

Beyond Tokenism: Assessing the Transformative Impact of Gender Quotas on Women's Political Empowerment in Pakistan

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ARTICLE INFO			ABSTRACT
Article History:			<i>Gender quotas have been implemented in Pakistan to enhance women's political participation, yet their effectiveness in fostering genuine empowerment remains contested. This study examines whether quotas have led to substantive representation or merely symbolic inclusion. Through a mixed-methods approach analyzing legislative records, election data (2008-2024), and interviews with female parliamentarians the research evaluates the socio-political barriers that constrain women's agency in politics. Findings suggest that while quotas have increased numerical representation, structural inequalities, patriarchal norms, and party politics limit transformative impact. The study argues for institutional reforms to move beyond tokenism toward meaningful political empowerment.</i>
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Introduction

Worldwide initiative to boost women's political involvement through the adoption of legislative gender quotas, with more than 130 countries applying various types of electoral quota systems (International IDEA, 2023). Advocates contend that quotas are crucial for dismantling systemic obstacles to women's representation, illustrated by Rwanda's post-genocide constitution (2003) that required 30% female representation, ultimately leading to the highest global percentage of women in parliament (61%) (Powley, 2005). Nonetheless, researchers warn that quotas by themselves do not ensure significant impact, given that cultural norms, party gatekeeping, and institutional opposition frequently restrict their ability to create change (Krook & Zetterberg, 2014). In Latin

America, quota laws have notably boosted women's numerical presence, but enduring patriarchal systems still undermine their policy influence (Franceschet et al., 2012).

Likewise, in South Asia, although India's Panchayati Raj system allocates 33% of local seats for women, research indicates that numerous female representatives act as stand-ins for male family members (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). This global diversity emphasizes the importance of embedding quotas requires more than just numerical within broader institutional and cultural transformations to achieve genuine gender parity in political leadership (Dahlerup, 2006). Gender quotas aimed at increasing women's participation in political positions are often employed as corrective measures to address the long-standing lack of women in politics.

Pakistan's political economics emphasizes the institutional impacts and structural impediments that limit women's political participation. According to Syed & Tabassum (2014), Pakistani women's political participation is limited by conventional gender norms and limited educational opportunities, which severely limit women's ability to assume leadership positions.

Gender disparities in positions of political leadership are perpetuated by electoral processes. Due to cultural prejudices, a lack of party support, and limited access to political money, women are still underrepresented in positions of decision-making despite reserved seats and quotas. To ensure equitable political representation and participate in broader conversations on gender inclusion in governance and policymaking inside Pakistan, it is imperative to address structural inequities, support women's economic empowerment, and put accountability mechanisms in place (Cheema et al. (2022). Pakistan has deliberately opted to execute constitutional amendments and electoral reforms that establish a 17% reserved quota for women in its national and provincial assemblies (ECP, 2018).

The success of these policies in fostering meaningful representation, where women occupy significant positions in policymaking, is still a topic of debate, even with their evident dedication to gender-inclusive governance in Pakistan (Bari, 2018). Critics within Pakistan frequently view quotas as nothing more than symbolic acts since lawmakers elected to reserved seats in predominantly male political factions are often marginalized (Khan, 2020). The goal of this study is to ascertain if gender quotas have genuinely led to political empowerment or whether their impact has been negligible.

The effects of quotas have been intricate globally. For instance, Rwanda's constitutional structure has produced the highest proportion of women parliamentarians globally at 61%, whereas in India, grassroots quotas in Panchayats enhanced local governance but faced challenges from elite control (Dahlerup, 2006).

In Pakistan, the unique patriarchal sociopolitical environment presents challenges for female legislators, who frequently encounter systemic barriers to their independence, such as family responsibilities, religious conservatism, and safety concerns (Zia, 2022)

Table 1: Socio-Cultural Barriers

Barrier	Manifestation	Impact
Traditional Norms	Gender roles restrict mobility	Limits public visibility
Security Concerns	Threats from militants	Deters campaigning
Media Bias	Focus on attire, not policies	Undermines credibility

Literature Review

Women in Pakistan's political arena encounter various obstacles, such as gender quotas, socio-cultural barriers, and entrenched political dynasties. Although quotas have been in place since 2002, a significant number of seats are occupied by prominent women from powerful political families, perpetuating the existing system. Additionally, socio-cultural norms and patriarchal attitudes hinder women's political engagement, particularly in regions affected by conflict and post-conflict situations. The report advocates for reforms to strengthen the enforcement of quotas, encourage inclusive practices within political parties, and tackle socio-cultural challenges, especially in conflict-affected areas.

The level of women's political activity and their role in the governance of the Pakistan is analyzed from an international perspective and scope throughout different time periods, and serves as a case study to draw conclusions on social phenomena in general. A woman's ability to engage in politics is considered adequate if it is perceived actively participating as a result of the granted political quotas. These factors underline striking changes which the additional political quotas fueled those designed for to support women.

The literature regarding gender quotas points out a fundamental contradiction between their symbolic significance and concrete impact. Advocates argue that quotas impede the entrenched patriarchal order by inducting women into politics and even Dahlerup (2006) went as far as to claim that quotas "fast-track" equality by allowing women's participation in parliamentary democracies. This claim is reinforced by some country-specific case studies which demonstrate how women's parliamentary representation increased in countries like Scandinavia and post-conflict Rwanda due to quota systems (Tripp, 2015). On the other hand, there seems to be a lack of literature that supports this uncritically optimistic view. Bari (2018) studies how quotas in South Asia often give rise to the "proxy representation" phenomenon, where female politicians are viewed not as political actors, but as mere replacements for male relatives. This argument holds a great deal of importance in the context of Pakistan in which Khan (2020) argues that due to cultural conservatism and low party support, the politically active women chosen through quotas are rendered passive tokens of power instead of real decision makers.

Shore the divides stand highlighted best by the illustrative results of the studies surrounding gender quotas. Supporters of quotas claim that these measures aid in dismantling patriarchal governance systems since, as Dahlerup stated in 2006, quotas "accelerate" women's integration within the parliamentary framework, which indeed accentuates gender equality. This perspective seems to be validated by global statistics which suggests that women's representation in the parliaments of Scandinavia and even in Rwanda after conflicts has greatly improved due to quota systems (Tripp, 2015). On the contrary, Bari (2018) critiques this optimistic perception and provides evidence from South Asia where women with political power due to voting and quota systems are subjected to a "proxy representation" phenomenon, where they are perceived as tokens who represent the interests of their fathers, husbands, or male relatives rather than genuine political figures. This line of critique is where Khan (2020) cites Pakistan's cultural conservatism which has little to no party backing is used to politically marginalize women who are elected through quota systems, denying them the opportunity to be empowered as policymakers and instead relegating these women to the role of powerless symbolic leaders.

Evaluating different nations reveals a stark difference in how gender quotas function and their impact relative to the institutional framework and political context of a given area. Things become more complicated with Rwanda's mandatory quota system as defined by its constitution compared

to India's Panchayati Raj; both are designed to enhance women's participation in politics but more often than not reinforce patriarchal control through proxy rule (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). From this evidence, it appears that quotas are not self-sufficient remedies but rather policy tools shaped by more foundational forces like interparty competition, election systems, and prevailing sociocultural attitudes within a society (Krook & Zetterberg, 2014).

Research Questions & Hypotheses

1. **RQ1:** Has Pakistan's implementation of gender quotas led to a significant influence on policy from female legislators?
2. **H1:** Quota women exhibit lower legislative activity than directly elected counterparts.
3. **RQ2:** How do socio-cultural barriers constrain women's political agency?
4. **H2:** Patriarchal norms and security threats reduce women's public engagement.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative methods approach to evaluate how gender quotas have changed Pakistani women's political empowerment. It uses qualitative analysis to gauge women's political involvement and legislative impact by looking at election statistics from 2008 to 2024 and bill sponsorship rates. The study uses qualitative discourse analysis of media representation to examine how gendered framing, linguistic biases, and visual portrayals are present in news articles (print and digital), TV debates, political talk shows, documentaries, social media (Twitter, Facebook, podcasts), and parliamentary speeches by female Members of Parliament.

In order to assess policy measures meant to lessen inequities, a case study of the gender-sensitive reforms implemented by the Sindh Assembly offers institutional background. Collectively, these techniques shed light on whether quotas have promoted real representation or just symbolic inclusion, looking at how media narratives, legislative authority, and structural obstacles have shaped women's political paths in Pakistan in addition to numerical presence.¹

Historical Background of Women in Pakistani Politics

- **1956–1973:** Limited suffrage; Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's era saw nominal inclusion.
- **2002 Reforms:** Musharraf's Local Government Ordinance reserved 33% seats for women.
- **18th Amendment (2010):** Strengthened provincial quotas but faced implementation gaps.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis: Gender Quotas in Pakistan vs. Other Countries

Country	Quota Type	Impact
Pakistan	Reserved seats (17%)	High numbers, low influence
Rwanda	Constitutional (30%)	World's highest female representation (61%)
India	Panchayat quotas (33%)	Grassroots empowerment, but elite capture persists

Women's Reserved Seats in Pakistani Parliament

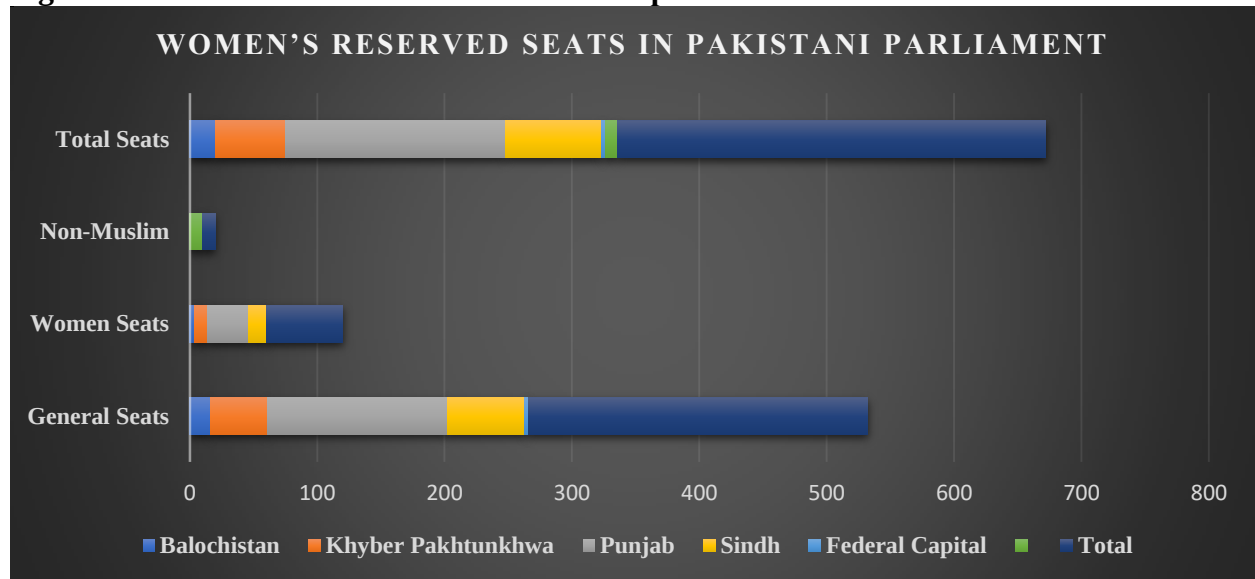
The National Assembly of Pakistan reserves 60 seats for women and 10 for non-Muslims, proportionately allocated among the provinces: Punjab has the largest share with 32 women's seats

¹<https://www.dawn.com>, <https://tribune.com.pk>, <https://www.geo.tv>, <https://www.aaj.tv>, <https://pakistan.unwomen.org>, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction>, <https://www.facebook.com/WPC.Pakistan/>, <http://www.na.gov.pk>, <http://wpcp.gov.pk>, <https://www.pildat.org>, <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws> & <https://lums.edu.pk>

(53% of the total reserved seats), followed by Sindh with 14 seats (23%), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with 10 seats (17%), and Balochistan with 4 seats (7%).

The three general seats in the Federal Capital do not adhere to a gender quota, and all provinces exclude reserved seats for non-Muslims. This allocation mirrors provincial populations but perpetuates inequalities, as Punjab possesses 141 general and 32 women's seats (173 total), whereas smaller provinces like Balochistan are given only 20 seats despite covering 44% of Pakistan's landmass. The system ensures minimal female representation (17.8% of the overall 336 seats) but continues to reinforce structural imbalances in regional political relevance.

Figure 1: Women's reserved seats in Pakistani parliament



(Sources National Assembly of Pakistan (2024). <https://na.gov.pk/en/content.php?id=2>)

Who are the women parliamentarians?

Although representing just 17 percent of the current Parliament's membership (69 out of 399 – comprising 314 MNAs and 85 Senators), women lawmakers accounted for almost half (49 percent) of the parliamentary agenda – marking a historic peak since 2015-16. Women Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) proposed 55 percent of the agenda in the lower chamber, whereas women Senators represented 31 percent in the upper chamber.

Although women legislators played a substantial role in parliamentary activities, the pace at which their agenda items were considered decreased relative to earlier years. In 2024-25, the National Assembly dealt with 67 percent of agenda items sponsored by women, a decrease from 69 percent in 2022-23 and 81 percent in 2021-22. Likewise, the Senate tackled 77 percent of women's agenda topics, down from 85 percent in 2022-23 and 94 percent in 2021-22. Nonetheless, this trend indicates a wider stagnation in parliamentary effectiveness instead of gender-related differences, as initiatives backed by their male counterparts saw a similar decrease.

In the National Assembly, 83 percent of co-sponsored items were attended to, while 67 percent of those introduced by female legislators and 66 percent by male lawmakers were dealt with. The Senate displayed a comparable trend, tackling 80 percent of co-sponsored initiatives and 77 percent of agenda items put forth by both women and males (FAFEN Report 2024-25)²

²https://fafen.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/FAFEN_Report_on_Women_Voting_Choices_2025_01_26.pdf

Defining “Women” As A Constituency

Recent voting patterns in Pakistan indicate that women voters are progressively affecting election results, although their influence is still shaped by structural limitations. Data from the 2024 general elections indicates that in 22 National Assembly constituencies, the level of voter turnout among women surpassed the victory margins, playing a crucial role in shaping electoral outcomes (PILDAT, 2024). Nonetheless, this increasing influence functions within enduring constraints:

Spatial Disparities: Women voters in urban areas (especially in Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad) show more independent voting behaviors than those in rural regions, where cultural traditions frequently influence family voting as a unit (Gallup Pakistan, 2023).³

Issue-Centric Voting: According to post-election surveys (PATTAN, 2024),⁴ female voters are placing greater emphasis on education (37%), healthcare (29%), and inflation (22%) rather than traditional kinship ties. This change led to surprising losses for various dynastic contenders in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Structural Obstacles: Even though women make up 44% of registered voters, their turnout is still 10-15% lower than that of men in many constituencies, with 15 districts showing gender turnout gaps greater than 20% (ECP, 2024).⁵

The 2024 elections were a pivotal moment as female voters significantly changed the results in important swing districts such as NA-130 (Lahore) and NA-247 (Karachi). However, their complete electoral potential is still unexploited because of:

Table 3: Gender-Based Voting Patterns by Region

Region	Total Communities Analyzed	Same Candidate/Party (Women & Men)	Different Choices (Women vs. Men)
Overall	21,188	17,304 (82%)	3,884 (18%)
KPK	3,242 (2,805 + 437)	2,805 (87%)	437 (13%)
Punjab	12,578 (10,343 + 2,235)	10,343 (82%)	2,235 (18%)
Sindh	4,112 (3,322 + 790)	3,322 (81%)	790 (19%)
Islamabad	416 (262 + 154)	262 (63%)	154 (37%)
Balochistan	840 (572 + 268)	572 (68%)	268 (32%)

(Sources of Data FAFEN, Report (2024-25))

Beyond Discourses: The Limits of “Women’s Politics

- **Constraints of Party Politics:** Women sidelined in major parties (PML-N, PPP).
- **Feminism as Taboo:** Female MPs avoid feminist labels to evade backlash.
- **Second-Rate Politics:** Reserved seats perceived as “gifts,” not earned authority.

Legislative Quota and Women’s Representation

Women face various obstacles when aiming to participate in elections and transition from reserved seats to general seats, which reflects the goals of the reservation system. During a training seminar

³ <https://gallup.com.pk/>

⁴ <https://www.pattan.org.pk/>

⁵ <https://ecp.gov.pk/general-elections-2024>

focused on the electoral framework, women legislators urged the government, political parties, and the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to make women-oriented amendments a priority in the Elections Act, 2017, the Election Rules, 2017, and the electoral codes of conduct.

The Trust for Democratic Education and Accountability (TDEA) organized the workshop as part of its Women Leadership Development Program, aimed at empowering women legislators holding reserved seats to vie for general seats. The workshop was attended by 11 MNAs, including Ghazala Saifi, Munawwara Bibi Baloch, Nafeesa Inayatullah, Nusrat Wahid, Saira Bano, Shaheen Saifullah, Shahnaz Saleem, Shahida Akhtar Ali, Syma Nadeem, Uzma Riaz, and Zill-e-Huma, as well as 12 MPAs from Sindh, such as Adeeba Hassan, Ghazala Sial, Heer Soho, Hina Dastagir, Kalsoom Akhtar, Naseem Rajpar, Shahana Ashar, Rabia Khatoon, Seema Zia, Sarwat Fatima, Shazia Umar, and Tanzila Umi Habiba. Ms. Mossarat Qadeem, Chair of the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN), and Dr. Anoosh W. Khan, a Trustee of TDEA, spoke at the event, representing various parties including Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians (PPPP), Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA), Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal Pakistan (MMAP), and Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) (TDEA-2023).

Table 4: Allocation of General Election Tickets by Gender (2008–2024)

Party	2008	2013	2018	2024
PPP	219 M (95.7%)	233 M (94.4%)	212 M (94.3%)	227 M (94.2%)
	10 F (4.3%)	14 F (5.6%)	13 F (5.7%)	14 F (5.8%)
PML-N	165 M (97.1%)	202 M (96.7%)	208 M (96.3%)	245 M (96.5%)
	5 F (2.9%)	7 F (3.3%)	8 F (3.7%)	9 F (3.5%)
PTI[^]	91 M (96.9%)	Boycotted	224 M (97.4%)	N/O Contesting (Candidates ran as independent)
	3 F (3.1%)	Boycotted	6 F (2.6%)	
MQM-P	56 M (93.4%)	114 M (95.0%)	199 M (96.2%)	112 M (95.7%)
	4 F (6.6%)	6 F (5.0%)	8 F (3.8%)	5 F (4.3%)
Other Parties	768 M (98.1%)	450 M (97.2%)	1,210 M (97.6%)	1,422 M (97.8%)
	15 F (1.9%)	13 F (2.8%)	30 F (2.4%)	32 F (2.2%)
Indep.	706 M (96.8%)	1,131 M (97.0%)	2,248 M (95.5%)	3,101 M (95.1%)
	24 F (3.2%)	35 F (3.0%)	95 F (4.5%)	160 F (4.9%)
Total	2,005 M (97.1%)	2,130 M (96.6%)	4,301 M (96.4%)	5,107 M (96.3%)
	61 F (2.9%)	75 F (3.4%)	161 F (3.6%)	220 F (4.1%)

(Data sourced: ECP 2024, FAFEN 2024-25, and Party Nomination Lists)

The table 4 allocation of general election tickets by gender (2008–2024) indicates ongoing gender imbalances in the distribution of electoral tickets in Pakistan from 2008 to 2024, with women consistently receiving fewer than 6% of party nominations.

The PPP achieved the highest level of female representation, reaching 5.8% in 2024, while most other parties, such as PML-N (3.5%) and MQM-P (4.3%), made negligible advancements. Interestingly, independent candidates displayed better gender inclusivity, accounting for 4.9% in 2024, likely due to grassroots initiatives.

Although there was a slight overall increase in female ticket allocations (from 2.9% in 2008 to 4.1% in 2024), systemic obstacles persist, as parties still favor male candidates in more than 95% of instances. The reduction of PTI's formal involvement further complicated these trends, leading

more female candidates to seek independent candidacies. Sources: ECP, FAFEN, and party records.

Recommendations

To convert gender quotas from mere symbolic gestures into effective instruments of real empowerment, this study suggests a multi-faceted strategy. Political parties ought to reform their internal structures by creating transparent processes for candidate selection, instituting mentorship initiatives for women seeking office, and implementing stricter consequences for discrimination based on gender. Legislative efforts should extend beyond mere seat allocations to establish a suitable proportion of women in party leadership roles and committee positions. Furthermore, there should be regulations that focus on the policy contributions of female politicians rather than their personal lives, while media organizations must undergo gender-sensitive training to reduce biased representations of these politicians. Educational institutions and civil society should engage in civic education programs that confront patriarchal views and emphasize the historical and current roles of women in political leadership. The government needs to tackle safety issues by providing gender-sensitive campaign training and instituting specific security measures for female candidates and officeholders. To foster inclusion for underrepresented populations like rural, low-income, or religious minority women, it is essential for academic institutions and policymakers to collaborate on evaluating the implementation of quotas with an intersectional perspective. Pakistan can only attain meaningful political empowerment beyond mere symbolic representation if there is a harmonization of institutional improvements with changes in perspectives.

Results and Discussion

The evidence suggests that gender inequalities persist in the context of Pakistan's politics, even with the implementation of gender quotas. In percentage terms, the share of electoral slots allocated to women was minuscule (4.1% in 2024), only showing some progress since 2008. PML-N (3.5%) and PTI (whose candidates ran as independents) performed worse than PPP (5.8%), although the latter did not carry the imprimatur of a formal party.

Independent candidates had a relatively higher proportion of women contesting the seats (4.9%). Further evidence on the lack of legislative power was provided by sponsorship of the more “feminine” topics like education and health, which women were “allowed” to propose. Moreover, media coverage of women lawmakers was saturated with stereotypes; they were described as “emotional” or “inexperienced” or simply rendered invisible as far as any serious power or agency was concerned.

Nonetheless, looking at the detailed coverage of the Sindh Assembly showed more welcoming trends, suggesting that earmarked quotas have the potential to lead to change when supported by party resources at the grassroots level. These findings add doubts about quotas working in silos, showing the absence of linkages between head counts and substantive forms of power and agency. These findings challenge the efficacy of quotas as one-dimensional solutions because their implementation does not translate into tangible empowerment. The existence of severely constraining factors like the presence of internal party misogyny, underrepresentation in the media, and social conservatism severely curtail women’s political power, indicating the need for a systematic approach rather than cutout solutions.

Conclusion

Rudimentary attitude towards women, discrimination against female leadership, and issues of security still remain barriers to progress. There is some improvement in the participation of women in politics in Pakistan, but the reality behind the inclusion is empowerment, which requires deeper efforts than legislative quota inclusion allows for, as women are normally placed in subordinate roles that overlook their broader contributions. Realistic transformation in socio-political constructs requires political parties to act by mandating constitutional quota compliance at all levels through equitable selection policies, guidance training, and adequate protective structures for women.

Through this prism, quotas cannot be seen as achievement but rather stepping stones towards gender equality. Pakistan's political culture desperately awaits an overhaul. Women's presence in governance striding beyond window dressing requires partitioning highly bureaucratic frameworks that consider their participation as a democratic nicety. Socially fixed party structures alongside patriarchal biases need urgent attention along with improved safety measures to tackle deeply rooted inequalities.

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