

## **SHIFTING TRENDS OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN PAKISTAN: A STUDY WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON SINDH PROVINCE**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on women's political participation in local government in Pakistan. The argument is based on the data and information collected from secondary sources of data such as books, research reports, official statistics, papers, internet, etc. Firstly, the paper describes the history of women's participation at the local government level of politics in Pakistan in a chronological order. Secondly, it highlights the changing patterns of quota allocation for women at this lowest tier of formal political institution in the country. It also explains the effects of enhanced quota on increasing women's participation in local government councils. It further highlights the shifting pattern of women's political participation from elite women's exclusive participation in politics to opening doors of political forums at this lowest level for non elite, less educated women coming from low income groups in the country.*

**Keywords:** *Pakistan, Women's Participation, Local Government, Sindh, Education*

### **Introduction**

There is a general saying that women and men are like two wheels of same cart. Only if both of them are happy and healthy enough to perform equally better than the cart may run well. No cart can run with one wheel sufficiently small as compared to the other. The same applies to the role and status of men and women in society. A society can get develop only if it's all members are equally happy,

health and satisfied enough efficiently perform for the development of all. On the contrary, we see women in Pakistan are faced with lower educational status, poor health conditions, harmful socio-cultural practices, difficulty in access to law and justice, and no say in decision making from family to the state level.

Women's equal participation in all aspects of social life is an essential for the development of a health society and better world for future generations. This equal participation can be ensure by enabling and facilitating women's participation in all basic social institutions of the society such as education, health, politics, economics, and etc. Politics is one of the basic social institutions of each and every society. The equal participation of women as half the population of every society on earth is essential for making this institution more and more democratic and efficient.

Women's representation and participation in political forums of Pakistan has never been so promising. For a long time, they were either absent or marginally represented in formal political forums from parliament to local government level. Throughout the history, women's representation in national assembly was no more than 22%. During the years from 1947 to 2000, the representation of women could not be more than 10%. The participation of women was further lower in senate as there has never been any reserved seat for women till the year 2000. It was very late in the year 2000, when 17% quota was reserved for women in national assembly and senate. The situations were not different in case of provincial assemblies. The local government is the level was witnessing the vulnerable level of women's representation. This lowest tier has also been less studied for its dynamics and shifting pattern.

Accordingly, this paper aims to identify the patterns of women's representation in local governments in Pakistan. To cover the patterns of women's participation all around the country with its different cultures and local government experiences was beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, the paper is written with a special focus on shifting patterns of women's participation in local government of Sindh province. The paper is divided into four parts. Following this brief introduction, there is a section dealing with the history of local government in Pakistan along with the marginal quota reservation for women in them. The next section dealt with the effects of increased quota reservation on women's participation in local

governments in general. The two sections deal with changing patterns of women's political representation at district, tehsil (Sub district) and union council level.

### **History of Women's Participation in Local Government Level**

Invariably every military government after seizing power emphasized on establishing local government system to undermine the established political powers (mainly of big regional landowners and feudal leaders) at provincial and national levels. Whereas, the democratic governments relied on alliances with big regional/ rural landowners and feudal leaders to secure vote blocs, and they never favored local government systems. This variation of interest witnessed the introduction of local governments by military regimes and their dissolution by democratic government several times in Pakistani history. This struggle did not let these institutions to reach their maximum political potential.

In 1958, after imposing first Martial Law and dismantling the national and provincial assemblies, General Ayub Khan introduced the local government system of 'Basic Democracies' to substitute universal suffrage for electing Assemblies and President with an electoral college of 80,000 Basic democrats (both, officially nominated from government departments and directly elected, at local Union Council levels). There was no reservation for women (Mumtaz 2005). The whole system was over-dominated by bureaucrats involved at all tiers of these local bodies and could not last long after Ayub's regime. Later, during 1971-1976 Bhutto's elected government introduced a local government law but no elections were held. Zia's military regime seizing power from Bhutto revived local government system and held four elections of local government during 1977 to 1988. There were two seats reserved for women in union councils and 10% seats of District Councils, except in NWFP (Mumtaz 2005). During the democratic period of 1988-1999, four democratically elected political governments remained in power, but no election for local government were held, rather all elected Local Governments, sooner or later, were dismissed.

**Table 1: Women's Representation at Local Level**

<b>Year</b>	<b>% of Women Quota</b>
1959	No quota

1977-1988	2*
1988-1991	2
1991-1993	10
2002-2008	33

*\*2% at Union council and 10% at District council, except in NWFP*

*Source: Data gathered from diverse secondary resources and compiled in table form by the researcher.*

In respect of women's participation, the local bodies also reflect the same situation; as here reservation of seats for women remained 2% till 1991-1993 when it increased to 10%. In 1998, about 12.7% seats were reserved for women in the Punjab local councils, while 25.8% in Baluchistan, 2.9% in NWFP and 23% in Sindh but the elections were only held in Punjab and Baluchistan where the number of women elected rose to 12% and 25%, respectively, but these representatives never assumed office. Therefore, women's representation remained marginal until again Musharaf's military regime took over in 1999 and introduced a Devolution of Power Plan. It reserved 33% quota for women at all tiers (Union, Tehsil, and District Council) of local government system. The 2001-2002 elections inducted more than 36,000 directly elected women Union Councilors on more than 40,000 reserved seats (that was 90% coverage while 4001 seats remained vacant because women were stopped by tribal/religious leaders to participate in election in some provinces (Yazdani 2004)) giving an unprecedented rise to women's participation at any of the political level.

Before the local government elections in 2005 the number of seats at Union Council was decreased from 21 to 13 but retaining the same 33% quota for women<sup>1</sup>. In 2005 election the number of women councilors elected in union

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<sup>1</sup> The Local Government Ordinance 2001 was amended before 2005 elections to reduce the number of members in a Union Council. Correspondingly, the number of women's reserved seats per Union Council was reduced from 6 to 4, but the proportional representation of quota seats remained the same. SPDC (2007) reported that it is not clear why the number of seats were reduced.

council were more than 24,000 (in comparison of 36,000 in 2002). Although the number of elected women has decreased in 2005 but still the last two local government elections have enlarged the space for women to participate at local politics.

### **Increased Quota and Women's Political Participation in Local Government**

The last local government system working till the year 2010 in Pakistan consisted of three hierarchical tiers; (i) District Councils (DC) (i.e. total 102 DCs in the country), (ii) Taluka/Tehsil/town (sub district) Councils (TC) (i.e. 394 TCs), and (iii) Union Councils (UC) (i.e. 6132 UCs). Only the Nazim (Head/Mayor), Naib Nazim (Deputy Head/Mayor) and all members of the Union Council (the lowest tier) are elected through direct election on universal adult franchise. All the Naib Nazims of Union Councils by default become the members of Taluka Council and all the Nazims of Union Council become the members of District Council and they serve as Electoral College to elect the heads (*Nazim*), deputy heads (*Naib Nazim*) and members on reserved seats of these respective councils. At each tier 33% quota has been allocated for women that have brought more than 36,000 Women Union Councilors in 2002 and 24,000 women in 2005 elections<sup>2</sup>.

In all four provinces of Pakistan, women have enthusiastically participated at all tiers of local government in last two elections. The situations in each province slightly vary due to their social and cultural diversities. NWFP and Baluchistan provinces that are classically tribal societies having relatively more conservative environment, are still relatively resistant to women's political participation in local governments; having 70.6% in NWFP and 77.4% in Baluchistan women reserved seats filled in the year 2002 and 85% and 97% respectively in the year 2005 (Aurat Foundation 2005a) with reports of the incidences of mass violations to stop women from casting votes and contesting elections (Aurat Foundation 2001). Punjab and Sindh are feudal societies with relatively less conservative environment, therefore, witnessed a better higher level of women's political participation. Punjab has performed very well with its 96.7% in 2001 and 98.7% in 2005 women seats filled and with several women elected as Nazims<sup>3</sup> at Union

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<sup>2</sup>Pakistan government through amendments in Local Government Ordinance reduced the number of Union councils from 21 members to 13 members.

<sup>3</sup> Nazim means Head of the council.

Council<sup>4</sup> (the lowest tier of local government). But the province of Sindh has taken lead in bringing forth women in local government at all levels. It has an incomparable history in the country for having four women District Nazims (Mayor) and one district Naib Nazim (Deputy Mayor) elected in local government (Hussain 2006; Aurat Foundation 2005b) and by filling its 99.05% reserved seats for women at all tiers of local government in rural and urban areas during last local government elections in the year 2005 (Aurat Foundation 2005a).

### **Women's Participation at District and Tehsil Councils**

Like national and provincial levels, in local government also the higher authority positions (e.g. Nazim and Naib Nazim of District and Tehsil Councils) were still dominantly composed of local/rural elite class and show the trend of patriarchal exclusion of women from higher portfolios. There were very few women as District Nazim (District Mayor) or Tehsil Nazim (Sub-District Mayor) in last two local government elections. Yazdani (2004) reports the negligible numbers of women at these higher portfolios in local government after 2002 elections, there were only total 16 women Nazims and Naib Nazims in different councils; 2 women District Nazims, 1 Naib Nazim at Tehsil, 11 Nazims at Union Council, and 2 Naib Nazim at Union Council. Both the District Nazims were from highly influential and political families of Sindh; Nafisa Shah from Khairpur (daughter of political leader, and former and current Chief Minister of Sindh, Syed Qaim Ali Shah) and Farriyal Talpur from- the native town of Zardaris- Nawabshah (sister of present president Asif Ali Zardari and sister-in-law of the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto). Both of these women were later present in National Assembly as members. Other Nazims and Naib Nazims of Tehsil and Union Councils also belonged to influential political families of Sindh and Punjab but none from other two relatively conservative provinces.

Similarly, in 2005 elections, four women have won as District Nazims (all from Sindh) and one as District Naib Nazim<sup>5</sup>. One was again Farriyal Talpur and other

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<sup>4</sup> Local government in Pakistan is comprises of three hierarchical tiers; District, Taluka (Sub-District), and Union Council. District is the highest tier of local government, Taluka is the middle level and Union Council is the lowest tier of local government comprises of few villages in rural areas and a small quarter of urban area.

<sup>5</sup> This data has been taken from the website of Election Commission of Pakistan <http://www.ecp.gov.pk>, retrieved on June 4, 2008, at 15:30

three were also from highly influential and political families of Sindh; Dr. Saeeda Soomro from Jacobabad (wife of big landowner and politician late Ahmad Mian Soomro-a parliamentarian, Senator and Deputy Speaker of the West Pakistan Assembly and mother of ex-Senate chairman, the caretaker Prime Minister in 2007-2008 and the interim President of Pakistan in 2008, Mian Muhammad Soomro), Raheela Magsi from Tando Allah Yar (from Magsi family and sister of Irfan Gul Magsi who have been Minister of Revenue and also of Auqaf, Religious and Minority Affairs), and Dr. Kaneez Sughra Junejo from Mirpurkhas (daughter of former Prime Minister Muhammad Khan Junejo). Social Policy and Development Centre (SPDC) also reported the results of a case study done on profiles of District Nazims in Punjab after 2002 and 2005 elections that show three particular trends: first, mostly Nazims (91%) were elected on the basis of *Zaat* (caste)/ *Biradri* (Kinship)/ Tribal ties; second, most of them (91% in 2002, 77% in 2005) belonged to ruling political party; third, mostly (70%-80%) belonged to leading political families (2007: 59-60). It clearly shows the overwhelming influence of kinship/tribal ties and of political affiliation in the present day political scenario in Pakistan.

Similarly, the councilors at District and Tehsil Councils, who are the Nazims and Naib Nazims of Union Councils also managed to achieve these status due to landowning, kinship and political affiliation working within Union Councils (UC). In Khan's (2006) research on local government and rural development in two districts of Northwestern Pakistan, the socio-economic profiles of District and Tehsil Councilors (UC Nazims and Naib Nazims) show them as belonging to groups of higher socio-economic strata of rural society. Therefore, he infers that these councils still are largely the domains of traditional rural elites (landlords). It indicates that political culture of Pakistan is still in the hands of the local elite men and prevents women from entering in these areas of power and authority.

### **Women's Participation at Union Council**

There is considerably less information on Pakistan regarding women's political participation in local government under quotas, probably because the new local government institutions and elected women were in place quite recently. The existing literature indicates that only the lowest tier, the Union Council, shows a break from the patriarchal trend of elite class's political participation. Pattan Development Organization in its studies of local government election processes

and results found that majority of the elected representatives belonged to the younger strata of society with majority (74%) of them less than 46 years of age (Bari and Khan 2001; Khan and Bari 2006). Similarly, these studies also showed that majority (79%) of them were literate; only 10% of them having passed the H.S.S.C examination (12 years of education) and 16% possessing bachelor level qualification (14 years of education). Illiterate councilors constitute 21% of the total number of elected representatives. Out of the total number of illiterate elected representatives, 69% were women. SPDC (2007) shows that on average, 27 percent of women councilors were not literate. Paracha (2003) providing more or less similar features and statistics in this regard, also explains that in respect of occupational background, unlike Nazims and Naib Nazims, most of the councilors belonged to low-income groups. Similarly, Khan (2006) also finds that, in general, majority of them belong to landless and small land holding groups. They mostly belong to low income or medium income groups. He argues that apparently local reforms have dislodged large landowners and social elites from control over the local politics thus local government units (the union council) cannot be called as elite dominant institutions.

At Union Council level, enhanced quotas (33% after 2002 in comparison of the 2% to 10% in past) for women have inducted a large number of directly elected women councilors (more than 36,000 in 2002 and 24,000 in 2005). Existing studies show that most of them were less than 45 years old (57 %); more than half were illiterate (53 %); most were housewives (73.7%); very few own land; and an overwhelming majority had never contested elections (79 per cent), neither had their families (64%) (Reyes 2002). Most of them were novice in this field, coming from middle and lower middle class families, also from rural areas, with less education, no previous political experience. A large percentage of women at councilor level was self-motivated for want of social empowerment, which means to be heard and known – “I am a living reality & can speak” (Yazdani 2004: 26). A sizeable number of local councilors were school teachers and women based in local community organizations (Shaheed and Zaidi 2005). These trends show a break from the patriarchal trend of women’s exclusion from or elite women’s exclusive participation in politics in Pakistan. They seem to have more in common with majority of rural/urban and lower class women than the elite educated upper class women politicians of past, coming from feudal or political



families or those still forming a large portion of women members of the present national and provincial assemblies.

Reyes (2002) indicates that the large participation by housewives reflected their willingness to go beyond their reproductive roles to assume community leadership roles. This may also have implications on the gender based assignment of household roles and responsibilities at home and broader community. Yazdani counts the achievements of these women, as (a) family support to contest elections leading to acceptance of women's right to participate in politics, (b) acceptance to take on political decision making on behalf of community, (c) equal political decision making right as an elected representative (2004: 31). She further added to this list the "social recognition, sense of authority, respect & improved social standing within and outside family being in a decision-making role are "THE" gains felt by these elected women" (Yazdani 2004: 31). Although, they were still facing resistance by male dominated systems of local government, low working or decision making power, lack of training, established stereotypes of politics as male domain, mobility issues, families' concern and resistance regarding their security and deliberate ignorance in and exclusion from major decision making processes at the council (also see Yazdani 2004; Mumtaz 2005), but at least the quotas have provided them opportunity to make an initial and massive entry in the political field which was not possible otherwise due to men and elite class dominated patriarchal political culture in Pakistan. The local government may also prove itself as nursery for producing a new generation of non-elite female politicians.

### **Conclusion**

This paper aimed to explore women's representation and participation in local government in Pakistan with a special focus on women in local governments in province of Sindh. The argument presented in the paper is developed on statistics, material, and information gathered from secondary sources of data including books, reports, research papers, official websites, and internet. The paper argues that women's representation in local government in Pakistan was marginal till the year 2000. Till the year 1991, the reserved quota seats for women did not comprise more than 2% of total membership of the local government systems introduced from time to time through different military governments and later by democratically elected governments. Later, the figure rose to 10% till 1993. It

was only after the year 2000 that 33% of reserved seats for women in all tiers of local governments was allocated. This initiative or enhanced quota allocation resulted in thousands of women entering in this local level of political decision making all around the country. The paper argues that this increased in women's quota seats at local governments has certainly enlarge the political space available for local women and give them venue to participate in the political activity.

Finally the paper indicates another shifting patten of women's representation in these political forums. It highlights that previously women in local governments were coming from elite class, but the enlarge quota and enhanced representation women also has open the doors of political forums for non elite less educated, young, common women from low income group. This is especially true for women's participation in the lowest tier of union council. The paper also suggests that these important aspects of enhanced quota representation for women, ensuring and facilitating the participation of common non- elite women, and drawing frameworks to strengthen their say in political decision making in local governments, in particular, and in all political forums, in general may help to develop and strengthen more democratic political institutions in Pakistani society.

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