

EMPOWERMENT OF PAKISTANI WOMEN: PERCEPTIONS AND REALITY

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Abstract

Women's access to higher education is considered a tool of their empowerment in the intellectual, organizational, social, economic, administrative and familial spheres. Ideally speaking, empowerment is an active multidimensional process which should enable women to realize their identity and powers in all spheres of life, including greater autonomy in decision making, ability to plan their lives, and greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives. However, these theoretical assumptions, related to empowerment, are questioned when it comes to the beliefs, customs and practices prevalent in reality. In the patriarchal context of Pakistan, the paper explores how far Pakistani Women Parliamentarians are empowered in their professional and personal lives; how far they exercise independence in decision making related to the issues of their personal and professional lives.

Background

In 1995, nearly a half-century after the creation of Pakistan, the National Report for the Fourth UN World Conference for Women had to admit that women "continue to suffer in the face of oppressive patriarchal structures, rigid orthodox norms and stifling socio-cultural customs and traditions in Pakistan."¹

Politics is a domain of power, and in Pakistan it is strongly male dominated. According to population indicators report of World Bank 2011, "Women constitute 49% of the Pakistan's population, being unutilized in the national development due to their low skill, less education and less empowerment in the realm of politics"². Patriarchal setup and social stereotypes dismiss their capabilities and create persistent hurdles in their way of empowerment. "Pakistan's political sphere is also

typically viewed as masculine and politicians as male” and major political positions are still in the hands of men whereas women are delimited to soft-profiles only, which ultimately jeopardize their level of empowerment in Pakistan.

Issues Associated with Empowerment

The word ‘empower’ denotes that it is not an internal phenomenon rather the external factors have to endow one with the specific power. Empowerment, in other words, is "the result of the process which enables an individual to know about herself/himself, what she/he wants, express it, try to get it and fulfill their needs, enhance confidence, awareness, mobility, choices, control over resources and decision making power. The process which enables an individual to gain all the above qualities is called empowerment³." The phenomenon of empowering someone implicitly comments on the powerlessness of the individual before. In other words, the process of empowerment in the social context involves that power is endowed to the powerless from the powerful entities in the society by “allowing the weak and the marginalized to have access to the tools and the materials they need to forge their own destinies”⁴.

When it comes to the issue of empowerment, customary law plays a vital role. As a matter of fact “The constitution of Pakistan recognizes the principle of equality of all citizens and the right to equal protection of the law”⁵; particularly, it makes discrimination against women on the basis of gender illegal, and calls for positive measures by the state. One example of how law works to ensure the maximum and equal participation of female gender in policy making is evident from the efforts that are made “to increase women’s participation through legislative measures like gender quotas which are being implemented at a remarkable rate all over the world”⁶. Purpose of this “quota system is to recruit women into a political position in order to limit their isolation in politics”⁷ There are other forces that work side by side with law i.e. customary law, which specially plays a vital role in case of absence of any constituted/written law.

Customary law can be defined as ‘traditional common rule or practice that has become an intrinsic part of the accepted and expected conduct in a community’⁸. Oxford dictionary defines customary law as the law ‘established by or based on custom rather than common law or statute’⁹. When it comes to the question how customs and traditions play a significant role in determining the position of Pakistani women in different spheres of life, one finds that many practices are flagrant violations of state as well as official Islamic law and are clearly detrimental to women’s welfare. However, some cultural practices protect women in an environment where legal protections are either absent or unenforceable. This is well known in many other contexts where traditional institutions “step into the breach” left vacant by absent or unenforceable legal protections. One can examine practices that appear to play this role in rural Pakistan. This is not to suggest that such customary practices yield optimal outcomes for women, but that given the lacunae in written laws and enforcement capacity, some customary practices may actually enhance women’s welfare¹⁰.

Empowerment of Women

Men and women are substantial part of any society but in male dominated societies, female population is the deprived and marginalized group of society. If men and women were created equal, the phenomenon of empowerment of women illustrates that initially they have been disempowered and as a relapse, they are encouraged to hold some power in their hands for the well being of the family or the society but above all, for themselves. Empowerment of women is generally seen in relation to men. The status of men is the measuring tool for scaling how much empowerment is required on the part of women. On the other hand, the empowerment of women is also seen as a threat to the singular rule of men but it needs to be clarified that empowering women does not imply disempowering men; they can both remain in power simultaneously¹¹. Such an empowerment is based, not only restricted to the physical or material aspects of life but it also

reflects their intellectual and emotional development, and this relationship is reciprocal in nature.

For instance, for a woman to be economically independent and socially active, her self-esteem and confidence need to be raised first, then she needs to be sensitized to her status in the society and its implications for herself and those around her; only then can she rise to achieve the physical scales of empowerment.

There are seven components regarding the empowerment of women: awareness of their rights; improved standards of living, equal ownership of productive resources, better health care for herself and her children, higher literacy level and education, increased partnership in economic and commercial sectors, and achievement of self-reliance, self confidence and self – respect¹². Furthermore, education, employment, contact with outside world, personality development, economic independence, institutional and legal support, promotion of women wings and activists are the prerequisites for the empowerment of women¹³. These are the social measures that need to be taken to give sustainable power to women.

Perceptions and Reality about Women

In today's world, there are certain expectations and hopes related to the outcomes of empowering women. It is expected that empowerment would establish equality between men and women as it should root out subordination of women; and once empowered, women can have control over their labour, income, sexuality, reproduction and mobility. It is also hoped that empowerment would be a way to economic independence, high self-esteem and self-confidence. It is further expected that in the context of politics, female empowerment i.e. Reserved seats for females in the parliament will lead to “a new kind of politics under a new leadership”¹⁴.

Reality of women empowerment, however, might differ from what is expected as the “rhetoric between theory and

practice” appears to be very the wide¹⁵. Terms such as “new age women” and “woman of substance” are just words in books¹⁶. Apparently, women might be awarded empowerment but the ground reality changes very rarely. In fact, independence and ample self-reliance are ‘idealistic terms’¹⁷. On practical grounds, people consult others and female, specifically, who is always thoughtful, sacrificing and caring for her family. The remarks of Jeanne Kirkpatrick (former UN ambassador for the United States) are significant in this regard: “I tend to think that the patterns of interaction in high politics are particularly unattractive to women - as unattractive to women as they are inhospitable to them”¹⁸.

Gender, Power and Politics

Discriminations on the basis of gender has proved to be a prevalent characteristic of system in Pakistan. “Women’s image is as that of mother and wife - the private and not the public one”¹⁹. These socially subscribed roles debar women from empowerment. These roles instill in them, the thought that only external factors would provide them with the power and opportunity to be empowered but this is not the case as empowerment “is not a commodity that can be handed over to women”²⁰.

Society is dissected not on the bases of the potential of individuals rather on their gender. When such an unjust division appears, women are the exploited group in this regard. Men are on the giving end of power i.e. they exercise their power whereas women are on the receiving end. Power does not appear to be neutral term in this context rather, “issues of sexuality are at the heart of the whole workings of power in modern society”²¹.

In human societies, different occupations are associated either with one gender or another. The more passive jobs are linked to women whereas the jobs that require activity or power are associated with men. Politics is also one of the fields that are governed by the idea of power. For instance, studies on the issues of 'gender and power' in the political context of

Bangladesh show that women do not have political status, access, or influence equal to men²². There is no doubt that women are considered as secondary to men in terms of their social role by various philosophers including Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Rousseau, who “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”²³.

The way to empowerment is incomplete without empowering women politically and providing them equal participation in the endeavour to run the nation. Out of the 50 percent female population of Pakistan, only 5 to 10 percent women participate in politics and it is rare for them to acquire the highest political positions²⁴. As a matter of fact, “political empowerment is the form of participation in decision making process at various levels of political activity”²⁵.

Women issues can be dealt, only when the representative will be an active part of the decision bodies locally, nationally and internationally²⁶. If we look at it in the context of India, the political experience of women in India was of being ‘puppets’ in male hands initially as they were not accepted equal by the male ‘*Panchayat*’ members; no one even remotely anticipated the level of commitment displayed by the women, who participated in politics as a result of 33% reservation at panchayat and municipal levels. The emergence of these women disproved the belief that women are not ‘available’ for politics²⁷. Thus, women in politics are not on the highest level of leadership so there are very few women heads of state; and gender is active “in the election, appointment and retention of female leaders”²⁸.

Political Rights of Women in Pakistan

With the independence of country, Pakistani women were granted suffrage in 1947 under the Pakistan Ordinance²⁹; and their right to vote was reasserted in national elections in 1956 under the interim constitution³⁰. However, the right to vote is

another thing and the practice of this political right is something completely different. In Pakistani context, the gap between theory and practice is quite wide. In fact “the constitution of Pakistan guarantees to ensure women empowerment in the society, but Pakistan being a patriarchal society, finds it difficult in implementing such constitutional provisions”³¹; so the female voting turn-out in Pakistan has always been very low. If we look at the history of developed countries, generally female voting turn out is high, but in developing countries like Pakistan, female are not allowed to vote in various constituencies. Even today, Pakistan currently has 32.2 million female registered voters in comparison with the 38.8 million registered male voters, female voters face severe hurdles in casting their votes and getting themselves to the highest echelons of the power corridor³². The reasons of this less vote turn out are embedded in the culture. A research of National Commission on the status of women claims, “in March 2001 during the local government elections, thousands of women in over 13 out of the 56 Union Councils of Swabi were barred from casting votes”³³.

As far as the right to be members of legislative bodies is concerned, the provision of reservation of seats for women in the Parliament can be seen throughout the constitutional history of Pakistan from 1956 to 1973³⁴. An attempt to trace the history of Pakistani female participation in politics shows that in 1956, 3 percent seats were reserved for women, which were increased to 5 percent in 1973 in both the national and provincial assemblies. This participation was doubled to 10 percent in 1984 but only for the National Assembly that provided twenty women with a chance to be indirectly elected. In 1985, twenty two women were in the national Assembly whereas from 1988-1990, four women competed for general seats besides the twenty reserved seats. The first Muslim female Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, was also elected in the same era. In 1988, the reserved seats for women lapsed and consequently there were only two women in the national and three women in the provincial assemblies. One additional seat was reserved for minorities. In 1995, there were four women each in the National and Provincial Assemblies³⁵. In politics,

women currently occupy 21 percent of the seats in the National Assembly and 18 percent of seats in the Senate. Pakistan has had one woman prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, and other women have found a place in various high-level positions in the central and provincial governments³⁶.

Reasons behind Low Participation

There are three major reasons for women's low participation in politics namely: *purdah* that is a religious obligation for a Muslim woman, illiteracy and violence against women³⁷. The countries with dominant religions (such as Islam in Kuwait) and philosophy (such as Confucianism in Korea) have low participation of women in politics³⁸. However, Pakistan also has the examples of the mother and the daughter Lady Nusrat Haroon and Daulat Hidayatallah. Lady Haroon was a prominent and powerful woman who devoted herself to work for Pakistan movement. Founded by her, Nusrat Club, was the hub of political activities of Muslim women. She was also elected as the President of all India Women Muslim League in 1943, and the Vice-President of All Pakistan Women's Association founded by Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali in 1945. "Daulat Hidayatallah accompanied her father Sir Abdullah Haroon to the Imperial Economic Conference in Canada. She was Joint Secretary of the Sindh Muslim League. In 1936, she married Anwar Hidayatallah, the son of Sir Ghulam Husain Hidayatallah. Her mother-in-law being politically enlightened was most supportive and biography of her father, Sir Abdullah Haroon is illustrative of her acumen and services"³⁹.

For instance, in the 1946 election, Begum Jahanara Shahnawaz and Begum Shaista Ikramullah got elected in Central Constituent Assembly. Women politicians could also be seen in the Pakistan movement but when it came to rule the country, the "monopoly" of male dominance did not let Fatima Jinnah to win⁴⁰. In 1965 presidential election, Ayub Khan defeated Fatima Jinnah by taking 64% of the votes. There were various reasons of Fatima Jinnah's defeat: indirect ballot, second amendment of the Constitution that confirmed

him as President till the election of his successor, Ayub Khan's unfair utilization of the state facilities etc⁴¹.

In the case of Pakistan, an analysis of the history makes it evident that there are certain factors that have led to low participation of women in politics. The factors which contributed to women's subordination include "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"⁴². However, despite the limited number and low participation, women have always been present in the political realm of Pakistan.

Pakistani women, despite hazards, have been participating in politics for a long time both in the formal politics i.e. parliament and the informal politics as activists. There are three paths of the empowerment of women in politics. Firstly, they can fill in the place of their deceased husband and father which is also known as political surrogates; and Benazir Bhutto is an example of "how in gender-traditional countries women's political activism is tolerated when it appears as though they are acting on behalf of male relatives"⁴³. It was the death of her father that won her the seat, and she "took over the male role in the family"⁴⁴. The second way is the political insider way. Such leaders work their way up through a part hierarchy over a number of years like Indra Gandhi. The third path is the political outsider path to power. These people enter when people are disheartened from their present political leaders so they are given the benefit of doubt and they get elected⁴⁵. Generally, women also join politics through the third path or route; and they are used as a tool to obtain more votes for a political party or a family. When it comes to the case of Benazir Bhutto, one argument is that her gender served positively for her as she was seen as an outsider to politics which lessened the threat to General Zia and she was ultimately not exiled like her brothers⁴⁶. Bhutto herself asserted; "in a way I had transcended gender. There was not a person who did not know the circumstances that had forced me out of the pattern of landowning families where young women were guarded zealously and rarely, if ever, allowed to

leave their homes without a male relative⁴⁷.”

Researchers have outlined some reasons responsible for the low or non-participation of women in politics. The reasons for any issue are dissected into internal and external factors but here only external factors stop a woman's way to politics. Household responsibilities are in the way of participation in politics. Only women have the dual responsibility of managing house and work simultaneously. Masculinist, confrontational, alienating culture is a reason for low participation of women in politics⁴⁸.

Answering the question as to why, despite all the odds, women have been participating in politics, four motivations or reasons are preferred that bring women into public sphere of life. These include; issues linked to the economic survival of themselves and their children; nationalist and racial/ethnic struggles; issues addressing broad humanistic/nurturing problems and issues identified as women's rights issues⁴⁹.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that in the traditional patriarchal society of Pakistan, women are expected to be dependent upon men; and in this context the idea of empowerment of women sounds only theoretical, not practical. Much of the role of Pakistani women in politics is determined through customs and traditions of the community, and thus, it is via customary law that Pakistani women politicians enjoy certain rights and privileges on one hand and face certain limitations, on the other. However, the findings of the current research proves, that women parliamentarians enjoy, practice and assert far more power in different spheres of their lives than generally it is assumed about women.

Notes

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