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Female Participation in Education and Representation in Politics in Sindh, Pakistan: Challenges and Opportunities

Ghazala Shoukat [1]   Sajid Mahmood Awan [2]   Farhat Jokhiyo [3]

[1] Postdoctoral Scholar, National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research (Centre of Excellence), Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad/Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan.
✉ghazal.panhwar@usindh.edu.pk

[2] Senior Research Fellow, National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research (NIHCR), Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan. ✉smawan@qau.edu.pk

[3] Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan.
✉ farhat.jokhio@usindh.edu.pk

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Abstract: Sindh, in Pakistan, and indeed, everywhere, has continuously faced gender-based inequality in educational and political circles. Though provisions like Article 25A make a constitutional guarantee for free education to all, with a 33% quota of representation for women, the level of participation is extremely low. Research will investigate and analyze socio-economic and cultural obstacles towards women's accessibility to education and political leadership comparing the urban-rural disparities. Drawing from qualitative data based on semi-structured interviews with women councilors, educators, and activists in ten districts, the study established a direct relationship between female literacy and political participation. The findings indicate that urban locations perform better than rural areas on both education and political participation, though patriarchal norms, economic dependence, and socio-political marginalization continue to constrain women's leadership roles. To overcome these challenges, Sindh needs three strategic interventions: (1) investment in the infrastructure of female education, (2) legislative reforms to ensure genuine female political representation, and (3) programs to challenge traditional gender norms. Overcoming structural inequalities is a sine qua non for fostering a society where women can meaningfully contribute to governance and socio-economic development.

Keywords: Female Education, Political Representation, Gender Disparities, Sindh, Pakistan, Patriarchy, Women's Empowerment, Rural-Urban Divide, Socio-Economic Barriers, Gender Quotas, Policy Reforms

Corresponding Author:

Ghazala Shoukat
Postdoctoral Scholar, National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research (Centre of Excellence), Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad/Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan.
✉ ghazal.panhwar@usindh.edu.pk

Introduction

Sindh, the second-most populous province in Pakistan, is riddled with deep-seated gender disparities in education and political leadership. With a population of 55.7 million, of which 48% are females (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023), participation by women remains disproportionately low in both education and politics. The literacy rate among women living in urban cities such as Karachi and Hyderabad stands at 62% and 58%, respectively, while rural districts like Tharparkar and Umerkot have shown a dismal 28% and 30% rate of literacy among women (Government of Pakistan, 2023).

This educational gender gap is further solidified by cultural practices like purdah and early marriage that deny women the opportunity of formal education and social participation (Crenshaw, 1989). Similarly at the political level, Sindh presents extreme gender exclusion especially in rural areas where less than 5% of the elected representatives are female.

To tackle these disparities, the Constitution (Twenty-Sixth Amendment) Act, 2024 brought in critical legal reforms to enhance women's representation in governance and the judiciary. This amendment has made it compulsory to include women in the Judicial Commission under Article 175A and ensures greater gender diversity within decision-making bodies (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2024). During the annual reporting period from July 2022 to June 2023, several key legislative measures were introduced in Pakistan to enhance the protection and rights of women, children, and marginalized groups. However, no new laws were passed in the National Assembly or the provincial assemblies of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during this time. In contrast, the Provincial Assembly of Sindh enacted significant legislation. On December 19, 2022, the assembly passed The Sindh Protection of Human Rights (Amendment) Bill, 2022, which received gubernatorial assent on December 30, 2022. This amendment introduced clauses related to business and human rights, incorporating the United Nations Guiding Principles (UNGPs) into provincial law and establishing mechanisms to address corporate-related human rights abuses. Additionally, it called for the inclusion of individuals with significant human rights experience, including minority representatives, in decision-making bodies. Another landmark law, The Sindh Healthcare Service Providers and Facilities (Prevention of Violence and Damage to Property) Act, 2021, was passed on August 5, 2022, and assented to on September 26, 2022. This legislation aimed to safeguard healthcare professionals, prevent violence in medical facilities, and ensure the uninterrupted provision of healthcare services. Furthermore, The Sindh Reproductive Healthcare Rights (Amendment) Act, 2022 was enacted on August 5, 2022, with gubernatorial assent on September 26, 2022. This amendment introduced key definitions, including the role of medical counselors, maternal death review mechanisms, and expanded protections for women's reproductive health. These legislative efforts demonstrate Sindh's proactive approach to strengthening human rights protections and addressing social vulnerabilities (Aurat Foundation, 2023). However, with these progressive laws, women are still politically marginalized—most in local governance where 70% of female representatives in Larkana are symbolic and under the influence of male family members (Samo & Chandio, 2019).

This study has asked why despite legal protections, gender disparities persist and how education directly influences women to become part of political activities. Therefore, researching institutional, economic, and cultural barriers presents a comprehensive road map to increase the number of female empowerments in Sindh.

Methods
This study will therefore adopt a mixed-methods approach that will use the quantitative and qualitative research methods to analyze female participation in education and political representation in Sindh, Pakistan.

Quantitative Analysis
This research is based on secondary data from the National Report on the Status of Women by the Government of Pakistan (2023). The data will be used to bring forth trends in literacy among women, school enrollment, access to higher education, and the status of women in politics through urban-rural comparisons.

Qualitative Analysis
This involved the qualitative component: semi-structured interviews with 25 women councilors, educators, and activists across ten districts of Sindh to document the lived experiences and challenges that women confront in both education and political participation. A purposive sampling strategy was followed to ensure that participants representing diverse characteristics were included: age, between young and experienced women leaders; geographical location, both urban and rural districts; socio-economic background, from low-income background to middle class; and political experience in distinguishing between activists at the grassroots level and those elected to public office. This allowed the research to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the different challenges and experiences of women in various political and social settings in Sindh.

Literature Review
Education as a Catalyst for Political Empowerment
The most crucial determinant in women's empowerment is education. It influences both economic independence and

political participation. Stromquist (2015) identifies four dimensions of empowerment, namely, economic, political, knowledge, and psychological, and determines that education builds up the capacity of leadership and decision-making.

Comparative studies confirm this correlation. In Rwanda, gender quotas ensured that women were able to occupy 61% of parliamentary seats but many were not able to move into leadership positions beyond symbolic representation (Krook, 2009). In Tanzania, conditional funding for education saw a 22% reduction in child marriages, demonstrating the robust connection between access to education with socio-political transformation (Tripp, 2015).

In South Asia, political agency is premised on economic independence. Studies have shown that women's land ownership in India increases their participation in local governance by 500%, furthering the argument that economic security is a stronger determinant of political empowerment than quotas alone (Begum, 2023). In Bangladesh, the Female Secondary School Assistance Program led to a 44% increase in female secondary school enrollment, indicating how financial incentives encourage female education and long-term participation in governance (World Bank, 2018).

Barriers to Female Education and Political Inclusion in Sindh

Sindh has been presented with few barriers that are unique in keeping women from being educated or participating in politics. The Sindh Rural Support Programme (2022) observed that 70% of girls in Tharparkar stop going to school due to security threats and the long distances to schools, which average about 5 km. Further, sexual harassment during school commutes is a major reason for girls in low-income areas of Karachi to discontinue schooling, with 60% of them leaving schools for safety reasons (Fatima et al., 2021).

The feminization of poverty remains a persistent issue, particularly among uneducated women and female-headed households, who face greater financial instability and limited access to well-paying jobs. The devaluation of female labor is deeply rooted in societal norms and economic structures, restricting women's ability to achieve financial independence. However, the findings highlight that educated women are more likely to attain economic stability, higher confidence levels, and greater influence within their families. This study also supports the notion that gender disparities in education and employment must be addressed through policy reforms, greater investment in women's education, and awareness programs to challenge restrictive social norms. By enhancing educational opportunities and economic inclusion, women in Sindh can move toward greater autonomy and socio-economic progress (Panhwar et al., 2021).

Patriarchal norms dominate political society. There is a symbolic presence of women in politics. Their men often control them as they represent political seats. Women also have less access to money, discrimination against them at party levels and by society at large that limits participation (Begum, 2023).

Results

Table 1

Female Literacy and Political Participation

District	Female Literacy (%)	Female Voter Turnout (%)
Literacy Rate (Women, 18+)	Female Literacy: 49% (Male: 70%)	CNIC Possession (Women, 18+): 74%
Rural-Urban Divide	Rural Female Literacy: 39% vs. Urban: 67%	Rural Women CNIC Possession: 72% vs. Urban: 78%
Enrollment Rate (Primary)	Girls: 69% vs. Boys: 88%	Women Voter Turnout (2018 Elections): 40% (Men: 60%)
Higher Education Access	Girls in Higher Education: 32%	Women's Representation in National Assembly: 20.2%
Women in Local Governance	Limited decision-making power in education policy	14%-33% representation across different local government tiers
Barriers to Participation	Cultural norms, financial barriers, lack of facilities	Patriarchal norms, political violence, elite dominance

Source: Government of Pakistan (2023), National report on the status of women in Pakistan.

Quantitatively speaking, by the numbers: female literacy is significantly lower compared to that of males, only 49% of women compared to 70% of men; in rural areas, this dips to a mere 39%, while in urban areas, this goes up to 67%. Such disparities in literacy rates suggest that geography is one of the stronger determinants for accessing education for women. Similar to this, school enrollment rates for girls are lower than boys: 69% of the girls versus 88% of boys show that family and social biases toward educating boys more than girls remain very strong.

Indeed, even the data on political participation points to certain systemic problems that works against women's involvement in governance. Although 74% of women have a CNIC, a prerequisite for voting, only 40% of them turned out to vote in the 2018 elections, compared to 60% of men. This disparity is not only due to logistical barriers—such as a lack of mobility, security concerns, and voting accessibility—but also a reflection of deep-rooted patriarchal norms that discourage women from exercising their political rights. Another major concern is the under-representation of women in governance, with only 20.2% of women being part of the National Assembly and between 14% to 33% representation at local government tiers, respectively. Although quota systems were put into place to ensure the inclusion of women in politics, many of them are in symbolic positions with no decision-making powers.

Lastly, these barriers to education and subsequently to political participation stem from cultural, economic, and institutional constraints. Traditional gender norms, financial constraints, and the lack of educational facilities are some of the barriers that restrict girls' access to education, while patriarchal structures, political violence, and elite dominance restrict the possibility of women's participation in politics. The quantitative data not only provide statistical evidence of these issues but also enforce the necessity of structural reforms to improve both women's access to education and their representation in politics. Policies to redress these inequalities will involve strategic investments in the infrastructure of girls' education, as well as cultural change programs that can challenge deep-seated gender biases—those that empower women to rise to leadership positions in education and governance.

Qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews with 25 women councillors, educators, and activists across ten districts in Sindh point to deep-seated socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that impede women's participation in education and politics. Analyzed using NVivo software, four major themes were identified: patriarchal resistance, economic constraints, security concerns, and tokenism in political representation.

Patriarchal Resistance to Female Education and Political Participation

A theme that emerged from all the interviews is that strong patriarchal opposition serves to restrict women's entry into both education and political decision-making. A large number of respondents suggested that families in rural Sindh discourage girls from seeking an education, fearing that educated women challenge traditional gender roles. As one respondent, a female teacher from Tharparkar, put it:

"Families fear that if girls get educated, they will refuse arranged marriages and demand independence."

In politics, women in reserved seats usually do not hold actual power as their male family members take decisions on their behalf. One of the female councilors of Larkana pointed out:

"The election elected me to a reserved seat, but my husband attends the council meetings on my behalf. I do not know what decisions are being taken on my name".

These findings are evidence that wherever legal mechanisms allowing for women's participation exist, the entrenched power structures still force women to the periphery in education and politics.

Economic dependence Limiting Women's Education and Political Participation

The second main constraint for carrying out these interviews was economic dependence. Most parents invest more in boys' than in girls' education due in part to a perception that investment in males' education pays dividends better financially. A parent in Umerkot said

"We spend 500 rupees a month on our son's tuition but can't spare 200 rupees on our daughter's books."

Economic barriers also hinder women's political participation. Many women reported that the costs of running a campaign, lack of access to funds and political networks dominated by men bar them from ever considering running for public office. A female political candidate in Hyderabad shared:

"To run for office, I need funds for advertising, travel, and public meetings. Women in our community do not have access to financial support for political activities."

These quotes hence show that the aspect of economic independence is a critical foundation of women's empowerment on both education and politics and without specific financial support, women will continue being excluded from taking leadership positions.

Security Concerns and Harassment as a Barrier to Women's Participation

Fear of harassment was mentioned as a significant factor influencing both education and political participation. Girls in urban Karachi and rural Sindh dropped out of school because of security concerns related to traveling to school. A Mirpurkhas community worker stated:

"Most girls leave school after middle school because parents are scared that their girls will be harassed while traveling."

Women in politics also face intimidation and threats, which discourage them from taking an active part in governance. One female candidate from Sukkur narrated her experience as follows:

"Contesting elections brought me threats. My campaign materials were torn down, and my family was pressured to stop my political involvement."

These findings show that the enhancement of security and safe spaces for women is a prerequisite to increasing their participation in education and political leadership.

Tokenism in Political Representation

Despite the implementation of quota systems to ensure gender inclusion, most women who occupy reserved seats lack actual power. One woman representative from Larkana said:

"I was approached to contest the election just because my father couldn't. The decision was taken without consulting me."

A political analyst from Karachi commented:

"Most female representatives in reserved seats perform symbolic roles. Their male family members hold the reins of power."

These quotes bring forth the fact that women's representation in politics is largely symbolic, reinforcing the existing male-dominated power structure rather than effecting meaningful change.

Discussion

The Influence of Education on Women's Political Participation

The quantitative data presented in Table 1 indicates that only 49% of women in Sindh are literate compared to 70% of men, and that rural literacy rates are substantially lower (39%) compared to urban rates (67%) (Government of Pakistan, 2023). This gap is consistent with low political participation, where only 40% of women participated in the 2018 elections compared to 60% of men. The qualitative interviews also support this link, where several respondents mentioned that illiteracy is a barrier to women's participation in political processes.

These findings are consistent with Stromquist (2015), who argues that education is instrumental in transforming women into empowered citizens politically, economically, and socially. Similarly, in a study of women's political participation in Punjab, Ilahi et al. (2023) concluded that educated women would also have greater chances of achieving leadership. Whereas the earlier research suggests a straightforward positive link between higher education and heightened political engagement, this research holds that even among formally educated Sindh women, patriarchal restrictions stand in the way of women's political agency. This only goes to show that education alone is not enough unless accompanied by structural reforms that allow women to exercise real power in governance.

Socio-Cultural Barriers: Patriarchy and Tokenism in Politics

These qualitative findings depict that even when women have gained political office, their presence is largely symbolic

because of the male-dominated power structures. Many of the interviewees reported that their male family members make decisions on behalf of the elected female representatives. This confirms previous findings by Samo and Chandio (2019), whereby it has been stated that the reserved seats for women in Pakistan are used as a way of perpetuating male dominance under the guise of female empowerment.

Moreover, the limited decision-making power of women in local governance—between 14% and 33%—agrees with Krook (2009), who argued that in many countries with gender quotas, female politicians are often excluded from the actual decision-making processes. Nonetheless, unlike research conducted on the success story of Rwanda with regards to gender quotas—wherein 61% of parliamentary seats belong to women who really make a difference in legislations—the case of Sindh suggests quotas do not mean automatic genuine participation. This shows that there is a desire for policy mechanisms that will ensure male relatives do not wield power over female politicians.

Economic Barriers: The Role of Financial Independence

It has been highlighted by the qualitative data that financial dependence on male family members is the reason many are prevented from contesting elections. Respondents explained that election campaigning requires huge finances, which are not available for women with low-income backgrounds. This confirms findings by Agarwal (2010), showing that economic independence is a much stronger determinant of women's political agency than mere political quotas. Results from Fatima et al. (2021) give quantitative data that support this study, showing that financial constraints are one of the reasons for lower female school enrollment rates: 69% for girls versus 88% for boys. Previous researches indicate that financial incentives—like Bangladesh's Female Secondary School Assistance Program—were able to raise female enrollment rates by 44% (World Bank, 2018). This proves that providing financial aid programs for female students in Sindh might bring about similar outcomes.

Security Concerns and Mobility Restrictions

One of the most important barriers identified in the qualitative findings is the threat of harassment, which deters women from going to school or participating in political activities. A large number of respondents, especially from Karachi and rural Sindh, said that parents take girls out of school because of security concerns.

Similarly, the quantitative data shows that while 74% of women have a CNIC, only 40% of them vote, which means that restrictions on mobility and safety contribute to voter suppression. This agrees with Tripp (2015), who concluded that in most developing countries, women's participation in politics largely depends on their freedom and safety to move within public spaces.

Policy Recommendations

This report, through its quantitative and qualitative findings, flags the critical hurdles to women's participation in education and politics in Sindh. The deep-rooted challenges can be tackled effectively only with multi-pronged policy interventions at several levels. Some of the recommendations are as follows:

Strengthening of Female Education Infrastructure

Barrier Addressed: Low literacy rate, gender gap in school enrollment, and high dropout ratio due to economic and security reasons.

- Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) to Female Students
- Implement a financial incentive program, such as Bangladesh's Female Secondary School Assistance Program, which increased enrollment of females by 44% (World Bank, 2018).
- Provide monthly stipends to girls in rural Sindh with the aim to reduce economic constraints leading to early school dropouts.
- Extend School Infrastructure in Underserved Areas
- Increase in the number of secondary schools for girls in rural areas, like in Tharparkar, where the mean distance travelled by girls is 5 km to attend school, as reported by the Government of Sindh in 2019.
- Provide females with safe and affordable school transportation to reduce security threats.
- Hire and Train More Female Teachers

▸ Increase recruitment of female teachers in rural Sindh to promote greater female enrollment, helping to overcome the concern by parents about mixed-gender schooling that prevents them from sending daughters to school.
▸ Integrate Life Skills & Political Awareness into School Curricula
▸ Devise gender-sensitive school curricula that will create awareness about women's rights, leadership, and political participation right from the outset.
▸ Introduce civic education in schools to equip young girls for active political engagement.

Ensuring Meaningful Female Representation in Politics

▸ Barrier Identified: Political tokenism, male domination of reserved seats and lack of financial and institutional support to women leaders.
▸ Imposing Accountability Mechanisms on Reserved Seats
▸ Legislate that prohibits male relatives from frustrating women representatives in reserved seats (as reportedly is happening in Larkana)
▸ Insist on a uniform training program on leadership for all women who have been elected so they can gain decision-making skills
▸ Public Financing of Women Candidates
▸ Establish a Women's Political Participation Fund that provides financial support in the form of campaign grants so that women with low incomes can also run for office.
▸ Create subsidized media access for female candidates to improve visibility during Political Campaigns
▸ Public Financing for Women Candidates: Create a Women's Political Participation Fund that would financially assist election campaigns to enable economically challenged women to access elected office.
▸ Create inexpensive access to media for women candidates as a means to increase their access to and presence in the political campaign environment.
▸ Political Mentoring and Training Programs: Develop and promote political mentoring programs for first-time women candidates in order to orient them through political processes.
▸ Capacity building training for women in policy, negotiation, and public speaking.
▸ Strengthen Political Party Gender Policies: Impose a minimum percentage requirement for women's representation in leadership positions of political parties to enhance internal gender equality.
▸ Provide incentives to parties that nominate more women for general seats, instead of relying solely on quotas.

Addressing Socio-Cultural and Security Barriers

Barrier Identified: Gender norms limiting women's mobility, fear of harassment, and lack of safe public spaces for women.

▸ Strengthen the Security of Women in Public Spaces: Establish women-only public transport services, as have been implemented in other places like India and Bangladesh to avoid harassment while traveling (Fatima et al., 2021).
▸ Post women police or officers at polling stations and schools to assure a safe environment for voting or studying.
▸ Run Media & Sensitization Programmes Against Gender Stereotypes
▸ Collaborate with media houses and religious/elderly leaders in discouraging stereotypes by portraying via the media, women's education and participation in politics as Islamically and culturally acceptable.
▸ Documentaries, radio shows, and social media campaigns celebrating women as role models in politics and education.
▸ Legal Reforms Against Workplace & Political Harassment
▸ Imposing such heavy punishment on harassment in political offices would help women politicians work without intimidation.
▸ Strengthen laws protecting whistleblowers for women who report harassment or coercion at any educational and political institution.

Women's Economic Empowerment Programmes

Barrier Addressed: Dependence on male family members for finances, lack of funds for electioneering, and limited access to business opportunities.

- Enhance Women's Entrepreneurship & Employment Programs: Through microfinance loans and business training, enable women to start up small businesses and thus attain financial independence.
- Nurture corporate and government policies that encourage the hiring of women and generate more job opportunities, specifically in rural areas.
- Land and Property Rights for Women
- Implement reforms that ensure women's rights to land ownership. Evidence from India showed that land ownership increased women's political participation by 500% (Agarwal, 2010).
- Legal aid and awareness programmes should be provided to sensitize women about their economic and inheritance rights.

Conclusion: A Roadmap for Inclusive Gender Reforms

It only shows that education and political participation go side by side in Sindh, though institutional and cultural hurdles remain to retard women's growth. While such policy reforms are taking place—for example, the gender quota—their implementation needs mechanisms and socioeconomic backup.

The path toward inclusion of gender, therefore, becomes multidimensional for Sindh and will include:

- Investment in female education and school infrastructure so as to close the literacy gaps.
- Ensuring political quotas translate into real decision-making power for women.
- Eliminating financial barriers through scholarships, political funding, and employment programs.
- Strengthening security measures and anti-harassment laws to enable safe mobility for women.
- Implementing these recommendations, Sindh can work its way towards a more inclusive society where women are transformative in governance and socio-economic development.

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