

Is political participation a human right? If so, what are the obstacles faced by women politicians of Pakistan to pursue careers in politics? What is the impact of political quota system on this?

1) Introduction:-

Political participation is one of the major human rights laid out by international laws and local laws and constitution of Pakistan. However, despite having this right on paper, the reality is far from that. Women in Pakistan face substantial hurdles when it comes to pursuing political careers. In this backdrop, political quotas have played positive role in ushering women into the corridors of power. That being said, it is also important to note that these quotas have so far failed to bring descriptive change in women representation and need the backing of proper women

empowerment in terms of their legislative capabilities in order to bring real change.

2) Political Participation as a Human Right :-

Political rights coincide with the concept of governance which is defined as:-

“the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic & social resources for development.”

— WB, 1992

This exercise of power is naturally divided equally between men and women and there are no gender-based restrictions when it comes to exercising this power. These rights are mentioned under

- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action.
- Sustainable Development Goals

a) Political Empowerment of Women as a Harbinger of Good Governance :-

It is not just a right for women to have political participation equal to that of men but it is also a pre-requisite to effective governance. According to UNDP:-

"Good governance cannot exist without gender equality, women empowerment is both a goal and a driver of effective governance" — UNDP.

3) Obstacles faced by Women in Political Careers in Pakistan:-

Women in Pakistan do face obstacles in the pursuance of political careers. ~~in~~ Pakistan is highlighted by the Global Gender Gap Report, 2025. According to which the parity in political empowerment has reduced from 12.1% to 11%.

a) Underrepresentation on General Seats

This is due failure of political parties to allot

5% general seats to women as has been mandated under the rules of ECP.

Elections Year	General Seats Given to Women
2013	3 %
2018	21 more than 2013
2024	4.6 %

b) Fatwas against political participation

Religious leaders often pass fatwas against women canvassing, threatening women candidates and their supporters. The fatwa of 300 religious leaders against women candidates in Kohistan (KPK) in 2018 elections is a case in point.

c) Harassment and Character Assassination :-

This is yet another issue that females face in their bid to pursue political career. Even some of the most popular politicians like Benazir Bhutto, Nusrat Ishaq Abbasi and Shireen Mazaari have faced such issues in their careers.

d) Political Violence

This is another fact of the lives of women politicians in Pakistan. It is often used as a form of tool to suppress their voices and struggles.

According to Women, Peace, and Security Index (2023), women face 0.01% of political violence.

e) Lack of Leadership Roles in Parties :-

This is highlighted by the fact that there are currently no women party heads in any party. Women also fail to get representation in parliamentary committees.

f) Impacts of Political Quotas:-

The impacts of political quotas have been both positive and negative. Let's take a look:

a) Increased numerical representation :-

Compared to 1990s when women formed less than 3% of

legislature, the numbers have not risen to 20% (in terms of parliamentary representation) (HRCP, 2025).

b) Helped Push Women-Related Legislations.

This increased number has allowed women in parliament to get women legislations to improve their overall condition. So far 11 laws have been passed.

c) Increased Political Awareness and Legislative Training.

Being a part of parliament has allowed women to gradually improve their political awareness and legislative know-how.

5) Issues and Criticism:-

Although, political quota have helped solve the woes of women politicians to some extent, they have failed to bring substantive change. Women have accessed the halls of power, but they sit there with little to do.

They are often

- i) Kept out of parliamentary standing committees
- ii) Have no say in the budgetary decisions of their parties
- iii) Lack constituencies and access to grassroots politics

6) Conclusion:-

Political participation is a fundamental right of all irrespective of their gender. Women in Pakistan are free to exercise this right but are often faced with hurdles. Political quotas do have helped them reach legislative chambers but they still lack true power. Going beyond quotas and ensuring parity at all levels is necessary to bring substantive change.