

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND ITS ROLE IN PAKISTAN POLITICS (A CASE STUDY OF SINDH)

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Abstract

Women being the most disadvantaged section of Pakistani society require special attention in regard with political empowerment to play their due role in overall development of the country. This becomes more important when we talk about political status of women in Sindh. Being one of the area where cultural and social conservativeness remains highly rooted in the society, women in rural areas of Sindh are unable to find space in political activity in elections. Though, there are some exceptions but largely women in Sindh struggle a lot in cashing-in their political power by exercising constitutional basic right. This needs to be addressed by the state governing bodies so that women in Sindh can play their due political role.

Key words: *Women Empowerment, Pakistan, Sindh, Cultural Conservativeness, Society, Political Empowerment, Constitution, Hindrances, Implementation, and Education.*

Introduction

It is important that the problem of Women Empowerment is discussed and some practical solutions be brought to the policy makers where they can devise a concrete policy for the betterment of women. This is significance because any kind of development we aspire is useless until and unless it does not carry the uplift programmes for women in genera and deprived rural women of Sindh in particular.

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Motivation for women voters or women political activists should be empowerment of less privileged women with better education, implementing better health policies for women, creating equal employment spaces for women and caring for the basic and political rights of women. (Ali, Azra Asghar, Akhtar, M. Javed:2012).

Pakistan's Constitution, as per Article 25 (2), is emphatic about giving equal rights to women. Unfortunately, despite this discrimination against women remains there due to lack of implementation of constitutional rights. (Masood, Talat, Johansson, Ingrid: 2018). Here the problem is not only making the policies but also creating the atmosphere where women feel equally treated in law and social norms reflect that equality.

A recent study by International Monetary Fund has revealed that Pakistan's GDP can be improved 30% if women is given equal opportunities. This shows that one the reason our country is not developing is because we are not utilizing our human capital in terms of women folk.

In our countries' context, the social support from clergy is very much detrimental in terms of reflecting religious teachings in empowering the women. Because Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had set true examples of protecting the rights of women and gave them the highest respect. (Masood, Talat, Johansson, Ingrid: 2018). Thus, there exists no fatal problem and reason why Pakistani women cannot entertain the rights ascribed in the constitution of Pakistan.

Political Geography of Sindh

Geography in terms of politics can be seen through the prisms of popular culture in given area. If we talk about Pakistan in general and Sindh in particular, we come to the fact that there are many insights and interesting perspectives when it comes to the political participation of women with reflections of geography. (Awan, Mohammad Ali 2016). Some of them can be understood as under;

Firstly, women participation in urban areas of Sindh has been detrimental and exemplary. This can be regarded as the sign of modern society where women generally get chance to get ample space in public gatherings. This results in their active participation in politics. This can be ascertain by the fact that voting ratio in of women voters in general elections in urban areas is better than rural areas. In rural areas political gatherings normally consists of male voters and thus, this results in less participation of women voters in rural areas.

Secondly, geographical areas with improved and high education ratios exhibit better voting ratios of women voters. This can be understood that education to women gives more opportunities and freedom of active participation in political gatherings and voting pattern of women improves on voting day.

Thirdly, areas where there is modern economic activities (factories or commercial areas with women workers) voting behavior of women in these areas gets improved if compared to the areas where women normally work in the crops or rural economy based modes of production.

This can be deduced that politics in Sindh shows different voting behaviors and patterns in different geographical areas, with very different kinds of factors dominating in regards with women voting behavior.

Besides, the ratio of women voters where there is in-migration and people have migrated from their native place for improved economic opportunities reflect improved ratio of women voters and political participation. This can be seen as a sign of economic freedom for women where they tend to work independently.

Hindrances Faced by Women in Sindh

In Pakistan commonly and in Sindh Province particularly, women face many difficulties in playing their active role in Pakistan Politics; the general issue before women empowerment are feudal lords, businesspersons, religious clerics and middle-class people.

Feudal Culture

Women face many problems due to feudal culture in country, especially in Sindh. The traditional thinking is that women are their honor and women should stay home for house cores and working in gender-mixed spaces is not safe for them. Thus, this reflects when coming to the political activities and voting choices for women. (Kamran, Sehar. 2017). Likewise, getting education and making decisions independently is not allowed. Those women who defy feudal traditions face very hostile and curse reaction from the society in general and from their families in particular. In Sindh, political activism is seen as a “male activity” and women generally are discouraged to take active participation in politics. Feudal class generally digests the very nominal participation of women folk and that for legal requirement where they are compelled to give a specified space to the women politicians.

Religious Limitation

Interpretations of religion has always been very controversial in the history and so is the interpretation of Islam in our society where it is seen as something which belongs to the men only and women are just the “things for use” of men. However, the main sprit of religion is the guidance of mankind, all the religions state that men and women are equal. Very conservative interpretation of religion bars the women from working among the men and partying with the opposite gender. (Anis Haroon 2010). This results in much squeezed political opportunities for women. Especially in Sindh, it gets manifold where it is aligned with feudal culture.

Lack of Education

Education is necessary for man and women, and it's essential that women get equal opportunities of schooling and complete all the levels of proper education. Education empowers the women to take independent decisions and get proper platforms for political activity. Through this, women know the right paths of their political career building. Unfortunately in Sindh province of Pakistan, literacy ratio for girls is very discouraging and needs to be improved so that women be able to get politically empowered.

Poverty and Lack of Economic Freedom

Poverty bars any person from politically participating freely because given the wide gap between poor and wealthy class, poor persons normally are not free in political decisions and when it comes to the women voters, it becomes more difficult for women folk to make independent political decisions when they are not economically independent.

In Sindh economic resources are mostly occupied by the male members of family and women normally earn less given the less earning opportunities for women. Women have also less authority on spending the gifted or earned money. According to State Bank Report, 75% of the population in rural areas of Sindh lives below to the poverty line, however the overall poverty ratio in Sindh is 40%. This shows that women in rural areas are highly less free in terms of economic decisions and that reflects poorly in their political decision making in the time elections.

Hostile Atmosphere for Women Activism

Given the feudal and traditional atmosphere of Sindh, women face very hostile conditions when it comes to political activity. Especially in rural areas, women have less support from families and society when a woman want to politically rise

to equal levels of male members of the society. (Rasheed, Sheikh Abdul. 2018). Though, women have equal political rights in the constitution but when practical politics comes, it becomes very difficult for any women in village to perform political activity. She is mocked, harassed, discouraged and sometime face life threats if she defies the current norms. Thus, political atmosphere in rural areas of Sindh is not in favour of women political activism. Government should focus on creating the level playing fields for men and women no matter they live in urban areas or rural settings.

Opportunities Available to Women in Sindh

With demonstrated difficulties mentioned and observed, there also exist some opportunities for women if they want to contribute and participate actively in political arena of Sindh. Let's scratch some of them. With the active role of election Commission of Pakistan and improvement in laws related to the rights of women voters, it has become necessary for the political parties to take on board the importance of women voters in letter and spirit. This has resulted in more reserved seats for women candidates in all three legislative bodies of the country i.e Senate, National Assembly and Provincial Assembly.

It has become necessary for contesting political parties to encourage the women voters to come and cast their votes on Election Day otherwise, according to the Election Commission Act, if ratio of women voters in total casted votes is less than 10% in any given geographical area or constituency then the result shall be deemed null and void. (Nizamani, Shazia 2018). This has encouraged political parties to interact more to their women voters and convince them to participate in political activity and come to cast their vote on the Election Day.

Besides, with the easy access of internet and use of social media, women voters have started taking their concerns known to the political parties and Election Commission of Pakistan. This opportunity has provided the women voters platform to lodge their complains reached to the concerned authorities (Election Commission of Pakistan) and has encouraged lot of women to come forward with practical solution of their issues. This has compelled the contesting parties to come forward with a well set programmes for women voters. Resultantly, the manifestos of all contesting parties include the plans about how they would work to improve the conditions of women voters.

Some Success Stories from Sindh

History has revealed that if given due and equal opportunities to women, they can play vital role in any given field. In Sindh we can say with conviction that those

women who got fair chance of playing their role in politics, they showed a character where they led political parties and contributed a lot in the political empowerment of women in particular and of men in general. Following are some examples from Sindh province;

Muhtarma Benazir Bhutto: Born in feudal family of Sindh, Muhtarma Benazir Bhutto made an example for all women in Pakistan by becoming the first head of government in Muslim world. After the painful execution of his father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, she struggled and led a political party and worked for the political empowerment of women. Muhtarma Benazir Bhutto, till she was assassinated during a political gathering in Rawalpindi in 2007, continued striving for the uplift of common people of Pakistan in general and for the political freedom of women in particular.

Ms. Sherry Rehman: Born in a bureaucrat family of a small but historical town of Sindh, Hala, Ms. Sherry Rehman rose to the batches where she become the first female Opposition Leader of Upper House (Senate). Before, she served as Ambassador to the United State of America and has remained very close to the first female head of the government in the Muslim world, Muhtarma Benazir Bhutto.

Dr. Fahmida Mirza is, currently, one of the few women National Assembly members who are directly elected on general seats in the past general elections. Before, she has been the first woman Speaker of National Assembly in the history of Pakistan.

Syeda Shehla Raza has been very active in politics in Sindh. She struggled a lot during her student life and was very active against the high handedness of military rule. She has been criticized and mocked by the political conservatives and oppositions but she has continued playing active role in political empowerment of women.

Ms. Nusrat Sehar Abbasi is very vocal woman politician in Sindh. She belongs to a geographical area of Sindh where culture is very conservative for women political workers. Born in the town of Rohri, Sukkur district of Sindh, she has earned a very encouraging status as a woman political worker.

Conclusion

With lot of political empowerment of women given the constitution and important policy legislation in place, women Pakistan generally and in Sindh specially, are

unable to take free ride in political activities. Thus, this hampers the dream of Quaid's Pakistan where the Father of the Nation idealized the equal role for women in the development of country.

Women in Sindh are still lagging behind in almost all spheres of social and political activity. Their ration in education in rural areas of Sindh is very low. There are scare facilities of basic health problems in far flung areas of Sindh. Women in Sindh are stilled killed in barbaric manner in the name of honor.

Successive government in Sindh have claimed the development and empowerment of women in letter but in spirit it has not converted as practically women still live in primitive conditions and are at war against the basic problems of health. It is significant that if we want to empower women then government should take revolutionary steps in this regard.

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