of women in its parliament and provincial legislatures. But merely increasing the quota of reserved seats for women in its legislative bodies will not help Pakistan achieve real gender equality and the meaningful empowerment of all women and girls. In fact, given the specific circumstances laid out above, increasing the number of reserved seats any further could only weaken the elected and representative character of the legislatures. If legal reforms are to be undertaken, a better path may be requiring political parties to

field a much higher number of female candidates for general seats.

Some countries, such as France, have successfully implemented such measures. At the turn of the millennium, France amended its constitution and election laws to require all parties to field an equal number of male and female candidates at elections. In 1997, women comprised only 11 percent of France's national assembly and only about six percent of its senate. In 2022, women hold more than 37 percent of seats.

Nicaragua passed an electoral law on gender quotas in 2012 establishing parity between men and women, leading to women holding 45 percent of seats in its legislature and 42.5 percent of mayoral offices. In 2008, only 8.6 percent of the country's mayors were women. The country's 2012 reforms require all political parties and coalitions that participate in elections to its national assembly to include 50 percent men and 50 percent women candidates in their electoral lists for national, municipal and the Central American parliament elections. Nicaragua's elections have not often been free or fair and the country's electoral council found that the 50 percent gender quota was "rigorously applied for the first time for the whole of the electoral process" in the 2021 election. Yet, it managed to have a mandate for gender parity among candidates without previous quotas for women.

Pakistan's Elections Act 2017 requires political parties to "ensure at least five per cent representation of women candidates" in general seats. But, as various analyses in recent years have shown, even that minimal quota has not led to an increase in the actual number of women parliamentarians.

There are three specific reasons for this. First, the current requirement of five percent is too low to make any significant impact. Second, parties have generally been reluctant to meet, let alone go beyond, this requirement. Third - and most important - parties largely award tickets to women for general seats in the constituencies they are not expected to win. As one parliamentarian told me on condition of anonymity, "This is mostly done to fulfil the requirement of the Elections Act and escape any punishment by the Election Commission."

Pakistan needs to learn from France and Nicaragua to increase the overall requirement of party tickets to women. And, to cement the measure in place, it should make it a constitutional rather than just a legal requirement, as France has.

If, for example, the constitution were to require that parties allocate at least 40 percent of general electoral tickets to women candidates, it would mean two different things. First, parties would have to draw from a much larger pool of women activists and politicians to meet this requirement, putting them under pressure to look beyond specific influential families. Second, parties would have to mobilise real resources in support of women candidates since widespread losses among their female contingents would badly dent their eventual parliamentary presence and power. The importance of party resources was clear in Suriya Bibi's victory; she benefitted significantly from the backing of the local PTI machinery as it pursued the party's current anti-establishment streak.

Pakistan's political parties can learn a lot from France and Nicaragua in moving beyond the rhetoric of gender equality and starting to pursue real parity in terms of gender representation in legislative

bodies. Reforms to push parties into nominating high numbers of women for general seats are a crucial step.

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