

Topic:

Women's Representation in Pakistani Politics: Symbolic or Substantive?

Abstract:

Women's Representation in politics is a key measure of a country's democratic development and commitment to gender equality. In Pakistan, Women's participation in political life has seen improvements over time, particularly through reserved seats in national and provincial assemblies. However, a serious question remains: is this representation only **symbolic** or is it truly **substantive**? This article explores this question by examining historical background, legislative progress, institutional mechanisms, cultural factors, and the actual roles women have played in policy-making. Using data from parliamentary records, reports by national and international organizations, and academic literature, the paper shows that while Women's visibility in politics has improved, many still lack real power or influence. Most are selected for symbolic reasons, with limited autonomy. However, some women leaders have successfully broken these limitations and made impactful contributions. The article concludes that for Women's political representation in Pakistan to become truly substantive, legal reforms, party-level changes, cultural shifts, and capacity-building programs are needed.

Introduction:

A democratic system cannot function fully without the active participation of all citizens, including women. Women's involvement in politics is crucial not just for gender equality, but also for the quality of governance, policy making and social justice. In Pakistan, a patriarchal society with deep rooted traditional values, Women's journey into politics has been slow and filled with challenges. Despite constitutional guarantees and international commitments, women remain underrepresented in decision-making positions.

In recent years, the presence of women in Pakistan's politics has increased. Reserved seats in the assemblies and efforts by civil society have played a role in promoting gender equality. However, this numerical rise does not necessarily translate into actual empowerment. Many women are nominated by political parties and often function under male supervision or influence. Their roles are limited, and their ability to bring meaningful change is questioned.

This Research aims to explore whether women's representation in Pakistani Politics is **symbolic**—meant just to fulfill quotas and show gender inclusion—or **substantive**—allowing women to influence policy and participate fully in governance. Through analysis of historical data, political case-studies, and current challenges, this article assesses the depth and effectiveness of women's political participation in Pakistan.

Literature Review:

The debate over symbolic versus substantive representation has been widely discussed in political theory. **Hanna Pitkin (1967)** made a key distinction: **Symbolic representation** refers to the mere presence of women in political roles, often without any real power or impact, while **Substantive representation** means that women use their positions to advocate for and implement policies that address Women's and societal needs.

In the Pakistani context, various studies have explored this issue. **Bari (2005)** noted that the introduction of reserved seats did improve Women's access to politics, but not necessarily their effectiveness. She argues that most women are selected based on family connections or loyalty to party leaders rather than political capability or grassroots work.

Rubina Saigol (2016) also points out that political parties in Pakistan often treat Women's presence as a token gesture. These Women's are rarely given key positions or a real say in decision-making processes. **Ayesha Khan (2011)** provides a historical overview, noting that while women have been active since the time of independence, their roles have been limited by culture, social norms, and institutional structures.

According to the **Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023)**, women in Pakistan held **20.2%** of seats in the National Assembly, which is below the global average. The **Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP)** reported that only **5%** of candidates in the **2018 elections** were women. Reports from UN Women and the **National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW)** echo these findings, stressing the need for real empowerment and political space for women.

These studies suggest that while the number of women in politics may be increasing, their roles remain largely symbolic, with limited influence over important political decisions.

Results and Discussions:

1. Historical Background and Milestones:

Pakistan's history includes several strong women figures. **Fatima Jinnah**, sister of the country's founder, was a significant political leader. The most prominent example is **Benazir Bhutto**, who became the **first female Prime Minister of a Muslim country in 1988**. Her leadership proved that women can lead even in conservative societies.

However, Benazir Bhutto's example remains exceptional. The majority of female politicians have not had similar autonomy or public support. Over the years, several legal provisions have been introduced to increase Women's participation:

- The **1973 Constitution** guarantees equal rights to women.
- The legal framework order **2002** introduced **60** reserved seats for women in the National Assembly and **17%** in provincial assemblies.
- The local government Ordinance **2001** allowed **33%** Women's representation in local government.

These reforms helped bring more women into politics, but the process of their selection often remains non-democratic and heavily controlled by party leadership.

2. Reserved Seats: Quantity vs Quality:

The reserved seats system has led to a steady increase in the number of women in parliament. However, this numerical progress does not always translate into meaningful participation. Women on reserved seats are nominated by political parties rather than elected by the public, and often have limited independence. Studies by **PILDAT (2020)** show that such women are expected to follow party lines without raising controversial issues.

Furthermore, they are rarely given by ministries or committee chairs. In most cases, male politicians dominate decision-making processes. Even when women do raise important issues, their voices are not taken seriously. As a result, their contributions often go unnoticed.

3. Social and Cultural Barriers:

Culture plays a major role in shaping women's participation in Pakistani politics. Deep-rooted patriarchy, gender discrimination, and conservative mindsets prevent many women from entering politics. In some rural areas, women are still discouraged or even prevented from voting. In tribal areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, there have been incidents where local elders signed agreements banning women from casting votes.

Moreover, women politicians face harassment, threats and media attacks. Online harassment is particularly common. A study by Digital Rights Foundation (2021) revealed that many women politicians were targeted on social media with abusive language and personal attacks. Such hostility discourages women from playing an active role in political life.

4. Substantive Representation: Success Stories:

Despite challenges, several women have succeeded in making substantive contributions:

- **Benazir Bhutto:** Apart from becoming Prime Minister, she introduced Women's police stations, first Women's Bank, and worked on health reforms.
- **Fehmida Mirza:** The first female Speaker of the National Assembly, she led important sessions and represented Pakistan internationally.
- **Sherry Rehman:** A leading voice on human rights and foreign affairs, she has served as Pakistan's Ambassador to the U.S and as a senator.
- **Marvi Memon:** worked on the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) and focused on Women's empowerment and financial inclusion.
- **Asia Nasir:** A minority women who consistently spoke for religious and gender rights in the National Assembly.

These Women prove that when provided with opportunities, women can perform equally or even better than their male counterparts.

5. Recent Data and Observations:

- According to **ECP(2018)**, women made up **44%** of registered voters, but only **5%** of electoral candidates.
- **IPU(2013)** ranked Pakistan 106th out of **190** countries in terms of women's political representation.
- **PILDAT(2021)** showed women legislators participated in **23%** of parliamentary discussions.
- Only **2%** of party leadership positions in mainstream stream parties are held by women (**NCSW, 2022**)

These figures highlight the structural and cultural limitations that prevent women from gaining full political empowerment.

6. Political Parties and Leadership:

Most political parties lack internal democracy when it comes to Women's participation. While they appoint women on reserved seats, they seldom allow them to contest general elections or hold key offices. The major parties **PPP, PML-N, PTI** have few women in decision-making bodies. Parties must take responsibility to train, support, and promote capable women leaders, rather than using them as symbolic figures to fulfill quotas.

Conclusion & Final Recommendations:

Women's representation in Pakistani politics has made progress in terms of numbers, especially due to reserved seats. However, most of this representation remains **symbolic** rather than **substantive**. Women are often selected based on loyalty or family ties and have little influence on policy making. Cultural norms, party structures, and social barriers further restrict their ability to participate actively and effectively.

Yet, there are exceptions—women who have managed to break barriers and contribute meaningfully to political discourse and development. These cases show that change is possible but requires sustained efforts.

Recommendations:

1. Reform the Reserved Seats Mechanism:

Reserved Seats should not be fulfilled through party nominations alone. Options like proportional representation, direct elections, or merit-based processes should be explored.

2. Strengthen Internal Party Democracy:

Political Parties must promote capable women to leadership roles and give them tickets for general seats, not just reserved ones.

3. Capacity-Building Programs:

Training sessions for women in politics should be organized on policy making, leadership and media communication.

4. Legal Protection and Implementation:

Laws against gender-based violence and harassment in political spaces must be enforced strictly to protect women politicians.

5. Cultural Change and Awareness Campaigns:

Society must be educated about the importance of women in leadership through media, educational institutions, and community programs.

6. Encourage Youth Participation:

Young women should be encouraged to engage in student unions, youth Parliaments, and internships to gain experience and interest in politics.

7. Media Representation:

Media should highlight positive stories of women in politics and avoid sensationalism or personal attacks that discourage women.

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