

# Women's Local Government Representation: An Assessment Of Influencing Factors

DR. MUHAMMAD HABIB<sup>1</sup>, DR. SUWAIBAH QADRI<sup>2</sup>, QURAT UL AIN SALEEM<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor Department of Humanities and Social sciences Newports Institute of Communication and Economics, Karachi, Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor Department of Political Science University of Karachi, Karachi, Pakistan.

<sup>3</sup>Research scholar Department of public administration University of Karachi, Karachi, Pakistan.

## Abstract

In today's political world, women's political representation is regarded as a crucial issue, especially in developing countries where women are often underrepresented and marginalized from accessing political leadership and power. In local government, which is the lowest tier of public administration, a number of challenges that range from lack of access to education and other resource and discriminatory laws to gender stereotypes and patriarchal nature of societies are confronted in ensuring women's equal representation in local politics. With this perspective, this research article attempts to analyze influencing factors that impact women's local government representation involving both challenges and prospects. Different factors are identified that positively and negatively contribute to women's representation in local government. The overall findings of this review have significant implication for researchers, policymakers and political activists working towards women's empowerment and gender equality in politics.

**Keywords:** Local Government, Women's representation, Women's participation, Gender equality, Pakistan.

## Introduction

The representation women in the political arena is a multifarious issue across the world. Significant progress in recent times has been made in ensuring women's political empowerment; however, they are relatively underrepresented at all levels of government, let alone the third tier of the government which is 'local government. This underrepresentation is mostly seen at the local government level, where decisions and policies have a direct impact on the general populace in communities (Hessami & da Fonseca, 2020). In politics, women's participation has become more than essential in order to ensure that their perspectives and voices are viewed and heard, respectively. Moreover, their priorities and needs are reflected in decision

and policy-making processes (Jabeen & Jadoon, 2009). Nevertheless, there has inevitably been a growing acknowledgement and recognition of the indispensability of women in partaking in local government politics, which certainly plays a crucial role in social welfare, service delivery and, importantly, economic development of communities and societies (Bawa & Sanyare, 2013).

In Pakistan, political empowerment of the women stratum has been a topic of unceasing discussion for several years, especially after the empowerment of media and consistent transfer of democratic power from one government to the other. The country has a long history of cultural norms and patriarchal values that undermine women's participation in public life. According

to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, a minimum of 21 percent women are the representatives of local government, which is relatively much lower than the global average of 36 percent (Huq, 2016). This evinces the fact that women's political representation in Pakistan remains significantly low, partly due to patriarchal impediments and partly owing to gender-induced disparities.

Thus, taking these views into perspective, this research article attempts to examine the factors influencing women's representation in local government in general and Pakistan in particular. For this, various socio-political and cultural factors are explored, together with structure and practices of political parties, legal frameworks, and women's access to basic amenities that may adversely impact their representation. By highlighting the need for strategies and interventions to ensure an increase of women in local government politics, the discussion of this article may inform policy and practice as well as promote a type of governance that ought to be gender-responsive.

### **Background of the Topic**

Women's participation in local or public affairs is one of the intriguing issues that has recently gained immense attention. According to a UN Women working paper, women's representation in deliberative local government bodies is relatively higher than in two houses of the parliament; however, such a representation is still not on par with men. The paper highlighted types of electoral system together with legislated gender quotas in local elections as a few of multiple factors that impact women's political participation on egalitarian basis (UN Women, 2021). Thus, it can be indicated that at the local level, their representation is lesser known but crucial level of governance.

In a patriarchal society like Pakistan, where men are regarded to be the superior authority in contrast to women as inferior, various expressions of discriminatory gender roles and

inequalities are prevalent especially in the rural areas of the country which is relatively more populated and has more acquaintance with public level issues. According to Jabeen & Iqbal (2020), gender roles are maintained and reproduced, thereby, influencing distinct life prospects for both men and women.

Since 1977, a number of international organizations and agencies ranging from the World Bank to UN Women has been promoting gender equality in global politics. Moreover, various interventions, reforms and investments have been boosted to ensure equal provision of access to women in local political affairs around the world (Funk, 2017). Regrettably, socio-economic disparities, domestic or household issues, and challenges including violence, harassment and discrimination have established many impediments in the way of women's participation in local government. As far as the legal framework of Pakistan is concerned, it has yet to provide with adequate level of protection for women's political rights, while there is also a lack of women's support and absence of legal protection that further add barriers to women's participation in local government (Jayal, 2005).

### **Research Question**

- What are the influencing factors that impact, both positively and adversely, the women's representation in local government?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Simon & Goes (2011), theoretical framework can be defined as a set of ideas and concepts employed to understand a particular phenomenon. As far as this research is concerned, intersectionality and feminist theory have been applied as two theoretical models to assess the factors influencing women's participation in local government. When it comes to intersectionality, it recognizes the fact that

individuals have multiple social identities, such as gender, race, class, and sexuality. These identities appear to interact and intersect to shape experiences of marginalization and privilege. It further argues states that an intersectional approach is essential to understand the complex manners whereby gender and other social identities intersect to shape women's experiences of political representation (Araujo et al., 2016). Feminist theory, on the other hand, emphasizes on the significance of gender equality by seeking to examine the way in which social and political structures are shaped by gender. Moreover, the theory is of the view that women's marginalization in society is due to unequal power relations and aims to empower women by challenging these power structures (Martinez-Cordoba et al., 2022). These frameworks together provide with a lens through which various factors influencing women's participation in local government can be examined as well as developing strategies to ensure and promote gender equality in political participation and representation, irrespective of gender-based discrimination.

It is important to mention that intersectionality and feminist theory are relevant to the present status of women in local governments around the globe. As argued by Cho et al., (2013), intersectionality manifests that women experience is shaped by both gender and other intersecting identities, such as ethnicity, race and class. This could be associated with those women who relatively belong to marginalized groups or communities by facing distinct forms of discrimination that further aggravates their exclusion from political representation. On the other hand, feminist theory recognizes the requisite need for strategies and policies that particularly address the unique challenges faced by women. For instance, a strategy aiming to increase women's participation in local government must be preceded by the fact that women belonging to the

lower social and economic backgrounds or from marginalized religious or ethnic groups may often face greater impediments in the way of political participation than others. The gender nature of political power is recognized by the feminist theory and manners in which traditional gender expectations and roles often ensue women's exclusion from politics.

### **Factors Influencing Women's Participation in Local Government**

Women's representation in local government is influenced by several factors. These factors were emanated from the findings of relevant studies that aimed at assessing the history, development and challenges regarding women's participation in local governments around the globe. Each factor is critically discussed as under:

#### **Legislated Quotas**

Legislated quotas are one of the most influential factors that affect women's representation in local government. Countries that have separate quotas for women's representation in local government have witnessed a significant increase in women's participation. Pakistan is one of the prime examples that has implemented legislated quotas for women in local government. Under the Local Government Plan, the Pakistani Government earmarks a thirty-three percent quota for women at the union council, municipality and district levels (Sumbas, 2020). Moreover, since the Pakistani parliament is bicameral (upper and lower house), both the houses have legislated quotas at the subnational level. On the other hand, when it comes to the Indian democratic government, it has implemented a nearly thirty-six percent quota for women in local government has resulted in a significant increase in women's representation (Bauri & Basu, 2022).

#### **Electoral Systems**

The nature and type of electoral system implemented also influences women's

participation in local government. As argued by Nkwana & Van Dijk (2012), those governments which make the use of proportional representation systems appear to have higher levels of women's representation than those that use first-past-the-post systems. This is due to the notion that proportional representation systems allow for greater diversity in representation and provide more opportunities for women to be elected.

### **Social and Cultural Factors**

When considering socio-cultural factors, they significantly play a crucial role in women's representation in local government. Most often, women are compelled with facing cultural and social barriers that deprive them from participating equally in politics. These socio-cultural barriers involve gender stereotypes, discrimination, and lack of support from family and community members (Pini & McDonald, 2011). In Pakistan, women's representation in the electoral process has remarkably remained at the lower level because of public perception that it contradicts the prevalent values and norms of the society (Hussain et al., 2017). Besides, male dominance, misrepresentation of religion, illiteracy, lack of support from local political parties, and patriarchal society are some of the factors that adversely impact women's representation in local bodies' elections. In a similar vein, in less urbanized areas with more traditional gender norms, women tend to be more severely underrepresented in local government. Women also tend to be underrepresented in political office or positions with more power, particularly expenditure power, like in higher tiers of local government (Muhammad & Shafiq, 2019).

Discrimination and gender stereotypes also play a critical role in hindering women's participation in politics. Women are often seen as comparatively less capable than men and are, therefore not taken sincerely as political

candidates. This subsequently leads to a lack of support from family and community members, which further limit women's participation in politics (Hessami & da Fonseca, 2020).

### **Economic Factors**

Economic factors also affect women's participation in local government. For instance, women often have less access to resources and face economic barriers that prevent them from participating in politics. In Pakistan, women seem to have comparatively less access to education and financial resources, which limit their ability to run for political office. Also, owing to caregiving responsibilities, their ability to equally participate in local politics is limited (Huq, 2016). This is particularly challenging for those women who run for office, as political campaigns are time-consuming and require significant resources.

Besides, adequate access to credit facilities and financial services is indispensable for women who are willing to run for office or participate in political campaigns. Unfortunately, it has been seen around the world in general and in developing countries in particular that they have less access to such services than men, which further exacerbate complexity to participate in politics (Jabeen & Iqbal, 2020). This can be particularly challenging for women who are running for office for the first time, as they may not have established networks of supporters and donors.

### **Political Factors**

Finally, when it comes to political factors, they involve party support and political will that collectively impact women's representation in local government. Political parties play a crucial role in promoting women's participation in politics by providing support and resources to women candidates. In addition to it, political will is essential in creating an enabling environment for women's participation in politics (Hussain et

al., 2017). In the case of Pakistan, political parties are often male-dominated, which can limit opportunities for women to participate in party politics or limit their ability to rise to leadership positions

### **Exploring Women's Representation in Local Government in Developing Countries**

In developing countries like Pakistan and India, women's participation and representation is a critical issue that has gained considerable attention in the past couple of years. While there has been massive level of improvement in ensuring equal representation of women in local level politics, governments of developing countries still confront significant challenges to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. According to Shroff & Meltzer (2014), women's representation in public affairs is positively associated with social spending of education and health. It is suggested that women's representation in political can result in more inclusive society that would benefit them as well as others from marginalized communities. However, at the global level, their political representation is still unequal and muted, with a mere twenty-two percent of all national parliamentarians account for the women stratum as of 2019 (Jabeen & Iqbal, 2020). Moreover, according to a report by United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (UNESCAP), there is a dire need for affirmative action like increasing women's quota in local politics, as well as in judiciary and other decision-making bodies. The report also insinuates the importance of women's movements in promoting gender parity in both national and domestic-level politics in order to accomplish the goals of women empowerment. Besides, the data for as many as 130 countries and areas indicate that representation of women in local government's deliberative bodies is

relatively higher than in parliament; however, it is still not at par with men (Bauri & Basu, 2022).

Furthermore, women's representation in local government is a less known but critical level of governance in a manner that it would help make a shift in global narrative of decision-making power from national to local level. For this, efforts have been made by some countries to implement legislated quotas for women in local government along with promoting women's leadership by providing adequate support and resources to female candidates. In Pakistan, the government provides financial support to female candidates by disseminating awareness-raising campaigns to promote their participation in local politics (Muhammad & Shafiq, 2019). Similarly, in Rwanda, the government has implemented policies to establish a quota system for women in local government. In the same vein, governments of India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and others have made initiatives to focus on the development of women's leadership skills. Importantly, the findings of Bawa & Sanyare (2013) revealed the case study of Ghana, which shows that the country's gender quota system, combined with women's political networks and capacity building programs, has resulted in one of the highest levels of women's representation in the world. Thus, it can be inferred that addressing socio-political and economic challenges confronted by women in partaking in local government affairs is crucial for political empowerment and gender equality.

### **Current Status of Women's Representation in Local Government**

Of the six million elected members in deliberative bodies of local government, as counted by SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) indicator, only 2.1 million (less than 36 percent) are women. This places their representation higher than in national parliaments (25 percent). Only 19 countries (representing nearly 14 percent of countries) have reached over 40 percent women in local bodies and a supplementary 27 countries have women's representation between 31 and 40 percent (UN Women, 2022). From these figures, it can be deduced that in majority of countries, women are still underrepresented. Thus, countries having legislated quotas have higher level of women's representation in local governments.

Legislated gender quotas are indeed an effective measure to ensure an increase in women's participation in local politics worldwide. The implementation of gender quotas has considerably altered trends of countries in women's representation at the local level particularly in developing countries. As per Hussain et al., (2017), electoral systems are also an influential factor that impact women's chances of partaking in local bodies' elections and winning them. In general, electoral systems form the basis for per electoral seat, ballot structure and how voters mark or express their choices. Additionally, with regards to proportional representation system, it correlates with the number of women candidates as elected representatives in local politics, as districts often persuade political parties to ensure inclusion of women besides men since balanced tickets may increase chances of electoral success.

It has been witnessed that the exclusion of women from decision-making bodies is common in developing countries, which limits the possibility of entrenching the principles of democracy and equality in a society, thereby, impeding economic development and demoralizing the attainment of gender equality. If

men generally monopolize the political processes and pass laws affecting the society at large, the process of decision-making does not always ensure balance in terms of interests of communities (Hessami & da Fonseca, 2020). Due to relatively institutional and cultural barriers in developing countries, which value their socio-cultural norms and standards, coupled with intermittent passage of discriminatory laws and lack of proportionate access to quality healthcare, education and other resources, women inhabiting these countries continue to be marginalized in the political arena. It is often the notion that the stereotypes at the community level are stronger among developing nations. Also, mobilizing females to partake in political mandates of their own cities and taking initiatives by focusing on the local level of government is minimal in developing countries, especially those existent in the Asian region. Besides, it has also been experienced that women are confronted with different political challenges and opportunities than men due to gendered behavioral expectations (Elections, 2021). Although women's leadership is important for their communities, particularly for adolescent girls, these prevalent socio-cultural norms inhibit women's political participation at the local level.

### **Research Methodology**

The methodology section of this research paper outlined the method employed to collect and subsequently analyze data in order to answer the research question. The chosen research method is secondary qualitative research. This type of research method involves collecting and analyzing data that has already been collected and published by previous scholars and authors; it does not require collecting a new information. As per Ruggiano & Perry (2019), qualitative research is a method of inquiry that focuses on social phenomena from subjective perspective and involves the collection and analysis of non-

statistical or non-numerical data in the form of text.

The collection and analysis of data was carried out from academic articles, books, reports, and other documents relevant to the topic that have been published by others. One of the primary advantages of using secondary qualitative research is that it allows the researcher to collect and analyze data that has already been collected and analyzed by others, which is both cost and time-effective. Thus, the secondary qualitative method in this research provided with a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the research topic by synthesizing existing research findings.

One potential limitation of secondary research is that the researcher has limited control over the data collection process and may not have access to certain types of data or information that may be relevant to the research question. It is also important for the researcher to evaluate the quality and reliability of the sources critically used in the secondary research.

## Results and Discussion

Through the literature review, it was understood that women's representation in local government is not the issue merely for third-world countries but is a worldwide problem, with varying degrees of participation and representation across countries. In spite of untiring efforts to ensure an increase in women's political participation and representation, they are still underrepresented in many parts of the world, including developing countries. For instance, it was learnt that women in Pakistan make up less than thirty-percent of local government representation, despite a 33% reserved quota for women. Similarly, it was understood that despite women have their own deserved quota at national, subnational and local tiers of the government, they still face significant barriers to political participation, including gender stereotypes and socio-cultural norms, coupled with paucity of access to education and

other resources, discriminatory policies and laws, and limited level of support from political parties.

When assessing the findings of Martinez-Cordoba et al., (2022), they are consistent with the above articulated literature review, which emphasizes the need to address the multifarious factors that hinder women's political participation and representation. The study provided insights into the specific challenges faced by women in Pakistan and highlighted the significance of affirmative action policies and gender mainstreaming, along with certain strategies that empower women to overcome the political barriers they face. Besides, the findings from Araujo et al., (2016) incorporated in this research revealed that women are underrepresented in most appointed and elected positions in local government. The study identified several factors associated with women's higher or lower levels of representation, including demographic, institutional and structural factors. The study also examined the effects of women's lack of parity, including policy attitudes, the policy process, and policy outcomes.

Nevertheless, despite the above mentioned perplexities and hindrances faced by women in partaking in local government politics around the globe, there are indeed some positive developments that been materialized in recent times to increase women's representation in local government. For instance, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has implemented capacity-building programs for women inhabiting underdeveloped countries, such as Yemen, Iraq and Afghanistan (UN Women, 2022). Owing to no substantial support from their respective governments to make socio-political efforts in the way of improving legislative participation for women, the UNDP has endeavored to materialize these, which inevitably have helped women overcome the obstacles to political participation and increase their representation in local level politics. In addition to that, the ANC (African National

Congress) existent in South Africa has implemented a gender quota system for local government elections. This system requires that at least fifty percent of candidates be women (Johannes et al., 2022). The program has also provided necessary logistical and financial support to women candidates and promoted women's issues in their platforms. These efforts have led to a significant increase in women's representation in South Africa's local government system. Besides, the Women's Campaign School at Yale University in the United States disseminated with proper training and support to female candidates. For the last four years, the program has been effective in the Women's Campaign School at Yale University provides training and support to women candidates in the United States. The program has been effective in promoting gender equality and increasing women's representation in local government.

With both challenges and positive developments in the way of women's representation in local government across countries, addressing the identified challenges requires a comprehensive approach to address the underlying socio-cultural stereotypes and norms that limit women's participation in politics, as well as legal and policy reform to ensure that women's participation is not impeded. For this, political parties ought to make a concerted effort to create more opportunities for women to participate in party politics. At the same time, access to education, healthcare and other resources should be improved to the level-playing field for female candidates.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

With the above exhaustive analysis and discussion on influencing factors regarding women's representation in local government, it can be inferred that despite much progress has so far been made in ensuring equal level of women's political representation in developing countries,

there are still significant challenges to overcome. Discriminatory laws and policies involving legal barriers to women's political participation further compound these challenges. Even when laws are existent, the lack of enforcement and due implementation limits women's ability to participate in local government affairs to the fullest. Considering political parties, they also pose significant challenges to women's representation, with male-dominated party structures limiting opportunities for women to participate in party politics. Finally, limited level of access to basic amenities, including financial resources, leaves many women belonging to vulnerable or minority communities at a disadvantage when running for office.

To address these and other socio-political and economic barriers, there is a need for local governments around the world in general and in developing countries in particular to implement gender-based quotas, provide capacity-building programs for women candidates, discuss issues confronted by women vis-a-vis their platforms, and encourage them to get engaged with local groups or city/town commissions to get more comfortable before running for elected office. Addressing these challenges is indispensable in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in local government and ensuring that women's practical needs are prioritized in the decision-making processes.

This research has analyzed the potential of affirmative action policies and gender mainstreaming in promoting women's representation and has examined certain case studies regarding successful women's representation in local government in developing countries. While the case studies discussed in this research has demonstrated political progress that has been made towards achieving gender equality in local government in some developing countries, there are nonetheless some significant challenges that require to be duly addressed. Thus, a blueprint of effective recommendations



to encourage more representation of women in local government affairs is provided as under:

- Devising and executing legislation to eliminate, or even alleviate, gender-based discrimination in political participation, particularly in developing or third-world countries.
- Increasing opportunities of access to education, healthcare and other basic resources for female candidates, particularly those belonging to the underprivileged areas.
- Raising awareness, acquaintance and changing attitudes towards women's political representation and leadership through community-based initiatives and media campaigns.
- Providing financial support and resources to women candidates to help them in overcoming the challenges emanated from political campaigning.
- Encouraging women's participation in political parties and addressing the structural-cum-institutional barriers that prevent women from assuming leadership positions in local politics.

### Research Contribution

The findings of this research have some fundamental implications for policymakers, civil society organizations, and international development agencies. The research thoroughly highlighted the need to address socio-cultural norms and political obstacles that impede women's political representation, provide them with adequate access to political opportunities and, importantly, remove discriminatory laws and policies that hinder women's representation in local government.

### References

1. Araujo, J. F. F. E., & Tejedó-Romero, F. (2016). Women's political representation

- and transparency in local governance. *Local government studies*, 42(6), 885-906.
2. Bauri, A., & Basu, A. (2022). Women's Political Participation and Empowerment in Urban Local Governance in West Bengal, India. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 00219096221100979.
3. Bawa, S., & Sanyare, F. (2013). Women's participation and representation in politics: Perspectives from Ghana. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 36(4), 282-291.
4. Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, 38(4), 785-810.
5. Elections, W. in. (2021, September 24). Women representation in local government Pakistan - Local Government election. WIE. Retrieved April 27, 2023, from <https://pakvoter.org/wie/women-and-lg-system/>
6. Funk, K. D. (2017). The Causes and Consequences of Women's Representation in Local Governments (Doctoral dissertation).
7. Hessami, Z., & da Fonseca, M. L. (2020). Female political representation and substantive effects on policies: A literature review. *European Journal of Political Economy*, 63, 101896.
8. Huq, S. M. S. (2016). Women's participation in local Government: a tool for sustainable development of Bangladesh. *European Journal of Business and Social Sciences*, 4(11), 169-183.
9. Hussain, S., Ahmed, W., Khan, A., & Ullah, F. (2017). Factors Affecting Women Participation in Local Bodies'

- Election in Pakistan. *Journal of Gender and Social Issues*, 16(1), 91-91.
10. Jabeen, N., & Iqbal, D. M. Z. (2020). Gender and local governance in Pakistan: Promoting participation through capacity building. *South Asian Studies*, 25(2).
  11. Jabeen, N., & Jadoon, M. Z. I. (2009). Gender and local governance in Pakistan: Representation vs. participation. *International NGO Journal*, 4(5), 264-276.
  12. Jayal, G. N. (2005). From representation to participation: Women in local government. *Nehru University, New Delhi*.
  13. Johannes, F. B., Liliweri, A., Gana, F., & Nursalam, N. (2022). Critical Factors for Women's Representation in Top Management Leadership Positions in Local Government. *JKAP (Jurnal Kebijakan dan Administrasi Publik)*, 26(2), 144-161.
  14. Martínez-Córdoba, P. J., Benito, B., & García-Sánchez, I. M. (2022). Women's management in local government: The effects of substantive representation on welfare service efficiency. *Social Policy & Administration*.
  15. Miller, D. I., Eagly, A. H., & Linn, M. C. (2015). Women's representation in science predicts national gender-science stereotypes: Evidence from 66 nations. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 107(3), 631.
  16. Muhammad, S., & Shafiq, Q. A. K. (2019). Gender Quota and Women's Political Participation in Pakistan: A Case of General Elections 2002.
  17. Nkwana, H. M., & Van Dijk, H. G. (2012). A gender-specific evaluation framework for the leadership development of women in local government. *Administratio Publica*, 20(4), 157-172.
  18. Pini, B., & McDonald, P. (2011). Women and Representation in Local Government. *International case studies*.
  19. Ruggiano, N., & Perry, T. E. (2019). Conducting secondary analysis of qualitative data: Should we, can we, and how?. *Qualitative Social Work*, 18(1), 81-97.
  20. Shroff, S., & Meltzer, R. (2014). Politics of State Feminism in Pakistan. *Politics*.
  21. Simon, M. K., & Goes, J. (2011). Developing a theoretical framework. *Seattle, WA: Dissertation Success, LLC*, 13-18.
  22. Sumbas, A. (2020). Gendered local politics: the barriers to women's representation in Turkey. *Democratization*, 27(4), 570-587.
  23. Women, U. N. (2021). Women's representation in local government: A global analysis. *Hämtad*, 27, 2022-01.