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The Journey of Women's Political Representation in KP's Local Bodies: Achievements, Challenges, and Future Outlook**Ikram Ullah**

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Abstract

This paper examines the state of women's political representation in the local governance structures of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. While constitutional mandates and quota systems have increased the numerical presence of women in local bodies, substantive participation remains constrained by structural, sociocultural, and institutional barriers. The study explores historical trends in women's electoral participation, evaluates the legal and institutional framework supporting their inclusion, and investigates the lived experiences of elected female representatives across diverse districts such as Swat, Dir, Peshawar, and the merged tribal areas. Drawing on electoral data, civil society reports, and qualitative field evidence, the analysis highlights the persistent influence of patriarchal norms, tokenism, and limited political empowerment, especially in rural and conservative regions. Additionally, the article delves into the motivations and pathways through which women enter politics, the support mechanisms provided by political parties and NGOs, and the critical gaps in capacity-building, budget access, and decision-making roles. In response to these challenges, the paper offers policy recommendations centered on legal reforms, civic education, digital inclusion, and long-term leadership development. It argues that fostering feminist leadership pipelines and ensuring meaningful participation of women in local governance are essential not only for democratic equity but also for improving governance outcomes. The article concludes that without systemic and sustained interventions, women's representation in KP's local bodies risks remaining symbolic, rather than transformative.

Keywords: *women's political participation, local governance, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, gender quotas, patriarchy, electoral reforms, civic empowerment, Pakistan.*

Introduction

The political participation of women has been considered as one of the important factors in conclusion about the health of democracy and gender equality in the world. During the last three decades, the international institutions, national governments, and civil society organizations combined efforts resulted in the measurable improvement of female representation in legislatures, local councils, and executive offices (Krook & Norris, 2014). Affirmative action and quotas have been some of the most important tools with regard to correcting the historical exclusion, and the effects have been varied but considerable in terms of women representation in the political fronts. As of 2024, women make up about 26.9 percent of national parliaments around the world, which is a significant increase compared to preceding decades; nevertheless, it is evidence of gaps. Such a lack of representation is even more stark when broken down at a sub-national level, especially in areas where patriarchal cultures sufficiently entrenched, female mobility is restricted, or the area experienced conflict in the past (Bauer, 2018).

One area in which women political representation is of serious concern is the local governance since this is where women are directly involved in the day to day activities like water supply, medical care, education and community development. When women are empowered at the grassroots, inclusive policy-making is possible and in many instances, it facilitates wider changes in gender relations in the community (Beall, 2005; Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). The research has indicated that women in local governments commonly focus on social services, women rights advocacy, and their more transparent and participatory leadership (UN Women, 2022). Additionally, institutionalization of the political participation of women at a local level is critical in building the leadership pipelines at the provincial and national politics. It provides a training ground, forms networks and increases the legitimacy of the female candidates in the case where they might face resistance in the male-dominated political system (O Neil and Domingo, 2015).

The presence of women in politics in Pakistan has been influenced by constitutional provision, party politics as well as religious-cultural struggles. The reserved seats of women, which became institutionalized in the early 2000s through the devolution reforms by then General Musharraf, provided a historical point-of-entry of thousands of women in the local government structures (Bari, 2010). These structural enablers notwithstanding, tokenism, absence of autonomy, and gendered violence are some of the main socio-political barriers that have disadvantaged substantive participation. This is especially the case of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), where cultural conservatism and tribal traditions and legacies of conflicts have added additional problems. The lack of mobility and social stigma, as well as the fear of coercion, hinder women in their political participation in KP particularly in rural and tribal areas where the patriarchal systems of decision-making are still in place (Khan & Naqvi, 2020).

The paper at hand endeavours to understand the dynamics of the representation of women in the local bodies of KP, their gains and current challenges and possible solutions ahead. This is particularly so because it questions the extent of institutional structures like reserved seats and devolution efforts in affecting the level of women in governance. It also looks at the impacts of cultural norms, party structures as well as grass roots activism and how they develop the quality and quantity of participation in women. Presented as a field-based study, policy analysis, and feminist political theory, the article provides a multidimensional perspective of representation- not by numbers but through statistical representation of how and to what extent women decision-makers, influential people, and their visibility in the local councils of KP. The study is based on the fact that gender can be understood as a political formation and that it would contribute both to academic discourse and policy changes that would lead to achieving equal governance.

Legal and Institutional Framework

Constitution of Pakistan gives a formal framework to representation of women in politics, promoting gender equality and local governance as state obligations. Article 32 highlights the necessity of developing local government bodies that have special representation of women whereas, Article 34 clearly outlines the requirement that the state should take steps to fully involve the women in every area of national life. In addition, another provision of the constitution, Article 140-

A, introduced by 18th Constitutional Amendment (2010), gives a mandate of devolution of political, administrative and financial authority to elected local governments. This legal context creates a strong argument on why women should be included in the grassroots and the local governance is an area that allows deepening of democracy. Yet, notwithstanding these forward-looking constitutional guarantees, there is a tendency to fail to enforce these rights and laws as a result of political inertia and resistance to social change because of patriarchal pressures, especially in provinces like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Kugelman, 2020; Shami, 2021). The mismatch in a constitutional intent and political practice has produced a space of formal rights that are absent in an operational sense. The inconsistent adherence to these articles that are worsened by the security issues and the conservative cultural environments has resulted in partial or tokenistic application of these requirements in KP (Ali & Nasir, 2023).

One of the most important legal initiatives towards inclusion of women in Pakistani society is the setting up of quota systems in local government. With the devolution plan of 2000-01 by General Pervez Musharraf, almost 33 percent of the seats in union, tehsil, and district councils were reserved to women. This quota significantly raised the numerical representation of women in local politics where more than 36,000 women got into the public offices across the country during the 2001 elections (Bari, 2010). Local Government Acts of 2013 and 2019 reintroduced the quota system in KP with reserved seats at a number of levels. Irrespective of such numerical benefit, such quotas frequently do not suffice to facilitate participation. According to many of the women councillors, they are forced to sit on the side of critical decisions and budgetary processes and are simply used as figureheads to meet the court limits (Batoool & Sattar, 2022). In addition, in most of the KP rural regions, the most women are not able to challenge even these reserved seats due to unwritten agreements between male elders which results into unopposed elections or proxy candidacies (Yousaf, 2018). Such practices beg the question of the transformational potential of quotas even in deeply patriarchal contexts and suggest a necessity of modes of enforcement beyond that of numerical representation.

Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and provincial laws are influential in the actualization of the women political involvement in the local government. Locally In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Local Government Acts of 2013 and 2019 were introduced in order to fulfil the terms of devolution set out in the 18th Amendment and stated institutional arrangements regarding the composition of the councils, elections and reserved seats. The ECP ensures delimitation, voter education as well as polling stations open to women and no woman is denied to contest elections. Although the ECP has at times acted against discriminatory actions such as agreements made to deny women their right to vote, its actions have been haphazard and reactive as opposed to proactive (Amin & Ali, 2020). Additionally, institutionalization of women political role has not been facilitated by the failure to conduct local government elections in KP at the appropriate time like in the case between 2015 and 2021. Uncertainties of the Local Government Acts on the authority of women councillors, budget management, memberships on committees also limit their impact on the outcome of governance (Shah, 2023). Accordingly, although the legal framework that facilitates inclusion is in place, it

usually operates in an ecosystem of governance that is both male-dominated and institutionally feeble towards the promotion of gender-equal participation in politics.

Electoral information and Trends in History

Political representation of women within the local bodies of Pakistan started when the Devolution of Power Plan (2000) was introduced by General Pervez Musharraf. In a landmark local elections in the year 2001, 33 percent quota of women was adopted in all the three levels of local government. The outcome of this was the unprecedented number of women entering the political office such as 36,000 being elected in the country and several thousands in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Bari, 2010). But this early impetus started to fade away in the following two election cycles. The quota was not abolished during the 2005 local government elections but based on field evidence we have seen an increase in the proxy approach to women participating in local elections as female family members and little policy impact of elected women (Zia & Bari, 2022). In the 2015 KP local elections under the Local Government Act 2013, women encountered severe sociopolitical opposition, and there were reports of jirgas dominated by men preventing women to vote and to stand. As the 2021 elections indicated, even though legal provisions were more well-defined and the political discourse of inclusion more salient, the number of women running in general seats was still low, which indicated that structural obstacles remained prevalent even after almost 20 years of the existence of the affirmative policy (Naz & Ahmad).

Although Pakistan has progressed legislatively with regard to representation of women, the real picture, as provided by the voter turnout and candidacy rates of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, is more limited. Regardless of the constitutional safeguards and quota distribution, in the 2015 local elections, voter turnout in a number of districts in KP was under 10 percent, and there were no women at all in some constituencies because of the informal male agreement to deny them a vote (Cheema et al., 2022). In the newly amalgamated tribal regions which were once FATA, the inaugural local elections in 2021, were also held where women were symbolically allowed to participate, but not sufficiently; voter turnout was much lower, compared with the settled areas. The discrepancy between law and practice is also revealed through candidacy patterns: although thousands of women were elected in reserved seats, less than 5 percent of women have contested in general seats, which demonstrates the internalized restrictions on women and the unwillingness of political parties to give general tickets to female applicants (Yousaf & Bano, 2020). In addition, a great number of elected women end up marginalized in the council proceedings, budgetary allocations and policy formulations which makes their work more ceremonial rather than practical. These figures prove that the quotas are not enough unless they are coupled with facilitating conditions that not only make women compete but also are empowered in political systems.

The stark regional inequalities that exist between the urban and rural areas and between the settled districts and the newly merged tribal regions are determining the level in which women shall participate in the political arena in KP. The presence of female voter turnout and the relatively larger pool of female candidates are generally recorded in urban centers like Peshawar, Mardan and Abbottabad on

reserved seats. Comparatively, there is a strong patriarchal culture in rural districts, particularly in southern KP district (Lakki Marwat, Kohat, and Bannu) where women are greatly disempowered to participate in voting and candidature (Khan & Akhtar, 2021). The case is worse in the merged tribal districts, where the political voice of women is a new development after the 25th Constitutional Amendment. Women have remained sidelines in local politics owing to the barriers imposed by culture, low literacy levels and the poor presence of states despite the constitutional provisions. In Bajaur and Mohmand, to give an example, women polling stations reported barely any votes in 2021, and female candidates were not prominent in the public domain because of mobility restrictions and conservative elements threatening those (Rehman & Nawaz, 2023). Such gaps imply that national and provincial policies should be made context-sensitive, and an emphasis should be put on gender inclusion in the traditionally excluded areas through context-specific legal, political, and educational initiatives.

Motivations and Pathways to Entry

The social-political reality in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa makes women enter the local politics as a result of their personal beliefs and family endorsements along with party affiliations. The first step to involvement in politics can be the family networks since most women enter politics through their families, particularly those families with male relatives who are politically active (fathers, husbands, or brothers). Such kinship connections are transgressors and gatekeepers as they open the doors to political spaces, but at the same time tend to restrict freedom of choice (Zia & Bari, 2022). In a lot of situations, women are nominated on reserved seats by political parties as they are required to meet the established legal quota, yet most of the time, they choose to nominate women that are closely related to the political leadership or popular families. It is a paradox, in which the process of political inclusion of women depends more on patronage rather than on merit or ideology (Krook & O'Brien, 2012). This is especially more so in KP, especially in rural or conservative regions. Female representatives are often asked to perform as surrogates of the male interests instead of being separate parts of the political process. However, one can also see an increasing number of women who break these standards due to more individual motives aimed at solving the issues that a community faces, at promoting education, or even combating gender inequities suggesting a shift in the motivation away from symbolic representation and toward material involvement.

In KP political parties have a key, but at times contradictory, role in the life course of women in politics. Even though the law has established the role of political parties in facilitating the inclusion of women, most of them lack well-developed internal systems of training or empowering female candidates beyond fulfillment of quotas. Studies indicate that women have been fielded by parties such as the Awami National Party (ANP), Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), both in urban and semi-urban areas although they tend to accommodate women with the help of token representation instead of focusing on capacity-building at the institution (Yousaf & Bano, 2020). On the other hand non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and grass-roots organizations have taken charge as key players in mobilizing and mentoring women at the grass-roots level. Leadership trainings, political and legal literacy programs have equipped women (particularly those of marginalized

regions) with resources to make sense and intervene in the political field (Naz & Ahmad, 2023). In combined tribal regions, societal networks tend to be more efficient than institutional mechanisms in motivating female participation especially through informal gatherings, vocational facilities or peacebuilding meetings. Such alternative places provide opportunities of legitimacy not only but also opportunities to build coalitions, which many women report as being very important in maintaining political engagement. The relationship between the NGOs and the dawning female leaders has hence become a fundamental element in the diversification of the means of political entry.

Education and social capital are becoming a strong determinant in the facilitation of women political involvement in KP. The women who are educated particularly those whose education has been in the teaching profession, the social workers, the lawyers, tend to seek political office as a combination of civic consciousness and legitimacy in the community. According to a research conducted by Khan-and Akhtar (2021), women who have secondary or tertiary education level are much confident to contest an election and efficient in using bureaucratic and the party systems. Political ambition has also been hatched by activism, especially rights based activism or disaster response efforts (e.g., post-2005 earthquake and or Covid-19 relief). Too many female activists find the way to the formal politics after years of advocacy on such topics as the education of girls, maternal health, or anti-violence projects. The efforts are further multiplied by social capital which is networks of trust, influence and mutual support. Women who are part of powerful social networks through communities or religion are usually pushed towards taking up some leadership or holding positions where they are allowed to engage their activism as long as it conforms to the socially approved practices of doing good work. But these enabling factors tend to differ significantly within the various geography of KP. In smaller or more conservative areas, low literacy and inflexible gender roles choke off such courses, necessitating intentional efforts to establish educational opportunity, exposure to the civic process, and pipeline development in terms of leadership potential among women aspiring to political office.

Structural and Sociocultural Barriers

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), values and gender norms are so patriarchal that they greatly impede the effective participation of women in local politics. There is also a rule that women do not participate in the life of the city and must focus on household duties, which is strictly located in the cultural traditions of that society as well as in the conservative interpretation of religion (Khan & Naqvi, 2021). These expectations are jelled in the form of limitations to the mobility of women without the presence of a male companion, confinement to public gatherings and social pressure associated with fierce female leadership. Such norms are more deeply engraved in rural and in merged tribal districts where even female candidates are not only opposed by communities but also by their families in many cases. These obstacles restrict access by women to political information, resources to run campaigns, and a means to reach voters, which are imperative to electoral victory and serving office properly (Naz & Ahmad, 2023). These challenges are complicated by low literacy levels, financial dependence, and conservative beliefs, all of which results in marginal representation or token representation.

The other significant disadvantage is the looming political violence and systematic marginalization; this is a point that discourages many women to even participate in politics in the first place. Cases of harassment, intimidation, and even physical violence on female candidates and elected representatives have been recorded particularly in election seasons or when local councils are debating (Bari, 2016). Most of the women end up being mere tokens even after they win elections- their representation in local organs suffice quotas but fails to result in real decision making. This usually is because they are not included in important committees, not provided with control on budgets and the existence of male counterparts in official and unofficial networks of influence. Another phenomenon, called proxy politics, also remains: women in government are forced to become the mouthpieces of male relatives, who take all the decisions (Zia & Bari, 2022). In consequence, even though KP can achieve numerical objectives of women representation, it is debatable whether the quantity and the quality of their participation are convincing. This trend continues the cycle in which women have no experience, exposure, and political efficacy, which only fuel the patriarchal stereotype that women are unfit to hold up leadership positions.

Although the Constitution of Pakistan and the local government acts has some provisions of the political participation of women like Article 32, 34 and 140-A, the execution of such provisions is not regular and mostly token like. Reserved seats are poorly covered by the law, and electoral systems have loopholes to exclude women in electoral systems by giving waivers to parties (Sayed & Mumtaz, 2020). In addition, there are no clear laws that govern the safety of women against harassment and indicate that they are safe in their offices, especially when in the limelight of their careers. The fact that complaint cells, legal aid or gender desks have not been put in place in KP further adds insult to the injury. They also hardly action the systemic exclusion or abuse, thereby creating scope to have impunity. The necessity of gender-sensitive policy audit and capacity-building of election officials is addressed numerous times by civil society organizations, and the political will is still not strong. Consequently, there is a large proportion of women who dare to enter the political field yet they do not have any institution that can protect them, which demoralizes them to even participate in this political arena and further strengthens the structural disadvantage that they already have in the political economy of the local governance in KP.

Experiences in Office

Women who are elected to local institutions in KP have had both amusing and frustrating experiences. As an example, female representatives, such as Zainab Bibi, have been credited with accessing community support of clean water and sanitation projects in Swat, despite stiff opposition amongst male members of the council and village elders (Naveed & Qaisrani, 2020). In a conservative part of Dir called Dir, female councillors have complained of being totally left out in the process of budget making with some even not being informed of council sessions (Shah & Mushtaq). The women in the urban centres such as Peshawar have relatively been given a chance to lead. The examples of Peshawar, in its Town-IV council, show that the women have been at the forefront fighting on issues related to the education of girls, access to reproductive services as well as solid waste management. Nevertheless, their success is always associated with their networks-

whether they are supported by political parties, civil society organizations or rich family members.

Although a number of women have contributed positively to governance, their gains are often stalled by internal council politics and bureaucracies. Female councillors complain that although they have been given official responsibilities, they do not have the right to implement projects or manage budgets on their own (Jafar, 2023). In certain councils, male chairpersons or Nazims take command and they distribute the workload in a manner that marginalizes women. In addition, when women endeavor to stand up, especially on matters that affect women like safety of women or violence against women, they are usually termed as troublemakers or are said to be acting beyond their mandate. This happens to be worsened by the setbacks in the disbursement of funds, role ambiguity, and the uncollaboration of the bureaucrats. A number of women also reported how they felt obligated to comply with male orders or face repercussions in the form of being denied access to resources in their respective constituencies or political isolation (Zia & Bari, 2022). However, there are women who have worked through informal coalitions on councils, where they have used sisterhood, mass media exposure, and NGO support to ram community-focused agendas.

The social networks that female councillors establish with men and local bureaucrats and the local actors are of great influence on the governance experience. The male colleagues especially patronize or marginalize women and hardly consider them as equal during deliberations on legislation or project (Khan & Naqvi, 2021). Other women have attempted to maneuver this scenario by allying and making strategic partnerships, albeit this is at times achieved with a tedious balance between commanding authority and creating backlash. Bureaucrats are also not all receptive to women leaders, some treat the women leaders as inexperienced and others take them seriously by taking part meaningfully when they are competent. As an example, in Charsadda, a woman councillor could cooperate with local administration to establish mobile health clinic in underserved communities, however, only after several months of negotiations and pressure by women rights groups. Locally based actors such as older people, religious leaders and schoolteachers may inhibit women action or support it according to their personal values and political status. The success of the projects headed by women in certain regions has slowly changed the mindsets of people implying that visible are continuous governance could gain respect and legitimacy in the long term (Naz & Ahmad, 2023).

Institutional and Political Party Support

The inclusion of women in political parties in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) can be deemed, in most cases, as a form of lip service, although the Constitution requires it, and the parties have their guidelines. Although women get appointed to reserved seats by the major political parties, including Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Awami National Party (ANP), and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) among others, they are hardly incorporated into mainstream campaign plans, or into the decision-making platforms. According to the research conducted by Bari (2020), women are often pushed to the margins of electoral politics where they are only nominated because of the necessity to meet the legal quotas and not their belief in their leadership ability. The inclusion of gender in party manifestos has

not been translated into practice where very few opportunities are accorded to women to either contest general seats or coordinate the campaigns at constituency level. Even on occasions that women contest the party leaderships assign them weak or unwinnable seats especially in conservative or rural areas of KP. Women councillors in most instances complain that male party bosses do not want them to be seen and they do not want them to move around and campaign funds or media space are not available to them (Zia & Sadaf, 2022). This has continued to keep women as low in political presence and bargaining power as a result of which a cycle of marginalization occurs.

Since the issue is part of the systematic exclusion of women in political institutions, training and capacity building have been some of the actions of the civil society and governmental bodies. NGOs like Aurat Foundation and Shirkat Gah in partnership with other donors like UN Women and GIZ have provided pre-election training in legislative procedures, budgeting, public speaking and outreach into the community (Shah & Mushtaq, 2021). Such interventions have played a particularly significant role in the preparation of newly elected women councillors in the districts including Swabi, Swat and Bannu. These programs are however not so sustainable because of lack of budget, project life span and even coverage of remote or conservative regions. Some of these have been tried to be institutionalized through government-led training modules introduced in the Local Government Acts (2013 and 2019) by KP. The absence of timely training, as well as training that takes into account the specifics of the workplace, have been mentioned by many representatives of women, and in certain cases, they did not even know that such training was being offered (Naveed & Qaisrani, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105160>). Irrespective of these shortcomings, women who actually take part in capacity-building programs tend to come out of the experience much more confident and politically conscious, showing that systematic and consistent political education of women is necessary.

Empowerment is a key indicator of local governance access, both in terms of finances and policymaking, where the women of KP probably lack any significant access to this access or policy making. Women councillors have little or no control on development funds and they are absolutely not likely to serve in any powerful budgetary or planning committees. As Jafar (2023) explains, there are numerous women recruited to serve in such soft committees as the education or culture committees but are systematically not allowed to serve in financial or infrastructure-related committees or those connected to law. Although in some countries laws give the same rights to propose and implement development schemes, women lack the ability to exercise these rights because of bureaucratic gatekeepers and male-dominated political system. Other women have ingeniously attempted to overcome such constraints by collaborating with non-governmental organizations and district managers to initiate locally based development works, however these collabs are not sustainable with a limited budget and institutional support (Naz & Ahmad, 2023). Moreover, being members of elected councils, women often encounter obstacles on the way to adoption of their resolutions or policy contributions. This highlights why structural reforms to promote meaningful inclusion through women, both in terms of tools, networks and authority, are necessary in ways that go beyond mere formal inclusion.

Future Outlook and Strategic Interventions

The prospects of the female political representation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) must be pursued through intentional reforms on the basis of substituting tokenistic quotas with substantive empowerment. This includes amongst other things the amendment of electoral laws to increase the competence of women in competing in the general seats to bring parity in the candidacy not relying on the reserved seats altogether. Even researchers such as Khan and Zia (2021) stress that unless we open the arena to competitive action, women will continue being structurally subordinate to party hierarchies that are unlikely to encourage them to become powerful. Moreover, reforms in devolution need to be taken further so as to ensure that local administration and financial control are given to local governments in which women are elected. This would enable them to have direct influence on budgets, development plans and the service delivery agenda as opposed to being decorative members of the councils. Even gender budgeting should be institutionalized as law because it would help to make sure that the priority of women will be taken into account consistently, in terms of healthcare, education, mobility (Naz & Ahmad, 2023). These reforms entail not only the need to make changes in legislation but also the political will power to implement compliance and transparency at a district and tehsil level.

Women empowerment in governance is not a short term action which can be achieved by reforming the law but rather a long-term sociocultural action. In this respect, education will continue to be the most transformative tool. The education of girls, especially in the rural and tribal regions of KP, is a precondition of the formation of the future generations of politically active and qualified women leaders. It has shown that there is a direct relationship between higher education and political participation particularly in South Asia (Bano, 2020). The media also plays a very crucial role especially as the watchdog and the voice of women in the political arena. Their primacy in the press and TV media should make women councillors visible and add their work to the agenda so that the female political leadership can become a regular topic. It is unfortunate, however, that media presentations in KP usually tend to marginalise or continue to stereotype women in a manner that makes them unworthy to be taken seriously. As Naz (2022) points out, the concept of digital inclusion, including access to smartphones, social media literacy and online civic forums, can be used to enable women to overcome social isolation and reach out to constituents rather than having to pass through the hands of patriarchal gatekeepers. Digital training of elected female representatives by the state would increase their effectiveness and outreach considerably in the governance.

The future of a sustainable women in politics in KP identifies with developing feminist leadership pipelines whereby talents are nurtured at an early age and then nurtured through their political careers. This implies nurturing mentorship, in which successful women, who are councillors, activists and politicians, mentor their younger counterparts (and marginalized ones in particular). Bari (2020) says that mentorship and peer learning can be very important in guiding women through the obstacles of the institution and the backlash of patriarchy and the emotional wear and tear of political life. The political parties are mostly male-dominated and hierarchically organized and need to institutionalize women wings

that have real powers and resources at their disposal that they are not supposed to be ceremonial. On the same note, leadership incubators and fellowships that are women-specific in local governance should be given a priority by the civil society and donor-funded programs. These efforts should focus not just on skills training but also on feminist consciousness, negotiation tactics, coalition-building, and strategic planning. Additionally, fostering cross-party women's caucuses at the local level could enhance collective bargaining and policy influence. Investing in such structures ensures that women are not only included but are prepared, supported, and empowered to lead with resilience and vision.

Conclusion

The history of the representation of women in the local bodies of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is the story of a half-century of gains. However, it is also the story of the eternal struggle that still hinders the inclusive governance. Although, constitutional provisions, quota system and local government reform have allowed thousands of women to participate in the political arena, their entry is often symbolic more than substantive. Institutional impediments like the patriarchal tradition, gender discrimination, and inability to access the decision-making platform restrict the influence that can be achieved by women when elected. Moreover, the field evidence and data provided by the elections also points to some dramatic differences between regions, both in the urban-rural setting, and in the civil districts and newly assimilated tribal territories, where the socio cultural opposition is further rooted. These barriers notwithstanding, women in KP have shown to be resilient and empowered, relying on informal interactions, grassroots campaigns and growing academic achievement to gain a voice in the public arena.

Moving into the future, ensuring women political empowerment in KP can rely on a multidimensional approach that focuses on institutional gaps, cultural opposition and capacity limitations all at once. The enabling environment will be generated by reforms in electoral laws, greater enforcement of the quota law and further decentralization of control to allow women to transition between being passive participants to active power holders. It is also vital to note the capacity of political parties, media, social society, and community-based organizations to change the discourse of the population and create encouraging rigs. The investments in education, digital skills and leadership training may create a new step toward the participation of younger and more diverse women in the political arena. In the end, genuine local democracy in KP which is representative and transformative would not only need to accommodate the presence of women; it will also need to accommodate female leadership, decision making and policy influence. Gender equality in politics is not only a question of fairness but the very basis of making governance better, more accountable, and development-friendly across the province.

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