



## The Intersection of Gender and Politics: Analyzing Women's Political Involvement During Benazir Bhutto's Government in Pakistan

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### Abstract

This study examines the role of gender in Pakistani politics, with a particular focus on women's participation in the political process under the Benazir Bhutto Government. The main objectives of this research are: to examine what cultural and political reasons caused the declining representation of women in politics during the Benazir Bhutto era, to analyze how these factors are still limiting women's political engagement in the country, and to explore what can be done to improve women's representation in Pakistani politics. Because it addressed the different challenges Bhutto faced as a female leader in a male-dominated culture, her leadership contributed to the transformation of gender dynamics in politics. This academic paper examines the impact of Bhutto's policies on the advancement of women's rights and the rights of other marginalized groups. Based on qualitative research, the study examines the political and social climate of the era through historical analysis, observations, documents, and content analysis. Bhutto's leadership was associated with improved gender balance in politics, increased visibility of women in public life, and the adoption of a progressive legislative agenda for women's rights, according to the study's findings. Moreover, it highlights the challenges that women face in Pakistani politics, as well as the need for further action to achieve gender equality in the country.

**Key words:** Women's participation, Pakistani politics, Gender challenges, Feminism, Benazir Bhutto.

### Introduction

The issue of women's political participation has been divisive ever since the nation was founded in 1947. The representation of women in politics has gradually grown despite many measures. This is particularly evident when one considers the proportion of women elected to Pakistan's National Assembly (Bano, 2009). The nation's lengthy history of patriarchy and male dominance shapes women's political perspectives. However, in the twenty-first century, women are becoming more powerful and engaged in politics. When Benazir Bhutto was elected in 1988, she became the first female head of government in the Muslim world (Azeem et al., 2018). In the 336-member National Assembly, 266 members are directly elected and 70 are nominated – 60 seats reserved for women and 10 for representatives of religious minorities.

This study emphasizes gender norms and women's political contributions in Pakistan under the government of Benazir Bhutto (1988–1996). The goal of this study is to identify the causes of the decline in the proportion of women elected to the National Assembly (Shahzad & Khan, 2023). The primary focus of this study is the political and cultural factors that contributed to women's lower political participation under the Benazir Bhutto government and how these issues continue to limit women's political participation in the country to this day (Weiss, 1990).



# Journal of Law and Social Sciences

## University of Turbat

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Benazir Bhutto was the chairperson of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). This was one of the most well-known political parties in Pakistan, and she served as its chair. As a leader of the nation, she thought that:

*"Leadership is a commitment to an idea, to a dream, and to a vision of what can be. Moreover, my dream is for my land and my people to cease fighting and allow our children to reach their full potential regardless of sex, status, or belief"* (Benazir Bhutto).

On a socialist mandate of "*Roti (bread), Kapra (clothes), Makan (shelter)*", "in 1970, her father had won Pakistan's first general elections based on the same slogan and platform. Moreover, Benazir's party had done the same in 1988. The party slogan was "*Islam is our faith, democracy is our politics, and socialism is our economy, all power to the people*" (Manifesto of PPP, 1988).

Bhutto faced numerous challenges throughout her career, primarily due to her gender. Her opponents frequently attempted to denigrate her and cast doubt on her competency to rule because of her gender. Despite the challenges, Bhutto was able to promote social justice, democracy, and human rights. She defied all the hurdles in her way and established an example for other women to follow. She demonstrated that if given the chance, Pakistani women can overcome any difficulty. Bhutto's leadership had a long-lasting impact and paved the way for other women in the country to follow in her footsteps (Abbas & Shahzad, 2020).

Women are becoming increasingly involved in politics worldwide, particularly in the West today. They are now assuming key leadership roles and impacting the fate of their countries. That is a clear indicator of progress and proof that the notion of equal involvement of men and women in politics is becoming more universally accepted in modern societies.

### Research Questions

The primary objective of this research is to examine gender norms and the representation of women in Pakistani politics, with a particular focus on the Benazir Bhutto Era (1988-1996).

1. What cultural and political reasons caused the declining representation of women in politics during the Benazir Bhutto era?
2. How are these factors still limiting women's political engagement in the country?
3. What can be done to improve women's representation in Pakistani politics?

### Research Methodology



The descriptive analytical method and qualitative data serve as the foundation for this study. Data was collected using purposive sampling from credible secondary sources, including academic articles, scientific papers, journals, and other scholarly publications. Content analysis and literature review techniques were employed to analyze and synthesize information from these sources, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and political factors influencing women's political engagement. It needs to conduct historical analysis on how Pakistani women's participation in politics has evolved. Through qualitative research methods, we have gathered information to reveal the individualized goals and experiences of a particular group. This kind of research is typically applied to complex issues that require a thorough understanding of human nature. The most popular qualitative research approaches for examining and understanding the attitudes, behaviours, values, and reasoning of a population.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A critique of formal equality and issues with equal rights and unequal conditions are often at the centre of discussions among feminists and social scientists, as well as their research on equality and gender difference. However, past political experience—particularly in the area of gender politics—shows that merely demanding equality would not eradicate discrimination and dominance. Women do not have equal opportunities in the employment market, either generally or in the competition for professional positions, despite having equivalent qualifications and professional training, because women's professional history is typically and substantially different from men's. They frequently need to demand separate quota systems in order to be granted equal opportunities with men. Furthermore, we frequently discovered that in other domains, affirmations of equality and equal opportunities and chances serve to exclude different demands and interests, force women to conform to male standards, or promote merely formal egalitarianism (Kulke, 1993).

### **Liberal Feminism**

Liberal feminism, also known as gender justice, is a political theory that was first articulated in the late eighteenth century with the specific goal of liberating women from restrictive gender roles and achieving sexual equality. Liberal feminism's message endures even though women's social circumstances vary from generation to generation, mainly because of the influence of liberal feminists. Gender justice is best served by altering current social structures and political systems, and women are entitled to the same social and political rights as men as rational human beings (Oxley, 2011). Being the most traditional form of feminism, liberal feminism has drawn much criticism, particularly from other feminists who contend that liberal feminists ignore racial, socioeconomic, and sexual orientational distinctions that are important for providing a fair appraisal of women's circumstances. All feminists concur that, while being a vibrant political movement with a diverse membership, liberal feminism's goals are still unmet on a global scale. Because of



this, liberal feminism will always draw fervent supporters and outspoken critics (Bimer & Alemeneh, 2018).

Additionally, they advocate for laws that shield women from harassment and discrimination in the workplace and public places (Pam Papadelos, 2019). A feminist perspective that advocates for gender equality through legal and political reforms. It is founded on the principle that people should have equal social, political, and economic rights and opportunities. Liberal feminism aims to achieve greater gender equality in both the public and private spheres, thereby building a more equitable society in which all individuals can prosper (Oxley, 2011).

### **Women Empowerment and Participation in Pakistan**

Women play a significant role in the decision-making process across a wide range of development-related fields. Governments are increasingly moving to guarantee and encourage women's leadership and involvement in political governance institutions. As the first female prime minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto ran for office in the 1988 elections, marking a historic turning point for women's rights. (Rosas-Moreno & Bachmann, 2012). Adding to the fact that these elections were predicated on first-party elections following an extensive 11-year interval. After an 11-year hiatus, these were the first elections based on party affiliation. There was a modest decline in the participation of women in these elections. Just 38 national and provincial seats were run by women, and six of them were won.

Thirteen of the 38 seats in the National Assembly were held by the Punjab Assembly, five by the Sindh Assembly, two by the NWFP (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), and one by the Baluchistan Assembly. Six seats were gained in this election, with four going to the National Assembly and one each to the Punjab and NWFP Assembly. In terms of women's representation, there was a slight rise in the number of women running for general seats in the 1993 elections. Of the 41 seats in the National Assembly that women ran for, only 7 of them were elected. Women retained four seats out of the sixteen National Assembly seats, while Punjab, Sindh, and the NWFP each received one seat. Women's participation in politics is lower in India than in Pakistan, as evidenced by the representation of women in the National Assembly of Pakistan and the Lok Sabha of India during the respective administrations of Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto (Khan et al., 2019). The rise in female participation in Pakistan's Parliament has facilitated women's ascent to significant positions in the administration. The leader of Benazir Bhutto's party, Dr. Fehmida Mirza, demonstrated her strength when she was chosen to serve as the first female speaker of the National Assembly in both Pakistan and the Muslim world (Parliament of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 2009). Benazir Bhutto secured women's political participation not only in Pakistan but across South Asia. Benazir Bhutto was included among the 100 most influential women in the world (Ghani & Ali, 2015).



Males continued to dominate Pakistan's social structure, but this was not always the case. Bhutto implemented a range of social measures aimed at empowering Pakistani women during her tenure. Bhutto strove to better the life of Pakistani women by enacting progressive laws. She played a key role in the 1979 Family Laws Ordinance, which recognized the property rights of female heirs. In 1984, she founded the National Commission for Women as a result of her relentless efforts to stop domestic abuse. This panel discusses issues about women, such as sexual harassment and domestic abuse (Saeed, 2004). She was an advocate for education and battled for women to have greater access to higher education. To ensure that female students had equal access to education as male students, she raised graduation standards and constructed elementary and high schools exclusively for girls. She oversaw the approval of the Female Education Law, which increased financing for female education.

Bhutto also played a key role in the establishment of the Women's University of Sindh and the Women's University of the North-West Frontier Province. She also worked hard to ensure that women had affordable access to healthcare by establishing the National Health Regulatory Authority, which would oversee hospitals and clinics. In addition to her domestic objectives, Bhutto was concerned about making Pakistan a more equitable member of the international community. Bhutto pushed hard to include Pakistan in talks about the Non-Proliferation Treaty and was staunchly against nuclear weapons (Ghafoor, Awan & Malik, 2020). The visionary Benazir Bhutto played a significant role in the emancipation of Pakistani women during her tenure. Bhutto employed a range of strategies to advance women's rights, including enacting progressive laws and expanding access to higher education. The women she influenced will feel her influence in their lives (Muhammad, 2019).

### **Challenges that Pakistani Women Face in the Political Arena**

Women's political participation in Pakistan has always been tough. Despite their significant contribution to society and the economy, women's rights to participate in politics and decision-making processes have not been adequately respected. Hate speech and violence, lack of education and awareness, gender-based discrimination and unequal opportunities, insufficient representation, and cultural norms are just a few of the significant political issues that Pakistani women face. Many of these attempts, however, did not benefit Benazir Bhutto, and rifts quickly arose in the relationships of many key actors. Personal interests superseded national ambitions, jeopardising Pakistan's democracy's effectiveness. Everyone sought to sail in the direction of the wind in order to benefit from an already criticised circumstance (Shaheed, 1977).

To begin with, hate speech, physical, and sexual assault have become major impediments to women's political involvement. Women are routinely assaulted and subjected to derogatory remarks. The hostile work environment is a direct outcome of the patriarchal ideology, which encourages aggressiveness and insults. The only way out of



this situation is for women to prove their strength, but this is a difficult task that may jeopardise their safety and security (Bari, 2005).

Additionally, lack of appropriate and complete political knowledge is a critical concern for Pakistani women. Women are unable to comprehend their rights or participate in political processes due to a severe lack of knowledge and suitable training. This is made worse by the fact that many men are inexperienced with political procedures and dismiss the importance of women's participation. This issue must be resolved. The participation and access of women to formal political power institutions vary by country. Women's political engagement and representation in industrialised countries, notably the Nordic countries, is steadily increasing. Nine of the twelve nations with more than 33% female representation in parliament are classified as having high human development. However, progress in middle and low-development nations is very low (Rubab et al., 2020).

Gender discrimination against women in political settings is a serious barrier. Women's experiences and viewpoints are often overlooked and dismissed. Furthermore, cultural values, religious beliefs, and traditional gender roles all influence the political climate. Women's political contributions are typically viewed with suspicion. This inhibits their ability to make informed decisions and participate in decision-making processes.

Another critical problem that must be addressed is the underrepresentation of women in politics. In Pakistan, only 33% of parliamentarians are women, a remarkably low percentage. There is also a negligible number of women serving as ministers and holding chair positions. This situation suggests that women are still not perceived as capable contributors in politics, despite their potential to make a significant difference (Bari, 2010).

### **Females' Disquiets**

Throughout her two terms in office, from 1988 to 1993, Benazir Bhutto remained committed to the cause of gender equality. The only party led by a female prime minister was hers. Her party announced a national employment strategy that established a 10% job quota for women in public service. According to her party, passing legislation would allow women to possess their resources and assets legally. The party was also unsuccessful in creating family courts presided over by female judges to hear family law cases, and in protecting women from atrocities like forced marriages and honour murders (Ahmad, 2020). Her government did not meet her right to child custody. She even failed to live up to the declaration that "women will be selected at the higher judicial level." The primary policymaking body for gender-related issues will be connected to the Department of Women's Development. Additionally, this announcement was ineffective. While Benazir Bhutto was prime minister, she had the opportunity to improve the lot of women, but she chose not to.





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The dilemma in Pakistan's politics is that politicians often lack flexibility when dealing with matters of national importance. Democracy under the elected government had been restored in Pakistan, but the old political divides had not closed. The November 1988 elections produced two roughly equally strong political groupings: the PPP and the *Islami Jamhoori Ittehad* (IJI). Bhutto, after being elected as PM, started her prime ministership with great public expectations. Benazir Bhutto was young, determined, and might be loyal to her aim of promoting democracy. However, the office of prime minister proved to be a tough job for her due to the grave and serious challenges (Khan & Ahmad, 2018).

Bhutto's administration sought to make headway on gender equality issues. She appointed women to important positions in her administration. She passed several laws to support women, such as the Family Laws Reform Act, which allowed divorced women to proceed with their cases even in the absence of proof of their husbands' adultery (K. Ahmed, n.d.). In 1989, she also proposed the Prevention of Anti-Women Activities Law, which attempted to alleviate some of the social stigma attached to the problem of violence against women. Bhutto mainly failed in her attempts to improve equity in Pakistani society. Instead of addressing the more significant structural disadvantages that women face in the nation, she concentrated on making superficial changes to institutions and laws that did not address the root of the issue. Her inability to properly implement the Family Law Reform Act—which suffered significantly when her administration was overthrown in 1990—serves as evidence of this. Consequently, the policy stayed purely symbolic and had minimal effect on the majority of women's lives (Saeed, 2004).

Moreover, Bhutto's leadership played a crucial role in maintaining the nation's deeply ingrained cultural beliefs regarding women. For instance, her government made a concerted effort to restrict press freedom and outlawed books that discussed subjects like female sexuality. This stunted the growth of the feminist movement and strengthened the patriarchal structures that hindered Pakistani women's access to fundamental rights (Khan et al., 2019). Both ambition and failure ultimately distinguished Benazir Bhutto's tenure as Prime Minister of Pakistan. She fought tirelessly to improve the lives of women in the country, but her efforts were ultimately futile. Her legacy highlights the intricacies of Pakistani women's issues, as well as the difficulty of changing firmly entrenched gender roles. Bhutto also took specific efforts to empower women. To address women's issues, she established a dedicated ministry for women. She also appointed at least five female ministers to her cabinet. She had also established a special ministry to address women's concerns and implement measures for women's empowerment (Khuhro & Soomro, 2013).

### Freedom of Press

According to Tariq et al. (2021), Benazir Bhutto placed a high priority on the ideals of free speech and expression, viewing them as essential human rights. She also gave the media enough flexibility to assure the provision of such essential human rights. Formerly, there were several limitations on the media that were imposed during the authoritarian





regime. She also reinstated all journalists who had been banned or sacked from media outlets by the previous administration for sharing news or expressing their opinions on political subjects. She also lifted the ban on some journalists and authors who worked for news organisations or radio or television stations. This provided authors the freedom to publish the truth without fear of being banned from the media. Benazir not only restored the right of journalists and writers to free speech and expression, but she also allowed opposition parties and their spokespersons to criticize or comment on any government initiative or national or regional problem without fear of repercussions. She abolished all laws that restricted freedom of speech and media expression. This led to a revival of media in Pakistan. The entertainment industry also began to flourish as a result of such initiatives to lift restrictions on media. She also established the People's Network Program, which led to the launch of new TV channels in Pakistan.

### Analysis and Discussion

Women's political significance declined during the Benazir Bhutto period due to both cultural and political considerations. Power has long been regarded as a masculine domain in Pakistan, and deeply ingrained cultural conceptions have led to the societal norm of males dominating politics (Haider & Ali, 2018). Women's political participation has been declining due to a lack of sustained commitment to women's rights. Several pieces of women's rights legislation were either not enforced, poorly implemented, or disregarded. Women's political participation has been limited by a lack of commitment to gender equality, as well as a lack of legislation to protect their political rights. There are also institutional and structural impediments that prohibit women from achieving success in politics (Magsi & Wajidi, 2016).

Women continue to confront various barriers to equal political involvement in many emerging countries. These are often characterized by deep-seated gender disparities, which may prevent women from achieving success in politics in terms of visibility and promotion prospects. Because of these factors, women continue to be underrepresented in politics. One of the key issues that continues to impede women's political engagement today is a lack of adequate resources. Women face significant economic and cultural hurdles that prevent them from pursuing political careers. The persistence of gendered cultural norms, which typically support and encourage women's exclusion from public decision-making processes, exacerbates these structural hurdles (Khuhro & Soomro, 2013).

Democracy, by definition, cannot be portrayed as gender blind. The democratic system requires citizens to participate in governmental activities regardless of their class, creed, colour, or gender. As a result, any democratic framework must be founded on the idea of equal rights, which includes the grant and exercise of people's political rights. Women make up more than half of the world's population; thus, their participation cannot be overlooked. Another problem impeding women's political engagement is a lack of role



models. Women are less likely to engage in politics if they lack female role models. It may also be intimidating and unwelcoming in a male-dominated political climate, which makes it significantly harder for women to seek office and successfully represent their constituents (Waqas & Awan, 2019).

Another significant barrier to women's participation in politics is the issue of safety and security. Women are frequently the targets of harassment and other violent acts during political campaigns and events, which may limit their ability to engage in the political process fully. Women are usually discouraged from entering politics due to fear or insecurity in nations with a high incidence of gender-based violence. Women's political engagement is greatly influenced by social norms and beliefs about what constitutes an appropriate role for women in society. Many countries continue to hold onto traditional beliefs and practices that uphold male authority in public life, which disadvantages women who aspire to hold political office and progress. However, significant progress has been achieved, with current programs focusing on fostering gender equality, raising awareness, and creating a favorable environment for female lawmakers (A. Ahmed, 2008).

Benazir Bhutto's rule (1988-1996) and the participation of women in regular politics have important implications for the broad field of governance in any given nation. Liberal democracy is evident in the application of the law, causation, and the concept of free will. However, it is also evident in the circumstances of many social groupings in places where the generalisation of power is not well applied. This is what it looks like for women. The characteristics of the State or society significantly influence the effectiveness of women's political participation and their presence. Women frequently suffer some serious repercussions from their underrepresentation and lack of involvement in national politics. However, the patriarchal structure of Pakistani society manifests in the domination of men over women. Nonetheless, Islamic beliefs advocate for treating women equally. Nonetheless, the progress of women is still hampered by sociocultural prejudice against them. As a result of education and civic society raising women's consciousness, women are becoming more powerful in social, political, and economic domains. Benazir Bhutto lived through Pakistan's purely feudal system. As the daughter of the East, she inspired women everywhere to take a stance and realise their potential. She was well-known for having the tenacity needed to manage an administration. Despite the patriarchal mindset of the country, which seldom acknowledges women as an equal gender, Benazir worked to raise the proportion of women participating in the national political processes.

### Conclusion

This research aims to examine the roles of women in politics and their place in Pakistan, with a particular focus on the period of Benazir Bhutto's tenure (1988-1996). This research is important as it will provide an in-depth understanding of the challenges that Pakistani women face in the political arena and the cultural and political factors that contribute to the decline in the presence of women in politics. Additionally, this research



will provide valuable insights into potential solutions to increase the presence of women in politics in Pakistan.

The case study of Benazir Bhutto's role as a leader in Pakistan's politics offers a valuable insight into the gender roles and the place of women in politics in the country. Benazir Bhutto was the first female Prime Minister of Pakistan, and her accomplishments during her two tenures were substantial. Her management of the economy, external relations, and foreign policy provided a degree of stability never seen before, paving the way for future women leaders in the country. Though there has been some progress in terms of female representation in Pakistani politics, the outlook for gender roles and the place of women in politics in Pakistan remains largely negative. Women still occupy very few top-level positions and are subject to traditional attitudes. The success of Benazir Bhutto is an inspiring case that proves that women can indeed be successful leaders, but this has yet to be replicated in the broader political climate of the country. Suppose Pakistan is to become a more equitable society. In that case, there must be greater advocacy and policymaking towards dismantling discriminatory gender-based norms and ensuring that women have a greater voice in all aspects of public life.

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