

Women in politics

Shazia Nizamani | Published April 16, 2018



IN most countries, including ours, women are given token representation in political parties and institutions eager to appear progressive, while maintaining structural barriers that prevent their elevation, despite their merits, to senior positions. While most parties have women wings, these wings hardly have any say in policy and organisational issues. And though there are reserved seats for women, parties treat these as a formality without investing in their election campaigns. Women elected on such seats make significantly little progress in getting policies and resource allocations to reflect women's interests.

This represents a failure to institutionalise gender mainstreaming. Rather, political parties are complicit in the systematic exclusion of women and minorities, and in some cases even collude to prohibit them from voting.

Like many institutions, the Election Commission of Pakistan has no women at senior levels; its wide gender balance at all levels is, in fact, striking. The ECP has worked on voter registration drives, and, more recently, even held a re-poll in Dir because women were previously excluded. Yet how is it expected to develop and implement sustained gender reforms if its own body does not reflect this mandate?



The writer is a social development researcher and freelance consultant.

Parties have failed to institutionalise gender mainstreaming.

The situation is worse for minority women — almost entirely politically excluded, deprived of rights and access to opportunities. There are exceptions that bring solace, such as the election of Senator Krishna Kumari. More significant would be to see her able to use her position to advocate for legislation on issues that affect her impoverished Hindu community, particularly its women. Her tenure will be a test case to see how much support she gets in her bid to change the system and bring the needs of her people to

the mainstream political table. Time will tell if is a one-off, or a trend that other parties will follow.

Another positive sign is Sherry Rehman's election as leader of the opposition in the Senate. The PPP has appointed women to senior positions before, but it should reflect on how much it has substantively contributed to empowering all women politicians.

The 2013 elections, during which 419 women candidates ran on general seats, shows a growing trend of women contesting general seats. The PPP brought the highest number of directly elected women to the National Assembly and the Sindh Assembly. Pakistan has 17 per cent women's reserved seats, whereas Nepal is in the lead with 33pc in its constitutional assembly, followed by Afghanistan with 27pc in its parliament. India has 33pc female representation at the panchayat level. In Nepal, quotas for women in local governments were introduced, and its election commission carried out intensive campaigns to engage women.

Countries in the global south that have committed to promoting women in leadership through affirmative action have far more women in political leadership positions than in some Western countries. By making pro-women policies and laws, they have encouraged more women to run for elected office and attain senior leadership roles. For instance, Uganda promotes gender mainstreaming in all government ministries, and has made it mandatory to have women in the leaderships of district governments. Such actions are now needed in Pakistan's political arena.

There is a gradual realisation that just and sustainable economic development depends on women having agency and a voice in decision-making at all levels. However, this cannot be enabled in a patriarchal system that denies women a support system within political institutions. Women politicians depend in large part on male counterparts who deny them the space to participate meaningfully in decision-making.

As such, all political parties must undergo comprehensive gender- and minority-inclusion audits. The state and all other stakeholders need to devise and implement a national gender action plan to eliminate political inequality. The plan should address issues ranging from increasing the number of seats, gender balance in the ECP, ensuring senior positions in party and other local bodies, awareness and education on political rights, mandatory representation of women in policymaking, national and local budgeting, ensuring free and safe environment for women voters, facilitating mobility of women politicians, providing legal support and assistance to women politicians to challenge electoral malpractices, adopting best practices of other countries' women's development programmes, etc.

Strengthening women lawmakers' roles will pave the way for laws, policies and programmes that can improve women's status with regard to health, education, livelihoods, land rights and enabling environment for equal opportunities. Women will have to break the multiple layers of the glass ceiling with their own resolve, support from their parties and civil society.

The writer is a social development researcher and freelance consultant.

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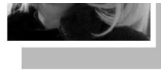




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Pakistani women comprise of at least one-half of the country's population. Yet in terms of their empowerment they come out with almost the lowest global ranking—146th out of 147. Since elections are just two months away this is the best time that women's groups asked each and every provincial and federal candidate the fair question: If elected what would they do to advance the lot of their female population?

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Sajjad Ali Soomro

Apr 16, 2018 10:57am

Excellent and true ideas shared by the writer. It depicts the real status of women in our politics and policy making. I agree to the writer. Pakistan is rich in promulgating laws but very poor in getting them implemented.

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Sadiqa Mian

Apr 16, 2018 06:08pm

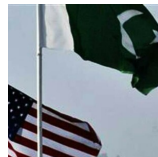
Representation of women on any profession or societal area is a reflection of the societal attitudes towards females. Women in politics represent tip of the iceberg of the treatment meted out to women by society at large. Until we improve overall education system in Pakistan for ALL regardless of social status or where someone lives, we will see these issues. Having a town few females in any walk of life, does not solve the actual problem.

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