Examining Political Representation of Women in Pakistan through Liberal Feminist Perspective: A Case Study of 2018 General Elections

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Abstract: *Despite comprising half of Pakistan's population, women face significant hurdles in political engagement due to entrenched gender inequality and patriarchal structures. Despite measures like quotas, genuine participation remains limited. Liberal feminist theory advocates for addressing the root causes of gender disparity, advocating for gender-inclusive politics by removing institutional barriers. This paper examines structural impediments to women's political involvement in Pakistan, using a liberal feminist lens. It illuminates systemic challenges hindering gender parity in politics, evident in the 2018 general election despite reserved seats in parliament. Cultural norms, social constraints, and violence perpetuate gender inequalities, impeding women's active participation in political processes. This analysis underscores the persistent gender gap in political representation, urging comprehensive reforms to dismantle barriers obstructing women's full engagement in politics.*

Introduction

Women engage in a wide range of political actions that go well beyond simply casting ballots. The United Nations (2005) states that it includes the freedom to associate, gather, and voice one's thoughts as well as the ability to actively participate in public affairs, which includes the ability to run for office and occupy public office (Rahman & Memon, 2015). Similarly, according to Kumar (2017), female political engagement occurs when women are able to have an equal say with males in decisions that have an impact on their lives (Kumar, 2017). Specifically, women's political engagement is regarded as a critical turning point in female empowerment, giving them the freedom to make their own decisions and actively participate in the political process (Bari, 2018). The question of women's political participation in Pakistan, like in many other nations, is intricately linked to cultural customs, historical injustices, and societal standards. Women in Pakistan suffer enormous obstacles to genuine political

engagement, even though they make up about half of the population. Gender inequality combined with the patriarchal system has made women marginalized in the political sphere. Although quotas and other similar policies have been put in place to boost the participation of women in parliament, they are only short-term fixes for long-standing problems. Furthermore, gender quotas fail to address the structural hurdles that prevent women from participating fully in decision-making bodies, despite the fact that they are acknowledged as essential for advancing female representation (Latif et al., 2015b). Addressing the underlying causes of gender disparity in political representation is crucial, according to a liberal feminist perspective that supports the removal of institutional impediments and the advancement of gender-inclusive politics. This paper (i) seeks to analyze the structural barriers preventing women from participating fully in politics (ii) by taking a liberal feminist perspective on Pakistan's female political representation. In order to find solutions for advancing

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gender equality, women's empowerment, and their active engagement in politics, we will examine the dynamics of political representation and participation from this angle.

Background of the study

Voting is only one aspect of becoming politically involved; there are many other activities as well. To be politically active is to have "the freedom to speak out, assemble and associate; the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs; and the opportunity to register as a candidate, to a campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all levels of government," as stated by the United Nations (2005). It also alludes to women's rights and freedom to pursue their interests, vote, and run for office. For many, the emancipation of women began with their entry into politics. The ability and independence of women to use their right to vote, run for office, take part in political protests, and make decisions is known as political empowerment. Increased representation of women in politics could lead to a greater focus on issues affecting women in the nation. Gender equality and unadorned democracy are thought to require female participation as a necessary precondition (Mayo & Borg, 2007). In addition to making women more accountable, it helps them participate more actively in public decision-making. The degree of female involvement in politics and their ability to influence decisions is a key measure of the state of gender equality in society. The Beijing Platform, published in 1995, stressed that gender equality is important and has the same influence on public decisions as it does on men; as such, promoting gender equality in public decision-making is essential to improving the rights of women. Women's political equality has already been addressed in the "Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women" (Articles 7–9), as well as women's equal participation at all levels (Article 7b) (Rahman & Memon, 2015). It has been declared: "States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women on equal terms with men, the right to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government, as well as the right to participate in the formulation and implementation of government policy" (Part II, Article 7b). In 1995, the United Nations.

All of these guarantees speak to the fact that women's right to equality in politics is inviolable without it.

According to Bari (2018), women's involvement in public decision-making is therefore required for their interests to be taken into consideration and is also a matter of unadorned justice or democracy (Bari, 2018). Women are discouraged and kept out of politics because it is thought that the essence of politics requires a masculine capacity, such as confidence, and activeness, rather than feminine individualities of indifference and submissiveness. Females' role and influence in the decision-making process are determined by their active and positive involvement in politics, which may result in political representation (Bourque & Grossholtz, 1998). Before 2020, women would make up about 48% of the nation's population, yet regardless of size, it has become clear that women have not played a substantial role in politics. Political representation of women has increased, which can provide a clear picture of the near future. However, actual conditions indicate that gender equality has not yet been achieved.

When analyzing the diversity of female representation, political parties are important variables to look at. According to Kandiyoti (1991), they are able to decide on the specifics of the nomination procedure, including whether or not to impose quotas and what kind of quotas to use. In a representative democracy, political parties play a crucial and pivotal role. As the primary conduit between the general public and decision-makers in the majority of political systems, political parties play a critical role in parliamentary systems of government (Kandiyoti, 1991). Political parties, the women's movement, and policy entrepreneurs are shown in relation to one another. Groups that support women Women's organizations are frequently seen as the primary forces for changes in political and gender concerns.

Political parties and women's organizations both function as collective entities. The organization's equivocal position on conformity and the unknown choice motivations make the matter more complicated. Wide finds it fascinating to investigate how powerful women may affect women's political situations (Dawn, 2020). The ability of a small group to alter the political landscape and the influence of a large number of individuals in generating new political issues and shaping policy decisions are highlighted. Although well-known people may increase the number of women in leadership positions.

Understanding Liberal Feminism

Socialist Feminism: K.J. Warrant (1996) states that

liberal feminism builds upon liberalism's theoretical foundation by contributing to a political philosophy based on the belief that women and men are inherently equal (Kandiyoti, 1991). Examining the social behaviours and laws supported by liberal ideology that may impede the attainment of gender equality is a crucial aspect of this critical analysis. Liberal feminists in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries advocated for women's right to vote, challenged the institution of marriage and its legal aspects such as divorce and property laws, and resisted attempts to restrict women's opportunities for education and employment. Even within the framework of liberal feminism, there exist different ideologies. Some liberal feminists believe in the basic equality of men and women, while others feel that women are essentially superior to men and should have equal rights to showcase their societal worth.

Another subgroup contends that women should have increased influence in setting public policy and engaging in politics due to the perceived superiority of their qualities. Lesbian, Marxist, and radical feminists have challenged liberal feminism for its position on gender equality. Marxist feminists attribute the gender difference in the home to capitalism, but liberal feminists' focus on equal opportunity is also considered responsible. Liberal feminists are concerned about the gender disparity in domestic labour (Lopez-Claros & Zahidi, 2005). They advocate for a reversal of traditional gender roles to provide women with greater financial, political, and economic empowerment while assigning men more duties in childcare and household tasks.

Feminists believe that men and women are perceived as distinct and hold uneven social statuses (Mayo & Borg, 2007). Women have the same social position as men, determined by characteristics such as class, colour, race, religion, education, nationality, or a mix of these. Consequently, women have fewer economic resources, lower socioeconomic standing, less authority, and fewer prospects for self-fulfilment. stated that the economic situation of women and men started to become more similar in the latter part of the twentieth century. It is well acknowledged that women typically earn less than males, work fewer hours, or not at all, and are primarily responsible for unpaid domestic tasks. Gender imbalance might potentially alter established societal norms. Rahman & Memon, (2015) argue that inequality is a result of unnatural variation, regardless of a society's demographic composition.

According to Bourque & Grossholtz (1998). who declared this in Implications of Liberal Feminism 55, these theoretical foundations demonstrate a paradigm that transcends the prevalent individualism and abstraction of liberalism. This is accomplished by concentrating on power and cultural systems and conducting an analysis of the lived experiences of women within these systems. There have been many different feminist movements that have evolved throughout history. Each of these groups has had the goal of eliminating gender inequality by tackling the fundamental factors that lead to the oppression and enslavement of women (Bourque & Grossholtz, 1998). From among the numerous different perspectives held by feminists, Enyew and Mihrete (2018) assert that liberal feminism is considered to be the most prominent. According to Kameri-Mbote (2016), liberal feminism has been responsible for bringing women into the public eye. She asserts that this is due to the fact that liberal feminism naturally places women in positions of political power. In light of this, the fundamental principle of liberal feminism theory is to advocate for equality in the realm of women's participation in political processes. Within the context of this discussion, the objective is to determine the means by which the legislation could be used to eliminate the obstacles that prohibit women from having equal opportunities in fields such as education, politics, and the job. According to Allauddin et al. (2020), liberal feminism is an ideology that is less concerned with dramatic revolution and more concerned with structural improvements within society (Allauddin et al., 2020).

The main idea that liberal feminist scholars adhere to is the concept of gender equality. Other important concepts include the capacity of individuals to reason, moral agency, and self-actualization, as well as the guarantee of legal frameworks that allow for the exercise of these talents. Patriarchal philosophy regards domestic work as a private space of obligation, but public work is viewed as a public sphere of responsibility, who contends that gender is an inherent sexist ideology that corresponds to this view. This viewpoint is held by current feminists, who consider gender to be a socially constructed complex mechanism that is used to influence women through a gender-specific division of labour (Akbar et al., 2022).

Males are able to gain access to a bigger number of resources that are beneficial to their personal development and professional advancement. This is because of their greater prominence and influence in

society. 2019 publication by Cohoodhry, Mutalib, and Ismail. Kassa (2015) asserts that women continue to face discrimination, marginalisation, abuse, and restricted social mobility, all of which contribute to the continuous production of imbalance. In addition, women continue to be subjected to restrictive social mobility (Kassa, 2015). According to Matloob et.al. (2021), gender-based divisions of labour are a source of suffering for women, particularly single mothers who are confronted with excessive rates of poverty. From the perspective of liberal feminism, the issue of marital inequality is one that affects a significant number of women. As stated in Jessie Bernard's foundational study on the subject, The Future of Marriage (1972/1982), males are socially and institutionally conditioned to experience sexual superiority in marriage. This conditioning occurs in the context of marriage. (Matloob et al., 2021)

When women enter into marriage contracts, they often find themselves in a position of powerlessness as they are expected to fulfil various roles for their spouses in physical, emotional, and domestic aspects, as dictated by marital property customs. Men, meanwhile, are excused from responsibilities and act as household leaders. Latif. 2015) suggest that a significant portion of the literature regarding the women's movement in Pakistan during the 1980s and 1990s opposes religious and military dictatorship. In Pakistan, feminists have employed a range of slogans within a political context. Due to this situation, conflicts have escalated among the government, the military, and advancements in capitalism (Latif et al., 2015a). Over the recent years, feminist liberalism has been focusing on tackling the disparity and diversity in characters' religious identities (Zia, 2009). Advocates of liberal feminism vehemently challenge the existence of discriminatory practices that marginalise women in private industries, while 56 men from Saif & Raza hold sway in the public domain (Khan, 2009).

Exploring Classical and Egalitarian Liberal Feminism

Classical liberal feminism and egalitarian feminism are two branches of the liberal feminist movement. This essay aims to elucidate the fundamental differences between the classical-liberal and egalitarian-liberal perspectives within feminism. Classical and egalitarian-liberal feminists have distinct perspectives on freedom, which significantly impact the issues feminism aims to address, the content of the liberal feminist agenda, and

the role of the state (Bryson, 2003). Advocating for women's personal and political autonomy and striving for equality in democratic self-governance processes in liberal societies such as the United States is a key objective for egalitarian-liberal feminists. They advocate for affirmative action, welfare state programmes, anti-discrimination laws, cultural shifts, and equal access to democratic self-governance as they trust in the state's ability to accomplish these objectives. These traits firmly position egalitarian liberal feminism on the left side of the political spectrum (Ghauri & Maik, 2018).

On the other hand, classical-liberal feminists frequently contend that the goals of feminism have largely been accomplished in nations such as the US and that the sole remaining responsibility is to combat laws that are discriminatory towards women. They often advocate for mostly unrestricted associational and economic arrangements and oppose measures such as anti-discrimination laws, affirmative action, and social programmes (Childs & Krook, 2008). Due to these attributes, classical liberalism is viewed as a right-wing political ideology. According to classical liberals, liberalising culture is not a goal that should be pursued through state intervention. However, some classical liberals argue that this remains a goal of liberal feminists. Looking at it culturally, classical-liberal feminists tend to lean more towards liberalism. However, there are classical-liberal feminists who lean towards conservative cultural views and are against the push for liberalisation. When women enter into marriage contracts, they often find themselves in a position of powerlessness as they are expected to fulfil various roles for their spouses in physical, emotional, and domestic aspects, as dictated by marital property customs (Khayyam & Tahir, 2019). Men, meanwhile, are excused from responsibilities and act as household leaders.

Luka. (2011) suggests that a significant portion of the literature regarding the women's movement in Pakistan during the 1980s and 1990s opposes religious and military dictatorship(Luka, 2011). In Pakistan, feminists have employed a range of slogans within a political context. Due to this situation, conflicts have escalated among the government, the military, and advancements in capitalism. Over the recent years, feminist liberalism has been focusing on tackling the disparity and diversity in characters' religious identities (Khattak, 2010).

Critics of liberal feminism and the feminist

movement in general claims that, with some limitations, our faith does provide women equal opportunities. The goal of these limits is to prevent any potential embarrassment (Markham, 2013). Our society opposes and criticises the Western liberal feminist movement because it clashes with our cultural norms and beliefs. Hurst argues that proponents of the "women in development" movement want for women to have opportunities to hold influential roles in economic and political decision-making. The issue with this definition of "empowerment" is that it may be just as easily revoked. Simply said, it does not need a significant change in the distribution of power (Lopez-Claros & Zahidi, 2005).

Michel Foucault (1980) argues that power should be viewed as relational rather than a finite thing. Power, as per Foucault's thesis, is not retained but instead manifested through the intricate web of social exchanges in which each individual is entangled (Foucault, 1980). The extent of control individuals possess is up for debate. Foucault contends that individuals adopt self-imposed restrictions and discipline as they internalise oppressive societal norms. People are socialised individuals whose actions are constrained by the prevailing social norms. Women are limited to operating inside the patriarchal paradigm that dominates this political discussion.

Examining Liberal Feminist and Women Political Representation in Pakistan

The feminist movement is split on the issue of whether men and women are inherently equal. Some believe that certain women possess inherent superiority over men and should have the opportunity to prove it. Some argue that women's qualities surpass those of men and so they should be involved in public policy and economic decisions (Khayyam & Tahir, 2019). Liberal feminists emphasise the significant benefits that society can derive from women's contributions to public service. Early liberal feminists overlooked the challenges faced by working women, but contemporary liberal feminists today recognise the societal advantages of educated women contributing to society. There is a widespread belief that women play a crucial role in the workplace, and society has tremendously benefited from their contributions. Earlier liberal feminists such as Susan B. Anthony and Maria Stewart focused primarily on the challenges faced by Black women and working-class women.

Women still face oppression and mental health challenges, despite the working class showing strong support, especially in corporate environments. Regarding women's impact in the workforce, the actual situation contradicts the assertions made by liberal feminists. The emergence of specific movements (like the "Me Too" movement and Mera Jism Meri Marzi, among others) is another significant outcome (Matloob et al., 2021). As a political writer might say, these movements are clearly leaving a significant impact on society. This type of movement emerges in reaction to the core argument of liberal feminism, which is that inequality is widespread. Many individuals are raising their voices against sexual violence in hopes of putting an end to it. According to Mayo & Borg (2007), society maintains the misconception that women are inherently less capable than men, both intellectually and physically. These societal misunderstandings have paved the way for the emergence of such movements that strive to eliminate inequality (Mayo & Borg, 2007).

Rousseau argues that women are considered emotionally complementary to males, while Saif and Raza delve into liberal feminism. He believes that women should receive training in tolerance and adaptability, while men should be instructed in bravery, temperament, and justice, among other virtues. The universal arguments of liberal feminism have supported women's rights, questioned women's preconceptions, and argued that biological characteristics are not sufficient to define social or psychological gender (Bourque & Grossholtz, 1998). Men and women are both essential contributors to society, and each should fulfil their responsibilities accordingly. Challenges emerge and present a substantial risk to the sustainability of any social structure in the presence of inequality. According to liberal feminism, the core concept is that men bear the responsibility for the inequality that hinders women from achieving their rights.

There is a continued gender disparity in online communities, with men being more prominent. The impact of liberal feminism on Pakistani society is evident, with gender inequality remaining a prevalent issue (Alexander et al., 2016). Furthermore, it has been observed that special broadcasts often include conversations about human cruelty. Some instances are strategically incorporated into these broadcasts to evoke compassion. It is argued that the influence of liberal feminism on our culture has led to some negative outcomes, with movements such as "Mera

Jism, Meri Marzi" being highlighted as an illustration. Many proponents of this movement argue that women should not be confined to household chores and that men should view women as equals as a result.

Post-marriage, husbands and extended family often restrict women's opportunities to work or socialize, despite their advanced education (Akbar et al., 2022). The stance of liberal feminists is thus reinforced and confirmed. Observers noted women coming out of their homes with signs and shouting phrases to protest against unfairness. Despite events in Pakistani culture, numerous religious experts, analysts, and writers perceive these women as bringing shame to our community and find the term morally objectionable, causing them to ignore the movement's issues (Akhtar & Mushtaq, 2014). According to certain religious academics, women can maintain their traditional role as breadwinners by remaining at home. Some feminists with differing beliefs opposed liberal feminists within the movement. The influence of liberal feminism on our society has been profound.

Ultimately, this study bolsters the commitment of liberal feminism to tackling social injustices. When analyzing the female demographic of a society, the issue of inequality stands out. Discontent and inequality have emerged in Pakistani society as a result of this. It is imperative for the country to focus on eradicating inequality by tackling its root causes (Tribune, 2023). The roles and impacts of men and women in modern society are interconnected and essential. Men and women should both contribute equally to building a society. Advocating for women's equal rights in voting and political participation, liberal feminism seeks to reduce inequality across various areas (Akbar et al., 2022). To enable women to achieve their maximum potential and make meaningful contributions to societal advancement, they must have equal economic opportunities and be represented in key decision-making positions, as highlighted in a couple of the many implications of liberal feminism.

General Election 2018 in Pakistan and Women's Political Representation

Gender gaps in politics are sustained by systemic hurdles founded in patriarchal norms and cultural biases, as is clear from examining women's political representation and engagement in Pakistan from a liberal feminist lens. The fact that a coalition administration was just formed amid political unrest emphasizes how urgent it is to remove these

obstacles. Allegations of violence, electoral malpractice, and pre-poll tampering tarnished the efforts of the many women who dared to participate in the 2018 general elections, challenging gender stereo types. This is a reflection of the deeply ingrained structural barriers that prevent women from fully participating in society, including religious dogmas, constrictive social and cultural standards, and a dearth of active support for women's rights.

Pakistan's structural inability to promote gender-inclusive politics is shown by the depressing data from the most recent elections, which showed that women made up only 4.7% of all candidates. Women's representation does not meet the required level, even in spite of legal obligations such as Section 206 of the Elections Act, 2017, which compels political parties to include at least five percent representation of female candidates in general seat. This shortcoming not only compromises democracy's core tenets but also keeps gender differences in political representation alive. For women's voices to remain unheard and for Pakistan to move closer to a fully representative democracy, structural impediments must be addressed in addition to creating a more welcoming political atmosphere.

Even though there were just a handful of female candidates in the 2018 election, their successes show that Pakistan could be on the road to gender equity in politics. The rise of independent candidates as front-runners represents a break from party politics and an increasing awareness of women's leadership potential across a spectrum of political beliefs. On the other hand, the dearth of female candidates in many constituencies and the concentration of female candidates in others highlight the necessity of more extensive institutional changes. Pakistan can establish a more representative and equitable democracy where women's rights are fully realized and their involvement in political processes is respected and promoted by working together to demolish patriarchal structures and advance inclusive policies. General Elections | IFES - the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2018).

Conclusion

In summary, a Liberal Feminist Perspective sheds light on the systemic obstacles and dynamics that impede gender parity in the political sphere of Pakistan when examining the representation of women. In spite of reserved seats in parliament, the article convincingly highlights the challenges that women encountered in the general election of 2024 and highlights the gender

gap that still exists in political participation. The electoral system's lack of active involvement of women in political processes can be attributed to long-standing societal obstacles, such as cultural dogmas, restrictive social conventions, and violent incidents. These barriers serve to sustain gender inequalities and impede the active involvement of women.

Additionally, the historical significance attributed to prominent women such as Fatima Jinnah and Benazir Bhutto serves to emphasize the advancements as well as obstacles encountered in the realm of female political participation in Pakistan. The constant battle to destroy patriarchal systems that impede women's agency and representation is evidenced by the gender disparity in political activity, even in the face of previous attempts to increase women's participation. Within the framework of liberal feminism, the recognition of the complex character of women's needs—especially in domains like healthcare and education—highlights the relationship between women's rights and political representation.

In order to improve direct female participation in parliament, the paper's recommendations support a multi-sectoral strategy including a range of stakeholders. This is consistent with liberal feminism's tenets, which place an emphasis on group efforts and structural modifications to attain gender parity and women's empowerment in the political arena. Liberal feminism aims to create conditions for a more just and representative democracy in Pakistan, where women's rights are fully realized and their voices are respected, by addressing systemic barriers, advocating inclusive policies, and creating a welcoming atmosphere for women to participate in politics.

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