

Available Online at EScience Press

## Journal of South Asian Studies

ISSN: 2307-4000 (Online), 2308-7846 (Print)

<https://esciencepress.net/journals/JSAS>

### Women's Political Participation in Pakistan: A Comparative Analysis of Barriers, Challenges, and Opportunities in the General Elections of 2018 and 2024

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#### ABSTRACT

This research investigates women's involvement in Pakistan's political sphere, offering a comparative analysis of their participation, the barriers they face, the challenges encountered, and the opportunities available during the general elections of 2018 and 2024. The study underscores the changing dynamics of female political engagement, critically examining the structural impediments that hinder their participation while exploring avenues for improved representation and empowerment in upcoming electoral frameworks. In the general elections of 2018, women held 20.5% of seats in the National Assembly of Pakistan, showing a modest development of women's participation in politics with 46.89% women voter turnout, but still, not a satisfactory level of participation. In the 2024 general elections in Pakistan, women's participation was lower than in the 2018 GE, as female voter turnout remained at 42.6%. This study answers why the turnout of women always remains low in GE. Women must be appreciated and encouraged by civil society, media and political parties to increase women's participation in politics and enhance the democratic process. An institutional program or initiatives to increase political awareness among women must be started. Political parties and governmental institutions must proactively cultivate more inclusive and welcoming environments for women to counteract the discouraging perception of male-dominated political arenas. This research attempts to analyze the barriers and Challenges that hinder women's political participation through descriptive-analytical research methodology.

**Keywords:** Women, Participation, Challenges, Barriers, Elections, Opportunities.

#### INTRODUCTION

Women's active political participation is essential for democratic development and the advancement of gender equality. In Pakistan, there has been considerable discourse and concern regarding pursuing gender neutrality within the political landscape. However, socio-cultural, economic and political barriers still prevent women from fully participating in politics and a satisfactory representation in decision-making. Moreover, the national and provincial legislature is male-dominated, and women have less representation (Awan, 2018).

There is a notable disparity between the representation of women in political decision-making and their participation in the whole political process; according to the Global Gender Gap Report 2021, Pakistan ranks 153

out of 156 nations in this regard (World Economic Forum, 2021). Twenty percent of Pakistan's National Assembly members are women, while seventeen percent of the Senate members are women (Sobia Naseer & et al, 2023).

Despite the legislation guaranteeing women's rights, still disparity persists across political parties and elected offices in Pakistan. Pakistan has passed legislation guaranteeing women's rights and increased access to education for females, among other measures, demonstrating the country's commitment to empowering women and achieving gender equality. Nevertheless, women in Pakistan continue to encounter numerous obstacles and problems while trying to become involved in politics, which is why their participation is limited (Abbas, 2019).

GE 2018 showed an increase in women's political participation than GE 2013. Political parties (PP) and legislative organs introduced gender quotas regarding political participation, which was one of the important moves towards developing the democratic process in Pakistan. However, despite such developments in domestic politics, women's participation remains low, along with socio-cultural norms that pose hurdles. On the other hand, women face difficulties, harassment and lack of support from their families when they come to join political activities.

Moreover, the 2024 general elections represented a critical juncture for advancing the progress initiated in 2018. As the political landscape continues to evolve, there is an increasing acknowledgement of the significance of women's participation in political processes, which is essential not only for achieving gender equality but also for promoting inclusive governance. Many stakeholders, including civil society organizations, political parties, and governmental institutions, actively advocate for women's rights and strive to cultivate an environment supporting their political engagement (Chaudhry, 2018). The rise of awareness campaigns aimed at educating women about their voting rights and the importance of their involvement in the electoral process indicates a notable shift in societal perceptions regarding women's roles in politics.

This study focuses on the comparative aspects of women's political participation in the 2018 and 2024 general elections, focusing on the barriers and the emerging opportunities. However, the development of the democratic process and women's political engagement is crucial not only for attaining gender equality but also for ensuring that the diverse perspectives and needs of the entire population are reflected in the country's governance (Choudhry, 2018).

#### **Puzzle Statement**

Gender quotas, different initiatives and programs have been introduced to increase the women's participation in politics, but their participation is lower than was expected in GE 2018 and 2024 in Pakistan. However, an increase was noticed in 2018 GE, but overall, women's participation was low in political offices. Before the GE 2018, many civil society organizations took measures to increase women's participation in the political process, and the government also introduced many programs to mobilize female voters and encourage females to run the political offices (Dar, S. A., & Shairgojri, A. A., 2022). Yet

women faced several hurdles and difficulties rooted in socio-cultural norms that created obstacles for them to play their societal leadership roles. When 2024 GE were held, questions were raised about the barriers and challenges that were hurdles regarding women's political participation.

Disparities in access to education and economic resources continue to hinder women's political participation, especially for those who live in rural and marginalized communities. As Pakistan approaches the next elections, exploring how these barriers can be effectively addressed is crucial. What strategies can foster a more inclusive political environment for women? How can civil society, political parties, and government institutions collaborate to support women's contributions to governance? This comparative analysis examines the factors influencing women's political participation between the 2018 and 2024 elections, seeking actionable insights for meaningful change in Pakistan's political landscape.

#### **Research Questions**

- What were the specific challenges faced by women candidates during the 2018 and 2024 elections?
- What are the key socio-cultural and institutional barriers that have hindered women's political participation in the 2018 and 2024 elections?
- What lessons can be drawn from women's experiences in the 2018 elections to inform strategies for enhancing their participation in the 2024 elections?

#### **Research Objectives**

- To examine and compare women's political participation levels in the 2018 and 2024 general elections in Pakistan, including voter turnout and representation in political offices.
- Analyze the socio-cultural, institutional, and economic barriers hindering women's political participation in both election years.
- To evaluate the possible solutions and suggestions to increase the women's participation in the political process in future.
- To highlight the developmental policies to promote gender equality in political offices, to empower women in the political spectrum of Pakistan

#### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In this article, both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Primary and secondary data have been

used to analyze the barriers women face in political participation. In primary data, reports of FAFEN and different websites have been used with creating tables and charts to provide the base for empirical research. For conceptual framework, in secondary data, a numbers of articles, journals, online articles, and newspapers have been used. Moreover, comparative analytical technique is used in this research to analyze and examine the barriers, obstacles, challenges faced by women and opportunities for women in political participation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Political Participation

Political participation serves as a crucial avenue for women's empowerment within the political decision-making process. Historically, Women have faced significant obstacles in expanding their involvement in the political arena, which is essential for them to attain leadership positions, understand the political landscape, and actively contribute to integrating gender perspectives in policy-making (Zaheer, A., & Jabeen, S., 2016).

Shaikh's article analyzes the paradox surrounding women's political participation in Pakistan, where gender quotas serve to empower women while simultaneously allowing political elites to marginalize them. The study highlights that women's involvement is frequently confined to reserved seats, resulting in a limited presence of women in positions of substantial political authority (Shah, 2015).

Hussain conducts a historical analysis of women's political participation in Pakistan, tracing developments from the country's independence to the present. The article examines legal reforms, including establishing gender quotas and their effects on women's political engagement (Hussain, S. , 2017). Similarly, Abbas evaluates the implementation of gender quotas in Pakistan, assessing their effectiveness in enhancing women's political representation. While acknowledging an increase in female parliamentarians, Abbas contends that these quotas do not inherently translate into authentic political power for women.

### Barriers

Shah (2015) offers a comprehensive analysis of the structural and societal obstacles that hinder women's engagement in the political processes of Pakistan. The study explores the influence of patriarchal norms, the dynamics within political parties, and the prevalence of violence directed at female politicians. It underscores the

necessity of implementing targeted interventions to enhance women's representation in political leadership roles (Shaikh, 2020).

Raza and Nawaz investigate the socio-cultural and economic barriers that inhibit women's full participation in Pakistan's political landscape. Their research includes a case study focusing on women in rural areas, highlighting how insufficient political awareness and social constraints restrict their involvement in the political process (Raza, S., & Nawaz, S., 2017).

Ali and Tariq (2021) identify the specific challenges female political leaders encounter in Pakistan, including public scrutiny, limited financial resources, and resistance from male colleagues, while suggesting strategies to address these issues (Ali, 2000). Similarly, Haider and Khalid investigate the obstacles female candidates face during political campaigns, highlighting challenges such as harassment, insufficient funding, and their underrepresentation in these campaigns. In a related study, Iqbal and Khan (2020) examine the role of social media platforms in promoting women's political participation in Pakistan, noting that these platforms offer women a venue to express political opinions and mobilize support (Khan, 2009).

Choudhry investigates the factors influencing female voter turnout in Pakistan, considering the impact of socio-economic conditions, access to voting, and awareness campaigns on women's electoral participation. Ghafoor and Shabbir (2021) analyze the effects of political violence on female candidates and their engagement in elections, addressing the increasing incidents of violence against women in politics and the discouraging effect this has on their political involvement. Meanwhile, Malik and Usman emphasize the importance of education in empowering women to engage in politics, highlighting how political education, training, and awareness initiatives can significantly boost women's participation in elections and decision-making processes (Shabbir, M. S & et al, 2021).

Awan (2020) identifies several barriers that hinder women's political participation in Pakistan. These include socio-cultural constraints, such as traditional gender roles that prioritize domestic responsibilities over public engagement (Awan A. , 2020). Additionally, women often face intimidation and violence when attempting to enter the political arena, which discourages many from pursuing political careers. Economic factors also play a crucial role, as limited

access to financial resources and education restricts women's ability to campaign effectively.

### **Political Empowerment**

Durrani (2019) explores media's influence on women's political empowerment in Pakistan. The article discusses how media can catalyze women's political participation by providing opportunities for activism and presenting challenges due to prevailing societal norms that may hinder their engagement (Durrani N. &, 2018).

Conversely, despite the impediments above, the political landscape of Pakistan has witnessed incremental progress in women's political inclusion. The institutionalization of women's wings within established political parties and the strategic application of gender quota systems have enhanced their representational presence (Allauddin, D. S. H. A., & Khan Rind, Z., 2020). Consequently, these affirmative measures have contributed to a discernible increase in the number of women elected to sub-national and national legislative bodies, thereby affording them enhanced opportunities for articulating gender-specific interests and influencing policy formulation.

Empirical evidence suggests that incorporating women into political processes yields benefits beyond the realm of gender parity, contributing positively to the quality and efficacy of democratic governance. Scholarly analysis indicates that women legislators tend to exhibit a greater propensity to prioritize policy domains such as public health, education, and social welfare provision, areas recognized as crucial for comprehensive national development (Khan S. , 2020). This discernible shift in policy emphasis underscores the substantive importance of incorporating diverse gendered perspectives in formulating and implementing effective governance frameworks.

### **Political Parties and Women**

Yousaf investigates women's roles in Pakistan's political party structures, revealing that they frequently face marginalization despite their significant positions. Rehman and Siddique (2021) assess the effects of legal reforms, such as gender quotas and laws aimed at preventing violence against female politicians, on women's political participation in Pakistan. Ghulam and Khan discuss the importance of women's empowerment through political engagement as a vital component of social and economic development, emphasizing the roles of gender quotas, political education, and public awareness in facilitating this empowerment (Siddiqi, M.

U., 2015).

Sadiq and Ahmed analyze the cultural norms and social attitudes towards women in Pakistani politics. The article argues that traditional values and patriarchal structures impede women's political engagement (Saeed, 2019).

The above-reviewed literature shows that a number of researchers have shed light on the women's participation in the politics of Pakistan, but no one has presented a comparative analysis of women's participation in the general elections of 2018 and 2024 in Pakistan. This research particularly fills this literature gap.

### **Case Presentation**

#### **Historical Context of Women's Political Participation in Pakistan**

Both societal and institutional factors have always shaped the participation of women in Pakistan's political sphere. Women in Pakistan gained the right to vote in 1947, right after the country's independence (Porter, 2003). However, their political involvement remained low for several decades due to various social and cultural barriers.

The table 1 presents a historical overview of women's political representation in Pakistan from 1956 to 2024, highlighting the total number of seats, reserved seats for women, and the corresponding number of women elected on both reserved and general seats. The introduction of gender quotas in 2002 has increased women's representation in Pakistan's legislature, peaking at 21.3% in 2002 and remaining around 22.3% in 2008. However, the number of women elected to general seats has fluctuated, with a significant drop in 2024, where only seven women were elected, resulting in a total representation of 19.6%. This indicates ongoing challenges in achieving equitable political representation for women in Pakistan.

The rise of Benazir Bhutto in the 1980s marked a significant turning point for women's political engagement in Pakistan, inspiring many to pursue public office. The introduction of gender-specific seats in the National Assembly in the 2000s aimed to promote gender equality, though it did not immediately enhance women's political power. Despite ongoing challenges such as societal norms and economic inequalities, women in Pakistan have made notable advancements, particularly evident in the elections of 2018 and 2024.

Table 1. Women Political Participation in National Assembly from 1956-2024.

Election Year	Total Seats	Reserved Seats for Women	Women Elected on Reserved Seats	Women Elected on General Seats	Total Women Members	Percentage of Women
1956	310	10	10	0	10	3.22
1962	156	6	6	2	8	5.1
1965	156	6	6	0	6	3.8
1970	313	13	13	0	13	4.15
1972	144	6	6	1	7	4.9
1985	237	20	20	4	24	10.1
1988	237	20	20	2	22	9.3
1990	237	20	20	4	24	10.1
1993	217	0	0	4	4	1.8
1997	217	0	0	6	6	2.8
2002	342	60	60	13	73	21.3
2008	342	60	60	16	76	22.3
2013	342	60	60	9	69	20.3
2018	342	60	60	10	70	20.5
2024	342	60	60	7	67	19.6

Source: FAFEN Report on Women in General Elections 2024.

Table 2. Gender Gap from 2013 to 2024.

Regions	Absolute			Percent		
	GE-2013	GE-2018	GE-2024	GE-2013	GE-2018	GE-2024
KPK	2,297,064	2,600,361	1,960,675	16.4%	14.6%	8.9%
Islamabad	49,836	49,142	53,783	8.0%	6.4%	5.0%
Punjab	6,136,068	6,682,862	5,036,268	12.5%	11.0%	6.9%
Sindh	2,017,887	2,482,538	2,230,541	10.6%	11.1%	8.3%
Balochistan	494,117	672,636	660,381	14.8%	15.6%	12.3%
Total	10,994,972	12,487,539	9,941,648	12.8%	11.8%	7.7%

Source: FAFEN 2024, p. 5.

The gender disparity in voter turnout by region in Pakistan from the 2013 to 2024 general elections is shown in the table 2. Although the gender gap has generally decreased, suggesting gains in female voter turnout, the disparity is still substantial, particularly in conservative and rural areas like Punjab, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). Between 2013 and 2024, the gender gap shrank from 12.8% to 7.7%, with noteworthy gains in places like Islamabad. However, challenges persist, and the pace of progress varies regionally, reflecting both the success of reforms and the ongoing barriers to full gender parity in political participation.

#### Women's Participation in General Elections 2018 & 2024

The 2018 General Elections were significant regarding women's involvement in the political process. The

electoral system in Pakistan is designed to reserve 60 out of 342 seats for women in the National Assembly, with 10 seats in the Senate reserved for women. In addition to these seats, women also have the right to run for open seats. In 2018, Pakistan saw a considerable increase in female participation compared to previous elections.

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage distribution of males across different regions, specifically Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Islamabad, Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, and an overall category. Notably, Punjab exhibits the highest percentage of males at 39.40%, significantly exceeding the other regions. Islamabad and Sindh share an equal percentage of 16.90%, while Khyber Pakhtunkhwa shows a slightly higher proportion at 21.30%. Balochistan records the lowest percentage of males at 16.10%. The overall male percentage is also stated as 16.90%, aligning

with the values for Islamabad and Sindh, suggesting a potential averaging effect or a weighted average skewed by the lower percentages in most regions compared to

Punjab’s significantly higher figure. The chart’s title, "Percent Male," explicitly indicates the data being represented.

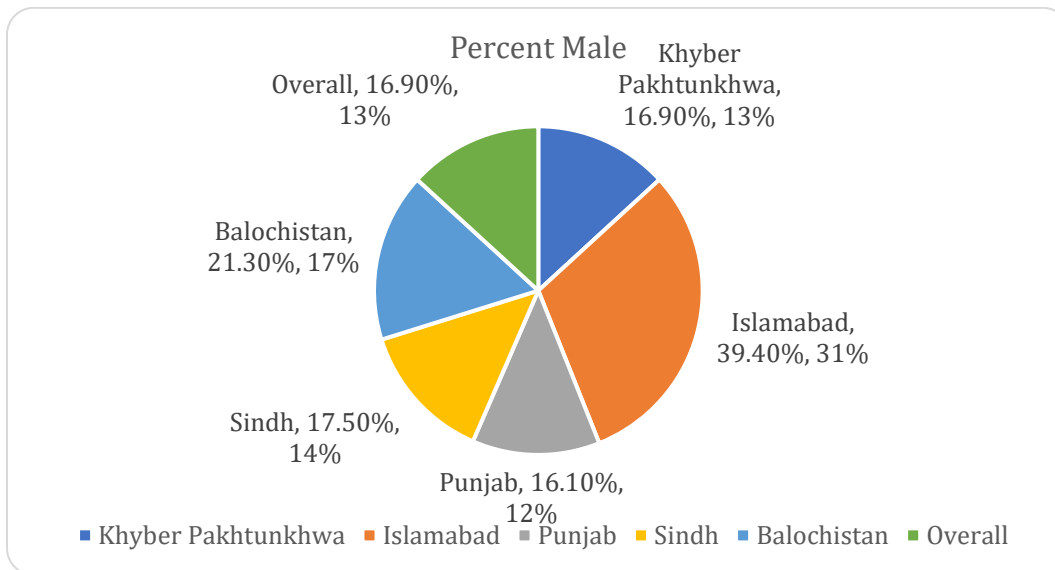


Figure 1. Change in registered voters from 2018 to 2024.

Source: FAFEN 2024, p. 11

**Voter Turnout:** In the 2018 elections, women’s voter turnout was a notable issue of debate. According to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), the gender gap in voter turnout was evident, although the gap had been narrowing over time. In some regions, particularly in rural and tribal areas, women were often discouraged or outright prevented from voting due to deeply ingrained patriarchal norms. However, urban areas witnessed a

higher rate of female participation. Despite these obstacles, the ECP’s efforts to engage women voters, including setting up women-friendly polling stations, made a positive impact. In the 2018 elections, the national female voter turnout reached 47.18%, which marked a modest increase from previous polls but still lagged behind male voter participation.

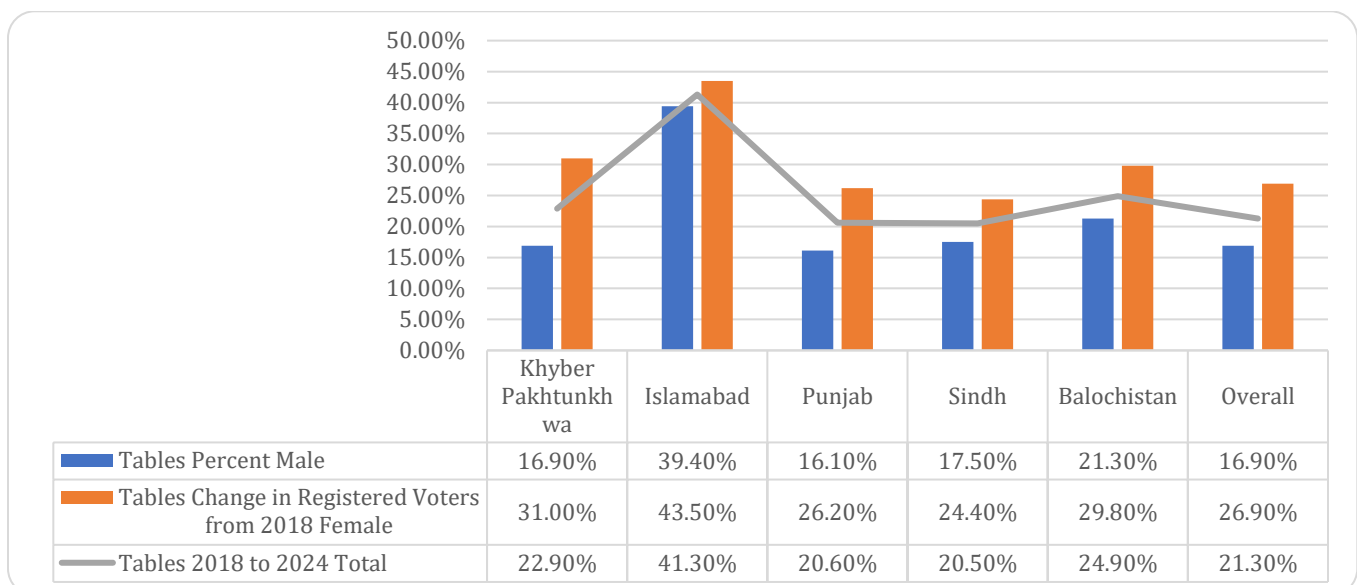


Figure 2. GE-2018 Category of constituencies by women turnout.

Source: FAFEN 2024, p. 14

Figure 2 presents data for various regions (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Islamabad, Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, and Overall) across three categories: "Tables Percent Male," "Tables Change in Registered Voters from 2018 Female," and "Tables 2018 to 2024 Total." "Tables Percent Male" is consistently the lowest across all regions, while "Tables Change in Registered Voters from 2018 Female" shows the highest values, particularly in Islamabad and

Balochistan. "Tables 2018 to 2024 Total" follows a fluctuating pattern, peaking in Islamabad and showing a general downward trend towards the "Overall" category. The chart highlights the disparities in these metrics across different regions, with Islamabad demonstrating notably higher values in voter changes and total counts compared to other areas.

Table 3. GE 2024 Category of Constituencies by Women Turnout.

Region Assembly	30%	30 -40%	41-50%	51-60%	60%	Breakdown	Postponed	Total
KPK	22	13	7	1		1	1	45
ICT				2		1		3
Punjab	1	22	66	45	2	5		141
National								
Sindh	7	27	22	3	2			61
Balochistan	4	5	5	1		1		16
National Total	34	67	100	52	4	8	1	266
KPK	54	41	12	6			2	115
Punjab	3	48	128	105	5	7	1	297
Provincial Sindh	26	48	39	12	5			130
Balochistan	15	12	13	5	4	2		51
Provincial Total	98	149	192	128	14	9	3	593
Grand Total	132	216	292	180	18	17	4	859

Source: FAFEN 2024, p.15

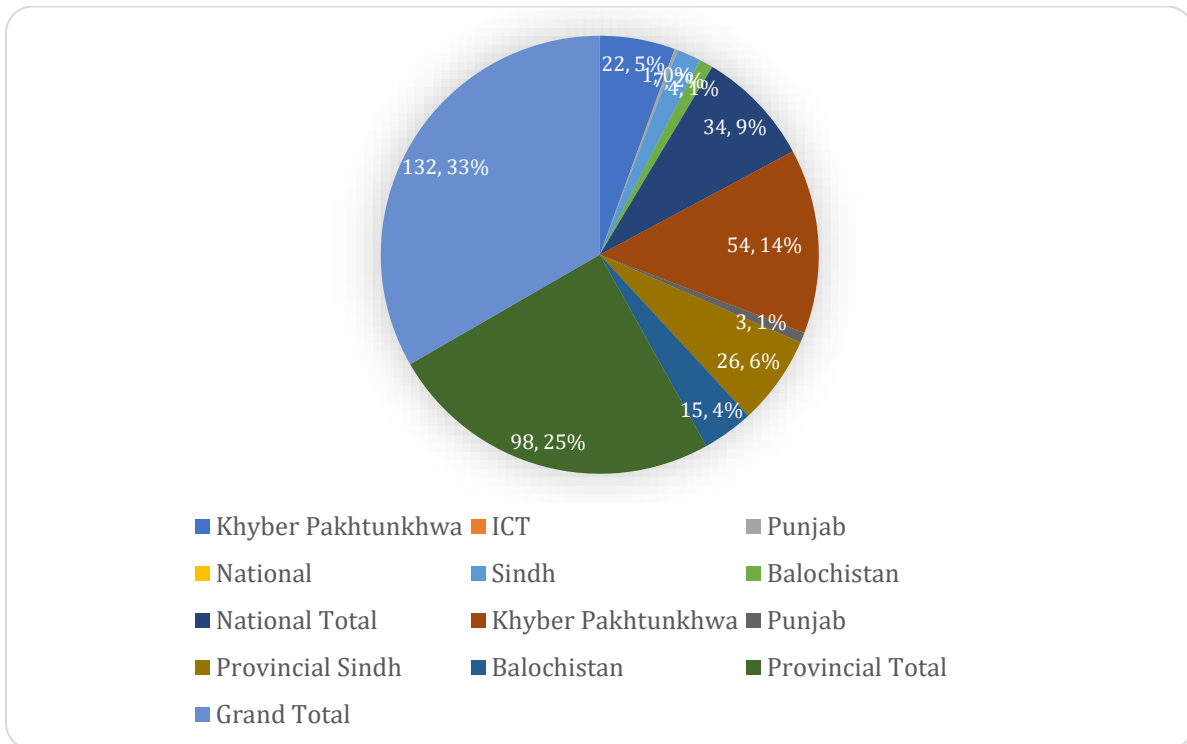


Figure 3. GE 2024 Category of Constituencies by Women Turnout.

Source: FAFEN 2024, p.15

The provided data consists of Figure 3 and Table 3 detailing assembly seat distribution across various regions in Pakistan. The pie chart visually represents the total number of seats allocated to each area, with Punjab holding the largest share at 132 seats, followed by Sindh at 98. The data presented illustrates the distribution of legislative seats across various regions, including Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and others, with a detailed breakdown by percentage ranges of votes received (e.g., 30%, 30-40%, etc.). The table differentiates between "National" and "Provincial" assemblies and includes categories such as "Postponed" and "Total" seats. Punjab holds the highest number of seats, with significant representation in the 41-50% and 51-60% vote ranges. The overall "Grand Total" of seats across all regions and

categories amounts to 859, providing a comprehensive perspective on seat allocation. However, this total is not visually represented in the accompanying pie chart.

**Women Candidates:** The 2018 elections resulted in 29 women being directly elected to the National Assembly, a historic achievement amid a record 420 female candidates. While many women benefited from established political connections and resources, numerous candidates struggled due to financial constraints and societal expectations. Despite the reserved seat system aimed at improving female representation, the low direct election rates highlight the ongoing marginalization of women in Pakistan's political process (FAFEN, Report on Women in General Election 2018 in Pakistan, 2018).

Table 4. No of constituencies by contesting women candidates in GE 2018 & 2024.

Assembly	Region	No female Candidate 2018	No female Candidate 2024	At least 1 female candidate 2018	At least 1 female candidate 2024
National	KPK	39	24	12	21
National	Islamabad			3	3
National	Punjab	72	47	69	94
National	Sindh	25	19	36	42
National	Balochistan	9	7	7	9
National	National Total	145	97	127	169

Source: FAFEN 2024, p.20-21

Table 5. Difference in Turnout: Male vs Female.

Assembly	Region	Exceeding Men	Equal	Less than Men	No Gender Breakdown	Postponed	Total
National	KPK	1		42	1	1	45
	ICT			2	1		3
	Punjab	1	3	132	5		141
	Sindh	2		59			61
	Balochistan			15	1		16
	Total	4	3	250	8	1	266
Provincial	KPK	3		110		2	115
	Punjab	6	4	279	7	1	297
	Sindh	9		121			130
	Balochistan	5	2	42	2		51
		Total	23	6	552	9	3
Grand Total		27	9	802	17	4	859

Source: FAFEN 2024, p. 16

Table 4 compares female candidates in the 2018 and 2024 National Assembly elections across various regions of Pakistan, including Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Islamabad,

Punjab, Sindh, and Balochistan. It highlights a decline in constituencies without female candidates from 2018 to 2024 in all regions, indicating a positive trend in female

participation. Notably, Punjab experienced a significant increase in constituencies with at least one female candidate, rising from 69 to 94. Nationally, the total constituencies without female candidates decreased from 145 to 97, while those with at least one female candidate increased from 127 to 169. This data reflects a growing inclusion of women in the electoral process.

Table 5 categorizes assembly constituencies, both National and Provincial, across various regions like

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, ICT, Punjab, Sindh, and Balochistan, based on the gender distribution of voters, specifically noting instances where male voters exceeded female voters, were equal, or were fewer. Additionally, it highlights constituencies where gender breakdown data was unavailable and those where polling was postponed, culminating in the total number of constituencies for each region and assembly type and grand totals for each category.

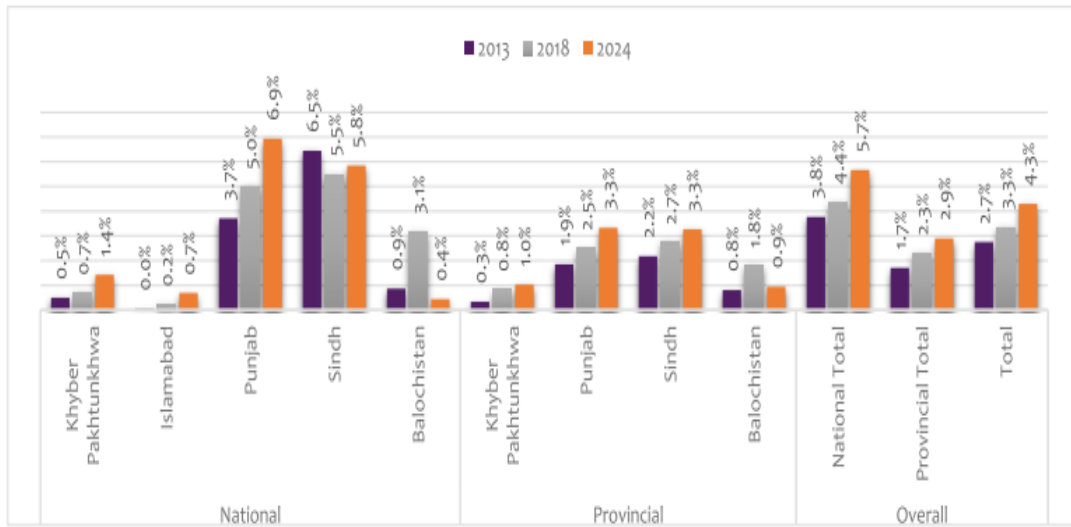


Figure. 4. Vote Share of Women Candidates in GE 2013, 2018 & 2024.

Source: FAFEN 2024, p.27

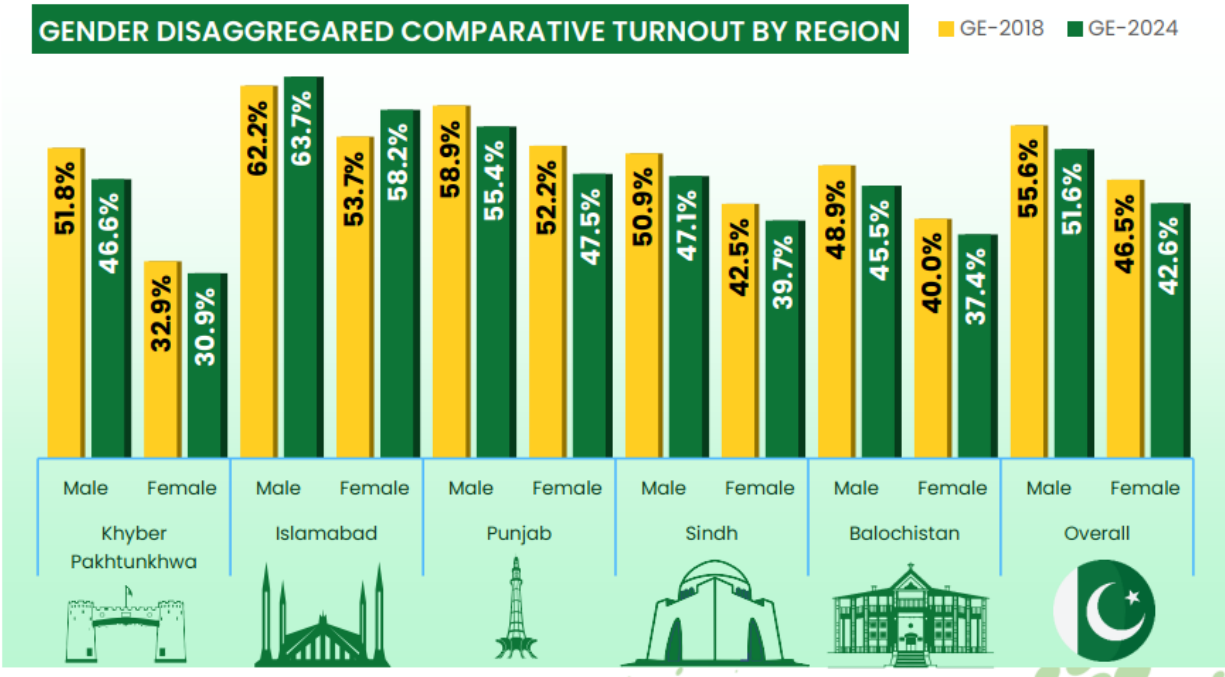


Figure 5. Comparative Turnout by Regions.

Source: Arab News online accessed on 21-3-2025 <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2460311/pakistan>

This Figure 4 and 5 visually compares male and female voter turnout percentages across Pakistani regions (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Islamabad, Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan) for the 2018 and 2024 general elections, revealing a consistent gender gap with higher male participation, alongside significant regional disparities

where Islamabad boasts the highest turnout and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan show notably lower female involvement, while also illustrating changes in turnout between the two elections, prompting questions about socio-cultural factors, accessibility, and political influences on voter participation.

Table 5. Constituencies by Overall Turnout GE 2024.

Assembly	Region	Below 30%	30-40%	41-50%	51-60%	More than 60%	Postponed	Total
National	KPK	5	21	14	3	1	1	45
	ICT			1	1	1		3
	Punjab		5	45	84	7		141
	Sindh	2	16	34	7	2		61
	Balochistan	3	4	5	4			16
	Total		10	46	99	99	11	1
Provincial	KPK	13	45	46	6	3	2	115
	Punjab		17	97	165	17	1	297
	Sindh	3	48	54	18	7		130
	Balochistan	4	23	10	10	4		51
	Total		20	133	207	199	31	3
Grand Total		30	179	306	298	42	4	859

Source: FAFEN 2024, p. 13

Table 6 provides a detailed breakdown of assembly constituencies based on the percentage of votes cast, categorized into the following ranges: "Below 30%", "30-40%", "41-50%", "51-60%", and "More than 60%." It covers National and Provincial assemblies across various regions, including Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, ICT, Punjab, Sindh, and Balochistan. Additionally, the table indicates the number of constituencies where polling was postponed. It presents the total constituencies for each region and assembly type, culminating in overall totals for each voting percentage category, postponed constituencies, and the total.

**Barriers to Women’s Political Participation in 2018 and 2024**

Women’s political participation is a critical aspect of democratic governance worldwide. Despite progress in legal frameworks and increased societal and political awareness, socio-political barriers rooted in cultural

norms and institutional biases continue to limit women’s participation in political processes. These barriers obstruct women’s access to leadership positions and influence over policy decisions, hindering the development of inclusive democracies. The underrepresentation of women in political spheres highlights the gap between theoretical ideals of equal representation and the practical realities of political systems (Malik, 2024). These constraints, deeply embedded in patriarchal structures and discriminatory norms, restrict women’s political agency through a complex interplay of factors such as limited access to resources, cultural biases, and institutional power imbalances (UN-Women, 2023). Analyzing these barriers through a theoretical framework provides insight into the mechanisms that sustain gender inequality in politics and offers a pathway for challenging power dynamics to create a more equitable democratic system.

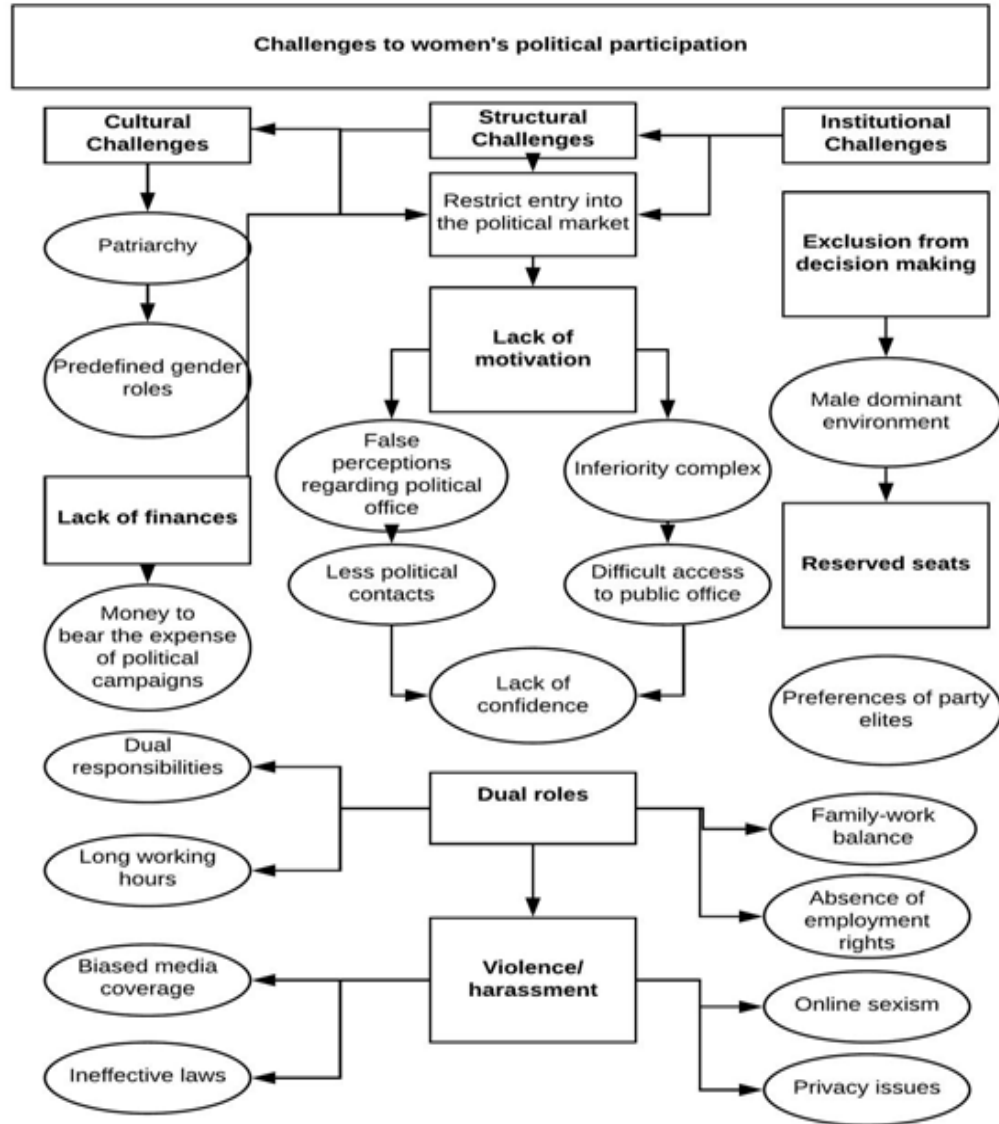


Figure 5. Conceptual model of challenges of women’s political participation.  
 Source: Supply and Demand model of Candidate Selection by Norris & Loveunduski (1995).

Figure 6 outlines the multifaceted challenges hindering women’s political participation, categorized into cultural, structural, and institutional barriers. Cultural challenges stem from patriarchal norms, predefined gender roles, financial constraints, and dual responsibilities, often exacerbated by biased media and ineffective laws. Structurally, women face restricted entry into the political market, leading to a lack of motivation rooted in false perceptions, limited networks, and an inferiority complex, compounded by difficult access to public office and a lack of confidence. Institutionally, exclusion from decision-making, a male-dominated environment, the complexities of reserved seats, and the preferences of party elites

further impede women’s progress, while dual roles and the pervasive threat of violence and harassment, including online sexism and privacy issues, create additional obstacles to their full engagement in politics.

**Rural and Urban Divide:** In Pakistan, women’s political participation is profoundly shaped by the dichotomy between rural and urban contexts and class dynamics. Women residing in urban areas generally exhibit greater political engagement than those in rural regions. This disparity can be attributed to various socio-economic factors and entrenched traditional norms that frequently hinder women’s political involvement in rural settings.

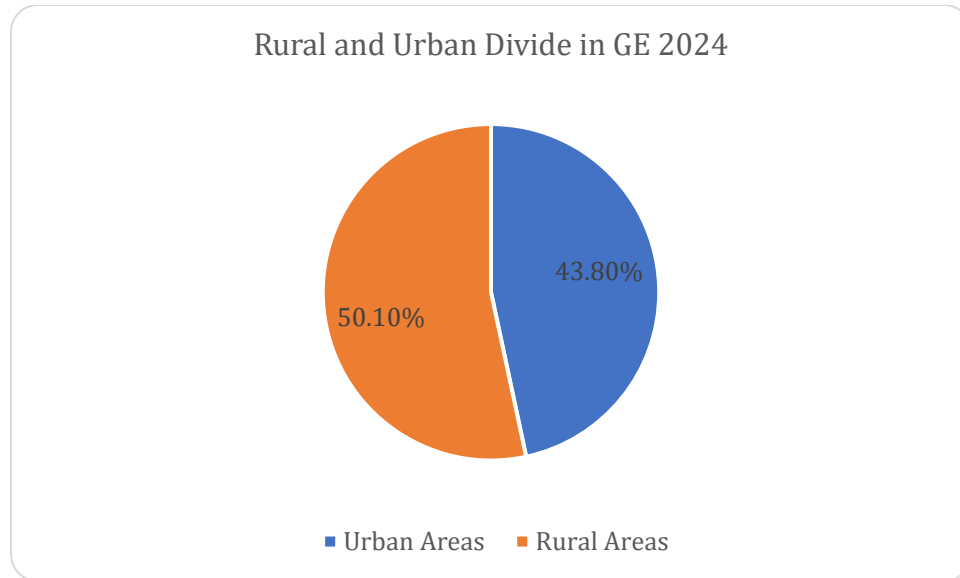


Figure 6. Rural and Urban Divide in G-E 2024.

Source: Ali, S., & Khan, M. (2019). Rural-Urban Divide in Women's Political Participation in Pakistan: A Comparative Study. *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies*, 18(1), 23-40.

Figure 7 reveals a higher voter turnout among rural women than their urban counterparts, although the gender gap in turnout is more pronounced in urban settings. While urban areas tend to have greater female political representation, likely due to better access to education and resources, rural women exhibit higher economic participation rates, often in agriculture. This suggests a divergence where urban women have more engagement in formal political structures and access to enabling resources. In contrast, rural women's participation is more evident in the economic sphere and voter mobilization, highlighting the need for context-specific strategies to enhance women's overall political empowerment across Pakistan.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

### Barriers/Challenges to General Elections for Women

Despite the significant strides made by Pakistani women in politics, many barriers to their full political participation persisted in the 2018 elections. These barriers can be grouped into several categories:

In Pakistan, women face several challenges that hinder their political participation. Societal expectations, particularly in rural areas, discourage women from voting or engaging in politics due to patriarchal attitudes (Awan, 2018). Political violence, including harassment and threats against female candidates and voters, remains a significant issue, with women experiencing intimidation both online

and offline (Shabbir, M. S & et al, 2021)). Economic dependency on men in many regions restricts women's access to the resources needed to run political campaigns, limiting their visibility and chances of success (Saeed, 2019). Furthermore, political parties often prioritize male candidates, offering limited support to women, and internal resistance within these parties further obstructs women's career advancement (Hussain, S., 2017).

In the context of the 2018 general elections in Pakistan, women encountered various barriers that significantly obstructed their participation in the electoral process.

**Social and Cultural Norms:** The prevalence of deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes often served to dissuade women from exercising their right to vote. Traditional gender roles imposed limitations on women's public engagement and autonomy, particularly in conservative regions where cultural practices restricted their mobility and access to polling stations. Figure 6 illustrates the salient role of cultural factors, such as entrenched patriarchal norms and prescriptive gender roles, in contributing to women's financial constraints and the imposition of dual responsibilities. These factors, in turn, significantly impede their engagement in the political sphere.

**Economic Constraints:** Many women experienced financial dependency on male family members, which substantially hindered their electoral participation. The absence of personal financial resources hindered their

ability to travel to polling locations, thereby further restricting their engagement in the electoral process. Figure 6 illustrates the salient role of cultural factors, such as entrenched patriarchal norms and prescriptive gender roles, in contributing to women's financial constraints and the imposition of dual responsibilities. These factors, in turn, significantly impede their engagement in the political sphere.

**Access to Identification:** Many women lacked the identity cards (CNICs) necessary for voter registration. This issue was particularly pronounced in rural areas, where bureaucratic obstacles and a lack of awareness regarding the registration process impeded many women from becoming eligible voters. In Pakistan, women encounter significant technical challenges during the National Identity Card (NIC) registration process, primarily due to systemic barriers and bureaucratic inefficiencies. Limited access to essential documentation, compounded by cultural norms restricting mobility and autonomy, poses a significant obstacle. Additionally, inconsistencies in the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) procedures create confusion and delays. Financial constraints and safety concerns further hinder women's ability to complete registration, resulting in their underrepresentation in official records. These issues not only impede women's access to identity but also limit their participation in civic and social activities, perpetuating gender inequality in the country.

The NIC registration process in Pakistan presents significant challenges for women due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and societal norms. Requirements for extensive documentation, often dependent on male relatives, undermine women's autonomy and lead to inconsistent experiences. The lack of clear guidelines and the inadequacy of digitalization efforts further marginalize women, restricting their access to essential identity documents and reinforcing gender disparities in the country.

**Safety Concerns:** The potential for violence and harassment emerged as a significant deterrent for both women candidates and voters. Reports indicated that some women faced intimidation and threats, thereby fostering a hostile environment that discouraged their participation in the electoral process. Figure 6 underscores the complex interplay among the identified challenges. For example, the imposition of dual roles, rooted in cultural norms, can contribute to diminished self-confidence (a structural constraint) and difficulties in

achieving work-family equilibrium (linked to institutional arrangements). Furthermore, the pervasive issue of violence and harassment, influenced by prevailing cultural norms and potentially exacerbated by deficient legal frameworks, constitutes a significant impediment to women's political agency.

**Limited Political Representation:** Women were frequently underrepresented within political parties, often assigned to constituencies with minimal chances of success. This strategic placement undermined their electoral viability and reinforced the perception of women as tokens rather than serious political actors. An analysis of Figure 6 reveals that structural barriers, including restricted access to political offices, engender a lack of motivation among women. This lack of motivation frequently originates from misperceptions regarding political office, limited access to influential networks, difficulties in securing public office, and a discernible lack of self-efficacy.

**Insufficient Voter Education:** Many women remained uninformed about their voting rights and the electoral process due to inadequate voter education initiatives. These campaigns often failed to effectively target women, leaving them without the necessary information to register and participate in elections.

**Error in Voter List:** In Pakistan, the reliability of voter lists has emerged as a critical issue, with numerous reported errors that threaten the integrity of the electoral process. Voters and political parties alike have pointed out problems such as missing names, incorrect personal information, and inconsistencies in voter data. For example, many eligible voters find their names missing from the electoral rolls, which can lead to disenfranchisement during elections (Khan A. , 2021). Furthermore, inaccuracies like misspelled names or incorrect identification numbers can create confusion and result in potential rejection at polling stations (Ali S. , 2022). Political parties have voiced their concerns regarding the accuracy of these lists, asserting that such discrepancies could affect election outcomes and undermine the democratic process (Shah R. , 2023). The Election Commission of Pakistan struggles to maintain and update these lists, a challenge often worsened by bureaucratic inefficiencies and a lack of resources (Bashir, 2021). Ultimately, inaccuracies in voter lists raise significant concerns about the electoral process, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to ensure fair and transparent elections in the country.

**Role of Distance Polling Stations and Unnecessary Wait:**

Remote polling stations and extended wait times pose substantial obstacles to voter turnout and adversely impact the overall voting experience in Pakistan. Such issues can result in voter dissatisfaction and reduced participation and ultimately threaten the integrity of the democratic process, as individuals may feel discouraged from casting their votes due to logistical difficulties and time limitations.

**Lack of Support and Mentorship:** Women candidates often lacked access to mentorship and support networks within political parties, essential for navigating the political landscape and securing candidacies. These barriers collectively contributed to the challenges faced by women in the 2018 general elections, significantly affecting their overall participation and representation within Pakistan's political framework. Addressing these issues is crucial for promoting a more inclusive electoral process in the future.

**Women's Dependence on Males of the Family:** In Pakistan, women frequently depend on male family members to make decisions about various aspects of their lives, such as education and employment. This reliance fosters gender discrimination, restricts women's independence, and strengthens patriarchal systems, ultimately obstructing their empowerment and the advancement of society. The distribution of the male population varies across different regions, as depicted in Figures 1 and 2. Islamabad exhibits the highest percentage of males at 39.40%, significantly higher than the overall average of 16.90%. The dependence of women on male relatives is deeply embedded in cultural and societal norms that emphasize male dominance. This situation often marginalizes women in important decisions concerning their education, health, and financial autonomy. As a result, women's roles are usually limited to domestic duties, further solidifying their subordinate position in society.

**Women's Participation in General Elections**

The regional distribution of votes in the 2024 general election shows that Punjab accounted for the largest absolute number of votes (5,036,268), representing 6.9% of the national total (Table 2). KPK and Sindh also contributed significantly in absolute terms, although their percentage share of the total was 8.9% and 8.3%, respectively. Table 3 & and 3 indicate that a total of 859 constituencies were analyzed in GE 2024. The distribution of these constituencies based on women's

turnout shows a trend towards the middle ranges, with a significant number in the 30-50% categories.

As Pakistan approaches the 2024 General Elections, several emerging trends indicate enhanced women's political participation. The gender equality movement has gained significant traction in recent years, with initiatives from governmental and civil society organizations to promote women's involvement in politics. Figure 7 illustrates the near-equivalent apportionment of rural and urban constituencies in the 2024 General Election, demonstrating a marginal rural surplus of 6.3 percentage points (50.1% rural; 43.8% urban). This distribution suggests a relatively balanced electoral landscape, potentially influencing the dynamics of political representation and resource allocation. Nevertheless, challenges persist. A notable development is the increase in women's voter registration, driven by concerted efforts from the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to engage women in rural areas. There is a heightened focus on facilitating access to voter registration services for women, complemented by government-led awareness campaigns designed to educate women about their voting rights and the importance of their participation in the democratic process (FAFEN, Report on Women in General Election 2018 in Pakistan, 2018).

**Political Representation and Female Candidates:**

Analyzing the trajectory of women's political representation in the national assembly, a discernible shift emerges following the widespread institutionalization of reserved seats. The 1997 election, preceding this comprehensive implementation, witnessed a notably low proportion of female parliamentarians, constituting a mere 2.8% of the total membership. In contrast, subsequent electoral cycles, characterized by the allocation of reserved seats, demonstrate a marked augmentation in women's representation. The 2002 election serves as a salient illustration of this phenomenon, wherein the total number of women members surged to 73, representing 21.3% of the assembly's composition. This substantial increase can be predominantly attributed to the legislative provision of 60 reserved seats for women, underscoring the instrumental role of affirmative action mechanisms in enhancing female participation in national politics. A regional analysis of male voter participation (Figure 5) reveals a consistent pattern across the 2018 and 2024 general elections, with

Islamabad exhibiting the highest turnout and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa the lowest.

Women's political representation in Pakistan is projected to improve in 2024, with an increased number of women candidates contesting both reserved and general seats. Advocacy by women's rights organizations has focused on removing barriers such as the high costs of campaigning and the lack of political mentorship, which have traditionally hindered women's participation in elections. As a result, more women are expected to compete for both reserved and open seats (FAFEN, Report on Women in General Election in 2024, 2024). Table 4 reveals a significant shift in the number of constituencies with no female candidates between the 2018 and 2024 elections. The national total decreased from 145 in 2018 to 97 in 2024, indicating an increase in female participation. However, despite these positive developments, traditional political parties must take further steps to ensure that women candidates have equal opportunities for success. Women's representation in leadership positions within political parties remains limited, indicating that additional efforts are required to create an equitable environment that enables women to engage in political decision-making processes fully. Moreover, Figure 4 presents the vote share of women candidates in the 2013, 2018, and 2024 general elections. Nationally, the vote share for women candidates showed a consistent increase across these elections, rising from 3.8% in 2013 to 4.4% in 2018 and further to 5.7% in 2024.

Analysis of national assembly constituencies by region (Table 5) reveals a consistent trend in the 2024 general elections wherein female voter turnout lagged behind male turnout in a substantial number of constituencies in both Sindh (59) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (42). This pattern is further substantiated by the national overview presented in Table 5, which indicates that the predominant characteristic of voter participation across the country was a lower rate of turnout among female electors compared to their male counterparts (250).

**Opportunities/Advances in Women's Political Rights and Legal Framework:** A significant structural opportunity for enhancing women's political participation in Pakistan lies within the supportive legal and constitutional framework. The Constitution affirms the principle of equal citizenship, thereby establishing a foundational basis for gender parity in political representation. Complementing this are legislative

measures specifically designed to bolster women's involvement in formal politics, most notably the allocation of reserved seats for women across legislative institutions. This institutional mechanism has facilitated a notable increase in female representation at both local and national levels, thereby enabling women to articulate their interests within policymaking arenas and contribute to the legislative process (FAFEN, Report on Women in General Election in 2024, 2024). The Election Commission of Pakistan has also introduced women-specific polling stations to encourage female voter participation. Despite these advancements, significant barriers to women's political involvement are expected to remain in the 2024 elections.

**Fundamental Rights:** The Constitution of Pakistan enshrines the principle of equality for all citizens and explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sex, as articulated in Article 25. This foundational tenet establishes a legal framework that supports women's equal engagement across all dimensions of national life, including political participation.

**Reserved Seats:** An important avenue for enhancing women's political representation is the system of reserved seats allocated for women in the National Assembly, Senate, and Provincial Assemblies. Although these quotas have faced criticism for not being solely merit-based, they have significantly contributed to the increased presence of women within legislative institutions. Currently, the National Assembly comprises 60 reserved seats for women, the Senate includes 17, and provincial assemblies have varying allocations.

**Elections Act 2017:** This legislation requires political parties to designate a minimum of 5% of their general seats for women candidates. Although the application and effectiveness of this requirement can differ, it represents a significant opportunity to enhance the direct electoral participation of women.

**Right to Vote and Contest Elections:** Women are constitutionally guaranteed the right to vote and to run for public office without facing discrimination. This fundamental right, despite being occasionally obstructed by socio-cultural barriers, serves as a vital pathway for women's political engagement.

Patriarchal norms and cultural resistance remain significant barriers to women's political participation in Pakistan. In some regions, women encounter opposition from male family members or community leaders who perceive their political involvement as threatening

traditional gender roles (Malik, 2024). Additionally, political violence and harassment serve as major deterrents, with female candidates particularly susceptible to threats, sexual harassment, and online abuse. Ensuring the safety of female candidates and voters will be crucial in the 2024 elections. Furthermore, structural inequalities and economic obstacles, such as limited access to campaign funding, continue to pose challenges. Although progress has been made, political parties and government institutions must enhance their efforts to provide financial support and resources to women candidates to foster a more equitable political environment.

Political parties in Pakistan need to improve their support for women by promoting them to leadership roles and ensuring their inclusion in decision-making processes. The absence of female mentors within these parties complicates the political journey for younger women. However, the 2024 elections offer several opportunities for a more inclusive political environment. Increased education and awareness campaigns empower women, particularly in rural and urban areas, to make informed electoral decisions, leading to greater political participation. Additionally, strengthened legal frameworks, such as the Gender Equality Policy, and institutional mechanisms like safe polling stations and gender-sensitive electoral processes have enhanced the protection of women's rights and support for their political engagement (Sobia Naseer & et al, 2023).

The number of female leaders in Pakistan has significantly increased, with women now serving as governors, ministers, and members of provincial assemblies. As these women assume leadership positions, they act as role models, encouraging other women to become more involved in politics (FAFEN, Report on Women in General Election in 2024, 2024). Furthermore, the continuous advocacy efforts by women's rights organizations have been essential in promoting gender-specific policies and ensuring that women's perspectives are included in all facets of the electoral process. These movements are crucial for holding political parties accountable and advocating for greater female representation in government.

#### **Role of Media and Civil Society**

The media and civil society play a vital role in enhancing democratic participation, as demonstrated by the case of Dr. Saveera Prakash, a Hindu minority doctor who ran for a provincial seat in the 2024 general elections in Buner

district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, representing the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). Her campaign garnered substantial media and civil society support, especially among the local youth. This enthusiastic backing brought attention to her candidacy and underscored the significance of diversity in political representation. The support she received indicates a growing recognition and acceptance of minority voices within Pakistan's democratic framework, highlighting the potential for more inclusive governance (Khan A. , 2021).

Promoting the participation of professional women like Dr. Saveera Prakash is crucial for building a more inclusive democracy. Political parties should actively create opportunities for women throughout the country, as their involvement can enhance engagement and motivation among female voters. By confronting and dismantling the entrenched socio-cultural norms that often restrict women's participation, these efforts can help establish a more equitable political environment. As more women assume leadership positions, it can inspire future generations to participate in the democratic process, ultimately reinforcing the foundations of democracy in Pakistan (Ali S. , 2022).

#### **Similarities**

**Gender Quotas:** The 2018 and 2024 general elections in Pakistan implemented gender quotas, reserving at least 5% of seats in the National Assembly and provincial assemblies for women, reflecting a continued commitment to increasing female political representation.

**Civil Society Engagement:** Civil society organizations have played a crucial role in advocating for women's political rights, mobilizing female voters, running awareness campaigns, providing training for women candidates, and challenging societal norms that hinder women's political participation.

**Cultural Barriers:** Socio-cultural obstacles, such as traditional gender roles and societal expectations, have remained persistent, discouraging women from pursuing political careers and reinforcing the belief that women are unsuitable for leadership roles in many communities.

**Low Representation:** Despite progress, women's representation in political offices has remained low. In 2018, women held around 20% of the seats in the National Assembly, with preliminary data for 2024 showing slight improvements but still significant disparities.

**Challenges of Harassment and Intimidation:** Women candidates in both election cycles faced harassment,

intimidation, and violence, with reports of hostile environments creating substantial barriers to their participation in politics.

#### **Dissimilarities**

- **Voter Turnout:** In the 2018 elections, approximately 48% of registered female voters participated, indicating a modest increase in female engagement. As the 2024 elections approach, there are expectations for higher female voter turnout due to increased awareness and mobilization, though actual turnout will need to be assessed post-election.
- **Greater Emphasis on Women's Issues:** The 2024 elections have seen a heightened focus on issues affecting women, with political parties and candidates increasingly addressing gender-specific topics such as healthcare, education, and economic empowerment. This shift reflects a growing recognition of the importance of women's perspectives in governance, a priority that was less emphasized in the 2018 elections.
- **Political Party Dynamics:** The attitude of political parties towards female candidacy has likely evolved between the two elections. In 2018, many parties faced criticism for providing insufficient support to women candidates. By 2024, some political parties appear to be making more concerted efforts to promote women within their ranks, although the extent of this change varies among different parties.
- **Impact of Technology and Social Media:** Technology and social media have become more influential in mobilizing women voters and candidates for the 2024 elections. Social media platforms are increasingly used to raise awareness, share information, and connect women with resources and support, a trend that was less evident in the 2018 elections.
- **Policy Initiatives and Government Support:** The government's approach to promoting women's political participation may have evolved since 2018. In 2024, there is potential for more targeted policies, including enhanced training programs, financial support for female candidates, and stricter enforcement of gender quotas to address women's political barriers.
- **Public Perception and Attitudes:** Public

perception of women in politics may have shifted between the two elections. The increased visibility of female leaders and candidates in recent years could have contributed to changing societal attitudes, potentially leading to greater acceptance of women in leadership roles by 2024.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The examination of women's political participation in Pakistan, particularly in the context of the 2018 and 2024 general elections, reveals both progress and persistent challenges. While the implementation of gender quotas has improved women's representation in legislative bodies, the decline in the number of women elected to general seats in 2024 highlights ongoing obstacles such as socio-cultural norms, institutional biases, and economic constraints that impede women's political power. To enhance women's political empowerment, Pakistan must build on lessons from previous elections by enforcing gender quotas, expanding support structures for female candidates, and fostering a cultural shift that values female leadership. Achieving greater gender parity in political representation will require collaboration among government institutions, political parties, civil society organizations, and the public to ensure that women's voices are adequately represented in governance.

#### **FINDINGS**

An analysis of women's political engagement in Pakistan, comparing the 2018 and 2024 general elections, reveals that although there has been some advancement in women's voter registration, their actual voter turnout remains significantly lower than that of men. This disparity is further complicated by regional variations influenced by prevailing socio-cultural norms. The representation of women in elected positions continues to be limited despite reserved seats in Parliament, which provide a basic level of representation.

Several barriers hinder greater participation, including deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes, restrictions on women's mobility, economic dependency that constrains their autonomy, and inadequate access to education and political awareness. Logistical challenges, such as difficulties in obtaining necessary identification and the inaccessibility of polling stations, especially in rural areas—exacerbate these issues. Furthermore, women in politics encounter obstacles within political party

structures, often facing a lack of prioritization and challenges in attaining leadership roles. Security concerns also prevent women's political involvement, compounded by insufficient support systems.

The persistent gap between women's voter registration and their turnout highlights the significant challenges in converting registration into active participation. Nevertheless, there are opportunities for enhancing participation through legislative initiatives such as reserved seats, increasing societal awareness of gender equality, the active advocacy of civil society organizations, and the potential of technological advancements to improve voter awareness and registration. Achieving more equitable representation requires a comprehensive approach that addresses socio-cultural norms, economic inequalities, and institutional barriers.

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