

Q. Despite the entry of women legislators into politics on a 17 percent quota in national and provincial assemblies, still there are voices that "Is Pakistan's Gender Quota in parliament showing results?" Rethink and discuss how quotas can lead to political mainstreaming of women in Pakistan.

Answer.

1. Introduction

Since the inception of Pakistan, women's participation in politics has remained minimal due to patriarchal structures, socio economic constraints, and exclusionary political culture. To address this imbalance, successive governments introduced a gender quota system in national and provincial assemblies, reserving a share of seats for women. This intervention has enhanced the numerical presence of women legislators, but numerical strength alone does not necessarily translate into substantive empowerment. From theoretical perspective, liberal feminism considers quotas as an affirmative action tool ensuring equal opportunity in a male dominated institutions, whereas radical views them insufficient reforms that fail to dismantle entrenched patriarchal structures. In this way, the quota system in Pakistan can be analyzed as both a progressive measure of

inclusion and limitation in transforming power relations within the political Order.

2. Overview of Gender Quota System in Pakistan:

Period	Provisions for Women's Reserved Seats	Quota %
1956 constitution	10 seats reserved	3%
1962 constitution	6 reserved seats	3.8%
1973 constitution	20 reserved seats	4.2%
1985 elections (Zia Era)	20 reserved seats	10%
1988 elections	20 reserved seats	10%
2002 elections (Musharraf era)	60 reserved seats	17%
2008 onwards	60 reserved seats + women on general seats	21.6%
2024 election	60 reserved seats; 280 women contested general seats; female turnout 41.3% vs male 58.7%	17%

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3. Achievements and Limitations of Quota System in Pakistan.

3.1. Quotas are a positive step ensuring equal opportunity in Male-Dominated Political Sphere.

Quotas create entry points for women in an exclusionary system. Liberal theorists emphasize that without such affirmative action, women would remain marginalized.

The quota system in Pakistan normalized women's visibility in politics and allowed role models like Benazir Bhutto and Dr. Fehmida Mirza (first woman speaker).

3.2. Quotas as a Reformist tool to integrate Women in Decision Making

Liberal feminist stress that quotas reform within existing structures, provides women space in legislatures and committees. While not revolutionary, they serve as incremental progress, reshaping perceptions of women's capability in politics.

3.3. Quotas cannot dismantle Patriarchal Political Culture

Radical feminist argue quotas remain tokenistic. Women legislators

often lack autonomy, party heads allocate reserved seats to relatives, undermining merit. Patriarchal norms persist, as women are treated "fillers" rather than decision makers. This adds to limitation of quota system in Pakistan.

3.4 Real change Requires Restructuring of Institutions, Not Just Reserved Seats.

Radical thought highlights that institutional patriarchy must be dismantled. Without restructuring political parties and assemblies, quotas only provide symbolic presence. True empowerment requires shifting power dynamics, not just seat allocation.

4. Is Pakistan's Gender Quota in Parliament Showing Results?

Gender quotas are widely regarded as a vital policy for boosting women's access to the decision making. In Pakistan the 1986 Constitution introduced a 3% quota, later doubled to 20% in 1985, and currently fixed at 17% in the National Assembly. This has expanded women's numerical presence, but not their substantive empowerment. The 2024 general elections illustrate the limitation of quota system. Out of nearly 1000 candidates only 280 women (4.6%) contested.

general seats, and female voter turnout remained significantly lower. 41.3% compared to 58.7% men. Reserved seats continue to be the primary route for women's entry in parliament. Furthermore, women legislatures are not free from dominant sexist attitudes. In some cases, male relatives attend sessions or exert control over women's reserved positions, undermining the spirit of political participation. Thus, despite increased representation, quotas have failed to deliver meaningful autonomy, legislative agency, or transformation of entrenched patriarchal structures.

5. How Quotas Can Lead to Political Mainstreaming of Women in Pakistan

5.1 Expansion of Quotas

Expanding quotas beyond the current 17% could further increase representation. Liberal theorists argue that without altering structures, expansion ensures critical mass, where women's collective voice can shape debates.

5.2 Equalize Opportunities for Women in General Elections

Beyond quotas, women have equal access to ticket in general seats, ensuring they compete on merit. Quotas can

this catalyze broader inclusion in mainstream politics, according to the liberal school of thought.

5.3 Challenge Patriarchal Structures Within Parties

Radical feminists argue that the patriarchal politics is perpetuated when political parties allocate seats to wives, daughters, or relatives of male politicians. Internal democracy must ensure merit based selection of women candidates, by this way quotas can lead to political mainstreaming of women in Pakistan.

5.4 Give Women Autonomy in Assemblies

According to radical feminist, restructuring institutions is essential. Women must be granted autonomy to legislate independently, and this can be achieved by a radical change in the politics of Pakistan, so that political mainstreaming of women can flourish in the country.

6. Conclusion

The gender quota system in Pakistan has undoubtedly enhanced women's visibility in parliament, raising their share from mere 3% to 17%. Yet, this numerical strength has not ensured substantive

empowerment, as patriarchal structures continue to limit women's autonomy. From a liberal perspective, quotas are a positive, gradual reform that expands opportunities, while from radical lens, they remain symbolic unless accompanied by structural transformation. Therefore, quotas should be seen as a starting point, not an end, requiring institutional reforms, equal opportunities in general elections, and cultural shifts to truly mainstream women into Pakistan's political life.

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