

**RESEARCH PAPER****Gender Equality and the Role of Women Legislators in Sindh****Sanam Chandio**

1. Subject Specialist, Govt Boys Higher Secondary School Latifabad Hyderabad Sindh Pakistan

Email: sanamchandio1973@gmail.com

Abstract

Empowerment of women has taken the stage of public policy in Pakistan, especially in Sindh, where several progressive laws have been brought forward to protect the rights of women and tackle gender-based violence. Qualitative research was used, and documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews were conducted with women legislators and stakeholders. Results show that women parliamentarians make a significant contribution to highlighting women's issues, promoting laws to protect them, and shaping the legislative agenda. Laws are compromised by loopholes in enforcement, lack of awareness, limited resources, and an ingrained culture of patriarchy at the community level. The findings of this study indicate that although legislation is a significant milestone towards empowerment, substantial change is achieved only through strengthened implementation mechanisms, institutional backing, and societal transformation. Study recommendations are these legislative changes; the daily realities of a significant number of women in Sindh are still perceived through the prism of socio-cultural restrictions, ineffective implementation systems, and institutional oppressions.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Sindh Assembly, Women legislators, Gender based legislation, policy implementation, and Pakistan.

Introduction

“No country can reach the Height of Glory unless its Women stand Shoulder by shoulder with their Men” (The Founder of the Nation, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah). This research aims to investigate the role of female legislators in fostering women's empowerment through legislation in the Sindh Assembly and to identify the bottlenecks in its implementation. The Sindh Assembly has passed several legislations, such as the Sindh Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2013, the Sindh Child Marriages Restraint Act, 2013, the Sindh Commission on the Status of Women Act, 2015, and the Protection Against Harassment of Workplace Act, 2013, for the protection and empowerment of women in Sindh (M. Naich, Junejo, Lashari, Lashari, & Shah, 2020). However, implementing these laws is a distant dream. As a result, the plight of women is yet to be ameliorated across the province. Moreover, this research is of paramount significance to students, civil society, media personnel, politicians, and other institutions that are keenly interested in women's rights, women's empowerment, the eradication of gender-based violence, and child rights. There is no denying the fact that the neglected role of women in any domain compromises inclusive development. Generally, women don't enjoy the same power as men in health, decision-making, economics, and politics (Shoukat & Awan, 2025). This gender disparity in the given domains requires an analysis of the pitiful plight of women generally in Pakistan and particularly in Sindh. The development of women can't be reduced to one or two aspects; it must be analyzed across domains such as education, health, political participation, social activities, employment policy, property inheritance, and decision-making. Women are the most vulnerable segment of Pakistani society and are facing innumerable challenges. It ranges from patriarchy, legal discrimination, and cultural and social barriers (Mukherjee, 2025). However, due to constant legislation at the federal and provincial levels and the growing power of social media, the status and rights of women are highlighted and addressed. The empowerment of women is a key to sustainable development. Pakistan, as a signatory to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), can achieve them if it empowers its women. Therefore, a country in general and Sindh in particular needs to address the barriers such as patriarchy, financial dependence of women, and cultural and social norms so that the empowerment of women can be met. Some significant steps have been taken globally, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), to empower women in every sphere of life, including social, cultural, economic, and political (Shoukat, Awan, & Qadeer, 2025). In national parliaments around the world, women are either directly elected or their countries' constitutions provide for the indirect selection of women parliamentarians to ensure their participation. This study found practices undertaken for the empowerment of women at all three levels: the global, national, and provincial, and their execution. The majority of national parliaments worldwide use electoral quotas to increase the percentage of women parliamentarians in their respective chambers (R. A. Khan, Jawaaid, Khan, & Sajjad, 2023). The literature assumed that the more women in parliament, the more women would be able to safeguard women's rights. Various scholars have defined the term 'Empowerment' in different ways. However, this paper has aimed to understand the concept of the empirical in relation to the actions and decisions of elected women representatives in a country like Pakistan. In other words, women's empowerment implies full participation without the influence of patriarchal norms on elected women representatives while exercising the powers bestowed on them by the establishment of local, provincial, and national governments. Some of

these scholars have paid close attention to analyzing electoral gender quotas from various standpoints.

Literature Review

Gender, Law and Empowerment: Women's Rights in Sindh, Pakistan

This book analyses the legal space for women's rights in Sindh, focusing on how law has been both an enabler and a disabler for women. The book charts, through history, a tale of gender-specific legislation in Sindh, from colonial laws to modern-day reforms under the Sindh Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2013 and the Child Marriage Restraint Act. This book, therefore, delves deeper into the complex relationship between social norms and legal structures, showing how legislative reforms alone are not only unworkable but also incapable of working without a change in culture and society (Memon & Idris, 2018). The book further critically examines the effectiveness of enforcing these laws, looking into issues of corruption, lack of legal literacy, and patriarchal resistance (Rahman, 2020). The book clearly sets out the roles of the judiciary, law enforcement, and NGOs in advancing women's rights. Overall, it portrays the difference between lawmaking and practical capability while advocating for a multidimensional process to ensure that the legislative benefit reaches the very edge of women wherever they may be-in the rural areas and around the marginalized (Gondal & Hatta, 2024).

The Politics of Women's Rights in Pakistan" by Shirin M. Rai

Shirin M. Rai's work covers the political dynamics surrounding women's rights in Pakistan, with a particular focus on Sindh. The book attempts to give an overview of the history of how women's empowerment has been approached through legislation, especially in provincial contexts such as Sindh. It examines the roles of political actors, civil society, and religious groups in shaping discourse on women's rights. It is a book that specifically focuses on the regional laws: Sindh Domestic Violence Act and Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act, that political pressures and grassroots activism have influenced, while Rai has critically addressed the effectiveness of the laws in question while going on to discuss some of the barriers such as cultural conservatism, lack of strong implementation, and political instability(M. B. Naich, Shah, & Iqbal, 2023). The book notes that although legal reforms are necessary, political will and social transformation are more important to make them a reality. "Women's Rights and the Law in Pakistan: Legislative and Policy Reform" by Rubina Saigol. Among the book's key features, it discusses legislative and policy reforms to improve women's rights in Pakistan, with significant attention to Sindh. Saigol traces the entire reform process regarding key legal reforms such as the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act, and she argues that the laws themselves represent a meaningful step forward but are put in grave danger by unenforced policies(Ram et al., 2024). The book discusses how women's movements have been used to pressure the government towards these reforms, since policy is influenced by civil society. Again, Saigol, in her book, discusses the social and political environment that impacts women's empowerment, including economic inequality, the persistence of patriarchy, and high political instability. She advocates for an integration of legal reform that not only enacts legislation but also ensures women have access to justice and mechanisms to challenge discriminatory policies. Saigol's piece is a comprehensive articulation of the roles that law and policy play in either empowering or limiting women, depending on how they are used.

Women in Politics: Empowerment through Legislation" by Mariam Chaudhry

This book analyzes women's participation in political processes, with a special focus on the South Asian context. It focuses on how such legislators have, over time, shaped policy changes. The case studies analyzed here demonstrate that women leaders have indeed advocated gender-sensitive legislation. Chaudhry stresses the difficulties for women in the form of patriarchy and exclusion within the apparatus, yet underscores the potency of legislation to positively impact women's rights, especially in education, health, and family (Shahzad, 2021). The book concludes that although women have made tangible advances, their representation in core decision-making roles remains unsatisfactory. "Gender and Governance in Pakistan: A Study of Women Parliamentarians" by Ayesha Khan. This work establishes the nature and scale of women's roles in Pakistan's parliament, particularly in Sindh. It examines the evolution of women's roles in the provincial assembly, with concrete legislative inputs on gender mainstreaming (Ali, Fani, Afzal, & Yasin, 2010). The book is a historical analysis of women's political representation in Pakistan, highlighting concerns regarding reserved seats for women. The book revolves around specific legislative victories, such as those banning domestic violence and child marriage, apart from chronicling the socio-political obstacles that parliamentarians face. "Legislating Gender Justice: Women and Legal Reforms in Pakistan" by Tahira S. Khan. It is her take on legal reforms in Pakistan crafted by women legislators, focusing on how these affect gender justice and examining significant laws aimed at domestic violence (Mundhe, 2021). As well as the Early Child Marriage Bill in Sindh. Khan opines that legal advances do not protect women to full equality due to considerable cultural impediments. The book employs interviews with women lawmakers to reveal strategies these women use to promote women's empowerment through legal avenues.

Empowering Women through Law in South Asia" by Farida Shaheed

In the book, Shaheed covers the efforts of women legislators in South Asia, including Sindh, to advance women's rights through legislation. The author discusses ways in which women provincial assembly members have utilized their membership to advance legal changes (M. Khan, Warraich, & Ahmed, 2024). Book Topics: Issues dealt with in the book include inheritance rights, child marriage, and violence against women (M. Khan et al., 2024). In so doing, the book emphasizes the critical role played by women legislators in policy formation. The author particularly underscores the importance of sustained advocacy and alliance building among women legislators.

Women's Political Participation in Pakistan" by Nazish Brohi

The book provides an analysis of women's political participation in Pakistan, particularly through a detailed examination of Sindh. These issues have been related to how women are marginalized, yet at the same time recognized for their contributions to legislative progress. It has analyzed the role played by women in formal and informal structures of governance, as well as the challenges they faced in making worthwhile contributions (Houth, Hashmi, & Zarar, 2023). At the same time, in the context of the province of Sindh, it addresses all the key pieces of legislation concerning women's rights and thus sheds light on the dynamics of female leadership in such a male-dominated political sphere.

Method and Material

This study is planned as a qualitative and quantitative method and is based on in-depth interviews with different Women Political Leaders and members of the Provincial Assembly of Sindh Province. Keeping in view the nature of the research objectives, the efforts are aimed at collecting

material from diverse sources. Thus, there is a combination of primary and secondary sources. The primary research method for this study is literature review and conceptual modeling. In the second stage of the study, a qualitative appraisal was used, leveraging interviews and observations of key stakeholders to reinforce substantive, relevant data. This study conducted 12 to 15 in-depth interviews with members and Office Bearers of the Sindh Women's Parliamentary Caucus, and their participation, discussions, experiences, truthful reports, and quotations from actual conversations will be fruitful for this research.

Results and Discussion

The Speaker of the Assembly plays a very strong role in empowering female parliamentarians by shaping the legislative environment in which equality is maintained during discussions among parliamentarians. The speaker can do much, as it creates more space for the presentation of women parliamentarians and ensures that their views receive proper importance. Such a parliament's culture would ensure it hosts a gender-reflective and representative forum in which issues raised by women in the ruling party, as well as those of the opposition, are freely aired, mitigating potential biases stemming from its male-dominated nature. It is also the responsibility of the Speaker to ensure that women from opposition political parties receive equal degrees. Usually, time to present debates is not given to opposition women legislators in time, which undermines the purpose of their fight for women's rights and many pressing issues. Full-time opposition women to debate could help balance gender and thus restore equality in legislation. The Speaker can also play a role in changing the overall dynamics of the assembly by emphasizing respect for women parliamentarians and holding everyone to those standards. Thus, such practices would make this environment safe for women parliamentarians to express their opinions freely without any fear of being marginalized.

Solidarity and Collective Action

The final answer presents solidarity among women as the necessary lever for transformation and hence supports a collective, rather than individualistic, approach to overcoming systemic barriers; it is through that collective setting that the voices of women are heard. Conclusion: This approach centers on the necessity of unity among women in political and social spheres as the core of problem-solving in those areas.

1. Interview with Dr. Seema Zia (Karachi, 30 Oct: 2022)

Research Question No. 1: Challenges to Women Legislators to Address the Issues of Women

Although many important bills have been enacted to empower and protect women at different levels in the Sindh Assembly, problems still exist and are growing. These laws pass on problems from gender to sexual harassment, violence against women, education, employment, and political rights for women. Though these laws are undoubtedly progressive, the core problem lies in their ineffective implementation. The legal framework exists for women's empowerment, but putting that law into practice so that, on the ground, it translates into improvements in a woman's life is a big issue. The menace is especially severe in Sindh, owing to socio-cultural, political, and institutional reasons. For example, deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes-a low regard for women's

rights to protest or participate politically, and weak mechanisms in enforcement- pose great challenges to the implementation of these laws. Besides, a lack of strong monitoring systems and accountability structures has contributed to the failure to enforce these laws correctly. This means many women in Sindh cannot fully exercise their rights or benefit from the protection the law is expected to provide them. Bridging these gaps in practical implementation requires a genuine effort by both the authorities and civil society to ensure that the intended benefits of these laws reach the women for whom they are created (P-1). Most of the women in the Sindh Assembly sit in reserved seats, which, ironically, may limit their ability to empower themselves. Whereas these seats ensure women's representation in the legislative process, they impose constraints that hinder women legislators' ability to act freely. Reserved seats often tie women to party policies, thereby limiting their freedom to speak out on matters the party does not support. This is because survival in politics depends on the party. They do not have opportunities to express independent concerns or to forge gender-specific causes to promote. As a result, women in the parliament may hold key positions but fail to exert the strength needed to bring changes for women's betterment. What these female parliamentarians need, in other words, is greater independence to make a stronger voice in representing the plight of women, apart from party loyalty (P-2). It is one thing to empower women through legislation; it is another thing entirely to carry them out. Paperwise, with several progressive pieces of legislation, the same question applies: how much are these actually translated into practical implementation at the administrative, governance, and law enforcement levels? Most of the time, this is because institutions charged with enforcing the same have been deemed weak, and no seriousness has been manifested in their implementations. This equally results in poor implementation as it remains during the drafting of laws. Most implementation rules that should accompany a law are usually ignored. Though some formal rules have been created, this is still not fully developed. The ignorance and inadequacy of training regarding these laws remain a significant leading cause. Since the knowledge gap cuts across the citizenry as well, most people are only half-informed regarding legal rights. To mitigate this gap, there is a need to create sensitization and education for both official and citizen actors regarding the law and its application. The laws should not only be known but also enforced by these actors. (P-3). Of course, the Sindh Assembly has enacted many progressive laws over the years aimed at uplifting the status of women, but the challenge of their implementation remains. It would seem that there is a gross lack of awareness among the womenfolk of Sindh regarding the legal provisions available to them. Most women do not know what rights these laws give them. This is because there is ineffective communication from the government and a lack of trained personnel tasked with communicating this information at the grassroots level. Although NGOs have been keen on carrying out campaigns to inform women, it is ultimately the responsibility of the government to ensure that all women know their legal rights. Despite efforts to educate women on health issues like polio and coronavirus, their knowledge of legal rights remains minimal, limiting their access to justice. Without addressing these gaps in awareness and outreach, even progressive legislation will not have a transformative impact on Women's lives (P-4).

Conclusion

These were also the times of colonialism, and subsequently, all the developments through which the socio-political status of women in Pakistan underwent a sea change, with an almost gradual admission to more opportunities in both the private and public spheres. The movements for

women's emancipation and political empowerment did not emerge overnight; they were a conscious, continuous process unfolding in several stages. This research undertakes a comparative examination of Pakistan's political situation after 1947. The paper discusses various democratic and representative administrations that have entered Pakistan's history, including the Ayub Khan regime, Z.A. Bhutto's democratic government, General Zia-ul-Haq's rule, the democratic tenures of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, and the reforms of Pervez Musharraf's military regime, who simultaneously conducted democratic reforms in the early 2000s. At these times, various organizations emerged to promote the socio-political and educational standing of women, who were now more forcefully involved in the decision-making processes associated with constitutional amendments. Musharraf's era is generally regarded as the most beneficial for the political empowerment of women. His policies were considerably more advanced than those of the previous governments. His government introduced various reforms under which the status of women improved significantly, and many from other walks of life were motivated to join the process of empowerment.

Recommendation

Most importantly, this analysis concludes that although the roots of movements for women's empowerment are common in origin, their emergence in different regions has occurred at very different times. In one region, these movements have been underway for centuries, whereas in another area, they are a relatively recent development. Despite the myriad impediments that emerged after independence and are perpetuated by many forces, there is growing optimism that positive change will prevail over time. The ground for the establishment of women's rights was already set long before Pakistan existed. So, with the pragmatic shift in society's mindset, the cause of women's political empowerment will continue to move forward.

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