

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS: UNPACKING BARRIERS AND HOPING CHANGE IN PAKISTANI POLITICS (2021–2024)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores challenges to women's political leadership in Pakistani politics. Using an interview guide, data for this study come from women political activists. Feminist political intersectionality guided the methodological application of the study. Thematic analysis method and qualitative document analysis helped in the analysis of data. One finding of the study revealed some challenges to women's political leadership, such as structural, sociocultural, and legal challenges. On the other side the study revealed hope among women political activists foreseeing their careers as leadership positions. This article suggests improving women's participation in leadership positions that would lead to women's political empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Women's political leadership plays a significant role in their political empowerment and has become a serious concern in the contemporary times (Bilal & Ahmad, 2021). Some scholars have highlighted certain challenges to women's political leaderships (Foley, 2013). However, others are hopeful about women's leadership and gender-inclusive democracy (Brechenmacher & Mann, 2024). Women's participation in political leadership is a key indicator of their political empowerment that strengthens democracy (Bullough et. al., 2012). Nevertheless, women face barriers and have hope for their role as political leaders across the countries. Yet, Pakistan is no exception in this context with deep-rooted patriarchal traditions and a turbulent political history which make women's political leadership remarkable and constrained too. Starting from Benazir Bhutto as a classical women political leader in Pakistan to the rise of

contemporary women political figures, for instance Hina Rabbani Khar and Maryam Nawaz, women have made significant changes in their political leadership despite many structural and socio-cultural challenges. However, women number in decision-making forums still remains discriminatory. The years 2021 to 2024 mark a critical period as Pakistan faced major political instability, regime change, and evolving democratic practices. Investigating women's leadership during this time offers a unique opportunity to assess their influence on political discourse, policymaking, and governance reforms. This introduction sets the stage for exploring how women navigated political structures, shaped outcomes, and challenged traditional norms of leadership in Pakistan during this pivotal period. (Jalal, 1991; Bari, 2010)

While women in Pakistan have had constitutional guarantees for political participation and leadership roles but in reality, the situation is dismaying (Reference). The 2021–2024 period saw multiple national crises including political polarization, economic instability, and a volatile security environment—all of which tested the capabilities and visibility of women leaders. In the National and Provincial Assemblies, women often played crucial roles in legislative debates related to human rights, education, and health—sectors typically associated with gendered responsibilities. Yet, they also expanded their presence in broader political arenas such as budgetary discussions, constitutional reforms, and diplomatic engagements. The question remains whether these roles translated into tangible political power or remained confined to tokenism. To address this, the current study evaluates the lived experiences of women leaders, their contributions to policymaking, and the societal perceptions they encountered. It also explores whether the current political climate enabled a more equitable environment or further marginalized women's voices (Critelli, 2012; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

Understanding the role and impact of women leaders in Pakistani politics during this time is essential not only from a scholarly perspective but also for informing public policy and democratic development. This research goes beyond numerical representation to assess the quality and effectiveness of women's leadership. It investigates how women politicians influence decision-making within political parties, parliamentary settings, and electoral politics. Additionally, it addresses structural challenges such as gender-biased party hierarchies, limited media representation, and the persistent threat of harassment and violence against politically active women. Given the global emphasis on gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this study contributes to the discourse on inclusive governance by focusing on Pakistan's experience during a crucial political phase. Ultimately, this research aims to provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing the role of women in leadership positions across political institutions in Pakistan. (Naz, 2020; UN Women, 2022)

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the challenges to women's political leadership from 2021 to 2024
2. To examine women's participation in leadership positions from 2021 to 2024

Research Questions

1. What challenges women have faced from 2021 to 2024 to their political leadership?
2. What women have participated in leadership positions from 2021 to 2024?

Literature Review

Despite the promises international political community and Pakistan has made ensuring women's participation in leadership positions, women still face different challenges in this context (Ghafoor & Haider, 2018). Literature on women's political leadership in Pakistan show both challenges and opportunities to female participation in leadership positions. Some early studies, such as Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987) have reported historical, religious, and socio-political challenges that have marginalize women's public and political life. Additionally, the military regimes and democratic transitions since Pakistan's inception have offered women intermittent spaces for political visibility, often under the influence of international pressure or reformist agendas. However, these moments were rarely institutionalized into lasting change. Research shows that women's inclusion in the political domain often occurs through reserved seats rather than direct electoral success, which limits their agency and decision-making power. These foundational studies underscore that political empowerment is not solely about representation but also about influence, participation in policy-making, and challenging patriarchal party structures (Zia & Bari, 1999). Subsequent scholarship has examined the role of political parties and electoral systems in shaping women's leadership trajectories. Political parties in Pakistan tend to treat women candidates as symbols of modernity and progress, yet rarely empower them with critical portfolios or leadership roles. According to Bari (2010), while parties often comply with gender quotas, they frequently relegate women to passive or ceremonial functions. Moreover, party structures remain largely male-dominated, making it difficult for women to ascend through merit-

based political ladders. Studies by Bano (2009) and Jalal (1991) further argue that gendered gatekeeping within parties often limits the prospects for substantive participation. Even when women reach significant positions, their decision-making power is often undermined by informal male networks or tokenistic practices. This internal marginalization within political parties has prevented many competent women from playing transformative roles in national politics. (Bari, 2010; Bano, 2009; Jalal, 1991)

The literature also emphasizes the importance of media and public perception in shaping the political legitimacy of women leaders. Media portrayals of female politicians in Pakistan often oscillate between glorification and character assassination, reinforcing gender stereotypes. For example, Maryam Nawaz and Shireen Mazari have both been targets of gendered criticism, which affects not only their credibility but also discourages other women from entering politics. Research by Critelli (2012) and Khan and Naqvi (2021) shows that the public sphere in Pakistan is not yet a safe or inclusive space for women in leadership, as political discourse frequently contains sexist rhetoric and threats of violence. Social media, although a platform for outreach, has also been weaponized against women politicians through trolling and harassment. These factors collectively diminish the effectiveness and sustainability of women's leadership, creating an environment where their contributions are scrutinized more harshly than those of their male counterparts. (Critelli, 2012; Khan & Naqvi, 2021)

More recent studies have focused on the resilience and agency of women in navigating the political landscape of Pakistan. Researchers like Naz (2020) and UN Women (2022) highlight that despite the barriers, many women have managed to influence legislation, mobilize grassroots campaigns, and represent marginalized communities. For instance, women parliamentarians have been pivotal in advocating for human rights, gender-based violence laws, and minority protections. These achievements reflect a shift from symbolic to substantive representation, where women are not just present but impactful. The years 2021 to 2024 saw a continuation of this trend, with increased participation in debates on national issues such as education, health, and digital governance.

However, empirical data and field-based studies remain limited for this specific period, pointing to the need for focused research like the current study. By filling this gap, this research will contribute to both academic and policy-oriented understanding of women's political leadership in contemporary Pakistan (Naz, 2020; UN Women, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

The analysis in this study is drawn on feminist political intersectionality, especially on Crenshaw's concepts of structural intersectionality and political intersectionality (Weldon, 2008). Crenshaw's concept of structural intersectionality guided the analysis in this article on how the intersection of social class, education, and gender influence women's participation in leadership positions. As women faces barriers while participating to leadership positions, the concept of structural intersectionality guided the analysis on how different barriers hinder women's leadership positions. We have also used Crenshaw's concept of political intersectionality to analyze the data on how class position has marginalized women and affected their participation in leadership positions.

Methods

We have used feminist political intersectionality as an epistemological approach in this study that has guided qualitative methodology to develop an in-depth understanding of the barriers to and hopes of women's political leadership. Both primary and secondary data sources are used in this article. Using a purposive sampling method, data were collected from women's political activists through an interview guide. Data saturation point determined the sample size of 27 participants. Document method of qualitative data collection guided us while collecting data from official records, newspapers, women's public speeches, and articles published on women's political leadership. After collection of data through interview guided, the same has been transcribed and visited time and again to get familiarity with. Then we have coded the data with similar responses that led us to generating themes. Secondary data were managed and coded using qualitative document method. Both of

these processes clubbed together that produced the following data analysis.

Gender in Pakistani Politics

Gender as one of the variables is involved in Pakistani politics that has influenced women's participation in leadership positions (Dilawar, Hassan, & Bilal, 2025). Of significance importance is the period from 2021 to 2024 that saw continued struggles over democratic consolidation, with opposition parties challenging the legitimacy of government decisions and increasing pressure from civil society for more inclusive governance. Despite constitutional provisions such as Article 25 and Article 34 of the Constitution of Pakistan which guarantee gender equality and encourage women's participation in national life women remained largely underrepresented in decision-making roles. Although Pakistan boasts a reserved quota system ensuring 17% seats for women in the National Assembly and provincial assemblies, meaningful influence remains limited, as many women are placed in symbolic positions without real authority. Political parties often use these reserved seats to reward loyalty rather than promote capable female leaders, which dilutes the purpose of gender-inclusive representation (Zia, 2020; Bari, 2021). Despite structural challenges, the period from 2021 to 2024 witnessed several notable efforts by women leaders to carve out space within the political sphere. Women like Sherry Rehman, Hina Rabbani Khar, and others continued to play visible roles in national and foreign policy debates, challenging traditional gender roles. Additionally, new faces emerged at provincial levels, including in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan Assemblies, where women began addressing issues such as gender-based violence, education, and healthcare. However, most of these women operated within a restrictive framework shaped by patriarchal party politics, limited funding, and minimal media coverage of their work. Their contributions were often overshadowed by their male counterparts, and their policy inputs, though valuable, were frequently sidelined or absorbed into broader party agendas without recognition (Jafar, 2022; Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2023). The socio-political barriers women face in Pakistani politics are deeply rooted in patriarchal

culture, religious misinterpretations, and systemic marginalization. Women politicians frequently report experiencing harassment, online abuse, and exclusion from key decision-making forums. In rural and tribal regions, cultural constraints remain even more severe, as traditional norms often prevent women from even voting, let alone running for office. During the general elections and local body elections held between 2021 and 2024, several districts reported instances where no women candidates stood for election due to social restrictions and threats. Moreover, internal party structures still lack gender equity in leadership roles, and the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms means political parties often ignore gender representation in their core committees and executive councils (Krook & Zetterberg, 2021; Aurat Foundation, 2023).

There is growing awareness among youth, media, and civil society organizations regarding the importance of women's political participation. The rise of digital platforms and grassroots activism has empowered some young women leaders to bypass traditional gatekeeping mechanisms and connect directly with voters and advocacy groups. Initiatives by NGOs and international organizations during this period promoted political training and capacity-building for aspiring women leaders, contributing to a slow but steady shift in the political culture. Although challenges remain, the period from 2021 to 2024 indicates a growing push toward gender-sensitive politics, where women are not merely symbolic participants but potential agents of change. If sustained, these trends could eventually lead to more equitable political institutions and a stronger democratic fabric in Pakistan (Khan, 2022; UN Women Pakistan, 2023).

Women's Political Leadership: Navigating Past to the Present

The analysis in this article revealed that women's history in leadership positions in Pakistan is not simple. It has begun since the time of independence in 1947, when the new state inherited both colonial institutions and deeply patriarchal social structures (Mumtaz, Mitha, & Tahira, 2003). Despite societal restrictions, women were politically active even during the independence movement, with figures like

Fatima Jinnah setting early precedents for female leadership. Pakistan became one of the first Muslim-majority countries to grant women the right to vote and run for office, a significant achievement considering the regional context of South Asia. Women's political representation formally began with the 1956 Constitution, which reserved ten seats for women in the National Assembly. However, practical participation remained limited due to cultural norms, limited access to education, and weak political will. Early decades were marked by tokenism and symbolic representation rather than actual influence in decision-making structures (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed both advances and setbacks for women's political involvement. Under the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, women's participation increased modestly, and the 1973 Constitution reaffirmed their political rights. However, the political space for women significantly shrank during General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime (1977–1988), as regressive Islamization policies imposed legal and social constraints on women. Laws like the Hudood Ordinances reinforced gender discrimination and limited women's visibility in public life. Yet ironically, this period also sparked resistance and the birth of strong women-led movements such as the Women's Action Forum (WAF), which mobilized against discriminatory laws and fought for women's political inclusion. These struggles laid the foundation for a more organized and assertive presence of women in political activism and civil society (Weiss, 1998; Jalal, 1991).

A major breakthrough came in the 1988 general elections when Benazir Bhutto became the first woman Prime Minister of Pakistan—and the first in the Muslim world—marking a turning point in the symbolic and real possibilities for women in politics. Her leadership not only challenged gender stereotypes but also inspired a new generation of women to consider politics as a viable career. Subsequent democratic governments continued the practice of reserving seats for women in legislatures, but it was under the rule of General Pervez Musharraf (2000–2008) that the number of reserved seats was significantly increased. In 2002, the Local Government Ordinance introduced a 33% quota for women in local government bodies, providing thousands of women with a platform to enter

politics at the grassroots level. This development was one of the most significant institutional changes in women's political empowerment in Pakistan (Bari, 2009; Jalalzai, 2013).

However, despite these structural provisions and symbolic achievements, women's political participation in Pakistan has remained inconsistent and fraught with challenges. Cultural resistance, lack of resources, male-dominated political parties, and the absence of gender-sensitive policy frameworks have continued to limit their effective involvement. While reserved seats have ensured visibility, they have not always translated into genuine political influence, as most women legislators are selected by party elites rather than elected by popular vote. Nonetheless, the evolving political consciousness among women—fueled by education, media, and civil society—has led to greater demands for inclusion, equity, and representation. The period from 2010 to 2020 saw growing awareness around gender issues, setting the stage for more active female political engagement in the 2021–2024 era (Zia & Bari, 2016; UNDP Pakistan, 2020).

Women in Pakistan face numerous social barriers that hinder their advancement into leadership roles, particularly within the political arena. Deeply embedded patriarchal norms define rigid gender roles, often limiting women's mobility, decision-making power, and aspirations outside the domestic sphere. Many families discourage or forbid women from entering politics due to perceptions that it is not a "respectable" or "safe" domain for women. Female political figures are frequently judged not on their competence but on their appearance, marital status, or family background. These stereotypes are reinforced by conservative interpretations of religion and culture, which are often manipulated to justify excluding women from leadership roles. As a result, many capable women either abandon their political ambitions or face immense pressure to conform to male-dominated norms, thus creating a social environment resistant to women's leadership.

(Ali, 2021; Zia, 2020)

Culturally, women leaders in Pakistan contend with a media landscape and societal mindset that both exoticize and trivialize their participation. The public discourse often emphasizes sensationalism over substance, reducing women's

political contributions to gossip or controversy. Cultural taboos also restrict women from engaging with male constituents, participating in late-night meetings, or traveling independently, all of which are essential components of political leadership. Moreover, in rural and tribal areas, cultural customs and honor codes often prevent women from even casting votes, let alone running for office. In many parts of the country, especially Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, powerful tribal and feudal structures further entrench gender hierarchies, making it nearly impossible for women to challenge male dominance in politics (Shah, 2018; Bari, 2019).

From an institutional perspective, political parties often described as patriarchal bastions—offer limited space for meaningful female participation. Women are frequently relegated to token roles or appointed to reserved seats without real decision-making authority. These reserved seats, though important for symbolic representation, are typically filled by elite women connected to powerful male leaders, leaving grassroots women excluded. There is also a lack of gender-sensitive policies within party structures, such as maternity support, harassment redressed mechanisms, or mentorship for female politicians. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), while mandating minimum percentages of female candidates, has often failed to ensure accountability for non-compliance. Furthermore, funding disparities mean women candidates are frequently unable to compete with their male counterparts who enjoy greater financial and logistical backing. (Krook & Norris, 2014; Aurat Foundation, 2022).

On the political front, women face systemic exclusion from power structures, particularly in executive and cabinet-level decision-making positions. Even when women are elected, they are often marginalized in parliamentary committees or assigned portfolios considered “soft,” such as health, women development, or education. Political violence and harassment also disproportionately affect women. Threats, smear campaigns, and character assassination on social media have become common tools used to discourage women’s participation in politics. There have been multiple instances where women candidates have had to withdraw from elections due to safety concerns. The lack of

strong legal protections for women in politics further exacerbates their vulnerability. These political barriers reflect not just a lack of representation, but a lack of systemic commitment to inclusive governance (Naz & Rehman, 2023; UN Women Pakistan, 2023).

Women leaders in Pakistan often recount their experiences as a mix of personal resilience and institutional struggle. Many female politicians and public figures describe their leadership journey as being shaped by both strong familial support and persistent resistance from political structures dominated by men. For instance, interviews with female parliamentarians reveal how gender biases affected their early career, where their candidacy was questioned or dismissed on the basis of their sex rather than their merit. Despite being educated and professionally competent, many had to prove their credibility repeatedly in environments that favored male counterparts. Women frequently emphasized the double standards they faced—where assertiveness was labeled arrogance, and ambition was interpreted as overstepping gender boundaries. These experiences reflect a broader societal mindset where women are often expected to be seen, not heard, in leadership circles (Bari, 2010; Human Rights Commission of Pakistan [HRC], 2021).

One of the recurring themes in the narratives of women leaders is the challenge of balancing public responsibilities with private roles. Most female leaders highlight how societal expectations of being primary caregivers and homemakers persist, even as they take on demanding public leadership positions. Interviewed women from both national and local levels point out that they receive little to no structural support in managing this dual burden. Female members of local government bodies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, for example, noted the lack of childcare facilities during council meetings and the general disinterest of male colleagues in creating inclusive environments. Many said they were expected to be grateful for just being allowed a seat at the table, without being granted real authority or decision-making power. These structural inequalities are often invisible but deeply entrenched, revealing the subtle ways gendered power continues to operate within Pakistan’s political system (Naz & Ahmad, 2022; UNDP Pakistan, 2020).

The personal stories of women leaders also reflect remarkable resilience, innovation, and agency. Despite facing threats, character assassination, and institutional exclusion, many have succeeded in breaking barriers and influencing public discourse. Interviews with women leaders involved in social justice, education reform, and gender equality movements show that many have leveraged their positions to introduce progressive legislation, build community programs, and mentor younger women. Several narratives detail how women used grassroots campaigns and constituency work to build legitimacy and power from the ground up, particularly in areas where mainstream politics ignored gendered concerns. These women view their leadership not only as political participation but as a form of resistance to systemic oppression. Their experiences suggest that while institutional pathways remain restrictive, women often create parallel routes to leadership through community organizing, activism, and coalition-building. (Zia, 2020; Jalalzai & Krook, 2017)

Furthermore, these experiences underline the importance of mentorship, solidarity, and support networks for women in leadership. Many interviewees cited the guidance of other women—mothers, teachers, activists, or senior colleagues—as crucial to their development. In contrast to the often competitive and hierarchical male political culture, women leaders tend to value collaborative approaches and inclusivity. They spoke of building alliances across party lines to pass gender-sensitive legislation and of using their platforms to amplify marginalized voices. Still, these networks are underfunded and largely informal, which limits their scalability. Women leaders repeatedly call for institutionalizing such support through leadership training, legal reforms, and inclusive policy frameworks that go beyond token representation. Their stories highlight not only their personal journeys but also point to the systemic changes needed to create a genuinely equitable political landscape in Pakistan (Shirkat Gah, 2021; UN Women Pakistan, 2023).

Women leaders in Pakistan have played a pivotal role in shaping progressive legislation, particularly concerning gender rights, education, health, and social protection. Despite being underrepresented numerically, women parliamentarians have introduced a significant

number of private member bills addressing domestic violence, workplace harassment, child marriage, and reproductive health rights. For instance, the passage of the “Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010)” and the “Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Acts” at both federal and provincial levels were largely driven by female legislators and women-focused advocacy coalitions. These legal advancements, although often met with conservative resistance, reflect the impact of women leaders on Pakistan’s legislative landscape. The influence of female lawmakers has been particularly strong in provincial assemblies where reserved seats allowed them to push through social welfare agendas even in male-dominated environments. (Jabeen & Jadoon, 2021; UN Women Pakistan, 2020).

Beyond legislation, women leaders have contributed to the democratization and humanization of governance. Many women who have held local government positions, especially in the 2015 and 2022 local elections, were directly involved in improving service delivery in health, education, and water sanitation in their constituencies. Their leadership has often emphasized community-based problem-solving and inclusive governance, rooted in grassroots realities. Studies show that constituencies with active female representation tend to receive more attention to health and education services, particularly maternal and child health initiatives. Women leaders also bring a relatively lower tolerance for corruption and higher levels of civic engagement, characteristics that have contributed to a more citizen-centered governance style. These contributions are critical in a political culture where governance is often synonymous with patronage and elitism. (Shah, 2018; Bari & Sattar, 2021).

In the realm of party politics, women have gradually begun to reshape internal party dynamics, although progress remains uneven. Political parties in Pakistan often function as patriarchal institutions, where decision-making and leadership are heavily centralized around male figures. However, the growing presence of women in party leadership such as the women’s wings of mainstream parties like Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-

N)—has contributed to a gradual shift. These women leaders not only mobilize votes but also influence candidate selection, campaign strategies, and public narratives around gender justice. Intra-party quotas and constitutional amendments by the Election Commission of Pakistan mandating female candidates have further opened space for women's voices in party structures. While these changes are still evolving, they suggest an ongoing transformation in how party politics engages with women leaders (Zia & Bari, 2021; Aurat Foundation, 2022).

Moreover, the symbolic and inspirational value of visible women leaders—such as Benazir Bhutto, Sherry Rehman, Hina Rabbani Khar, and more recently, emerging figures in provincial assemblies—has fostered a cultural shift in the political imagination of Pakistan. Their presence challenges deeply entrenched stereotypes about women's roles in public life and offers young women political role models. Research indicates that visible female leadership increases women's political participation, voter turnout among women, and even educational aspirations for girls. This symbolic impact extends beyond formal politics to influence social movements, civil society activism, and feminist discourse in Pakistan. As such, the influence of women leaders is not only institutional but also normative—gradually redefining what leadership looks like in a historically male-dominated political landscape (Krook & O'Brien, 2012; Jalalzai, 2016).

Women's political empowerment in Pakistan faces a complex array of challenges deeply rooted in social, cultural, economic, and institutional frameworks. Patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes continue to limit women's access to leadership roles and decision-making positions across political parties and government institutions. The persistent cultural expectation that women prioritize family responsibilities over public life significantly restricts their participation in politics. Many women face direct and indirect discrimination, harassment, and intimidation within political spaces, which further discourages active involvement. Additionally, violence against women politicians, including threats and physical attacks, remains a critical barrier that undermines their safety and ability to perform leadership roles effectively. These challenges are exacerbated in rural and

conservative areas, where women's mobility and freedom of expression are severely restricted by social conventions and local power structures (Bari, 2015; Shirkat Gah, 2021).

Institutional and structural barriers also impede women's political empowerment in Pakistan. Despite constitutional guarantees and reserved seats for women in legislative assemblies, women often lack real influence and power within these positions. Tokenistic representation, where women are present but marginalized in decision-making processes, remains a significant concern. Political parties frequently nominate women candidates on reserved seats rather than general seats, limiting their electoral legitimacy and accountability to voters. Furthermore, insufficient financial resources, limited access to political networks, and lack of capacity-building opportunities hinder women's ability to contest competitive elections and sustain political careers. Electoral violence, party factionalism, and intra-party discrimination further restrict women's advancement within party hierarchies. The electoral system itself, dominated by patronage politics and dynastic influences, tends to favor established male candidates, making it difficult for women to break through entrenched political elite circles (Aurat Foundation, 2022; Khan & Malik, 2023).

There are emerging opportunities and hopeful prospects for advancing women's political empowerment in Pakistan. Increasing awareness about gender equality, combined with advocacy by civil society organizations, media campaigns, and international support, has created a more conducive environment for women's political participation. Legal reforms, such as the implementation of gender quotas and anti-harassment laws, are beginning to take root, offering formal mechanisms to enhance women's representation and protect their rights. The rise of women's wings within political parties and the gradual inclusion of gender-sensitive policies at the institutional level demonstrate growing recognition of women as important political actors. Additionally, the digital revolution and social media platforms have opened new spaces for women leaders to engage with constituents, mobilize support, and challenge traditional gatekeepers of power. Youth-led movements and increasing numbers of educated women entering politics also provide a fresh impetus for change,

signaling potential generational shifts in attitudes toward women's leadership (UN Women Pakistan, 2023; Zia, 2022).

To fully harness these opportunities, Pakistan must address the multifaceted challenges through sustained policy reforms and societal transformation. Strengthening political education and leadership training for women, improving access to campaign financing, and institutionalizing mentorship programs can empower women to compete effectively in elections. Enhancing legal frameworks to ensure zero tolerance for gender-based violence in political settings and promoting gender-sensitive party structures are critical steps to creating safer, more inclusive political environments. Moreover, engaging men as allies in promoting gender equality, dismantling patriarchal norms through public awareness campaigns, and fostering community support for women leaders are essential to overcoming cultural resistance. Ultimately, political empowerment for women in Pakistan is not just a matter of representation but a transformative process that requires systemic change in social attitudes, institutional practices, and political culture to achieve sustainable gender equality (Khan & Ali, 2023; Human Rights Commission of Pakistan [HRC], 2021).

Conclusion

The analysis in this article concluded that women's political empowerment could not be possible until they have held leadership positions. However, women face different barriers to their participation in leadership position in Pakistan. At the same time, women are hopeful for making their political careers occupying leadership positions. About challenges to women's political leadership, it has been concluded that patriarchal norms, socio-economic limitations, and political party dynamics are the main hurdles to women's political leadership. This article further highlighted that women in leadership positions often face harassment, marginalization, and violence, which not only threaten their safety but also limit their ability to effectively advocate for policy changes and governance reforms. The persistence of such obstacles highlights the urgent need for comprehensive and targeted interventions that address both the visible and structural impediments to women's full political engagement. These include combating gender stereotypes, enhancing access to financial and

educational resources, and creating safer political environments that protect women from intimidation and violence. At the same time, the evolving socio-political context in Pakistan offers encouraging prospects for advancing women's political empowerment. Legal reforms, including gender quotas and anti-harassment laws, have begun to institutionalize mechanisms for greater female representation and protection within political spaces. The increasing role of women's wings in major political parties and the rise of young, educated women entering the political arena signal shifting attitudes and a gradual dismantling of traditional barriers. Moreover, the rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media platforms provides women leaders with innovative tools to engage with constituents, build networks, and challenge entrenched power structures. These developments suggest that women's political empowerment is not only possible but also integral to the broader democratization and development process in Pakistan.

To ensure sustainable progress, it is imperative to adopt a holistic approach that combines legal reforms, capacity-building, and societal transformation. Empowering women politically requires not only increasing their numbers in legislative bodies but also enhancing their substantive influence in decision-making processes. This entails fostering inclusive political party structures, facilitating access to campaign financing, and promoting mentorship and leadership development programs for women. Equally important is the need to engage men as allies in the struggle for gender equality and to challenge deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes through public education and community engagement. Ultimately, women's political empowerment in Pakistan is a catalyst for more equitable governance, social justice, and democratic consolidation, underscoring its significance not only as a matter of women's rights but also as a foundation for national progress and stability.

Findings

Patriarchal norms and cultural barriers continue to limit women's political participation in Pakistan.

Women are often marginalized within political parties and mostly occupy reserved seats.

Women leaders have positively influenced legislation related to women's rights and social welfare.

Digital media and civil society organizations significantly support women's political empowerment.

Violence and security threats remain major obstacles for women politicians.

Emerging youth engagement and gender-sensitive policies signal gradual progress toward women's political inclusion.

Recommendations

Implement robust legal frameworks to protect women politicians from violence and harassment.

Increase women's access to campaign financing and political resources for competitive elections.

Promote gender-sensitive reforms within political parties to ensure meaningful inclusion.

Expand leadership training and mentorship programs tailored for women politicians.

Encourage public awareness campaigns to challenge patriarchal norms and support women's leadership.

Strengthen digital platforms and civil society initiatives to enhance women's political engagement.

Foster male allyship in political spaces to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for women.

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