



Women's Political Participation in Pakistan: A Qualitative Exploration of Gender Quotas' Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the effectiveness of gender quotas in enhancing women's political participation in Pakistan through a qualitative approach. Conducted in Islamabad, the research reveals that while quotas have increased formal representation, they have not significantly improved decision-making power. Many respondents reported limited influence, institutional and financial barriers, social and cultural constraints, and challenges in policy implementation. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with female politicians to understand their experiences and challenges in political spaces. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's six-step framework. The findings highlight that political gatekeeping, economic disparities, and societal expectations continue to hinder women's meaningful participation. Furthermore, weak enforcement mechanisms limit the impact of existing policies promoting inclusivity. To address these issues, the study recommends strengthening institutional support, increasing financial accessibility, challenging cultural norms through awareness campaigns, ensuring effective policy implementation, and promoting inclusive decision-making structures. Without these reforms, gender quotas will remain a symbolic measure rather than a transformative tool for political empowerment.



Introduction

Women's political participation is a key pillar for democratic governance, social justice, and inclusive development. Women can bring their perspectives to policymaking, promote gender-sensitive laws and challenge gender-normative customs through political representation (Ogwora, 2022). Yet, despite strides made in gender equality globally, women still face enormous challenges to political engagement. However, they face various structural barriers at the deep level of patriarchal structures throughout the economic, socio-cultural and political sphere, the lack of political mentorship, and socio-cultural norms that subvert the notion of female leadership and consequently their political budding (Tartir, 2025). To correct this ongoing underrepresentation, numerous countries adopted gender quotas as a policy intervention to promote women's presence within political institutions. Gender quotas, which require that a certain minimum percentage of women be included in the list of candidates for political positions, are frequently seen as an essential measure to close the gender gap in politics and promote more representative governance (Ochala, 2025).

At issue here are gender quotas, which can take different forms, such as reserved seats, legal candidate quotas, and voluntary party quotas. Reserved seats ensure a certain number of legislative slots for women so women occupy their place in political institutions. One form of affirmative action is legal candidate quotas, whereby political parties must nominate a certain percentage of candidates of a certain sex, which puts pressure on parties to examine gender equity within (Muriaas & Peters, 2025). On the other end, voluntary party quotas require political parties to make a commitment to increase the number of women through political parties but do not impose any legal mandate on political parties to do so. Mechanisms such as these have resulted in numerical gains for women's political representation, yet their impact on facilitating meaningful political empowerment remains contested (Mori, 2024).

Critics of gender quotas argue that they risk tokenism; such representatives, the argument goes, have little political power. And women who get elected through such quota systems may meet resistance in male-dominated political structures that limit their capacity to effect real policy change. On occasion, the ruling political parties opt female candidates who are more closely associated with male party leaders than with independent political activists, making a mockery of the objective of women being empowered by being independent political players. Indeed, the effectiveness of gender quotas is closely linked with the general political and cultural environment. Quotas may not be enough to change discriminatory mindsets or break structural barriers in societies where gender biases are ingrained in the social fabric (Yadav, 2024).

However, proponents of gender quotas argue that they are doing something which is essential for accelerating progress toward gender equality in politics. Studies show that when more women enter political office, they tend to push for policies that are relevant to issues related to gender-based violence, maternal health, and women's economic opportunities. Moreover, the presence of more female leaders can inspire younger girls and boys alike, gradually changing perceptions of women in leadership. However, in those countries where gender quotas have been implemented effectively and supported by more comprehensive institutional reforms, they have resulted in long-term changes over time to political culture and governance structures (Terjesen & Lorenz, 2015).

Problem of statement

Gender quotas have been implemented in Pakistan to promote women's political participation, but whether they have been effective in bringing about substantive representation remains a concern. Although these quotas may have brought women into political institutions in greater numbers, they have not, however, ensured that they are in positions of influence and decision-making. However, female politicians still confront systemic obstacles, such as entrenched patriarchal attitudes, party discrimination, and male-controlled political systems all of which hinder their capacity for meaningful engagement with governance. Quotas are seen as something political parties are legally obligated to use instead of something that can stimulate real women's leadership. As a result, such women tend to stay marginalised, occupying spotty positions of formal power without much real authority. Moreover, the available literature on gender quotas in Pakistan is largely concentrated on the statistical representation of women, with few empirical works that investigate the extent to which quotas have enhanced women's ability to affect policy and governance. The ineffectiveness of gender quotas is exacerbated by a lack of institutional support, poor capacity-building programs, and societal resistance. This study will endeavor to critically assess gender quotas in Pakistan, examining how effective quotas are in facilitating women's empowerment in politics, the challenges they encounter, and their impact on gender-inclusive governance in Pakistan. Answering these questions would help clarify the importance of gender quotas in political equality and transformation.

Objectives

1. Analyze the impact of gender quotas on women's political representation and decision-making.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of different types of gender quotas in enhancing women's political participation.
3. Identify challenges that limit gender quotas' role in achieving substantive political empowerment.
4. Examine the socio-political effects of gender quotas on governance and gender equality.

Literature Review

The participation of women in politics is a leading topic in gender studies and political science, especially when it comes to the study of so-called gender quotas. Gender quotas are mechanisms to boost woman office holders, combat systematic disadvantages that have propelled gender exclusion from an early stage onwards. Although these quotas are in place in different regions of the world, they have been a subject of academic dispute regarding their effectiveness. Others contend that quotas work to get more women into politics and drive progressive policy changes, while others question their contributions to substantive political empowerment (Dahlerup, 2007). The fourth piece outlines varying opinions on gender quotas and the effect they have had on political empowerment for women, as well as the obstacles to their use.

Theoretical Foundations of Gender Quotas

There are several theories of representation that underlie gender quotas adoption. Descriptive representation is the theory that political institutions ought to reflect societal demographics, such that women attain political office in proportion to their size in the population (Terjesen & Sealy,

2016; Shah et al., 2021). Therefore, the main aim of quotas is to promote and ensure more women's presence involved in politics, by obliging a certain percentage of women to become candidates or elected officials. Conversely, substantive representation highlights the influence of women's political engagement on government policy outcomes. It contends that it is not enough to just pour women into office, but rather, whether they are able to use their office to affect policy that benefits gender equality and social welfare (Caul, 2001).

Scholars are often in of quotas as a “quick fix” for gender equality, i.e. as a means of reaching gender parity that avoids the slow and organic process of increasing women's political presence through a more traditional path. Others caution that while quotas can ensure that women are included in the political process, they can also be ineffective in bringing about real change unless backed by institutional and cultural changes that enable and empower women to translate their numerical presence into real political power (Shemla et al., 2025).

Types of Gender Quotas and Their Implementation

The nature and reporting of gender quotas will differ by political and electoral system. There are three different forming types of gender quotas:

1. Reserved Seats

This quota reserves a certain number of legislative seats specifically for women. Reserved seats have led to some of the highest levels of female political representation in the world, in countries like Rwanda and Afghanistan. Critics, however, contend that reserved seats reinforce the notion that women require special provisions rather than being able to compete for seats on the same basis as men (Bird, 2014).

2. Legal Candidate Quotas

These quotas force political parties to field a certain minimum percentage of women candidates. They are mandatory and have been used in countries such as Argentina and France. Data indicate that legal quotas (like other forms of regulations) work under placement mandates: making sure that women are placed in positions where they can win elections — not just nominated in unwinnable districts (Chowdhury, 2016).

3. Voluntary Party Quotas

Gender quotas are sometimes adopted internally within a political party without the presence of such laws. The political parties in Nordic countries, for example, have taken the initiative to promote female participation (Weeks, 2018). As those quotas are not legally binding, however, their success is contingent upon the party's willingness to pursue gender equality.

Effectiveness of Gender Quotas

Studies of gender quotas show variable results at terms of whether they lead to actual political empowerment for women. Evidence shows that quotas greatly enhance women's representation and lead to policies that positively impact women and other marginalized communities

(Moghadam, 2010). (for instance) note that gender quotas are associated with a greater investment in education, healthcare, and social welfare policies, which may limit the power of the men's rights movement.

Other research comes with the caveat that quotas don't always beget real political power. In several other instances, female candidates as a result of quotas remain on the margins of political institutions, positioned mainly in symbolic roles with little to no decision-making power. This phenomenon is described as "tokenism" because women are only elected when they satisfy numerically regulated quotas, then they are excluded from true legislative processes once in office (Kerevel, 2019).

Difficulties in Applying Gender Quotas

While they offer many potential solutions to gender parity, there are also some problems surrounding gender quotas that diminish their impact. These challenges include:

1. Political Resistance and Weak Enforcement

Across the country, male-dominated political establishments resist quotas for women. Political parties might nominally obey quota laws, putting women forward in places where they won't win. Women may be elected to power only to be cajoled to stand down in favor of male candidates (Clayton, 2015).

2. Cultural and Institutional Agility

Gender quotas can be undermined by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Although women are included in the political process through quotas, they tend to be subject to discrimination, exclusion from decision making and difficulties in reconciling political with traditional gender tasks. Moreover, these women may relate with "double standards" where their capabilities and leadership skills are more examined compared to their male counterparts (Bosson et al., 2022)

3. Quality of Representation and the "Proxy Candidate" Problem

One criticism often made of gender quotas is that they lead to the election of women who are disproportionately elected because of family or political connections rather than merit. This is especially prevalent in countries where a system of political dynasties is entrenched, resulting in the appearance of "proxy candidates" women who come into office not because of their own political ability, but because they are related to some powerful male politician. And although these women may be in office, they often have little independence in making decisions (Waylen & Souther, 2021).

4. Structural Constraints Within Political Institutions

Even when women do make it into representative bodies, they are often constrained by structural barriers to making an impact. The research indicates that female politicians are often made members of lesser powerful committees or ministers with voters which limits their capacity to influence key policies in office (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008). In many of

these instances, male-dominated political cultures create barriers to women breaking into front-running positions, thereby perpetuating gender hierarchies in political institutions.

Impact of Gender Quotas on Governance and Policy

Nonetheless, in many contexts there have been positive policy benefits associated with the introduction of gender quotas. Research shows that the more women there are in political office, the more attention circumstances surrounding gender are paid to, such as legislation on domestic violence, maternity leave or equal opportunities. In addition, female political leaders are more likely to champion social welfare policies benefiting families, children and disadvantaged groups

In addition, gender quotas may have societal effects in the long run by defying antiquated gender expectations and inspiring women in their pursuit of political careers Bosson et al (2022) showed how Rwanda's gender quotas translated greater representation of women in government into increased participation of women in civil society and grassroots activism.

Research Methodology

This study employed qualitative research methods to explore the effectiveness of gender quotas in promoting women's political participation in Islamabad, Pakistan. A phenomenological research design was adopted to capture the lived experiences of women in political positions, policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders. The study was conducted in Islamabad, where all key legislative and policy decisions of Pakistan are made, being a political and administrative center. A qualitative research approach facilitated the use of semi-structured interviews, allowing for rich expression of perspectives. A purposive sampling approach was employed to recruit 15 participants, comprising female politicians, policymakers, gender activists, and representatives from pertinent organizations. Doing so allowed the study to capture perspectives from people who had direct experience and insight into gender quotas in Pakistan's political context. The semi-structured interviews supported flexibility in questioning while still keeping focus to the key themes in the research. By doing this, participants felt free to share their experiences with rich detail in their responses. The interviews highlighted the importance of gender quotas in enhancing levels of political participation, challenges faced by women in political roles. Data were analyzed according to the six-step thematic analysis model of Braun and Clarke, as follows: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and preparing the final report. This provided a framework for identifying key themes and patterns, thereby enabling a thorough analysis of participants' experiences. To keep with the integrity of the research, ethical considerations were conscientiously argued following the above mentioned points. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to inclusion in the study. Ethical research protocol was followed, and participant completion was voluntary, with the understanding that withdrawal at any point incurred no penalty (withdrawal). Moreover, all data were kept in a safe condition and used for research only.

Results and Discussion

This section outlines the main findings from the study as per emerging themes. The discussion contextualizes these findings in the light of literature and discusses their significance. The end summarizes the key insights, recommendations offer managerial implications and direction for future research

Theme 1: Limited Influence in Decision-Making

Many of respondents said they took issue with their perceived lack of real influence over decision-making. Even as they hold positions, they often feel left out of major discussions in which core policies and political strategies are developed. And their role is mostly symbolic, with the real decision-making authority held in a few individual hands.

One respondent narrated:

“When I first came, I thought I would have a say in shaping policies, and I could make some difference. But then I learned that many big decisions are made long before discussions travel to us. They see us but do not hear us. When we speak up about the important issues, those points are turned off, dismissed or not even discussed.”

Another respondent added:

“Most meetings are just a formality. Key players then make their decisions, largely behind closed doors, and we are to toe the line. I recall another time when I raised an important issue and was told, ‘We will take this into consideration in the future.’ But nothing ever changed. There is a system where only a few have real power, and the others just add to numbers.”

These experiences touch on the difficulty of moving from tokenization to substantive inclusion. Without structural reforms, representation will be superficial rather than substantive.

Theme 2: Institutional and Structural Barriers

Institutional and structural barriers, many respondents noted, prevent them from participating fully in politics. The lack of resources, established political networks and political kingpins all combined means that new entrants are only ever able to break through in limited roles.

One respondent narrated:

“Politics is not merely about talent or capability; it’s about who supports you and how much financial resources you have. I decided to run, I soon discovered that some candidates were receiving full-on financial and strategic support from the party, while others like me were left to fend for themselves. “Without good funding and political connections, it’s nearly impossible to get above a certain level.”

Another respondent added:

“To this day, even after years of experience, leadership is beyond reach. Some positions are only for a select few, and the rest of us are expected to be order followers rather than actual decision makers. I put forward an innovative campaign strategy that would have offered the best outcome, but it was swept aside in favor of a traditional approach that benefitted those in power. It’s hard to make progress when every opportunity is controlled by established figures.”

These answers highlight the importance of institutional changes that ensure equal opportunities and resources for all participants. Without them, structural barriers to participation and political advancement will persist.

Theme 3: Social and Cultural Limitations

The effects of political participation transcend institutional issues. Some respondents noted that they often have to balance political responsibilities and traditional expectations, which can curtail their autonomy and ability to act effectively.

One respondent narrated:

“There is the unsaid expectation of performing traditional roles alongside political responsibility. My thinking is that since I am taking care of multiple things I cannot do everything perfectly, and I feel like I leave room for judging from every side. People ask all the time about my decisions and if I should be spending more time taking care of my family needs than being involved in politics.”

Another respondent added:

“Sometimes we don’t have a choice in political participation. So, a lot of us come into politics because of outside influences and even once in, our decisions are influenced by family or party pressure. There are cases where I have heard individuals withdrawing from political engagement, that is not a path for them, their families feel. So much grit and determination to keep going in this business without the full support of the people you love.”

There is a lot of need to target perception of the people for independent way of participation. Normalization of long-standing attitudes makes it possible for people to do politics without feeling forced to limit their perspectives or give up certain opinions.

Theme 4: Challenges in Policy Implementation

One of the weaknesses we face is that even when policies are proposed and adopted, often only partially, implementation is one of the major challenges. Many of the respondents noted meaningful execution of policy being stymied by resistance from influential groups, lack of enforcement mechanisms and bureaucratic lag.

One respondent narrated:

“One thing is to propose a policy, and ensuring that a policy is executed is a completely different challenge. I helped with an initiative that was passed, after months of work, but once it was passed little was done to implement it. The policy began to fade from view, as the key stakeholders who initially backed it grew wary, and eventually it was forgotten. Many policies do not deliver real impact without strong enforcement,”

Another respondent added:

“Even once such a policy is put in place, oftentimes no proper follow-through takes place. If you ask me about these two reform movements; one was clearly billed to bring about serious change,

but there was no accountability after the announcement that the reform would be implemented adequately! "Policies that look good on paper fall apart in practice because no one is tracking how they're actually performing."

We can see from these responses the requirement of enforcement mechanisms with accountabilities to the levels of the policy. Otherwise, policies risk being nothing more than empty gestures rather than catalysts for meaningful change.

Discussion

The present study, based in Pakistan where gender quotas exist but political participation of women does not match quota availability, sheds light on the complexities of political engagement. The results show that formal representation has increased as a result of quotas, but that formal representation has not translated into political influence. Many who hold political positions reported being excluded from key decision-making processes. This is consistent with earlier research that finds quotas cannot be the sole strategy for overcoming institutional and social access barriers (Mori, 2024). Quotas can also function as a symbolic representation of political inclusion, but do not create genuine political empowerment as they provide similar powers as before, rather than the same power (Ogwo, 2022).

One major theme emerging from the findings is one of institutional resistance and political gatekeeping. Many respondents noted that well-connected networks dominate political spaces, hindering the ranks of new entrants from gaining traction. Many reported that senior political figures typically dominate decision-making and that those newly elected through quota systems often have little influence. This result echoes earlier work showing that established political institutions are remarkably resilient to new entrants, especially when those entrants don't fit with the existing structures of power (Dahlerup, 2007). In other instances, respondents believed their roles to be symbolic organizations which support the argument that meaningful representation is more than just numbers; it needs to be structural within political organizations.

One of the central issues emphasized in the study is the impact of financial means on political participation. Some respondents explained that fiscal limitations stifle their ability to campaign well, develop political networks, and support long-term political careers. Most said they did not have access to party funds and had to rely on personal or outside help, which left them at a disadvantage to their wealthy urban counterparts. This is congruent with research indicating that economic divides hinder political participation (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008). So many do not get the financial backing they need to compete in elections or advocate for policies that align with their interests.

Social and cultural factors also affect political participation. Because as it was often said by the respondents, societal expectation is a big factor that determines how politically involved they are. Many said they felt squeezed between family members and communities, which often perceived politics as an untoward or side issue. A respondent recounted their need to obtain prior approval from family elders before standing for a political position, highlighting how traditional structures continue to guide political purchasing. Another commented that even after obtaining a political position, they were always questioned about how they'd balance political work with domestic duties. This disavowal backs up research that shows that we expect individuals to fulfill a part, preventing them from fully participating in other political acts (Moghadam, 2010).

The study also highlights challenges regarding the implementation of policy. Though policies exist to encourage inclusive political participation, interviewees cited a lack of enforcement for such policies. Although gender quotas are in place, participants said, there are no effective mechanisms in place to make sure those who are elected through these means actually are empowered to make decisions. Another respondent said their opinions were often ignored in many of the large discussions, even though they were part of a political committee. Other respondents noted that some political inclusion policies exist merely on paper and have little effect in practice due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and lack of accountability. These results are consistent with previous work which shows that even if a new policy appears, success is more likely to depend on rigorous enforcement, transparency, and ongoing evaluation than on whether new policies have been adopted (Bosson et al., 2022)

In short, it shows that although gender quotas have created formal political representation, they have not substantially transformed power relations or decision-making processes. A key challenge is institutional inertia, followed by financing constraints, social norms, and weak implementation of policies. To overcome these issues, it is essential to take a holistic approach that prioritizes true political empowerment rather than mere numerical representation, while prioritizing the roles in political office are empowered accordingly to govern.

Conclusion

This Study reveals that despite gender quotas increasing formal representation, they have not significantly improved decision-making power. Full political participation remains elusive because of institutional resistance, financial constraints, and cultural expectations. And weak enforcement of policies that foster political inclusion renders them impotent. The implications are that meaningful participation cannot be solely achieved in changing structures, but also through changes in social attitudes and approaches to how policies are implemented. Until these deeper systemic issues are addressed, political inclusion will resort to symbolism instead of transformation.

Recommendations

- Parties and institutions should devise mechanisms to ensure that those elected by quotas have actual decision-making power. They should be provided with leadership training programs and mentorship initiatives.
- Special Powers In order to financially support candidates deprived of economic resources, special funding programs should be established. There should be transparent mechanisms to ensure that parties have equal access to party funds and electoral support.
- educational programs and awareness campaigns should be introduced to counter societal perceptions that restrict political participation Efforts by media and civil society need to create an environment for inclusivity.
- Policies that promote political inclusion should contain clear monitoring mechanisms and independent scrutiny of their effectiveness. Regular assessments should ensure that such policies are not just symbolic but result in real empowerment.
- Political parties should introduce formal mechanisms to ensure that elected representatives from diverse backgrounds have a voice in policy discussions. This entails also reforming the way internal parties work to stop gatekeeping and increase equal access to the leadership.

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