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## **Women in Politics: Gaining Ground for Progressive Outcomes in Pakistan**

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Ayesha Khan and Sana Naqvi

## Summary

This paper is an analysis of findings from a study of women's political voice in Pakistan under the A4EA Research Programme. It is based on mixed methods, drawing together archival and secondary sources, qualitative interviews with activists, politicians and key informants, and the findings of an online survey with women parliamentarians. Section 1 unpacks the history of women's struggle for political inclusion, explaining how activism led by the women's movement prepared the ground for the military regime to restore and increase a quota for women in all elected bodies. Section 2 examines how women elected to the Senate, National Assembly and provincial assemblies view their own accountability as politicians, the strengths and limitations of women's caucuses as a means to push for progressive policies, and their own vision for political empowerment. Set against discussions with other stakeholders, the section concludes that women may be less empowered than their male counterparts in politics in terms of exercising their voice, yet they aspire to becoming mainstream politicians and view themselves as accountable to a broader electorate. Section 3 places the political participation of women in a broader context of progressive policymaking since Pakistan's formation in 1947. It identifies three 'golden periods' for such policies, each characterised by strong political backing for reform on women's issues. It concludes that only when women appeared in larger numbers in the assemblies, and caucuses were formed in 2008, were they able to exercise sufficient voice and push for political support to address sensitive religious and cultural norms through progressive legislation.

**Keywords:** Pakistan, women's political participation, gender quota, women's movement, democracy, Islamisation, collective action.

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# Acknowledgements

This study is part of Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA), an international research programme which explores how social and political action can contribute to empowerment and accountability in fragile, conflict, and violent settings.

## Acronyms

AF	Aurat Foundation
ANP	Awami National Party
APWA	All-Pakistan Women's Association
CAC	Citizen's Action Committee
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
DCC	District Coordination Committee
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
ECP	Election Commission of Pakistan
EU	European Union
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
INGAD	Interagency Gender and Development Group
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
LFO	Legal Framework Order
NA	National Assembly
NCSW	National Commission on the Status of Women
NWFP	North-West Frontier Province (now KP)
PCSW	Provincial Commission on the Status of Women
PML (N)	Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz group)
PML (Q)	Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid group)
PPP	Pakistan People's Party
PTI	Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf party
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WAF	Women's Action Forum
WCHR	World Conference on Human Rights
WCW	World Conference on Women
WPS	Women Parliamentarians Survey

# Introduction

Inclusive politics remains an elusive goal in Pakistan, which has a history of military interference in governance institutions, unstable elected governments and internecine conflict. Women's voices, within the corridors of power or as constituents whose interests must be accounted for, have been weak but are growing stronger. Activism, led by the women's movement and civil society advocacy groups since the 1980s, has yielded results. The state has opened up democratic spaces to women in elected legislatures and local bodies through an expanded reserved seats quota; and recently legislators revised electoral rules to mandate a minimal level of women's greater inclusion as candidates and voters.

This paper aims to contribute to the growing body of literature around how feminist mobilisation and political voice leads to progressive policy outcomes (Weldon and Htun 2013; Htun *et al.* 2013; Htun and Weldon 2010; Rao and Cagna 2016). It will explore three questions:

1. How did the women's movement lead to the decision to restore and increase the quota for women in elected bodies?
2. How have women used their elected positions, and worked in caucuses, to promote their interests? What other measures will further strengthen their political voice?
3. Can we gain insight into pro-women policymaking by looking at women's activism, political voice, and other factors within a broader contextual framework to identify patterns that may predict further progress?

Section 1 will provide a history of women's mobilisation for their political voice, and details of the campaign for restoration of a reserved seats quota in elected bodies that culminated in the post-2000 landmark decision. Section 2 will examine women's experience in the legislative assemblies after the restoration – to whom they feel accountable, how they have used caucuses to strengthen their voice, and measures to further their political empowerment. Finally, Section 3 will mark out salient features of the socio-political terrain as it unfolded chronologically, since independence in 1947, to show how it became fertile for greater inclusion of women in the political process and other progressive policy outcomes. The assumption guiding this discussion is that progressive policies – for women's rights and empowerment as citizens – is a desirable outcome. Its analysis takes into account the obstacles to progressive policymaking posed by religious and cultural practices, described as 'doctrinal' (Htun and Weldon 2010) and argues the reforms leading towards greater political participation enjoyed broader support partly due to their 'non-doctrinal' nature.

This paper draws on a variety of sources, and mixed method research tools for its analysis.

1. Archival material from the leading women's rights group, Women's Action Forum.
2. A review of secondary literature on women's political participation in Pakistan, covering their experiences in local bodies, legislative assemblies, and voters, as well as scholarly work around feminist mobilisation and policy change.
3. Thirty-two key informant interviews with politicians, activists, donors, legal professionals, consultants and government officials from Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Peshawar and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).
4. Group interviews with activists from the women's movement from Karachi and Islamabad, and four group interviews with local activists in conflict-affected Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally-Administered Tribal Areas, which are particularly resistant to women's political inclusion.
5. An online survey of all elected women in the National Assembly, Senate and provincial assemblies.

6. Conferences and consultations with civil society and political representatives in which the performance of women legislators, effectiveness of the caucuses, and legal measures to increase women voters and representatives were discussed. Informal interviews and minutes of these meetings form part of our data for analysis.
7. Media coverage related to women's political participation and 2018 elections, e.g. YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, and news articles from three leading newspapers of Pakistan: *Dawn*, *Express Tribune* and *The News*.

## 1 The struggle for political inclusion

Women in Pakistan advanced a tradition of activism they inherited from colonial India, in which both Muslim and Hindus mobilised to demand their rights and lobby for inclusion in political processes. Women were granted the franchise (under the same conditions as men) in 1928 and allocated seats in the Federal Assembly and Council of State in 1935. In the 1946 elections two women were elected to the Central Constituent Assembly, thus when Pakistan gained Independence in 1947 they continued as part of its first Constituent Assembly (Hanif 2009). They tabled a bill, 'Charter for Women's Rights', to demand equality of status and reserved seats, confident that women would be acknowledged for the critical role they had played to mobilise support for independence. They were supported in their legislative agenda by a United Front group of women activists who lobbied for changes in the Shariah-based inheritance laws – which were granted to allow women the right to inherit property, including agricultural lands, soon after.

In 1954 the Constituent Assembly was dissolved, and instead of fresh elections the two provincial assemblies (for East and West Pakistan) elected a National Assembly, but without women. The first Constitution (1956) of the new country provided women ten reserved seats for a period of ten years, based on delimiting women's territorial constituencies and giving women a double vote in these constituencies. No elections were held under the 1956 Constitution due to the President's decision to abrogate it, dissolve the Assemblies and declare martial law in 1958, bringing Ayub Khan to power. Ayub's government promulgated another Constitution (1962) that allowed for a controlled democratic order, on a non-party basis. It provided six reserved seats for women in the National Assembly, and five in each of the two Provincial Assemblies, which remained in place for the 1965 elections (Table 1.1).<sup>1</sup>

Until this point the socio-political context favoured a slow but steady inclusion of women in public life and progressive legal reforms to enhance their rights. In the aftermath of women's mobilisation during the Pakistan Movement, the high visibility of elite women activists and politicians in the public sphere, including Fatima Jinnah, sister of Pakistan's founder, contributed to the sense that possibilities for women were opening up in the new country.<sup>2</sup> Ra'ana Liaqat Ali Khan (First Lady 1947–51) established the first national women's organisation, the All-Pakistan Women's Association (APWA). She also helped to establish the Army Medical Corps, and founded both the Women's Naval Reserve and Women's National Guard. In response to pressure from APWA, Ayub Khan's government passed the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (1962) restricting second marriages and curtailing men's arbitrary powers over divorce, which remain in place, but are contested by the powerful religious lobby until today (Jahangir 1998). Importantly, the personal ideological and religious bent of Ayub Khan was moderately socially progressive, despite his authoritarian government and selective use of Islam in order to appease the religious right during his tenure. Upon the persuasion of the Family Planning Association of Pakistan and advice of Western technocrats, he launched the country's first family planning programme in 1965 (Khan 1995).

<sup>1</sup> Prior to that the West Pakistan Assembly had 6 women members (1956–58).

<sup>2</sup> Group interviews with women activists, Islamabad and Lahore.

Fatima Jinnah ran an unsuccessful election campaign against Ayub Khan in the 1965 presidential election. Her candidacy stirred a debate about whether a woman in an Islamic country was allowed to serve as head of state. The influential religious party Jamaat-i-Islami opposed Ayub's continued rule and supported her, leading Ayub to endorse edicts by other groups of religious scholars to deny her the right to serve as head of state (Sardar Ali 2000). Ayub Khan was ousted after a wave of public protests in 1968, to be replaced by another general.

After the 1970 elections, held under the 1969 Legal Framework Order (LFO), the results were disputed despite the majority of seats being won by East Pakistan's Awami League party. In the West, the socialist populist PPP promised basic rights to the disenfranchised and a social agenda based on reducing class disparities. Nusrat Bhutto, wife of PPP leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, actively mobilised women to vote during her husband's election campaign. It was estimated more than half of eligible women voted, making it the largest turnout ever (Law Division 1976). The reserved seats provision under the LFO was a total of 13 for the National Assembly (Table 1.1).

However the election dispute led to civil war, which ended once the country lost its eastern wing and the new state of Bangladesh was formed. In former West Pakistan, Pakistan People's Party held a majority. The next National Assembly thus only met in 1972, with the total number of reserved seats for women reduced to six. The four provincial assemblies of former West Pakistan convened with a total of 11 women in reserved seats, and none in general seats. For the first time, a woman was appointed Deputy Speaker.

The new Assembly unanimously passed the 1973 Constitution, which gave women the most rights to date. These included equality before the law and equal protection of the law, non-discrimination on the basis of race, religion, caste or sex for government service (Sardar Ali 2000). A new constitutional provision based on indirect elections granted 10 reserved seats to women in the National Assembly and 23 in the provincial assemblies for a ten-year period or two general elections, whichever came earlier. It also enshrined women's right of participation in all walks of life (Article 25) – this would be undermined by the military regime that followed.

**Table 1.1 Constitutional provisions for women's seats in the National Assembly and numbers elected (1955–99)**

Years of assembly	Legal provision	Reserved seats	Mode of election	Number of women		
				R	G	T
1955–58	--	--	--	0	0	0
1962–65	6 seats [3 from each province]	6/156	Elected by NA members	6	0	8*
1965–69	As above	6/156	" "	6	0	6
1972–77	13 seats (7 for East and 6 for West)	13/313	" "	6	0	0
1985–88	20 seats, extended to 3 <sup>rd</sup> general election or 10 year period	20/237	" "	20	2	22
1988–90	As above	20/237	" "	20	4	24
1990–93	--	0	--	0	2	2
1993–96	--	0	--	0	4	4
1997–99	--	0	--	0	6	6

Notes: R= Reserved seats; G= General Seats; T= Total.

\*This figure is not confirmed, some evidence suggests 8 women sat in the NA.

Source: Hanif (2009: 30–31).



Nusrat Bhutto remained highly visible during her husband's tenure as Prime Minister. In 1975 she led the government delegation to the First World Conference on Women in Mexico, after which the government formed a Women's Rights Committee that recommended far-reaching reforms to improve women's legal status. It suggested new laws to help increase women's membership in elected bodies, and observed that women in reserved seats lack a constituency to which they are accountable. It recommended a series of supportive measures as well, to include and integrate women more wholly into political activities. Among them was a call for political parties to give 'a reasonable proportion of party offices to women', more women officials in the Election Commission to protect their rights at the time of polling, and increased presence of women in cabinet and senior government positions (Law Division 1976: 97–8). Progress on these counts was minimal until electoral reforms 40 years later.

During Bhutto's tenure women mobilised primarily through political parties and organisations, particularly amongst the left, and trade unions. Many who would later launch the women's movement came from the cadres of the PPP and Democratic Women's Association (the women's wing of the communist party). More traditional organisations, such as APWA and Behbud, continued their work, which was primarily welfare and not rights-oriented. Because the state was consciously opening up its policies towards women's inclusion as part of the government's socialist progressive platform, this period stands out as an anomaly for women in Pakistan. In fact, activists suggest that if it were not for this PPP government, then the subsequent reversal of the state's approach by the next government would not have hit women so hard – and the women's movement may not have emerged to defend the gains made.<sup>3</sup>

After Bhutto held the next elections in 1977, for the first time a woman won on a general seat. However, the turmoil of opposition protests over the result led to General Zia ul-Haq, Chief of Army Staff, assuming power in a military coup d'état. Zia suspended the 1973 Constitution and launched an Islamisation drive to counter the leftist populism of his predecessor. Islamisation provided him with an ideological justification for the suspension of democracy and cultivation of the religious right as his political constituency.

His drive was characterised by a series of laws detrimental to the status of women and religious minorities. His broader policies with respect to women targeted their bodily integrity and became widely critiqued in the emerging feminist literature (Hussain, Mumtaz and Saigol 1997; Khan 2004). Sex outside of marriage became illegal, punishable by death. Zia tried to diminish the presence of women in public places, and enforce wearing of chadors in educational institutions. He banned women from playing spectator sports, and temporarily suspended the family planning programme (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987).

Zia's policies triggered a new wave of activism, commonly referred to as the modern women's movement, to differentiate it from the mobilisation in the country's early years. A group of urban educated women, many of whom had a background in leftist politics, joined together to form the Women's Action Forum (WAF) in protest against the regime. Their confrontation with the state marked a divergence with older women's groups such as APWA, who shied away from the risks associated with challenging the military regime and open hostility with the government. WAF members had some linkages with women politicians, and encouraged them to address women's issues through the manifestos of the more progressive parties involved in the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy during the 1980s, with limited success (Hanif 2009).

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<sup>3</sup> Interviews with WAF members, Nighat Said Khan (2014) and Neelam Hussain.

Zia's rule is widely understood as the darkest period for women's rights in the country's history. His few positive steps to improve the status of women have been difficult to explain in the absence of democratic politics or accountable governance. Even the women's movement was just emerging during these years and cannot take credit for these measures – which include the first government department for women's development, expansion of the family planning programme (after initially freezing it), and the increase in women's political representation. These moves may be better understood in the light of the analysis in Section 3, which takes into account the important role of key individuals in steering policy outcomes for women under different regime types.

The question of women's political participation was subject to increased scrutiny during Islamisation. Zia established a committee to propose an 'Islamic political framework' in 1983, which recommended separate electorates for men and women, a ban on non-Muslims and women from becoming head of state, and a requirement for women candidates to the assemblies to be above age 50 and obtain written permissions from their husbands to contest seats (Hanif 2009). These suggestions arose from Zia's need to sideline Benazir Bhutto, daughter of the Prime Minister he deposed, as an emerging political force. While they were never acted upon, they nonetheless signalled the inevitable direction of his Islamisation drive and prolonged an unnecessary discussion, begun by the previous military regime over Fatima Jinnah's candidacy, about whether a woman could be head of state.

Although Zia included few women in senior policymaking positions, possibly the most influential figure was Attiya Inayatullah, who led the Family Planning Association of Pakistan before joining his government as adviser on population welfare and women's affairs. She argues that it was critical to have a woman in a decision-making position who enjoyed a good working relationship with Zia, 'without compromising on principles'.<sup>4</sup> She believes Zia responded to her suggestion to double women's reserved seats because she had gained his confidence through her work, and enjoyed the support for this measure from Zia's Minister for Religious Affairs. Zia first launched an assembly of hand-picked members called the Majlis-e-Shoora in 1981 which Inayatullah refused to join, although it included twenty women, before he called for non-party elections in 1985.

Zia's revised reserved seats provision doubled from 5 to 10 per cent quota for women in the National Assembly, and extended the quota period to three general elections (for National and provincial assemblies).<sup>5</sup> The 1986 Commission on the Status of Women Report was ready, but Zia banned its release. The report recommended a minimum of 20 per cent reservation of seats for women in the national and provincial assemblies, to be directly elected, as well as two seats reserved for non-Muslim women in the national assembly. It even suggested that political parties should have at least 20 per cent women membership before being allowed to contest elections, and that union councils have two women members each (Hanif 2009).

During Zia's era WAF protested against efforts to ban women from serving as head of state or Prime Minister.<sup>6</sup> WAF's charter and demands were based on the principle of non-discrimination between the sexes and equality of rights as guaranteed by the Constitution (Article 25), and it used rights-based arguments against the ban and other Islamisation policies. Its members, alongside representatives of other women's groups, lobbied for a reserved seats quota to be filled through a constituency-based direct mode of elections. They debated how best to establish criteria for the selection of reserved seats candidates, to ensure they would take up women's issues within parliament. They also wanted political

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with author, 2 June 2018.

<sup>5</sup> The number of women in the Punjab Assemblies was 12 on reserved seats, with an additional 1–2 elected on reserved seats for Christian minorities.

<sup>6</sup> WAF Newsletter No. 7, April 1985.

parties to field and fund a fixed percentage of women candidates to run on general seats, a measure that even the PPP was reluctant to endorse.<sup>7</sup>

The establishment's efforts to undercut the PPP's support base changed the complexion of these elections and all that followed since. Just before the 1988 elections, held after Zia's sudden death in a plane crash, the new president passed an ordinance making it mandatory for voters to show their national identity cards at the time of polling. This measure had the effect of politically disenfranchising millions of voters, mostly amongst the poor who comprised the largest support base of the PPP. Since more women than men were not in possession of identity cards, which remains the case until today, the requirement has served as an effective voter suppression strategy, with particularly negative implications for women.

The 1988 party-based elections brought the PPP to power on a wave of popular support for Benazir Bhutto, daughter of hanged PPP Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. She and her mother were elected on general seats, along with one independent woman candidate. Bhutto became the first woman, and youngest ever, Prime Minister of a Muslim country. She was also the first sitting Prime Minister to give birth while in office.

The reserved seats quota lapsed after these elections. Bhutto tried but was unable to restore the constitutional provision before her government's tenure was cut short and President Ghulam Ishaq Khan used his powers, enhanced during Zia's regime, to dissolve the assemblies.<sup>8</sup> Three more subsequent elected governments failed to restore the provision.

With no quota in place, during most of the 1990s the only women present in the National Assembly were those elected on general seats – up to six at most (Table 1.2). It became apparent that, despite Benazir Bhutto's high political profile, little was changing in the broader political culture to allow more women voice and representation. Thus, activists used this decade to lobby with politicians for the restoration of an improved quota, begin grass-roots mobilisation to create demand for women's inclusion in all elected bodies and increase their voting numbers.<sup>9</sup>

Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League party led the main opposition to Bhutto's PPP. Sharif was the political heir to General Zia, as such during his two stints in power in the 1990s he relied on an Islamist ideology for political credibility and was seen to be the preferred politician of the military-bureaucratic establishment. He exhibited little interest in policymaking for women, in fact his second government defeated a private member's bill to restore women's reserved seats in 1997. Sharif's motivation to provide reserved seats for women in local government was a continuation of military governments' preference to cultivate constituencies at the local level as a means to undercut the support base of political parties, who prefer to wield their power through elected assemblies (Khattak 2010).

WAF's initial street activism during the 1980s waned after the return to civilian rule; the movement was lulled into a complacent sense that reform was inevitable with the return of Bhutto's party to power and the fact that its leadership was sympathetic to its demands.<sup>10</sup> Leaders began to focus more on running their respective non-government organisations (NGOs). Today, activists often critique, with some regret, this 'NGOisation' of the movement, arguing it may have prevented the movement from developing its own politics (Saigol 2016).

That said, one of the most successful NGO-led activities is the focused and sustained campaign for the restoration of women's reserved seats, which has led to the most significant improvements in women's political participation in the country's history. The campaign was

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Shahnaz Wazir Ali, member of WAF and PPP.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* and see Zubeida Mustafa, 'The issue of women's participation', *Dawn*, 12 April 1985.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Younus Khalid, Aurat Foundation; group interview with activists, Islamabad.

<sup>10</sup> Interviews with Shahnaz Ahmed, WAF and Aurat Foundation (2018), and Shahnaz Wazir Ali (2017).

developed by NGOs engaged in advocacy and rights-based work. Aurat Foundation (AF) took the lead, supported by Shirkat Gah, ASR Resource Centre, Strengthening Participatory Organisation, South Asia Partnership and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. International aid agencies committed to gender development provided key funding, which increased as the decade wore on.<sup>11</sup> Three significant international conferences in the 1990s added momentum to their efforts, serving as benchmarks for civil society, government, and donor organisations alike, to draw attention to Pakistan's progress on a number of women's rights issues. These were the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, and 1995 World Conference on Women at Beijing.

AF worked in all 102 districts across the country to increase women's presence both as elected representatives and voters. It mobilised volunteers to assist with registering women to vote and mobilising them to stand for election to union councils. Building upon leadership training initiatives by AF for other projects, they developed a cadre of women who became community resources – knowledgeable about how to exercise their rights and access state resources. A senior staffer explained, 'This becomes a structural change, you have put knowledge in the middle and the leadership is created so that it is never the same again'.

AF had a vision of creating 'social capital' at the grassroots level. Starting in the mid-1990s it built upon the local level citizens' action committees (CACs) it established in over 70 districts of Pakistan, comprising both men and women, to work on advocacy for child rights, women's rights, sexual violence, girls' education and women's economic empowerment. CAC members were trained as local leaders and mobilisers.<sup>12</sup> AF expanded this model and set up District Coordination Committees (DCCs) to steer the political campaign, drawing on CAC membership to train them to advocate for women's political participation in the electoral process (Aurat Publication and Information Service Foundation no date).

The campaign as a whole relied on multiple strategies. WAF activists leading the involved NGOs did the intellectual work, such as researching comparative reserved seats modalities and clarifying their demands. WAF revised its charter to demand an increase in reservation to 20 per cent, specifying conditions that the 'the candidates have a track record of being active in raising gender issues and working for the emancipation of women'. It proposed that eventually the modality be changed to permit women double votes, as in the 1956 Constitution, using one to elect representatives on reserved seats. Alongside these provisions, if parties were required to field women as first ten per cent and eventually 20 per cent of their candidates for general seats, then reserved seats could be phased out.<sup>13</sup> In response to the 1997 PPP government's bill to restore reserved seats in the National Assembly, WAF suggested the quota be 33 per cent instead, and ten in provincial assemblies.<sup>14</sup>

AF maintained consistent pressure on politicians through its Legislative Watch Programme, with a widely circulated quarterly newsletter to share research on laws required, or being drafted, for women, and monitor assembly proceedings. International treaties such as CEDAW and the agreements reached during international conferences provided opportunities for activists to report on government progress and prepare shadow reports

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<sup>11</sup> Key donors funding women's development initiatives with a focus on increasing their political participation during the 1990s were DFID, CIDA, UNDP, Unicef, and the Asian Development Bank, alongside INGOs such as the Heinrich Boll Stiftung and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Younis Khalid. See also Aurat's *Citizen's Report of the Citizens' Campaign for Women's Representation in Local Government in Pakistan 2000-1* (no date), for details of how these CACs were mobilised to advocate for 33 per cent representation of women in local government bodies, and through their activities generated candidates for these seats.

<sup>13</sup> Women's Action Forum (1990) 'Charter of Demands'.

<sup>14</sup> WAF (1995) Press Release. The statement referred to a Joint Declaration by the leading political parties in July 1995, committing to the restoration and improvement in modalities of selecting women on merit.

articulating their positions. The newsletter is still published, and remains an essential resource for monitoring the political participation of women and progressive law-making processes.

Due to AF's district-level campaign work, women who were mobilised through its CACs confronted their local politicians and demanded representation for the first time. In urban centres, AF representatives and WAF members met regularly with politicians from mainstream parties, as well as bureaucrats and legal experts, to discuss the restoration of reserved seats and improve on the existing modalities for their election, eventually winning important allies. AF offices in each province competed with each other to see which would be first to get a provincial assembly resolution passed on the restoration of reserved seats. In Balochistan, possibly the most conservative province, AF set up a forum of NGOs, lawyers, media and politicians to advocate in the assemblies and function as a pressure group on women's rights.<sup>15</sup> Balochistan, against all expectation, passed the resolution first, followed eventually by the remaining three provinces in 1997. This was not without dramatic hitches, for example, efforts by a tribal council in KP to prevent its legislators from passing the resolution was blocked at the last minute.<sup>16</sup> In 1998, AF held a national conference of women in politics, bringing 200 women from different parties together to deliberate on legislative and other issues. This intensive work with parties led to the demand for 33 per cent reserved seats being reflected in some party manifestos (e.g. PPP's).

The donor-activist nexus, and steady funding support from committed aid organisations was critical to the campaign's success. An inter-donor network called INGAD took shape in Islamabad, consisting of representatives from UN agencies (UNDP, Unicef and UNIFEM) and bi-lateral donors from Canada and the UK to coordinate their gender and development programming. Along with the foreign professionals, many of these representatives were Pakistani women and WAF members themselves. Funding increased during the 1990s as donors' development interests converged with the political part of AF's work. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) initially gave \$100,000 to AF's information network centres at the community level, which eventually formed the basis of CACs as the donor stepped up its funding.<sup>17</sup> (After the 2002 national elections, the first after the quota's restoration, aid organisations provided even greater funding for women's political participation.)

Thus, by the time that General Pervez Musharraf overthrew the last civilian government of the decade in October 1999, there was already a political consensus in place – evidenced by the assembly resolutions – that the reserved seats quota must be restored. This included 33 per cent reservation for women in local bodies.<sup>18</sup> The structure of the campaign had prepared thousands of women to be launched into politics through direct local elections. Meanwhile, aid agencies and civil society groups closely scrutinised the government's mixed adherence to its international commitments in the post-Beijing process after 1995. These commitments included measures to enhance women's political participation and representation in all decision-making bodies, legislative reform, and the establishment of a permanent Commission on the Status of Women.<sup>19</sup> The stage was set for a major policy initiative for women.

## 1.1 The restoration of a reserved seats quota

Government positions and policies for women can be wide-ranging and often contradictory, and Musharraf's regime was no exception (Khattak 2010). His imperatives were based, first,

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Shabina Ayaz, Aurat Foundation, Peshawar (2018).

<sup>17</sup> From 1995-2004 CIDA's women's development project spent up to \$4 million, run by WAF member, Rukhsana Rashid (Interview with author, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Local government consists of union, *tehsil*, town and district councils.

<sup>19</sup> NGO Coordinating Committee for Beijing + 5 (2000).

on a need to establish international legitimacy and differentiate himself from the unpopular policies of the previous military ruler, General Zia ul-Haq. As such, he promised to follow a policy of 'enlightened moderation', which implied a progressive approach towards women's rights. Second, military regimes in Pakistan have a history of nurturing democracy at the local government level as a means to develop political constituencies when the provincial and national assemblies are weakened through tactics such as non-party elections, incarceration and disqualification of political leaders. It allows for some level of 'grassroots democratic processes while centralised authoritarian rule can continue' (Khattak 2010: 53). Third, after the events of 9/11 he commenced a 'double game', playing off the threat of religious extremism to enhance his position as a reliable ally of the West in its 'War on Terror', against a courting of those same groups by not cracking down swiftly on growing Talibanisation in the northwest of Pakistan. This was to the detriment of women's rights and security on the ground, as activists were quick to point out once their initial enthusiasm for his 'enlightened moderation' wore off (Shirkat Gah 2013).

Soon after taking power, Musharraf started a devolution programme to empower local government. It involved extensive background research work initially managed through the National Reconstruction Bureau under the leadership of another General. Musharraf included 'technocrats' into his new government, among them many leaders of non-government organisations, eager to devise reforms around which political parties were never able to take effective action while in power.<sup>20</sup>

He was positively disposed towards meeting representatives of women's organisations. A personal contact arranged a meeting with AF representatives to discuss the modalities of reserved seats during Musharraf's first year in power. He surprised them by raising the possibility of 50 per cent reservation in local government bodies. Shahnaz Ahmed recalls being impressed with his liberal bent of mind. Some women activists believed at the time that 'Musharraf was not the obvious enemy, as far as women were concerned'. Appreciating his wish to come across as progressive, they believed they 'had no choice but to go with it'.<sup>21</sup>

He promulgated an ordinance in 2000, granting 33 per cent reservation to women in all three tiers of local government, holding elections soon after. Almost simultaneously, he established a National Commission on the Status of Women, meeting another key activist demand. The Secretary of the Law Commission set up a research group to reform family laws, using his relationship with activist groups (particularly AF) to inform this process and draft much-needed improvements.<sup>22</sup> Next, in 2002 through his Legal Framework Order to amend the Constitution, Musharraf granted 17 per cent reserved seats for women in the National Assembly and Senate, with a 17.6 per cent quota for the provincial assemblies. They were to be elected through a system of proportionate representation based on each party's strength in a given assembly, voted into office by their fellow party legislators (Aurat Publication and Information Service Foundation 2012).

Almost 40,000 women joined local government as the first local bodies elections were held in 2001 with the new 33 per cent quota, marking a milestone for women's entry into the political process. Musharraf was widely credited with the success, but activists understood it to be the culmination of a long campaign, which had included grooming large numbers of the candidates to occupy these seats.<sup>23</sup> Thus, they were disappointed, but not shocked, when Musharraf abruptly halved the number of union council seats in 2004, thereby drastically reducing the quota-based representation of women, peasants and religious minorities.

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Shahnaz Wazir Ali (2017).

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Shahnaz Ahmed, formerly senior staff member of Aurat Foundation.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Faqir Hussain, former Registrar of the Supreme Court (2018). Attiya Inayatullah (PML (Q)) joined Musharraf's government and worked on these legal reforms as well. As a result, Musharraf made important amendments, through ordinance, to existing laws, making the process of divorce easier, and allowing a Pakistani woman to pass on her citizenship to her children for the first time (Mirza 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Younus Khalid.

Discussions with activists yielded rich interpretations of Musharraf's controversial decisions to reduce the union council size and only grant half the quota (17.5 per cent) for women in the elected assemblies. One explanation is that the unexpected and successful participation of women at the local level with the 33 per cent quota (Zia 2005) shook the vested interests of generals and men in political parties. They had never expected such a strong turnout of women to occupy those seats. As with men from the feudal elite and religious leaders, they were reluctant to see women empowered enough to distribute the development funds available to local government representatives. They 'didn't want women to make noise', and certainly did not want to give them similar opportunities in legislative assemblies. Further, if women formed a third in each of the legislative assemblies (at 33 per cent reservation) they would have been able to demand funds and move bills even without the support of male politicians, another unacceptable outcome. In short, there was an immediate backlash to the affirmative action measure.<sup>24</sup> (Attiya Inayatullah, who participated in the cabinet debate says that there was a strong voice to limit the National Assembly quota to 30 seats only, and she managed to persuade Musharraf to go for a higher number.)<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, by forcing these heavily masculinised public spaces to concede so substantially to women's presence, the quota has had an immediate impact on political life and discourse in Pakistan in a way that earlier quotas did not. In an era of constant television coverage, the public quickly became accustomed to seeing women seated alongside men during assembly proceedings. Even representatives from religious parties did not forego the option of nominating women to their allocated number of seats, despite their stated opposition to the affirmative action. After the next national elections in 2008, the PPP government came to power and nominated a woman to serve as speaker of the National Assembly. Coming soon after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, this step was a gesture to the poignant absence of their former leader in the house, and a signal that women were to be fully integrated into the political culture of legislative assemblies.

However, the quota was not matched by a parallel measure within political parties, as activists demanded, to increase their allocation of tickets to women for elections on general seats at the same time. Table 1.2 shows the number of women on general seats (and occupying seats reserved for religious minorities) has in fact declined from 27 in 2002 to 19 after the recent 2018 elections. All of the provincial assemblies have seen a decline or stagnation in the numbers of women on general seats since 2002 as well.

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<sup>24</sup> Group interviews with activists, Islamabad and Karachi.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Attiya Inayatullah (2018).

**Table 1.2 Legislators, by seat type and house/assemblies (2002–present)**

House/assembly	Total	2002–2007 <sup>b</sup>			2008–2012 <sup>b</sup>			2013–2018 <sup>c</sup>					2018–present <sup>d</sup>				
		Women		% of Total	Women		% of Total	Women				% of Total	Women				% of Total
		G	R		G	R		G	M	T	R		G	M	T	R	
<b>Senate</b>	<b>104</b>	1	17	17.3	0	17	16.0	2	0	1	17	19.8	2	0	1	17	19.2
<b>National</b>	<b>342</b>	13	60	21.3	16	60	22.2	10	0	0	60	20.5	8	1	0	59	19.9
<b>Punjab</b>	<b>371</b>	7	66	19.7	10	66	20.5	10	0	0	66	20.5	6	1	0	64	19.1
<b>Sindh</b>	<b>168</b>	4	29	19.6	1	29	17.9	2	0	0	29	18.5	2	0	0	29	18.5
<b>NWFP/KP</b>	<b>124</b>	1	22	18.5	0	22	17.7	0	0	0	22	17.7	1	0	0	20	16.9
<b>Balochistan</b>	<b>65</b>	1	11	18.5	1	11	18.5	1	0	0	11	18.5	0	0	0	10	15.4
<b>Gilgit-Baltistan</b>	<b>33</b>							0	0	0	6	18.2				6	18.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>1207<sup>a</sup></b>	27	205	19.8	28	205	19.9	25	0	1	211	19.5	19	2	1	205	18.8

Notes: G/M= General/Minority R= Reserved Seats.

<sup>a</sup> Until 2013, the total number was 1,174 and then the Gilgit Baltistan 33-member legislative assembly was added.

<sup>b</sup> Source: Naz (2010: 12–13).

<sup>c</sup> Source: Lari (2013).

<sup>d</sup> Number calculated from the websites of each house/assembly.



## 1.2 Further reforms in electoral laws

Now that Pakistan has entered a more stable period of elected civilian governments, activists have further developed and refined the agenda for women's political participation with a view to dismantling – or 'unmaking the political patriarchy' (Bari 2015, Bari and Fleischenberg 2015). International aid agencies and NGOs have funded workshops, research, and advocacy to help identify solutions to the manifold obstacles preventing women's voices from being heard in the political process. There is a growing consensus in the emerging literature, amongst civil society and the development community, that affirmative action is needed within political parties and public sector institutions to achieve the political empowerment of women (Naz 2010).

Of increasing concern is the gender gap in voters. During the period for which gender disaggregated voter registration data has been available (2006–18), the percentage of women out of total registered voters has declined from 46.1 to 44.1 (Asian Development Bank 2016; ECP 2018b). Thus, the gender gap in registered voters was approximately 12.5 million strong before the 2018 elections.

ECP worked hard with its partner organisations and civil society organisations to close the gender gap before the elections, but was unable to do so. A few months before the July polls, the cost of an identity card was doubled, putting it further out of the reach of the poorest (Khan 2018). Out of a total 51.5 per cent voter turnout, only 40 per cent were female; there remained an 11.1 million strong gender gap in votes polled (ECP 2018a). Since these elections are the first for which gender disaggregated voters' data is a legal requirement under the new Election Law 2017, there can be no denying the yawning gender gap in voting persists.

Socio-political practices to prevent women from casting their votes, such as agreements amongst political parties and religious edicts, are a serious constraint to their political participation in some parts of the country. Activists and advocacy NGOs drew attention to this problem during the 1990s, but were unable to prevent its occurrence in successive elections. Aurat Foundation protested against the bans in dozens of union councils during the 2002 local elections in the North-West Frontier Province (now renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). A group of civil society members and rights activists filed a constitutional petition in the Peshawar High Court to demand elections in these areas be declared null and void, but without success (Aurat Publication and Information Service Foundation no date).

In 2015, after by-elections to a vacant National Assembly seat in Lower Dir, a constituency of KP both culturally and politically conservative, civil society again registered a strong protest. Out of more than 50,000 registered women voters, none voted on polling day, and even women polling staff did not turn up at their duty stations. Aurat Foundation sent a fact-finding mission that discovered the traditional *jirga*, or tribal council, had barred women from voting and announced their decision through local mosques. AF helped a group of local women to file a petition in the Peshawar High Court against the violation of their voting rights, but since the women did not appear in person the court did not accept their testimonies.<sup>26</sup> Next, activists, including politician Bushra Gohar and the National Commission on the Status of Women<sup>27</sup>, filed a series of petitions supported by the Election Commission of Pakistan to declare the polling null and void.<sup>28</sup> However, the winning candidate, from Jamaat-i-Islami, won a stay order from the Peshawar High Court against the ECP. Activists did not back down and soon filed an appeal at the Supreme Court.

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Tahira Abdullah, WAF (2018).

<sup>27</sup> Including Tahira Abdullah, who remained with the case up to the PHC and the SCP.

<sup>28</sup> Dawn (2015); Dawn (2016).

Although that decision is still pending, the legal activism and press coverage created enough political pressure that government addressed the issue in its 2017 package of electoral forms. The law now states if the women voter turnout 'is less than 10 per cent of the total votes polled in a constituency, the Commission may presume that the women voters have been restrained through an agreement from casting their votes and may declare polling at one or more polling stations or election in the whole constituency, void.'<sup>29</sup> WAF activist and former AF staff member Rukshanda Naz believes the new 10 per cent law would not have come about if it were not for the Dir-related legal petitions. 'The bell has rung' for both government and political candidates. 'They now know that there are some radical people who won't let this type of attitude of restricting women from voting go... there is some deterrence now.'<sup>30</sup>

Changing the political culture will require ongoing vigilance and activism. Despite the new law, after the 2018 elections it emerged women in the KP constituency of Shangla were banned from voting by a *jirga* decision. Local women filed a petition with the ECP, which ordered a re-vote (Chaudhry 2018). There were two other constituencies in which women voters almost missed the requisite 10 per cent of votes polled, implying that some level of restriction on their participation may still have been in effect (Shah 2018). Women who do make it to the polling station are often subject to gross manipulation by their families, polling agents or political party workers who instruct them how to vote (Aware Girls 2013).

Forcing men to cede control within political parties, and step back to allow more women to be elected on general seats, is proving particularly difficult. The new electoral laws allowed ECP to take special measures for the protection of women voters, a provision it interpreted expansively. It now requires political parties to submit an affidavit confirming they issued 5 per cent of tickets for general seats to women. Although the most number of women in history contested on general tickets for National Assembly seats in the 2018 elections, only eight out of 176 candidates won (Table 1.2). The provincial assemblies fared even worse, with only nine women elected out of 386 women candidates (Naeem 2018). Activists' fears had indeed come true<sup>31</sup> – it appears parties gave women tickets for seats they were sure to lose. Measures to mainstream women on general seats and in decision-making positions within political parties may require more extensive legislation before they are taken seriously.

## 2 Women in legislative assemblies

Section 1 addressed how women worked collectively to pressure the state to restore a quota for their electoral representation. Once they occupied seats in the legislative assemblies, they were subject to intense scrutiny of their performance and constant assessment of their relevance and role as political actors. We will explore the legislators' perceptions of whom they represent and are accountable to as politicians, their experience of women's caucuses as a strategy to enhance their voice, and which supporting measures and policies they identify to become empowered as politicians.

The discussion is informed by our qualitative research findings along with selected results from a Women Politicians Survey (WPS) conducted with women elected for the 2013–18 period to the Senate, National Assembly, and four provincial assemblies. The WPS was the first such systematic inquiry into their experience as women legislators. Since it took place after their assembly tenures came to an end and just before fresh elections in July 2018, it was an opportune time to solicit their perspectives. We received a total of 200 responses out of 234 questionnaires sent, i.e. 85 per cent of women responded (Table 2.1).

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<sup>29</sup> Election Laws 2017 (ACT No. XXXIII of 2017) Section 9.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Rukshanda Naz, formerly Aurat Foundation, Peshawar (2018).

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Rukshanda Naz, formerly Aurat Foundation, Peshawar (2018).

Most respondents were legislators elected on reserved seats (176 women, or 88 per cent of the respondents), since the number of women on other seats is minimal.

**Table 2.1 Women parliamentarians survey respondents**

House/ assembly	Type of seat					Total	
	General	Reserved	Minority	Technocrat	Not identified	Responses	Women per house/ assembly
Senate	2	13	0	1	2	18	20
National	5	43	0	1	2	51	70
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	1	20	0	0	0	21	21
Balochistan	0	11	1	0	0	12	13
Sindh	0	28	0	0	0	28	30
Punjab	7	56	2	0	0	65	75
Gilgit-Baltistan	0	5	0	0	0	5	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>235</b>

Note: The total women in each house varies in each election cycle, mentioned above are 2013–2018 counts. Gilgit-Baltistan is designated as a legislative assembly.

Source: Authors' own.

## 2.1 The political accountability of reserved seats holders

Activists suggest part of the problem with women elected on reserved seats is a lack of clarity about whose interests they represent – e.g. that of their own parties or women from their own areas – and therefore how to define their roles in the assemblies. Some advocate for a law requiring political parties to select candidates through a transparent and merit-based procedure. The argument holds that if women were selected with a proven track record in working for women's rights, or with a history of political activism within their own parties, it would lead to more effective participation in the assemblies. Further, if there was a clear trajectory for women entering politics, e.g. to move from local government, to reserved seats in the assemblies, and then graduate to become electable candidates on general seats, they would evolve into politicians with a strong standing in their own right.

Stakeholder interviews suggest that caucuses can only reach their potential as an instrument of women's collective action in the assemblies if their primary membership – comprising women on reserved seats – enjoys more political power. To ensure they would have voice within the assemblies, since the 1980s both the women's movement and successive Commissions of Inquiry have suggested a direct modality of election to reserved seats. Our qualitative interviews with women on reserved seats reveal they are often ignored within their political parties and during assembly proceedings because they lack constituencies of their own, and did not go through the rigor or expense of campaigning.<sup>32</sup>

Their status in the assemblies is further diminished because many are perceived to be proxies for male relatives who were unable to stand for election. Male colleagues derisively refer to them as '*khairati*', or 'charity' seat holders, and assume they must follow party positions on all matters. 'They have to work extra hard to establish their credentials,' says former PPP Senator Farhatullah Babar. 'They're aware that in the event they make a mistake, fingers will be pointed more towards them. They feel that no matter what we do we may get in trouble.'<sup>33</sup> During the 2013–18 assembly, women on reserved seats did not receive the discretionary development funds to which all elected members are entitled, which

<sup>32</sup> Interviews with Nighat Said Khan (WAF) (2014) and Sitara Ayaz (Senator ANP) (2018), and National Consultation (*op cit*).

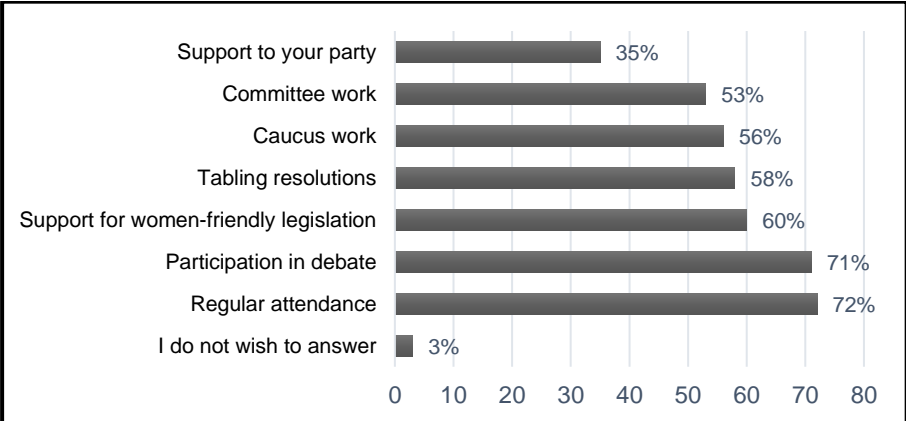
<sup>33</sup> Interview with author.

further disempowered them and caused resentment.<sup>34</sup> The net effect is that women on reserved seats, particularly in the provincial assemblies, are at a high risk of never really having their say on the floor of the house.<sup>35</sup>

Despite these issues, it became clear with the first assemblies elected after the restoration of reserved seats in 2002 that women took their legislative work extremely seriously. They attended sessions more regularly than men, made interventions that exceeded their ratio of total legislators, and raised women’s issues often (Zia 2005; Mirza and Wagha 2009). This level of participation has continued in the subsequent National Assemblies. In the recent provincial assemblies, too, women have attended sessions more often and made more contributions than men (FAFEN 2017a, FAFEN 2017b, FAFEN 2017c, FAFEN 2017d, FAFEN 2018).

Our survey asked all women seat-holders to assess their most valuable contribution to their house/assembly. Respondents could select as many options as they wished from the list below (Figure 2.1). Those most selected were ‘regular attendance’ (72 per cent) and ‘participation in assembly debate’ (71 per cent). Over half of respondents selected the contributions ‘tabling resolutions’, ‘support for women-friendly legislation’, ‘participation in committee work’, and ‘caucus work’. The least selected option was ‘support to your party’ (35 per cent), indicating this type of contribution is either limited as an opportunity or undervalued by women and/or their colleagues. Only 17 NA seat holders (33 per cent) felt their work in the caucus was their most valuable contribution.

**Figure 2.1 Most valuable contribution to the house**

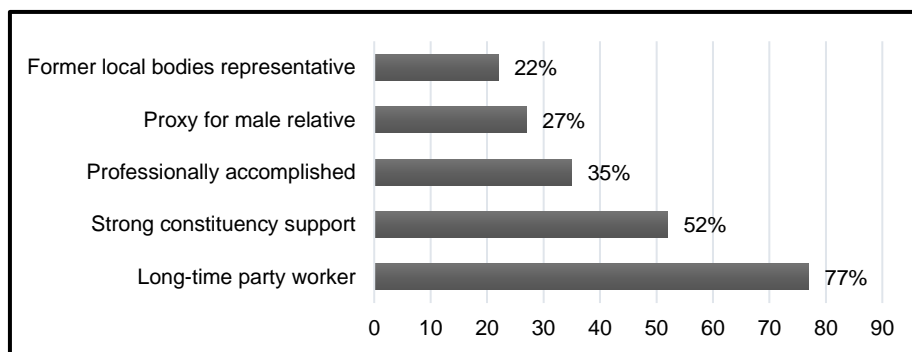


Note: Percentages calculated on the basis of 200 women (all seat holders); more than one answer possible.  
Source: Authors’ own.

In response to the question ‘were you elected because you are ...’, respondents were given five reasons with the option to respond affirmatively or negatively to each (Figure 2.2). The reasons most indicated by the 176 reserved seat respondents were being long-time party workers (77 per cent) and enjoying strong support in their constituency (52 per cent). Respondents were clearly reluctant to attribute their election to serving as proxies for male relatives, which our qualitative interviews suggested was the case. One reason could be that the survey format was not anonymous, however the responses suggest that women held their own professional accomplishments and experience as party workers in higher regard.

<sup>34</sup> Former Deputy Speaker of the Sindh Assembly, Shehla Raza argues that legislators should not receive any development funds at all, since their job is law-making alone (National Consultation).  
<sup>35</sup> Interview with Anooosh Khan, KP Commission on the Status of Women.

**Figure 2.2 Reason for election to reserved seats**



Note: Percentages calculated on the basis of 176 reserved seat holders; each question presented with ‘yes/no/I do not wish to answer’ response options.

Source: Authors’ own.

When women on reserved seats were asked whose interests they believe they represent (Table 2.2) to which they could select one answer only, they again displayed a strong sense of accountability to imagined constituents. That is, 75 per cent said they represented ‘women of Pakistan’, ‘women in my province or home region’, or ‘people of Pakistan’. Only 19 per cent view themselves as representing the interests of the legislators from their own party who elected them.

There was some provincial variation in results. The Sindh Assembly was the only house from which the highest proportion of respondents (36 per cent) said they represented the interests of the legislators who elected them. Out of the Punjab Assembly respondents, 43 per cent felt accountable to the ‘women of Pakistan’.

**Table 2.2 Whose interests do you represent in the house? (reserved seat holders)**

Interest groups	Total	
	Frequency	% of total
Women of Pakistan	64	36.4
Women in my province or home region	51	29.0
Legislators in my party who voted to select me	34	19.3
People of Pakistan	18	10.2
Women’s wing of my party	3	1.7
Women activists who support women’s rights	1	0.6
No response	3	1.7
Other	2	1.1
Total	176	100

Note: only one response per respondent possible. Percentages based on 176 respondents.

Source: Authors’ own.

There is a disconnect between women’s conscientious performance as legislators and their sense of accountability to women outside the assemblies on the one hand, and on the other male politicians’ view of them as ‘charity’ seat holders who are indebted to their parties and who must toe the party line within the assemblies. This finding strongly suggests an amendment to the modality of election for women on reserved seats to more accurately reflect their sense of political accountability.

## 2.2 Women’s caucuses as collective action in the assemblies

The next major development in women’s political participation after the restoration of reserved seats was the formation of caucuses within the assemblies to enhance their voice and leverage their numbers towards achieving positive legislation for women’s rights. There is a direct trajectory from the women’s movement to the formation of the first Women’s

Parliamentary Caucus in 2008. Its first Secretary General, Nafisa Shah says the idea of an all-party coalition came from her experience of working with the Women's Action Forum during the 1990s, before she entered politics. Aurat Foundation, too, argued a caucus would enhance women's voice in legislative assemblies; and during its campaign for restoration of reserved seats AF discussed its formation with political parties. The AF campaign in Balochistan led to the formation of the first All Party Balochistan Forum, a funded activity for capacity building and information dissemination from 1997–2005 that served as a precursor to the Parliamentary Caucus.<sup>36</sup>

When the Pakistan Peoples' Party came to power in 2008, a number of women with activist backgrounds entered the assemblies on reserved or general seats. 'All of us who came in, all had been part of WAF or Aurat or the women's movement in Sindh,' recalls Shahnaz Wazir Ali. 'So we came absolutely ready into the Women's Caucus because we had the agenda.' The Caucus' first Chairperson, Fehmida Mirza, was none other than the Speaker of the National Assembly, a directly elected representative. She had been part of the democratic struggle, as had many other women from PPP.<sup>37</sup>

The first Parliamentary Women's Caucus included women from all political parties. Its stated aim was to strengthen the parliamentary institutions and process, improve the capacity of legislators to make laws and exercise oversight on state activities. As a forum for women it would provide an opportunity to collectively address their priority issues (Naz 2010). Provincial caucuses were launched subsequently – Punjab in 2009 and the remaining provinces followed suit between 2014 and 2016. As the KP website states, the purpose of its caucus was to strengthen the voices of 'ignored and sidelined' women elected on reserved seats, most of whom entered the assembly for the first time and lacked confidence to demand their rights.<sup>38</sup>

The first Parliamentary Caucus took forward the progressive legislative agenda for women's rights begun during the previous National Assembly's 2002–05 tenure under Musharraf, leading to a series of unprecedented reforms, discussed in Section 3 below. The next Caucus, under the leadership of the more conservative Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) government (2013–18), was not under the stewardship of women politicians with an activist background, nor did the ruling party have a progressive agenda for women's rights. In part due to these reasons, its legislative output was somewhat weaker. Forging cross-party consensus on women's issues was more difficult than activists realised; support from the ruling party was clearly vital to achieving results.

The caucuses are part of a nexus of actors, groups and institutions that must work together in order to achieve positive outcomes for women. A key institution at the federal level is the National Commission on the Status of Women, which works as a watchdog on government policies and programmes, and makes recommendations of its own. Its provincial counterparts (PCSWs) were established during the last five years. All of the Commissions generate research and data, work with civil society groups and political parties to prepare legislation, and respond to government policies or emerging events on the ground. Chairpersons of these Commissions are appointed through the assemblies; some, but not all, have a history of WAF or activists engagement. Advocacy organisations work with the caucuses and Commissions to push for legislative and policy reforms. Bilateral and multilateral aid agencies, such as UN Women, UNDP and UK Aid fund activities of the caucuses, Commissions, and civil society organisations. The effectiveness of caucuses, therefore, is linked with how well they have established working relationships with the political leadership as well as all these supporting institutions and organisations.

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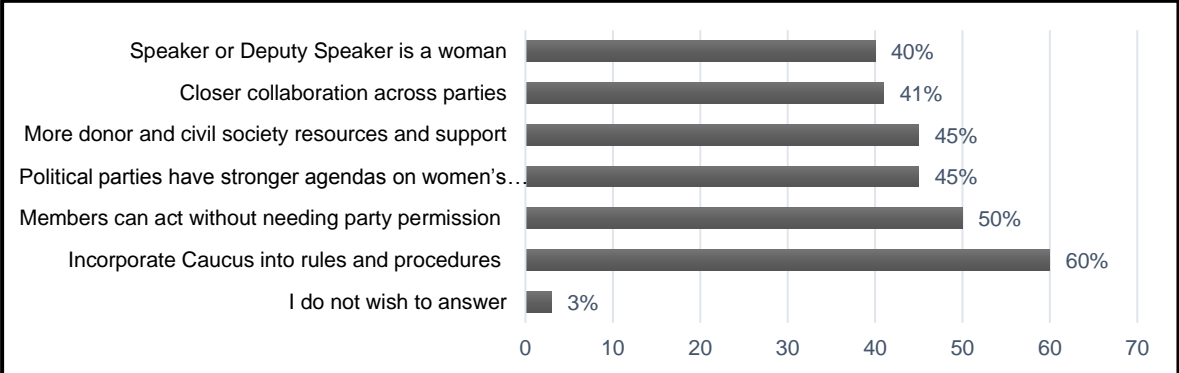
<sup>36</sup> Interview with Younus Khalid (2018).

<sup>37</sup> Some women elected from parties other than PPP also had experience in working for women's rights, e.g. Bushra Gohar (ANP), Attiya Inayatullah (PML (Q)) and Nilofer Bakhtiar (PML (Q)).

<sup>38</sup> See: [www.pakp.gov.pk/2013/women-parliamentary-caucus-wpc/](http://www.pakp.gov.pk/2013/women-parliamentary-caucus-wpc/).

All respondents (reserved and non-reserved seats holders) in our survey were *de facto* members of their caucuses. They rated their caucus work highly (see Figure 2.1 above) in the ranking of their most important contributions as elected representatives. We explored their views on how to strengthen the caucuses (Figure 2.3). They were invited to tick as many of the suggested measures as they wished. The highest number of respondents (60 per cent) felt that ‘incorporating it into rules and procedures of the Assembly’ would make their caucus stronger. This would raise a caucus’ status to that of permanent standing committee in the assemblies, giving it constitutional status. It would give a caucus significant powers of oversight over relevant government ministries, the power to examine and reject bills, and to summon individuals to testify. This legal power would allow a caucus to push for greater provisions for women and monitor their implementation (Senate of Pakistan 2014).

**Figure 2.3 How to strengthen your caucus**



Note: Percentages calculated on the basis of 200 women (all seat holders); more than one answer possible.  
 Source: Authors’ own.

All the other suggested measures, too, received endorsement from 40 to 50 per cent of respondents. These included more donor and civil society resources and support to caucuses, allowing members more freedom to act without party permission, closer cross-party collaboration across party lines, and political parties themselves having stronger women’s agendas.

These responses reflect some of the issues that complicate caucuses’ smooth functioning, as reported during our qualitative work as well. Antipathy between political parties, while not affecting women’s ability to communicate with each other within their caucuses, has restricted women’s ability to push for legislation because they are limited by their parties’ agenda and approach to women’s issues. The PPP leadership of the high-profile initial Parliamentary Caucus did not establish a close working relationship with the PML (N) leadership of the second Caucus (2013–18), which was less assertive than its predecessor during its tenure. When the Speaker of the National Assembly was a woman (2008–13), the caucus enjoyed higher visibility and status, and more legislation for women was tabled and discussed.

If a legislative effort is viewed as sensitive, as are most laws related to doctrinal (cultural or religious) matters, then strong political leadership, combined alliances across the institutions and groups mentioned above, is essential to overcoming multiple sources of obstruction. In KP, a domestic violence bill stalled and soured relations amongst women legislators, activists and the provincial Commission. Because the political leadership was not committed to the passage of this legislation, for fear of disturbing its alliance with religious parties, it referred the draft bill (prepared by the Commission) to the Council of Islamic Ideology, which declared it un-Islamic. Activists from civil society and the Commission did not back revised versions of the bill prepared through the KP Caucus, so they agitated until it was withdrawn. Thus, the

KP Caucus was unable to build up a broad enough consensus to support a compromise piece of legislation, while domestic violence bills in Punjab and Sindh passed.<sup>39</sup>

Donor organisations play an ambiguous role in supporting caucuses. They provide training on legislative matters, send women representatives to meet with counterparts abroad, and give technical assistance for policy development and formulation. They are often the only source of material support to women representatives' work. The Sindh Caucus, in the absence of any allocated staff from the assembly secretariat in the province, relies on two European Union-funded parliamentary assistants only. Intriguingly, the KP Caucus used donor funding to set up its own helpline – giving the impression of functioning more like an NGO than a legislative forum.<sup>40</sup> Since women parliamentarians complain they did not receive the development funding (to be spent in their constituencies) allocated to other elected assembly members, the helpline project may have served as a replacement that allowed reserved seat-holders from KP to provide a tangible service to their perceived constituents. Activists have criticised donor influence on some counts, noting that they sometimes dictate to both caucuses and NGOs how many and which pro-women laws should be proposed. Senior politicians, too, occasionally distance themselves from their caucuses when they disagree with a position taken on a women-related issue.

Class differences between women have also limited their ability to work collectively with one voice in the caucuses. Within parties, the most vocal women are predominantly more educated, wealthy and enjoy more access to the powerful. They tend to dominate in terms of proposing and developing legislation, networking with supportive institutions, activists and media, and gaining their party leadership's support. Other women, who constitute the majority of reserved seat holders, lack the confidence and experience of women with a class advantage. This has limited the effectiveness of provincial caucuses in particular. Women on general seats, enjoying more political influence, have sometimes distanced themselves from their assembly caucus by not attending its meetings or taking initiatives independently from it.<sup>41</sup>

## 2.3 Political empowerment

The WPS explored which policy measures were most important for increasing women's political voice. Included in the list of suggested measures was a 'more effective caucus', however, across all the assemblies it was the least cited measure (Figure 2.4). (The least cited policy measure, in each of the assemblies individually as well, was 'a more effective caucus'.) Sixty-three per cent favoured a higher quota than 5 per cent for tickets on general seats; followed by changes in political party rules to include more women in decision-making positions (62 per cent) and an improved modality of reserved seats (46 per cent). The responses showed only a slight variation amongst provinces.

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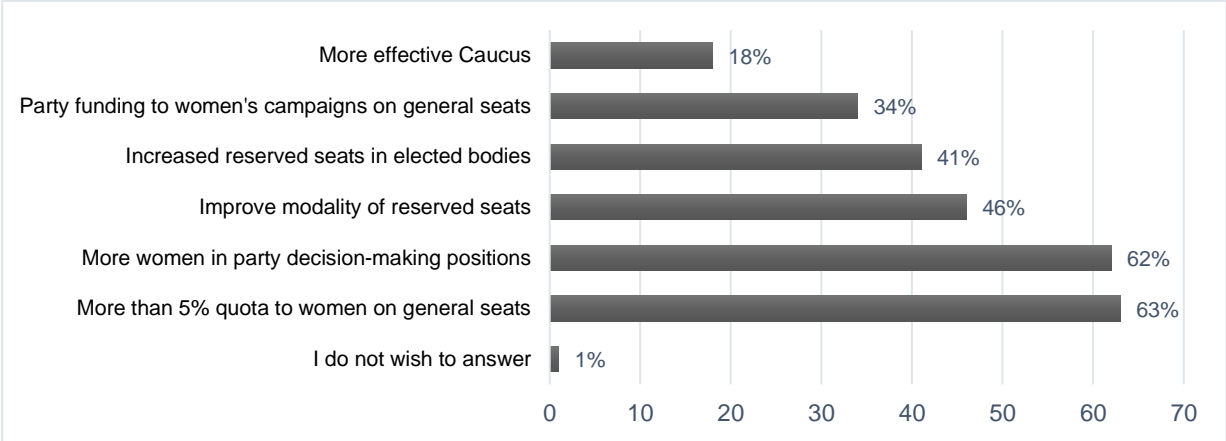
<sup>39</sup> Khwendo Kor workshop, 'Gender mainstreaming for strengthening government institutions for ending VAW', Peshawar, 14 May 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Sindh Caucus members, Karachi.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Rafat Yasmin, UNDP Islamabad, and comments raised during National Consultation to reflect on the Legislative, Representative and Oversight Role of Women Parliamentarians, 28 March 2018, Islamabad.



**Figure 2.4 Policy measures most important to increasing your political voice**



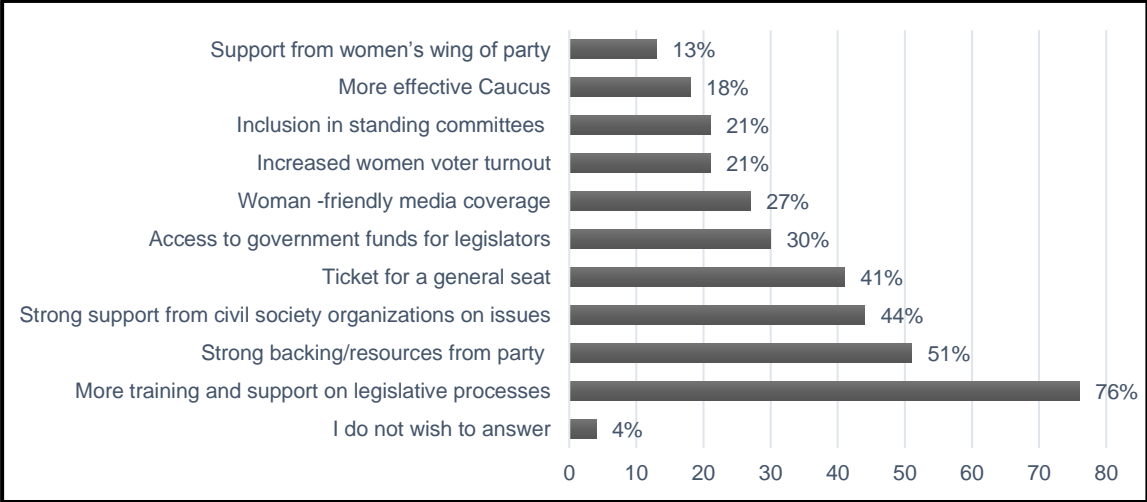
Note: Percentages calculated out of 200 women (all seat types); more than one answer possible.  
 Source: Authors' own.

These responses reflect some of the issues impeding the caucus discussed in the paragraphs above. They are also consistent with the findings mentioned in Table 2.2 that women on reserved seats believe themselves to be accountable to a broader electorate, hence it follows they are also keenly interested in changes to the modality of their election, and funding to support their campaigns (34 per cent). None of these changes will be implementable without the support of political parties, hence the often-quoted demand in the run-up to the 2018 elections (from both elected women and activists) that decision-making in parties include more women.

All respondents on all seats were asked which policy measures would empower them as politicians (Figure 2.5 below). Seventy-six per cent wanted more training and support in legislative processes, indicating current levels of support provided through existing government and NGO channels need to be increased. They also wished for more party backing and campaign resources (51 per cent), civil society support (44 per cent) and a ticket for a general seat (41 per cent). This suggests, again, that women are interested in running for general seats – although they did not express this when asked about the upcoming elections (see Table 2.3 below).

The survey data indicates that a trajectory for women from local government to the assemblies was not a trend; most women (67 per cent) denied their election was linked to local government experience. Only 22 per cent of reserved seats holders (see Figure 2.2) believed their local bodies experience was a reason for their election. However, further research to explore how many actually held local government experience before coming into the assemblies is needed to fully interpret this response.

**Figure 2.5 Measures most empowering to women politicians**



Note: Percentages calculated out of 200 women (all seat-holders); multiple answers possible.  
 Source: Authors' own.

Over 70 per cent of respondents (all seat-holders) said they were standing for re-election (no table shown). This does not reflect whether they were actually selected by their parties as candidates, since our survey took place while this process was still underway. Responses only indicated they were available to stand for re-election. The main reasons 39 women were not standing for re-election included family obligations (23 per cent) and problems with their parties, however 33 per cent of women cited additional diverse reasons that were not in the survey questionnaire.

**Table 2.3 For which assembly and seat would you run?**

Assembly/house	General seat	Reserved seat	Seats for minorities	Technocrat	Total	%
Senate	1	8	0	1	10	7
National Assembly	4	39	0	0	43	30
Provincial Assembly	4	89	3	2	99	70

Note: 142 (all seat-holders) who would run; multiple answers possible for house and seat types.  
 Source: Authors' own.

Seventy per cent of women who said they would stand for re-election wished to join a provincial assembly, however they were able to select more than one option as it is legal to stand for more than one seat at a time. Amongst those interested in a provincial seat (n=99), 90 per cent wanted to stand for a reserved seat while only four (4 per cent) were interested in a general seat. Most women in the NA and Senate were interested in reserved seats as well.

These results indicate that, barring a few individual exceptions, currently women legislators are not being groomed along a trajectory beginning with local government experience, followed by entrance into a legislative assembly on reserved seats and eventual election to a general seat. However, survey responses suggest that women do aspire to such a trajectory, since they view themselves as accountable to an (imagined) electoral base of women, wish for a greater share of decision-making within their parties, and want a higher quota of tickets to run on general seats – even though they may not view this as achievable in the immediate term.

### 3 Contextualising political voice for progressive outcomes

Table 3.1 is a visualisation of how a confluence of factors i.e., government type, political will, international context, women's political voice, civil society advocacy/activism appeared when there were progressive policy outcomes for women. While it does not establish causality, it allows us to draw some conclusions about how these outcomes were generated. Included among the outcomes are measures to increase women's political participation. The data for this table are drawn from key informant interviews with women who have served as policymakers and politicians, as well as activist group and individual interviews. The table is also informed by previous research conducted on policymaking for women (Khan 1998) and on a typology of sex equality policies developed by Htun and Weldon (2010).

The categorisations employed in Table 3.1 are as follows:

1. Years: The time periods are clustered by which government was in power.
2. Type of Government: Pakistan has experienced three different types of government since Independence in 1947, categorised in Table 3.1 as 'military', 'managed democratic' and 'transitional democratic'. Military regimes have ruled directly or less directly through holding party-less elections to assemblies with little power, i.e. 'managed democratic'. Transitional democratic refer to civilian elected governments without direct military control. However, indirect control over political spaces, including election processes and the media, remains largely with the military until today.
3. Political Commitment: Lack of political will is a concern for all stakeholders. In this scale: 'High' refers to support from political leadership at the highest level, for whom some legal or policy progress for women is tied to their political mandate. 'Medium' refers to support from political leadership, but not linked with their platform or mandate. 'Low' refers to no explicit support from leadership or links with political platform or mandate.
4. International Policy Context: This is characterised by international donor interest in Pakistan, high-profile international conferences and platforms for action that the government had to address, and mobilisation by the international feminist movement that influenced donors and policies. This is not measured here, but features of the context are identified as relevant.
5. Women's Political Representation: Women's inclusion at the individual level, in elected bodies (with or without reserved seats), and their voice within political parties. The highest ranking ('4') means they are included at all these levels.
6. Women's Activism: Three types of civil society activism are accounted for here. These are mobilisation by the Women's Action Forum; women's organisations existing pre modern women's movement; and grassroots mobilisation, including community-based activism facilitated by modern women's NGOs and women in political parties.
7. Policy Change: Significant progressive policies for women during each government.
8. Doctrinal vs Non-doctrinal: A policy initiative primarily related to religious or cultural status of women is 'doctrinal'. A 'non-doctrinal', such as an affirmative action measure or one not related to customary practices or scripture.

An examination of the table yields valuable insights into how women's political participation can be leveraged within a broader policymaking framework for positive outcomes.

**Table 3.1 Governance, social and policy context associated with policy outcomes for women**

Years	Type of government	Political commitment	Intl policy context	Women's political rep*	Women's activism**	Policy change	Doc	Nondoc
1947–1958	Civilian democracy	Medium	US support, Pak joins UN	2	2	Charter for Women's Rights presented in Assembly 1948 W. Punjab Muslim Personal Law Shariat Appl Act Women's Volunteer Service Women's National Guard Women's Naval Reserves	X	X X X X
1958–1965	Military regime	High	US support for govt	1	2	Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961 1962 Constitution 6 reserved seats for women	X	X
1965–1970	Managed democracy	Medium	US support for family planning	1 [opp leader]	2	1969 Legal Framework Order provides 13 reserved seats for women. Family Planning Programme set up	X	X
1971–1977	Civilian democracy	High	High: WCW '75 UN Decade for Women	2	3	Constitutional equality Reserved seats provision (10 in NA, 5% PAs) First Women's Rights Committee est. Government services opened to women Dowry & Bridal Gifts (Restriction) Act		X X X X X
1977–1985	Military	Low	Intl support high WCW '80	1	1	Women's Division and Prov Cells established Inquiry Commission on the Status of Women Second Women's Rights Commission set up		X X X
1985–1988	Managed democracy	Low	WCW '85	2	1	Reserved seats provision doubled (20 in NA) Dept upgraded to Ministry for Population Welfare Women Dev Chapter in 5-Year Plan		X X X
1988–1990	Transitional democracy	High		3	1 + 2	Ministry of Women Development est First Women Bank 5% women quota in government services 1985 Inquiry Commission Report released		X X X X
1990–1993	“ “	Low	High	2	1 + 2	Increased quota for women in local government		X

**Table 3.1 (cont'd.)**

Years	Type of government	Political commitment	Intl policy context	Women's political rep*	Women's activism**	Policy change	Doc	Nondoc
1993–1996	“ “	High	High [WCHR '93 ICPD '94 WCW '95]	2	1 + 2 + 3	Inquiry Commission on Status of Women set up Women's Police Stations Centres for burn victims and crisis established High profile govt part in 3 UN Conferences CEDAW signed Women appointed to superior judiciary Punjab govt 1/3 reserved seats in loc govt to women Women Devt Cells upgraded to Depts in provinces Beijing Follow-Up launched		X X X X X X X
1997–1999	“ “	Low	Intl sanctions Some donor support high	2	1 + 2 + 3	Death penalty for gang-rape Inquiry Commission Report released Cabinet asks provinces to double local govt seats		X X X
2000–2002	Military	High		1	2	Ordinances restore and increase reserved seats quotas National Commission on the Status of Women est. Citizenship Act amended Family Courts Act amended Local govt elections held [non-party]	X	X X X X
2002–2007	Managed democracy	Medium	Medium	3	2	Honour Killing Act 2004 Women Protection Act 2006 Laws passed to simplify bail for women prisoners Criminalisation of customary laws	X X X	X
2008–2013	Transitional democracy	High	Post-conflict donor support	3	1 + 2	First Women's Parliamentary Caucus Domestic violence laws begin Sexual harassment laws Anti-Women Practices Law Acid Crimes law	X X	X X X
2013–2018	“ “	Low	Western aid reduces	3	1 + 2	Anti-rape law Anti-honour killings law Provincial Women's Caucuses set up Provincial Commissions on the Status of Women est Provinces review marriage laws Domestic violence laws Electoral law reforms	X X X X	X X X X

Notes: \* 1 = Influential individual women in government/politics; 2 = 1 (above)+ few elected legislators; 3 = 2 (above) + reserved seats for women in elected bodies/assemblies.

\*\* 1 = WAF mobilisation; 2 = Vocal women's advocacy organisations; 3 = Grassroots mobilisation.

Sources: key informant interviews, Khan (1998), and Htun and Weldon (2010).

*No single consistent confluence of factors has yielded the most progressive policy changes for women.*

Still, Table 3.1 offers some surprises. One golden period for women was during 1971–77. The period was unique in that it featured a democratically elected government, with high commitment to women's rights. It was in power during the UN Decade for Women, yet not a favourite with Western governments and aid agencies. There were some high-profile women influencing policy, yet few elected to office. However, the ruling party had mobilised unprecedented numbers of women voters, and its women's wing was very active, perhaps making the government feel obliged to protect their interests. Major constitutional protections, including the reserved seats, and some other quotas for women were enacted *without a mobilised women's movement or significantly active women's advocacy groups* in the wake of the recent civil war in 1971.

A second golden period took place when the same political party was elected to power, led by Benazir Bhutto – but during her second tenure in office (1993–96), not her first. This time she was more able to act upon her avowedly high level commitment to women's rights, as articulated by her own statements and the party manifesto, largely because she managed to stay in power longer before the President dismissed her government. Still, her government lacked the will, and possibly the numbers, to tackle the undoing of discriminatory legislation against women from Zia's era. Bhutto was buoyed by an international context that featured three historical UN Conferences. She led the Pakistan delegations to all of them, committed the country to their platforms for action and signed CEDAW while in office. There were no reserved seats and few women in cabinet or elected office during this period. Nonetheless those in government were extremely active in pushing for the goals of these international conferences, since high-level political will was in their favour. WAF supported government in their efforts, pushing for it to accede to CEDAW and make other commitments for women's rights, including restoration and increase in the number of reserved seats. Its members by this time led national-level NGOs, which engaged in constant advocacy with the government and awareness-raising in communities across Pakistan. *Critical to the success of the advocacy efforts was support from Western aid agencies, which funded manifold preparatory activities in the run-up to the UN Conferences, facilitating their work and funding activists to directly assist the government to prepare its reports.*

The third golden period (2008–18) built upon three main areas of policymaking introduced during Musharraf's military rule and subsequent managed democracy, i.e. restoration and increase of reserved seats for women in all elected bodies, amendment and reforms to some religio-cultural laws, and setting up of a National Commission on the Status of Women. The golden period was ushered in after full civilian rule was restored in the wake of free elections, and a progressive party with a high level of commitment to women's rights came to power. *Party commitment played a significant role here, just as it did 1971–77, because it maintained its interest in progressive policy making even after the assassination of its key advocate – Benazir Bhutto herself.*

During this period of transitional democracy, ongoing women's civil society activism was matched by the strong showing of women's representation in legislative assemblies. *Women formed the first ever Parliamentary Women's Caucus in the National Assembly, which helped the legislative reform agenda to gain pace, addressing both doctrinal and non-doctrinal reforms in equal measure.* Although both donor support and high-level political commitment waned during the next government's tenure (2013–18), devolution allowed for provinces to pursue their own legislative reform, and political backing at the provincial level pushed for progress. The development of Provincial Commissions on the Status of Women during this period gave further support to policy reform, in some contexts reinforcing or replacing the role of advocacy NGOs.

*Non-doctrinal progressive policies for women are far more common across all time periods than those that engage with doctrinal issues.*

In Pakistan's early years, where there were key women in political leadership positions (two in the Constituent Assembly), there was an effort to pass a bill for women's rights, a doctrinal issue about women's right to inherit land was addressed, and highly visible women's service cadres were set up. The military regime that followed this civilian period of rule managed to reform Muslim family laws as well as increase the number of reserved seats for women. Both measures can be viewed as a culmination of the advocacy and activism of the previous period, which generated the momentum for reforms.

The most damaging policies for women were enforced under military rule during 1977–85, when Islamisation was the ideological justification for disruption to democratic governance. In this period the policies (not shown in Table 3.1) reflected the highest level of political will pushing towards a deterioration in women's status. *The few positive policies enacted during Islamisation were under the influence of some key individuals in government, one of them a woman, and all non-doctrinal.* They include the increase in reserved seats for women in time for the 1985 non-party elections.

From 1962 until 2002, almost all progressive policymaking for women was non-doctrinal. The doubling of women's reserved seats, and restoration with increase in the provision were both decisions taken in this vein. More policies were possible when the level of political commitment was medium to high, and during low periods little or nothing was accomplished. *The only time we begin to see a combination of policies that address non-doctrinal as well as the more sensitive doctrinal issues is when democratic spaces begin to open up, beginning with the managed democracy under Musharraf in 2002.* By this time Musharraf's level of political will for pro-women reforms had somewhat waned, but he saw political advantage to pushing for the Women Protection Act 2006 which reformed Zia's draconian laws against *zina*, or illegal sex. Musharraf's party amended the *zina* laws although by way of a semi-democratic dispensation, and only after building up social and political support.

*A high level of political commitment accompanies all periods of positive policy change for women.*

The nature of this political commitment may vary, with two military rulers wishing to project themselves as modern, enlightened leaders (Ayub Khan and Pervez Musharraf) and being, therefore, not ideologically opposed to women's empowerment. This would suggest that only authoritarian rulers have the capacity to enact policies with doctrinal implications because they have sufficient power to counteract right-wing political protest, but this is not borne out by subsequent legislation enacted after the restoration of reserved seats for women in elected assemblies. From 2002 onwards, new laws continued to be passed, backed by first Musharraf's ruling political party (Pakistan Muslim League – Quaid) and the next elected government, Pakistan People's Party, in 2008. *The fact that doctrinal laws began to be reformed only after building up a minimal level of political consensus shows that the democratic process helped to legitimise progress in these areas and manage opposition.*

With the first-ever transition from one civilian elected government to the next in 2013, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) came to power. As ideological heirs to General Zia ul-Haq, leaders of PML (N) had neither a track record nor a stated agenda in favour of improving women's rights. However, by this time, the relatively low level of political commitment at the federal level could be off-set by two factors. The first was the continued presence in Parliament of PPP politicians committed to achieving reform in the rape and honour killing laws, although their government had not managed to arrive at consensus legislation. They managed to push consensus bills that made it through both National Assembly and Senate, with the support of the Caucus.

The second factor was the constitutional amendment of 2009, which devolved most legislative business to the provinces. Henceforth, provinces have had a mixed record in their ability to pass domestic violence laws, only being able to do so when the provincial government itself has had a high level of commitment to such reform. In the 2013–18 period, for example, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government led by Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf (PTI) stymied efforts by the provincial women's Caucus to pass domestic violence legislation, as its leadership was opposed to the measure and in coalition with the religious right. In the province of Punjab, the PML (N) Chief Minister pushed hard for passage of a domestic violence bill, despite his party's conservative profile, and succeeded. (The legislation was weak, however, in that it failed to criminalise domestic violence against women.) Thus, the future of progressive policymaking will be mapped out in the realm of provincial politics, if devolution and regular elections continue uninterrupted.

*The successes of women's activism and advocacy campaigns need to be assessed over decades.*

The modern campaign to restore and increase the reserved seats quota for women started as a WAF demand and became a core advocacy campaign of women's advocacy NGOs, led by the Aurat Foundation, during the 1980s and 1990s. So too, were the repeal of discriminatory laws put in place during Zia's martial law, which only began to be addressed over 20 years after they were passed. *All of the progressive policy outcomes shown in Table 3.1 from the 1990s onwards were advocated by the women's movement, albeit some of them in watered down form.* This includes institutional innovations, such as the National Commission on the Status of Women (2000) and its provincial counterparts, the Parliamentary and provincial Caucuses (2008 onwards), electoral law reforms (2017), and laws to protect and promote the rights of women (2006 onwards).

The only earlier successes, during the 1990s, such as signing of CEDAW and formation of a new Inquiry Commission on the Status of Women, took place when the PPP came to power and there was political intent to show progress on women's empowerment, despite the weak civilian dispensation. Similarly, the restoration of reserved seats – even though it was under Musharraf's government – followed a decade of increased activism and a spate of policy progress initiated by Benazir Bhutto's government.

*The value of international momentum for achieving domestic progress on women is significant, especially during 'golden periods' of policymaking.*

The international context grew favourable for women's rights and empowerment as the international feminist movement grew in stature and influence, mobilising the United Nations towards its path-breaking support for reproductive rights at ICPD in 1994 and re-framing of women's empowerment at Beijing the following year. This translated into increased donor support to women's advocacy groups in Pakistan in the run-up to these conferences, and follow-up activities during the next decade – the results of which were felt in policy breakthroughs post-2000. Benazir Bhutto's weak civilian government 1993–96 was buoyed by the opportunity to garner support for her progressive agenda on the international stage, resulting in Pakistan's accession to CEDAW in spite of religious opposition. The most important achievement supported by international momentum and donor backing was the eventual restoration of reserved seats for women in elected bodies.



## 4 Conclusion

Pakistan is still a fragile and transitional democracy. Its elected legislators are learning how to hold on to participatory political spaces under difficult circumstances that considerably weaken civilian leadership. A clear story is nonetheless emerging about how vital this process is to empowering women and making the state more accountable to their progress. In particular, the democratic process is essential to addressing some of the more difficult religious, cultural and social constraints that disempower women from exercising their rights.

Women parliamentarians have demonstrated they are committed participants in the legislative process. Yet they are not able to push a legislative agenda without support from senior party members. Without exercising voice within their parties, and some measure of electoral power to give them leverage, they are constrained as negotiators across party lines within their caucuses.

Reserved seats holders have an expansive sense of their responsibility, as the WPS results have shown, they see themselves as accountable to women in the region/country more than to the male legislators from their parties who elected them. This finding could be taken into account in future as improvements on the modalities of reserved seats election are debated. However, the suppression of women voters, particularly amongst the poorest, will remain a key obstacle to women's political empowerment until the gender gap in identity cards, voter registration, and votes cast is closed.

The WPS revealed women on reserved seats have no clear career trajectory to grow in their political roles. Although many do have experience in local government or in their parties' women's wings, there are no clear criteria for becoming a candidate on a reserved seat. In a related finding, respondents also cited a preference for re-election to reserved seats, rather than election on general tickets, although many did suggest a higher quota for general tickets would be a desirable affirmative action mechanism. This willingness to remain reserved seats holders may be due to a level of complacency, as male politicians argue, and cushioning against the rough world of constituency-based politics, or it is more likely to be a reflection of the most realistic option they have in politics at present.

Women clearly need ongoing support in order to become more empowered and effective legislators, citing numerous measures from civil society, donor agencies, bureaucracy and their own parties. This includes material support, as well as more recognition for the caucus as a body within the assemblies – in interviews some respondents suggested they be granted the status of a standing committee. The reserved seats quota itself is now seen as just one of a series of affirmative action measures needed to build a more inclusive democracy in which women are politically empowered.

Women legislators appear to have the most impact on progressive policy outcomes that are doctrinal, rather than the less politically and culturally sensitive 'non-doctrinal' ones such as the reserved seats quota itself. However, without high-level political backing, they do not exercise enough leverage themselves to negotiate for these reforms. To usher in a 'golden era' of pro-women policies, a confluence of factors is needed. Findings suggest that to sustain such a period will require women at all levels of policymaking, consistent international support, and a strong and dynamic activism on the ground to keep the state vigilant.

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