

Women, Politics, and Linguistic Violence

ABSTRACT

There is a history of women exclusion from major centers of power, including the political arena, not only in developing countries but also in developed countries where women were given the right to vote much later than men. Likewise, in Pakistan, women, like other walks of life, were poorly represented in politics and on political forums. (Siddiqui, 2014). One of the major reasons for this discriminatory exclusion is the metanarrative about the role of women in the societies of South Asian countries which restricts the movement of women only to the domestic chores. This paper critically analyzes the significance of women's participation in national politics as a means of decision-making. Over the period there is a gradual increase in the visibility of women in the political sphere, especially through reserved seats. However, the women who manage to reach parliament are treated discriminately by their male colleagues. This paper discusses the challenges faced by women parliamentarians on the basis of gender and focuses on the linguistic violence against them, including slurs and abusive language, leading to serious psychological and professional consequences for them. The paper offers some doable recommendations to reduce/eliminate linguistic violence against women parliamentarians to create an enabling environment for them to demonstrate their full potential to play a constructive and meaningful role in the sphere of politics.

Keywords: *women, parliament, representation, discrimination, gender, politics, political discourse, language violence, linguistics violence*

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Introduction

Women in different walks of life have been excluded by a patriarchal design (Siddiqui, 2014). Politics is one such field where women were historically discouraged to take part in. Over the period of time, however, slowly and gradually women, the world over, were given the right to vote and later representation in the parliament. In Pakistan, we also see a gradual increase in the representation of women in the parliament that brought some positive changes in terms of bringing women's perspective in the process of legislation. Women parliamentarians, however, face several challenges in a predominantly patriarchal environment. Besides mentioning the general constraints faced by female parliamentarians, this chapter highlights the challenge of linguistic violence against women in parliament and suggests ways to cope with this challenge. It is a painful historical fact that women were not given voting rights for a long time even in the so-called developed countries. New Zealand was the first country where women were given the right to vote in 1893 followed by Australia (1902), Canada (1918), the United States (1920), the United Kingdom (1928), France (1944), and Pakistan, India, and China (1947). This brief overview shows gendered apartheid on the one hand and on the other hand a long, brave struggle by women for the basic right to vote.

Literature Review

One main reason for political discrimination against women is linked with a common stereotypical belief that men's major role is in the public domain and women's job is to take care of the home. Bari (2005) argues that women's current exclusion and disempowerment in public spaces result from centuries of discriminatory structures. These structures include democracy that de-privileges women by relying on the public-private divide and historically depriving women of citizenship rights. Shaheed (2010) argues that the increasing use of religious idiom and its exploitation in the political sphere led to the Zia era, where the erosion of women's rights under religious discourse became acceptable. Similarly, Ahmed & Anwar (2017), delve into how dominant and hegemonic discourses of gender in Pakistan contribute to the production of subordinate and submissive feminine identities, resulting in low levels of political participation among women. The dominant socially designed attributes for women, such as childbearing, caregiving, homemaking, submissiveness, and dependence, are internalized and embedded into the culture, social structure, and social organization of Pakistani society. As a result, women are excluded from political participation, which is viewed as a male prerogative.

Confining women to the four walls of the home would also mean restricting them to the private domain only and silencing their voices in the public domain. Thus, restricting women to domestic chores only was a symbolic act to silence the voices of women. The process of exclusion and discrimination is constructed, legitimized, validated, and perpetuated by the biased legislation largely controlled by the powerful groups of society. Such legislation is usually biased against women. To break the vicious circle of patriarchal hegemony it is important to make efforts to reclaim the silenced voice in the different fields of life, including politics. Thus, entering the sphere of politics is one such attempt to reclaim the silenced voice and reflect women's perspectives and viewpoints in political forums such as the parliament.

In Pakistan, there is a long journey of struggle for women for representation in the parliament. If we look at the parliamentary history of Pakistan, we see a slow but gradual increase in the number of women in the parliament.

Women in the Parliament: Positive Outcomes

The increase in the number of women seats has a long and consistent history of women struggle in Pakistan through women forums and NGOs. The recurring question, however, is whether women presence is instrumental in adding value to the parliamentary performance. The answer to this question is multilayered as the issue is much complex and broad. Let us first look at some positive outcomes of women's involvement in the parliament. Women's presence in the National and Provincial did contribute to the efforts for equality, women's rights, and social justice. Women parliamentarians were successful, to a certain extent, in bringing forth women's rights issues to the limelight and facilitating legislation to protect women's rights. Building on women's participation in politics Wang (2013) investigates the impact of increased representation of women in parliament on pro-women legislation in Uganda. The study finds that the parliamentary women's caucus has been instrumental in creating a common ground for women to collaborate and use their increased numbers to build political leverage between the years of 2006 and 2011.

Similarly, Htun, et, al., (2013) also examines the impact of women's presence in the Argentine Congress on legislative behavior regarding women's rights. They found that when women's presence increased, both women and men introduced more bills related to women, which led to more discussion and awareness of gender-related issues in the legislature, specifically in Argentina.

Challenging the Public/Private Divide

Weiss (1999) has argued that civil society in Pakistan gains significantly when women mobilize for a cause. It also challenged the stereotypical divide between public and domestic roles assigned to men and women respectively. Bari (2010) analyzed their parliamentary interventions and collective political and policy-maker behavior and found female parliamentarians to be more regular, active, and engaged on political issues in the parliament, with many also tabling and debating on hard-core political issues. Over time, we observe a positive increase in the number of women in the parliament but there is a need to further strengthen women's participation in the parliament both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Mere visibility in the parliament is not enough. The broader patriarchal structure in the society must be challenged. Thus, women even being part of parliament are forced to work in the patriarchal structure. Awan (2012) concludes that empowerment for women in Pakistan cannot be achieved until the patriarchal mindset of society changes. Bari (2010) suggests, that "deeper reforms are required to address and amend gender-discriminatory practices at the level of political parties, such as neglecting women at the time of awarding party tickets."

Challenges Faced by Women Parliamentarians

Women parliamentarians face several challenges in the pre and post-process of becoming members of parliament. The first challenge is the patriarchal structure of Pakistan where it is difficult for a woman to contest in an open election. Thus, most of the women become members of the parliament on quota basis. Different political parties are given a specific number of women seats based on their performance in the general elections. Mostly the women who are related to the powerful politicians, manage to get the nominations by their parties.

One inbuilt weakness in the special seats is that the women on special seats cannot claim the popular support of the constituency and are usually discriminated against the regular male members of the parliament. There is a public perception that members of reserved seats have lower social status. Khan & Naqvi (2020) conducted an in-depth research into quotas concerning the effective representation of female legislators in the political sphere. Women parliamentarians face hostility and resentment from their male colleagues, who refuse to treat their female colleagues as competent due to their absence from a constituency.

Besides other challenges faced by women parliamentarians, there is a serious challenge of linguistic violence against women, based on gender, in the political discourse on the assembly floors.

Women Parliamentarians and Linguistic Violence

It is important to understand the role of language in the construction of gender and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes. Language is used by powerful groups, in a patriarchal society by men, to construct identities: a glorified identity for themselves and a stigmatized identity for others. A patriarchal society assigns roles, attaches expectations, and offers opportunities asymmetrically on a gender basis. Women are usually described by their physical appearance instead of their achievements and intellectual qualities. They are, stereotypically, defined by their marital status and with reference to their male relations. Such representation is further strengthened and perpetuated through different apparatuses of power. This contrived view of women is entrenched in the minds of the masses and male parliamentarians are no exception. If we carefully study the Constitution of Pakistan (1973) we realize that throughout the text masculine pronouns are used as if it is only concerned with the male population of Pakistan.

Lakoff (2003) suggests that in the institutional discourse, the dominance of male-only language affects our perception of what is happening around us. This linguistic bias is so evident in political institutions like the Senate, National and Provincial assemblies where many a time women parliamentarians face linguistic violence in the parliament. Such discourse, based on slurs, abusive language, and sarcasm, humiliates, degrades, and discriminates against female politicians based on their gender. This discriminatory discourse emanates from the age-old patriarchal structure in South Asia and constitutes a conservative view of women who do not qualify for a parliamentarian and whose only role is confined to the private domain, i.e., home.

Naming and Shaming in Parliament

There are repeated instances when women parliamentarians in Pakistan are ridiculed by naming and shaming by their male colleagues. Women members who secured seats through reserved quotas were taken for granted by their male colleagues who often covertly or overtly make them realize that they have no real constituency. Many a time their physical appearance becomes the target of satire. Sometimes they are harassed just because of their gender. In one case a female parliamentarian on the treasury benches lodged a complaint for harassment by her party head alleging that he sent her immoral text messages on the phone. In the National Assembly, a female parliamentarian complained against the derogatory remarks by a senior parliamentarian of the opponent party calling her "a tractor lorry" and making fun of her physical appearance. The remarks were repeatedly reported in print and electronic media and tarnished the public image of the said female parliamentarian. The same senior political leader again allegedly made such remarks by calling the opponent political member, largely of women, as "trash and leftover" A proper complaint was lodged but the only action was

expunging the remarks and nothing more than that. The senior male member never apologized, and no action was taken against him.

The worst part is that women's protest is never taken seriously. One reason could be that the important positions in the parliament like the Speaker of Assembly, the leader of the house, and the leader of the opposition are usually men who cannot appreciate the sensitivity of the issue.

According to the National Assembly website(https://na.gov.pk/en/spkrs_list.php) since 1947, when Pakistan came into being, up to 9th August 2023, there have been twenty-three speakers of the National Assembly of Pakistan. Out of these 23 speakers, 22 of them are male. In the history of the Senate of Pakistan (<https://senate.gov.pk>) since its establishment in 1973 there have been 7 chairmen of the Senate and all of them were male. This can help us understand the reflection of the patriarchal structure prevalent in our society.

Linguistic violence affects the female parliamentarians in different ways. The most obvious effect is the tarnished public image that sticks to their persona and remains with them for the rest of their lives. This often leads to their stigmatized self-image. One extreme reaction could be either internalization of a contrived identity or getting intimidated and leaving the political arena for good. All this leads to reduced visibility of women's political discourse.

Need for an Enabling Linguistic Environment

It is important to understand that just increasing the seats of women does not automatically empower them. Such violence is common in different walks of life including the legislative bodies of the countries. For genuine empowerment, we need to create an enabling environment for the women politicians. One important enabling factor is the use of language which is not biased against women. Linguistic violence against women is a world phenomenon. In Pakistan, this issue has been highlighted in the recent past, especially by the women's organizations working for the rights of women. The use of gendered language against women is entrenched in the society that it is considered as a norm without realizing that this amounts to linguistic violence which has three major repercussions. It hurts the self-image, constructs a hateful identity, and perpetuates gender-based stereotypes.

Recommendations for an Inclusive Linguistic Environment

To reduce/eliminate linguistic violence some urgent steps need to be taken at the lower and upper houses of the parliaments.

- a) There is a serious need for proper legislation to be passed to discourage verbal violence in the political discourse based on gender.
- b) There needs to be a proper language conduct policy to be followed by the parliamentarians.

- c) There should be orientation sessions for the parliamentarians, focusing on the appropriateness of the language use and sensitizing them about the repercussions of the use of gendered language.
- d) There needs to be a group of parliamentarians from all parties, with equal gender representation, to monitor and ensure that no linguistic violence takes place in the parliament.
- e) The speakers of the National and Provincial assemblies and the chairperson of the senate must ensure that the parliamentarians use the appropriate language.
- f) Women should show zero tolerance for linguistic violence in the Parliament and those found responsible must be dealt with severely according to the laid down rules and the language conduct policy of the parliament.

Conclusion

Historically women have been discriminated against in different walks of life, especially in the power centers, including the political forums, i.e., Parliaments. In Pakistan, due to the long struggle of women's organizations, now women can be seen in action in the National and Provincial parliaments. Women's representation on the political forums helped highlight their issues in the parliaments by bringing their perspectives into the political discourse. There are, however, several challenges faced by the female parliamentarians including the challenge of linguistic violence which impacts them negatively at personal and professional levels. There is a need to take some important measures that may lead to an enabling environment that is more inclusive and equitable and where women can participate to their full potential with confidence and without any fear of linguistic harassment.

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