



RESEARCH PAPER**Women's Empowerment and Political Participation in Pakistan:
Implications for SDG 5**

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to evaluate the link between the empowerment of women in Pakistan and their involvement in politics using Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) as an analytic tool; the goal of SDG 5 is to create equal opportunities between men and women regarding political participation and thus achieve equal rights for both genders in all spheres of life. The study also evaluates the benefits of women's political participation both to the development of democracy and the promotion of Pakistan as a nation-state with a positive international standing. A qualitative data analysis of historical and contemporary barriers preventing women from participating in politics (such as societal norms perpetuated by patriarchy, economic dependence, and exclusion from formal decision-making) was completed using secondary collection methods. The research policy framework used in this study identifies many areas where significant improvement can be made; however, many obstacles remain for women despite the constitutional protections provided. Digital activism has created greater awareness of the need for women to participate in politics, and pressure has been placed on countries by international agencies, resulting in some marginal gains made by women. The findings of this study support the claim that by empowering women politically, the stability of democracy will be enhanced and the image of Pakistan in the international community will benefit. The study also provides several recommendations, including: 1) stronger policies for women's political participation; 2) expanding educational reforms; and 3) increased institutional support for women's political participation

KEYWORDS Women Empowerment, Political Participation, SDG 5, Gender Equality, Pakistan, Soft Power, Democracy, Women's Rights

Introduction

Women's empowerment is one of key issues in global politics & development. No country can be sustainably developed unless women have equal access socially, economically & politically. Although women make up nearly half of the population in Pakistan, they have historically had a stigmatized role in government, thus limiting the proportion of women represented at all levels of political and decision-making institutions. Women's political participation is the basis of democracy, inclusion in governance systems, and participation in formulating public policies through the contribution of women's voices. Women's Empowerment is defined as the process whereby women become empowered and have the capacity to make decisions on their own behalf, exercise their

rights, and be able to participate equally with men in all aspects of societal life. There are various aspects of women's empowerment, such as social, education, economic, & political. Political empowerment is the most important aspect of women's empowerment as it will give women the power to shape laws, policies, and the governance system. Voting, becoming a politician, being part of political parties, and involvement in public discourse fall under women's political participation.

The Sustainable Development Goals for gender equality (Goal 5) are getting rapid acceptance around the world. In this regard, the UN through its members has made a commitment to try and attain goal 5 (gender equality) through empowerment of women and girls, enhancing their participation in the society in Pakistan. Moreover, Pakistan has also committed to contributing towards the attainment of SDG 5 through empowerment of women and reducing gender discrimination. Soft Power is an approach that was defined by Joseph Nye, where Soft Power refers to the ability of a state to influence other nations as well as individuals using attraction and image and not force. The idea of equality and empowerment of the genders creates an image that favors that particular nation within the domain of international relations. This results in the development of Soft Power in Pakistan, as empowerment enables it to look good in terms of global relations, fosters democracy, and contributes to improving society. Despite the fact that there are various reforms and strategies for women's empowerment being developed in Pakistan, patriarchy continues to pose a major hindrance to women's empowerment (challenges of women's empowerment in Pakistan are illiteracy, dependence on men, economic inequality, social and political instability, violence against women, and cultural restrictions). Nevertheless, women are increasingly participating in politics, media, civil society, and public affairs.

Literature Review

Discussed in detail by different scholars, the social, political, and developmental dimensions of women's empowerment and political participation are very important. According to Naila Kabeer (1999), empowerment represents the ability of an individual to make strategic life choices that had previously been denied. Political participation is shown to be considered one of the most influential indicators of empowerment because it often means that women will have some influence in contributing to governance and policymaking.

Based on Ali's readings (2021), researches in Pakistan have shown that women's political participation, therefore, has gradually gotten better throughout years, thanks to constitutional reforms, reserved seats, and coming to awareness. But many researchers argue that just representation is not enough without the power in actual decision-making handed to women. They also point out that cultural traditions, patriarchal norms, and the absence of a stable economy stand as impediments for women in active politics.

UNDP (2022) research points out that gender equality is important for sustainable development. SDG 5 is the one to cease the misery of discrimination in women's equal participation and empower them politically and economically. There have been various policies instituted within Pakistan for the purpose of transforming the ideal into reality, yet the implementation gap still stands as a major obstacle.

Joseph Nye (2004) states that when a nation supports women's right and has many women in high-ranking leadership positions, it is seen as a progressive and democratic place and earns the country respect and credibility from other countries as a result of its support for women. Therefore, empowering women will be beneficial to that country in both its own domestic growth and internationally.

There is substantial evidence that women can positively contribute to a nation through their role as leaders. UN Women (2023) discusses female leadership within Pakistan, and how females like Fatima Jinnah and Benazir Bhutto have historically fought against the traditional structure of institutions within Pakistan, giving rise to more women leading public lives. Women in Pakistan are benefiting from the growing levels of support from the media, educational institutions, and civil society organizations as they increase their political participation and become more aware of their rights.

The existing literature (research papers, reports, case studies, etc.) offers a plethora of insight regarding the relationship between women empowerment and political representation, but there is still a great need to create the connection between these two topics and the Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) and the concept of soft power in relation to Pakistan. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how women's empowerment facilitates democratic development and builds Pakistan's reputation in the international community.

Material and Methods

This study is qualitative and descriptive in nature, using secondary sources (books, journal articles, international organization reports, government publications, newspapers, and online academic sources). The descriptive method is used to illustrate the relationship between women's empowerment, political participation, SDG 5, and soft power in Pakistan. In this investigation, the aim is to examine how women have historically participated in the political system, evaluate the current political environment for women in Pakistan, identify the challenges women face as they participate in the political system, and identify policy responses or initiatives developed to support increased female political participation. Research conducted through both scholarly and institutional sources will be analyzed to develop a better understanding of the progress Pakistan has made regarding the participation of women in politics as well as barriers to women's political participation that remain in place. The use of qualitative methods will provide a more complete understanding of the social and political reality of women in Pakistan.

Conceptual Framework: Women Empowerment, Political Participation, and Soft Power

The empowerment of females refers to a broad range of issues that fall within the realm of women's needs, including social autonomy, economic independence, access to education, and political engagement. Political empowerment is particularly critical as it allows female citizens to impact the workings of government and help support the national growth of a country through their involvement. Without female citizens taking part in the institutions comprised by democracy, democracy is unable to function properly. Females participate politically when voting in elections, being members of political parties, running for office during elections, participating in an active campaign, and serving in positions of public office. Each of these forms of political engagement by females results in transforming women from passive, spectator members of their community to engaged, active participants as well-both for the woman herself as well as for her community.

In his theory on "soft power," Joseph Nye explains how countries create their influence through means of attraction rather than by means of coercion. This can be exemplified in today's world by how nations treat their women within society and their dedication towards achieving gender equality within those societies, through potential means of success. The country exhibiting the highest empowerment levels towards women through multiple arenas, such as leadership positions, opportunities in education, and women's rights, will benefit by attaining a more favorable perception both domestically

and internationally. As such, this empowerment will serve to enhance that state's soft power with respect to its reputation as well as position in terms of international relations.

The implementation of the abovementioned strategies and advances toward women's empowerment will contribute positively toward enhancing Pakistan's soft power via a rise in female representation in areas such as government, media, education, foreign affairs, and civil society, resulting in the development of a publicly perceived image as a mature and inclusive democracy. To have the same effect, these moves will allow Islamic individuals to change worldwide opinion of Islam while enhancing the positive image of Muslims as an advanced group with respect for the international community and human rights.

Historical Evolution of Women's Political Participation in Pakistan

Women remain key participants today in politics in Pakistan but are often held back by societal and cultural barriers to clearly participating in politics. Women such as Fatima Jinnah were among the first pioneers to advocate for women's political involvement in Pakistan while supporting democracy and constitutionalism. Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was the first female head of government in a Muslim-majority country, which symbolizes the substantial contributions by women through politics, and establish Pakistan's importance among nations of the world. The constitutional provisions that have been established to provide for representation of women are an important component of women's involvement in politics. The use of reserved seats in the provincial and national assemblies is one method by which the number of women legislators has been increased. Political reforms enacted by successive Pakistani governments to increase the number of female voters registered and the number of women voting on election day will continue to help increase the number of female legislators.

Current Status of Women's Empowerment in Pakistan

Women's economic empowerment is slowly but steadily improving with greater engagement of women in the banking industry, as well as in entrepreneurship, healthcare, media, teaching, and technology. Digital and online business platforms provide new opportunities for women to be entrepreneurs. Financial independence from work has positive effects on a woman's self-confidence, leading to increased political and social engagement. In addition, women's political engagement has increased rapidly; women are now campaigning for office, engaging in political campaigns, and serving in parliament. Increased numbers of reserved seats have increased the number of women represented within Parliament at both the national and provincial levels. Women elected as politicians have favored legislative change in relation to domestic violence, sexual harassment, access to education, and child rights.

There are many different ways in which women's empowerment has been communicated and built up through the various forms of media (social media, television shows and public conversations) and have increased global awareness of gender equality and rights for women. In particular, female journalists and activists are using social media as a platform to express dissent against the discrimination of women, among other things. Although there have been advancements in the area of women's empowerment and equality, those advancements have not yet closed the gap that exists in terms of gender inequality in Pakistan. There continues to be restricted access for women to education, health services, economic development opportunities, and political participation, with particularly limited access being experienced by women in rural areas. Furthermore,

women's freedom and agency are still affected by the patriarchal system regarding their ability to participate in decision-making processes.

Women's Political Participation and SDG 5 in Pakistan

Goal 5 targets empowering girls and women through the provision of equal opportunities regarding Gender Equality. An important factor towards attaining this goal involves political participation, whereby women must be equally represented within government bodies to facilitate inclusive development. In relation to this goal, there have been many efforts taken by Pakistan for the betterment of goals of SDG 5 regarding the involvement of women within governmental bodies. In particular, through reserved seats for women in the legislative process, more female representation has been achieved within the legislature. Measures have also been implemented by the Election Commission of Pakistan towards improving women's opportunities to register and participate in the election process. The empowerment of women helps to achieve SDG 5 by promoting equality, reducing discrimination, and enabling women's political participation in order to ensure that public policies are responsive to the needs and desires of women and other marginalized communities. Moreover, the empowerment of women adds to Pakistan's soft power on a global scale as many international institutions, organisations, and foreign states are now assessing countries based on their human rights performance (with particular emphasis to gender equality) and democratic values. Pakistan's recent improvements in terms of women's representation, access to education, and women's rights through legal reforms will create a favorable international reputation and enhance Pakistan's diplomatic position.

Challenges and Limitations

The increase in women's participation in Pakistan has developed over time; however, many barriers to the advancement of women continue to exist. Perhaps the largest barrier to women's empowerment is society's patriarchal nature. In many parts of the country, women are commonly dissuaded from participating in political or public engagement due to the tendency to attribute politics to males. A large portion of women's engagement is linked to their educational level; therefore lower rates of education/awareness relating to the political system can lessen a Woman's ability to engage in politics as well. Women in rural settings tend to incur added difficulties resulting from low educational achievement and lack of access to educational facilities. Additionally, women become economically dependent on men as a result of the costs associated with political involvement and/or the need for support to engage in politics. Women who act as political activists or politicians are also adversely affected by violence and harassment directed towards their person as well as through online communication and intimidation. This can lead to women being discouraged from participating in politics due to fears of losing their lives and well-being or fears of losing support from family, friends, and social networks. The lack of implementation of existing laws to protect and enhance the rights of women in Pakistan continues to pose a challenge to women. Over the last few years, several new laws have been put into place to assist or protect women. However, the systematically dysfunctional nature of law enforcement agencies, and the lack of accountability and/or transparency from law enforcement personnel, has rendered these laws ineffective. Thus, women typically experience difficulties obtaining access to justice and/or equitable opportunities. At times, media representations of women politicians create bias through an emphasis on either physical appearance or family ties (as opposed to "politicking"), and manifest a bias against women leaders. Consequently, this impedes society's overall perception of women in leadership roles. Finally, there is an immense void between the

perceptions of women leaders in the community in terms of representation and actual power.

Government and Institutional Initiatives

Various initiatives aimed at enabling the empowerment and political participation of women has been undertaken by the Government of Pakistan. Through the introduction of constitutional reforms and reservations for seats for women in assemblies, the representation of women in assemblies has increased significantly. Several laws have also been put in place, including laws to prevent harassment, domestic violence, and provide protection for women; all of which continue to be introduced. The Election Commission of Pakistan has also made it their mission to promote the registration of women voters and increase women's participation in elections. The awareness campaigns and monitoring mechanisms put in place have aided in the inclusion of women in elections. The role of civil society organisations, and non-government organisations is invaluable to women empowerment. Many organisations implement leadership programs, awareness campaigns, educational workshops, and provide legal assistance to all the women who require it. All of these services have supported a considerable number of women to become conscious of their societal, political and legal rights. Across the globe, both UN organisations such as the United Nations (UN) and UN Women and UNDP, have provided funds and are involved in programmes and policy development regarding gender equality and support for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 5.

Conclusion

The role of women in empowering them to participate politically, in turn helping to improve democracy, develop society and provide a more effective, equitable, and humane form of governance, is crucial to the progress of Pakistan towards becoming a country that is fully engaged in democratic governance. This research examined the connections between women's empowerment, political involvement by women, availability of sustainable options as it pertains to SDG5, and international soft power in relation to the country of Pakistan. The results demonstrate that while women continue to experience extreme cultural, economic, and prejudice-related barriers (i.e., a long history of discriminatory practices related to gender and direct access to jobs and education), women have achieved marginal positive progress via legislative changes, equitable access to educational opportunities, representation in political offices, and increasing public awareness regarding women's rights and issues of gender discrimination.

Countries that promote women's rights and gender equality typically look at being of service to other countries and receive more esteem from other countries. Therefore, in order to further establish legitimacy for Pakistan as a nation, dealing diplomatically with other nations by continuing to improve gender equality in Pakistan and supporting the advancement of women in Pakistan, will lead to an increased level of international acknowledgement of Pakistan's legitimacy as a nation, which will ultimately elevate Pakistan's stature both at home and abroad. Women can exercise their right to participate in political processes through their participation in governance and the making of public policy. Women leaders and activists have played a significant role in promoting the democratic development of Pakistan and contributing to the social consciousness of this nation. The growing number of women participating in the political realm is evidence of the positive change that has been introduced to society. This study has also shown that Women Empowerment is not only a domestic issue but has also become an important source of soft power at the international level. To ensure SDG 5's long-term sustainability, there needs to be a deliberate implementation of policy reform and institutional change;

continuous access to educational opportunities and serious transformations in social norms that exist among Pakistan's citizenry. For this to happen, Pakistan must continue to invest in the empowerment of women; only then can they achieve their goals of developing inclusively and sustaining democracy as an institution. Societies in which women have equal access and opportunity to achieve their full potential will develop sustainably and peacefully, whilst at the same time generating respect amongst other countries throughout the world.

Recommendations

- Investments made by Pakistan in female education will empower women and develop their political consciousness, and as a result, will increase women's confidence in themselves as well as their involvement in society.
- Political parties should give "opportunities" to women candidates, which will enable them to take part in decision-making processes and not merely in tokenistic participation.
- Laws regarding the protection of women's rights, equal participation in workplaces, and women's participation in politics should be implemented by the government. Resources that can empower women to participate in the development of their respective societies should be made available through governmental organizations devoted to empowering women.
- To encourage and promote participation by women in politics, awareness campaigns must be implemented to create a better understanding of the traditional role of women in rural and conservative areas, to encourage women's involvement in these communities; awareness campaigns should also address the challenges that have been created by gender bias.
- To help women participate in governance, those who have attained positions of governance or are engaged in political activities should be protected from harassment, violence, and abuse through the internet; to encourage the participation of women in governance, there is a need to ensure that there are safe spaces for all women.
- This is important to the positive portrayal of female leaders in the media since it can be considered a strategy of emphasizing their qualities and capabilities. Portrayal of female leaders in the media through responsible journalism can be perceived as an initiative of empowering women to participate in governance.
- Pakistan will link the concept of women empowerment to that of soft power and, hence, as a result of empowering its female leaders and promoting women education and equality, it will build strong relationships with other nations.

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