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Empowering Women Politicians in Pakistan: Views from Within

Women parliamentarians and local legislators in Pakistan still face a significant uphill battle to establish or deepen their political careers, despite recent gains such as the Election Law 2017 which mandated parties to issue 5 per cent of their tickets for general seats to women. Even with constitutional protections, women's entry into the political arena is still subject to religious and ideological debate and, when they do manage to enter this arena, their personal credibility and physical safety is subject to attack. A recent survey of women politicians flags up both significant challenges such as silencing and verbal harassment and areas for improvement, particularly in the cross-party women's caucuses.

Prior to the Pakistan General Election in July 2018, which saw an overall 0.7 per cent decrease in women legislators, the Collective for Social Science Research (CSSR), based in Karachi, carried out a survey to gauge the women legislators' perceptions of who they feel accountable to, their experience with women's caucuses as a tool to enhance their political voice, and measures to become more empowered as politicians. The survey was conducted under the auspices of the Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) research programme, which includes a work stream focused on women's social and political action.

The results offer an important insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the current political system, and suggest policy outcomes to empower women in politics.

CSSR surveyed 235 women legislators from across the country. Out of the 200 respondents (85 per cent), 88 per cent were on reserved seats and the other 12 per cent were on general, minority or technocrat seats.

Quotas ensure women have access to power – but these need to be increased

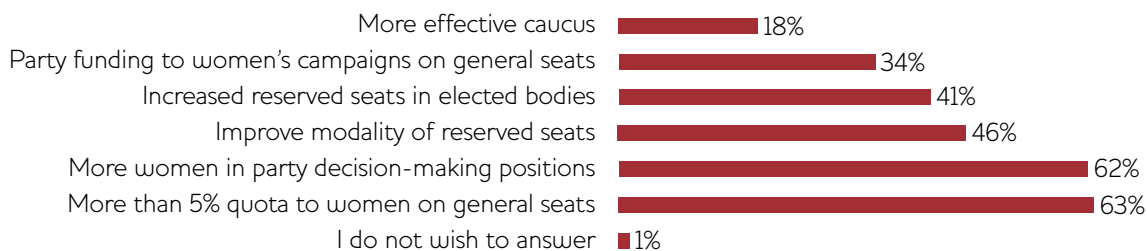
In Pakistan, a 17 per cent quota of parliamentary seats are reserved for women. These reserved seats are allocated to parties proportionately according to how many general seats they have won. Women are elected to these seats by their party legislators rather than directly

mandated by voters. To further increase women's representation, the Election Law 2017 mandated parties to submit an affidavit confirming they issued 5 per cent of tickets for general seats to women. To be elected on a general seat would dispel the stigma that women on reserved seats are indebted to male party members, which are often dismissed by colleagues as 'charity' seats.

The new rule was generally obeyed for the 2018 elections but, as activists feared, women candidates were given tickets for seats they would lose. Although the most number of women in history contested for National Assembly general seats, only eight out of 176 women candidates won. The provincial assemblies elected a total of seven women out of 386 women candidates.

When women legislators were asked what policy measures would increase their political voice, 63 per cent indicated the quota for seats for women should be increased while 62 per cent felt there should be 'more women in party decision-making positions', to counter the perception that women's role is to campaign for electable men rather than participate in fora where substantive matters are discussed. To make this possible, it appears that significant reform within parties, with quotas to ensure women's voice is heard, will be required (Figure 1). One possible reform could be around 'party funding to women's campaigns in general', which 34 per cent of women surveyed said is an important step to strengthen political voice.

Figure 1 **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.

Women on reserved seats see themselves as accountable to a direct voter base despite not being directly voted in to their seats

Interestingly, despite being voted in by legislators (rather than directly by voters), only 19 per cent of women on reserved seats see themselves accountable to these legislators. Instead, a significant majority (65 per cent) felt that they represented 'women in home region/country', suggesting they feel more accountable to imagined constituents, even though they are not directly elected by them. There is a natural dissonance between women legislators' sense of accountability to women outside the assemblies and the male politicians' view of them as 'charity' seat holders who must tow the party line. A change in the modality of election to reserved seats, from indirect to direct election, would be an important step to strengthen their political voice.

There is no career trajectory for women from local government bodies to general seats in the legislatures

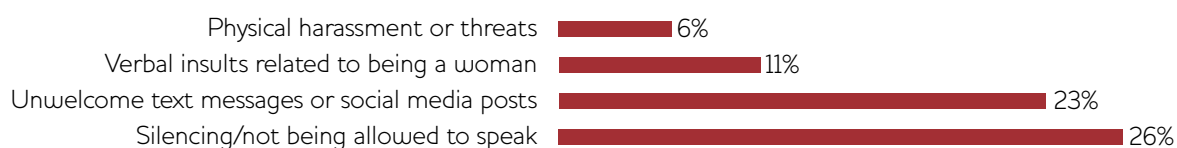
Having a career trajectory is important because it builds experience in constituencies and a knowledge base for women to become effective legislators. Women on reserved seats also need to counter the charge of male legislators that they occupy 'charity' seats only and are indebted to them for support, since

they are indirectly elected by legislators from their parties. The survey showed the trajectory for women from local government to reserved seats in provincial or national assemblies was not a trend. Only 22 per cent of women linked their prior experience in local bodies as a reason for being elected. When asked what seats they would stand on, 68 per cent said reserved seats, showing that women are still hesitant to stand on general seats.

Women face significant levels of discrimination and harassment in politics

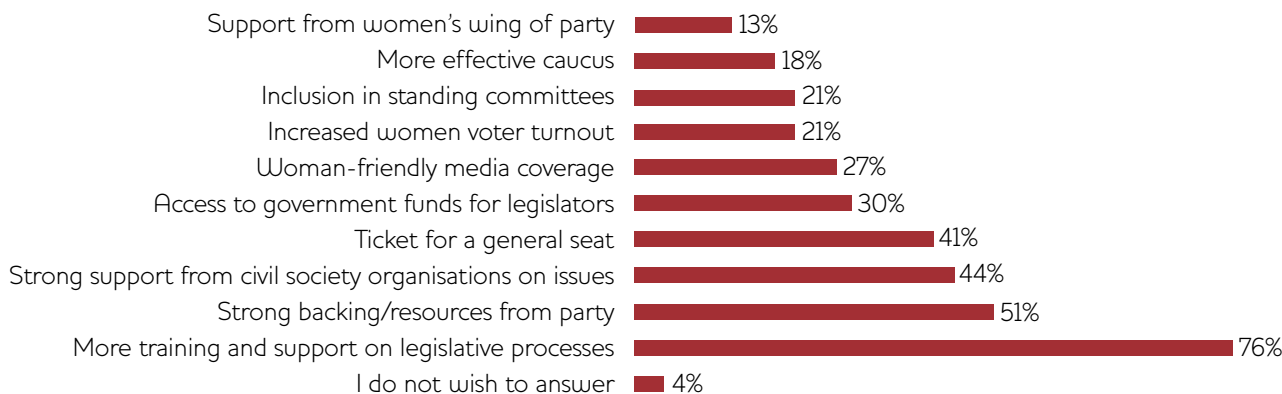
Despite constitutional protections, women's entry into the political arena is still subject to religious and ideological debate. When they manage to enter the political arena as candidates, their personal credibility and physical safety is subject to attack. This results in exclusion from meetings which do not involve 'soft' topics, silencing in parliament by men who instruct them not to speak or speak over them, and physical threats – for example, to women campaigning for election in conservative areas. They are also verbally harassed frequently during rallies, talk shows and even on the floor of the parliament, all of which is enthusiastically covered in the media. Silencing and unwelcome social media contact were the most reported forms of harassment (Figure 2), although not all women chose to answer these questions.

Figure 2 **Harassment faced by women**



Note: Percentages calculated on the basis of 200 respondents; each question presented with 'yes/no/I do not wish to answer' options.
Source: Authors' own.

Figure 3 **Measures most empowering to women politicians**



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

What measures would be most empowering to women politicians?

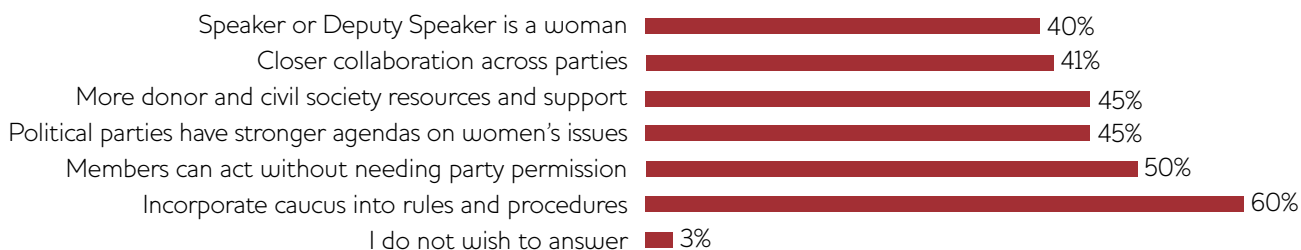
When parliamentarians were asked what measures would be most empowering to women politicians (Figure 3), 76 per cent indicated more training and support on legislative processes, pointing to their lack of confidence or experience. Women (51 per cent) said they need more backing and resources from parties.

Incorporation of women's caucuses into assembly rules and procedures would increase their power of oversight

All respondents were *de facto* members of their cross-party women's caucuses. The first Women's Parliamentary Caucus was set up in the National Assembly in 2008 to help elected

women work across party lines on legislation to advance women's rights. Provincial caucuses were established more recently. Fifty-six per cent of the respondents cited caucus work as one of their most important contributions to the house. The greatest proportion (60 per cent) felt incorporation of their caucuses into assembly rules and procedures was needed (Figure 4). This measure would raise their status to that of permanent standing committees in the assemblies, giving them constitutional status. It would give each caucus significant powers of oversight over relevant government ministries, the power to examine and reject bills, and summon individuals to testify. This legal power would allow a caucus to push for greater legislative provisions for women as well as monitor their implementation.

Figure 4 **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.

Policy recommendations

For legislators:

- Increase the party-based quota for women to be granted tickets for general seats.
- Consider revising the modalities of reserved seats election, with a transparent process for their nomination as candidates, and possible direct elections.
- Media and digital crime laws need to protect women from social media-based forms of harassment.
- Strong measures during elections are needed to curtail the physical threats women face to their safety, such as disqualification of candidates who exhibit harassment behaviour.

For political parties:

- Encourage a clear trajectory of women entering politics, i.e. they should first serve in local bodies, then move on to a reserved seat in a legislative assembly and then to a general seat.
- Establish mechanisms for handling allegations of harassment.

For assemblies:

- The women's caucus in each assembly must be incorporated into rules and procedures, giving them committee status.
- The assemblies must form committees, as mandated by the law, to process harassment complaints and increase accountability of male legislators.
- Establish complaint mechanisms for allegations of harassment within assemblies.

Training needs:

- Political parties, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and donor agencies should provide more training and support to women politicians to empower them to participate effectively as legislators.
- Media representatives need training so they cover women candidates and legislators with respect and seriousness.

Further reading

Khan, A. and Naqvi, S. (2018) *Women in Politics: Gaining Ground for Progressive Outcomes in Pakistan*, IDS Working Paper 519, Brighton: IDS

Khan, A.; Naqvi, S. and Yousuf, Z. (2019, forthcoming) 'Politics and Sexual Harassment in Pakistan', *IDS Bulletin* 50.1

Credits

This *IDS Policy Briefing* was written by **Ayesha Khan**, Senior Researcher at the Collective for Social Science Research (CSSR), Karachi, and author of *The Women's Movement in Pakistan: Activism, Islam and Democracy* (I.B. Tauris, 2018), and **Sana Naqvi**, Research Assistant at CSSR. It was edited by **Emilie Wilson** (IDS) and produced as 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, funded with UK aid from the UK government.

The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IDS or the UK government.



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