

IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN PAKISTAN: THE CASE OF QUOTA-BASED LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

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Abstract

Innovation and experimentation in political system is considered a positive step, particularly, when the intention is to bring democratization at grassroots level. However, its configuration in a society needs a thorough examination of elements of local culture that are detrimental to the process. The introduction of quota system for women in the Devolution Plan of Pakistan is one such prominent example. This is a novice and bold step taken for the empowerment of women which gives them 1/3rd representation in government at local, provincial and federal levels. In order to determine whether the quota-based system for women's participation in the local government really contributed to their empowerment, 21 qualitative interviews and two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with male and female members of local government in Swabi and Karak Districts were conducted. The study looked for contextual problems in introducing fast-track quota system to give equal representation to women in local government of Pakistan. Using the concept of social capital as lens to interpret the empirical evidence, the study finds that the policy failed to dismantle traditional networks and vested interests operating at the local level. Social links of women is performing the expressive purpose of social capital in doing domestic chores, child rearing and providing support to male family members. They are alienated completely to form networks to bridge the gap with power structure that could perform the instrumental purpose of real empowerment. Hence, the policy resulted either in supporting the existing structure of power relations or lead to solo flights of female representatives who opted to fight against the posed barriers.

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Key words: Local Government, Women's Empowerment, Quota System, Social Capital, Expressive Social Capital, Instrumental Social Capital.

Introduction

Women are integral part of human society and constitute half of the world population. However, this equality in number has never been an indicator of equality in opportunities and treatment in society. On the contrary, they have been historically always stereotyped as child-bearers, household managers and responsible for establishing and maintaining family relationships with neighbors and relatives (Moser, 1989). Although reforms in education, health, employment etc. are being implemented to gradually improve women's conditions, nonetheless, many countries have yet to go miles to achieve greater gender balance in all walks of life. Feminist movement has been active to fight for women's rights across the board and it is primarily owing to their engagement that gradual progress in gender equality is observable in education, labor force etc (Kabeer, 2003). However, the power-wielders in political field are more reluctant to accommodate women in decision-making process. Realization of the idea of women's political empowerment in true sense has yet to see many phases and faces through time in developing countries.

In response to call for greater gender equality, international and bilateral development agencies have been proclaiming policies to better integrate women into wider economic and socio-political processes (Hust, 2002). However, cultural barriers do not allow women's empowerment particularly in the field of politics where their presence is negligible in most developing countries. Although some improvement is seen regarding their numerical strength in electoral bodies yet their inclusion in decision making at state level is a far cry (Nasreen, Sanauddin & Gul, 2016). Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Denmark and

Norway have been forthcoming in incrementally incorporating women in electoral bodies beyond 30% threshold. Feminists and women's rights activists have been asking for fast-track set up for improving women's participation in politics in developing countries. It is also important to note that although political development in Scandinavian countries is considered no more a model (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005), where quota provision for female boasted their representation a little from already encouraging position of 20-30%. It is, nonetheless, believed that if such a setup is introduced in developing countries, this would enable women to capture high level decision-making positions. Likewise, it is also believed that women will affect meaningful and significant change in politics for their own and other women's development. Hence, a 'fast track' quota system is considered more appropriate to streamline women in politics (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005).

The demand for women's quota in political offices received unprecedented attention in the 1990s and UN's division on the advancement of women and the European Union discussed it in detail (Gierycz, 2001; Jaquette, 1997). In its 'Platform for Action', the 1995 Beijing Conference declared 30% quota for women as a target and UNIFEM's Progress of the World's Women 2000 affirmed the pledge made in Beijing Conference. It is believed that such a step would give positive impetus to the empowerment process that has already changed the status of and opportunities for women in many parts of the globe including Pakistan.

Women politics in Pakistan/literature

Pakistan is one of the 25 countries that have introduced legal or constitutional quotas for women in legislatures both at national and local levels (Tinker, 2004). The incremental track discourse advocates the classic liberal notion of 'equal opportunity' or 'competitive equality' of nineteenth century authors like Mills

(Mill, 1970), who considered the formal provision of equal opportunities, i.e., giving women the right to vote, as sufficient. Following the liberal precepts, it is argued that women do not have as political resources as men, therefore, there is consistent need of capacity-building for women and political awareness in the masses that would gradually lead to more representation of women in politics (Dahlerup and Freidenvall, 2005). Since women's empowerment is a bottom-up approach (Batliwala, 1993; Bystydziensky, 1992; Chandra, 1997, Rowlands, 1998), once marginalized groups have acknowledged their disadvantaged status and analyzed the reasons behind it through education, supposedly, they would be able to articulate and express their views on political platforms, whether local or national. Following from this, it is believed that the introduction of innovations like quota would sustainably lead to women's empowerment for once they have enhanced awareness and received access to economic resources, they will be able to fight better for their rights. There is, however, a flipside to the argument as well: the relationship between knowledge and power is no doubt generally positive, but it can also be argued in Hust's (2002) terms that if women are given power through fast track, then they would not be able to exercise it if they do not have prior knowledge of the concerned area.

There are different socio-political challenges to women's empowerment in politics. Female education has not yet become top priority in a developing country such as Pakistan. Traditional structures are still reluctant to accommodate women in mainstream positions. Political parties are family or dynastic parties with fixed leadership patterns (Weinbaum, 1996). Candidates for electoral bodies are selected by the 'elites' of political parties. This 'top down' approach has its own measures of selection.

Keeping the above conjectures in view and adopting social capital theory as framework, this paper seeks the impact of 'fast

track' quota system on women's political empowerment in Pakistan where they lack both social and economic capital. In the rest of the paper below, we first spell out the meaning of social capital by way of a diagram (Figure 1). The diagram is also meant to help readers understand the two (occasionally dichotomous) subtypes of social capital, viz., expressive social capital and instrumental social capital. Following this brief explication, we turn towards elaboration of theoretical relationship between social capital and women's political empowerment. The subsequent section on 'methodology' briefly elaborates the strategies and techniques that were used for data collection for identifying contextual factors that are positively and/or negatively affecting women's empowerment in local government. In the final section of the paper findings from the field are analyzed and discussed to arrive at the conclusion.

From the above discussion, it could follow that quota for women at national and provincial levels might be distributed through male members of the family or relatives, Similarly, it could also be argued that prior to (s)election, people might not have heard about their female representatives. Even after getting the status of *Nazim* (Head of the council at each level of District: Urdu word for Mayor) and Councilor, these women might fail to get access to the network of institutions and organizations as well as people of their constituency (Nasreen, Sanauddin & Gul, 2016).

Theorizing Social Capital and Women's Political Empowerment

How far the quota system is beneficial in capturing the instrumental function of social capital for women in local government of Pakistan? This missing link between female representatives and other social networks might have clear implications of social capital. Social Capital is defined as "resources embedded in one's social networks, resources that can be accessed or mobilized through ties in the network" (Lin, 2008,

p. 51). The types of social resources that could be available to a woman in her network in traditional set up of Pakistan is shown in the following diagram. A woman is entrusted with domestic duties wherein she finds chance for establishing strong ties only with relatives and neighbours. They share realistic aspects of life with those people who could be taken for granted and who could be helpful in performing their duties. Even if educated and employed, women have to shoulder the double burden of work and housekeeping. Embedded resources in women's networks can be utilized for expressive purpose of performing traditional duties only. Whereas consistent networks of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973; Burt, 1992) are enmeshed under male dominancy. That is why men utilize the resources available in the web of multiple links as instrumental for capturing other resources to keep male dominancy intact.

In most cases, Pakistani women – particularly those belonging to lower middle-income groups and lower-income groups – though have access to social networks, they mostly have lower social capital. They can capitalize on the resources available to them. However, the type of resource available does not suffice for empowerment. Social capital theorists believe that social networks have more or less resources attached to them and these resources are accessible to individual/groups in their domain (Bourdieu, 1986; Burt, 1992; Flap,1991; Flap, 2002; Lin, 1982; Portes, 1998; Putnam,1993; Putnam,1995). Some theorist believe that the density and closure of networks is linked with more resources, whereas, for personal success, it is important to go for weak ties in a network.

The dichotomy of strong and weak ties has different connotations and significance in social capital literature. The former denotes the expressive and the later represents the instrumental function. As Lin says, “instrumental action is taken to obtain resources not possessed by the actor, whereas expressive action is taken to maintain resources already

possessed by the actor” (Lin, 1999). The expressive function of social capital is a means to maintain resources against the possibility to lose it (Lin, 1986;1990). Efforts are made to access and mobilize others who share concern and control of comparable resources so that embedded resources can be assembled and shared to preserve existing resources.

Bridges in networks are more instrumental (Granovetter,1973; Burt, 1992) in facilitating information. Sometimes, a dense or closed network is preferred because of certain outcomes of interest (Lin, 1999;1986;1990). Denser networks may have relative advantage for preserving resources (i.e., expressive actions). Consequently, it would be better for the privileged class to have a closed network so that they can preserve and reproduce resources (Bourdieu, 1986); for example, a mother moves to a closed knit community so that her children's security and safety can be guaranteed. On the other hand, to search and obtain resources not presently acquired (i.e., instrumental actions), such as making a political career or finding a better job (Bourdieu, 1986), accessing, and extending bridges in the network should be more beneficial.

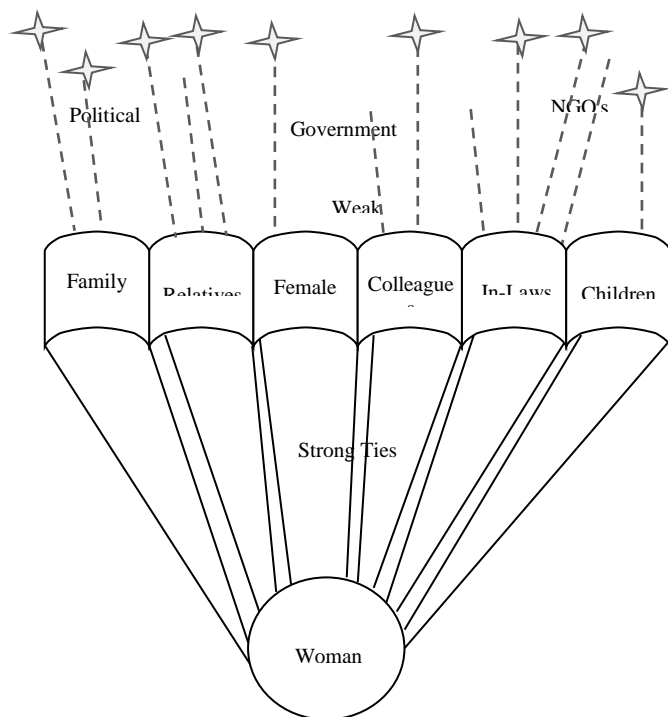


Figure 1: Graphical representation of Pakistani women with strong ties with family members/relatives and a network of their male family members' weak ties with power structure.

Methodology

This study was conducted in two districts, Karak and Swabi, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan. The two districts were selected as these have relatively better female literacy levels and general awareness among the masses. General literacy rate in district Karak is 41.9% where 18.1% constitute female portion (GOP, Census, 1998). In district Swabi, female literacy rate is 18.3% in total literacy rate of 36% (GOP, Census, 1998). It should be highlighted though that there is no significant difference in the social fabric throughout the province as society is patriarchal in nature and less attention is paid to women's empowerment. A number of political parties are active in these districts each of which has dedicated groups of workers and activists at the grassroots.

In qualitative research we usually do not count (numbers or categories) but attempt at capturing different representations of the issue(s) (Lofland, 2004). for this research qualitative approach is adopted in the target districts. This is because, firstly, it gives the privilege to allow research participants to express themselves in terms that they like, and, secondly, it allows the researcher to observe the reality from many perspectives where personal observations and the experiences of common man cannot be overlooked.

Fourteen male and seven female interviewees were selected from ex-District/Tehsil *Nazims*/Councilors from each district for unstructured interviews. Moreover, two Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted in both districts (1 female and 1 male focused group discussion). In order to conduct counter factual analysis on the data, male representatives of the active political parties were also interviewed.

Analysis and Discussion

This part of paper is divided into two main sub-parts. The first part 'emergence of women on political scenario' will elucidate the embarking of women on new political sojourn, their experiences and understanding of political institution. In second part titled 'beyond presence', attention is given to unearth the reality of proposed goals of women's empowerment through introduction of quota in electoral bodies. It has been also aimed to compare and contrast the process both at national and local levels in the light of field data.

Emergence of women on political scenario

It is pertinent to understand the planned place for women in political avenue; their way of (s)election and attitude of different political parties towards emerging patterns are also equally important. In this regard, the study found that 33% women were elected on reserve seats. When Under the Martial Law regime of Musharraf (year needed), elections of the local bodies took place on non-party basis (Malik, 2009; Khan, 2008). Earlier, political parties had consistently lacked interest and initiatives to encourage women to context election at Union Council level. However, after the introduction of Devolution Plan in the year 2000, vigilant about the importance of local power structure at district/tehsil levels, political parties expressed enthusiasm in bargaining with local representatives.

Data from the field reflected that majority of locally elected female representatives in both districts were aged, illiterate, belonging to poorer classes and low castes, a finding which is strongly corroborated in the earlier studies for instance Nasreen et al., (2016), Malik (2009), Khan (2008). It shows that higher status families were not yet ready to introduce their womenfolk in political sphere. This trend nullifies the criticism leveled against the manipulation of their womenfolk by local elites at lowest political level. Alternatively, the local elites of the

community supported them by lobbying with their male counterparts. During political campaign, even a single female would not participate in any public gathering. In contrast, male representatives running election for the same positions openly and warmly contested elections. It is perhaps owing to this ingrained animosity towards women's participation in politics that the nomination of female candidates was declared only to the close of the election. Secondly, due to strong observance of *pardah*¹ female mobility is restricted to the houses of close relatives. Therefore, their campaign consisted of single personal visit of a female nominee to surrounding houses where some link of family terms was sufficient to get lip-support from female masses. Usually, the laymen caricatured the characters of these female representatives and even womenfolk looked down upon the new trend of women as politicians.

The real contest was observed in the election of District and Tehsil *Nazims*. After getting elected, female Councilors remained in public media for few days. With the approach of District and Tehsil elections, however, the female representatives gradually disappeared giving place to their decision-maker male counterparts in the shape of husband, father, brother etc. Then these males bargained with the local 'elites' and decided one way or the other. It was reported that lobbying and money decided who would occupy the high positions at district and tehsil levels.

When asked about the cause of occupying the seats in councils, the female representatives were enthusiastic about their efficiency like attending meetings and involvement in general social welfare activities like distribution of sewing machines in their communities. In response to a question regarding their understanding of the local government system, for example, it was noted that women councilors would turn toward their male counterparts for answer. They did not know the plight of

¹ The practice of screening women from male strangers in Muslim societies.

common women on one hand, and their responsibility on the other. They tried to impress the researchers like traditional male political demagogues. There were only a few cases where women representatives were educated and knew that local government is devolution of power to give more autonomy to local male and female members of the community. But, arguably, getting influence from male colleagues, they too were using catchwords like ‘bureaucratic hurdles’, ‘corruption’, and ‘dictatorship’ etc. Those who could not comply to the on-going patterns sat aside and those who wished to carry on as leaders were labeled as ‘behaving unwomanly’ and ‘having loose character’. These findings corroborate Hust’s observations while discussing the case of female representatives in rural areas of Orissa, India (Hust, 2002).

When interviewed about the steps taken towards women’s empowerment in the council, the District and Tehsil *Nazims* told that they consistently asked for female participation in every meeting. They were always welcomed, and proper place was given to their proposals in every agenda. But they did not propose any plan except the routine demands of families/communities. Although proper training was arranged by the federal government for all local female representatives in order to make the system run smoothly.

Reservation of seats for marginalized groups prescribed in policy is an affirmative step taken toward the ramification of centuries old oppression. It brought, undoubtedly, this oppressed reality into spotlight by incorporating women in the process of decision-making at least numerically. In the following section, the gaps in the policy and its congruency with local elements in the shape of social loopholes or assimilation are analyzed.

Beyond presence

So far, we have gone through the analysis of the proposed outcomes of ‘fast track’ in the shape of women’s presence in

active politics through (s) election. Indeed, the provision of quota has made some remedy by 'placing' women in more decision-making positions. Was it only envisaged in the policy? Is it sufficient for the proponents of women's empowerment? Or should it have produced desired changes toward ultimate goal of gender equality? To credibly explain these questions, we aimed to understand the phenomenon of women's empowerment in natural settings. During the fieldwork we could not observe any stratagem or devised barriers that operated against the implementation of the quota system. The religious parties too sent their female representatives to national and provincial assemblies. Social hurdles that obstruct social change are consistently operative without discrimination of gender. So, in this section, we evaluate evidence that can help us understand the factors due to which 'fast track' quota system could not achieve the desired ends and due to which the supporters of the quota system failed to foresee them.

To being with, the incumbents were asked about the general knowledge of politics and development projects. Female councilors had scant information about political system and their illiteracy was a main obstacle in reading newspapers for updating their views. Majority of women councilors referred to their male family members for information about the procedures and implementation of development projects in their localities that were completed on their behalf. These projects included dug wells, pressure pumps, street pavements etc. It clearly indicates that the female representatives had no or weak social networks with political field and other organizations prior to their election.

Local bodies elections have been never regularly held in Pakistan (Zaidi, 2005). Thus, at the end of their political tenure these representatives could not retaining the higher status for long. Among them, those few who were literate and understood how things had been working complained of the cold response extended from men in power, i.e., District/Tehsil *Nazims*.

Ultimately, their family members who supported them felt tired and started advising them to succumb. A very few among them who tried to combat the challenges to the emerging concept of social equality. This endeavor resulted in solo flights as social exclusion from their community either in the form of getting labeled as ‘too bold’, ‘behaving unwomanly’, ‘product of low caste’ etc. or started joining NGOs and women’s activist organisations.

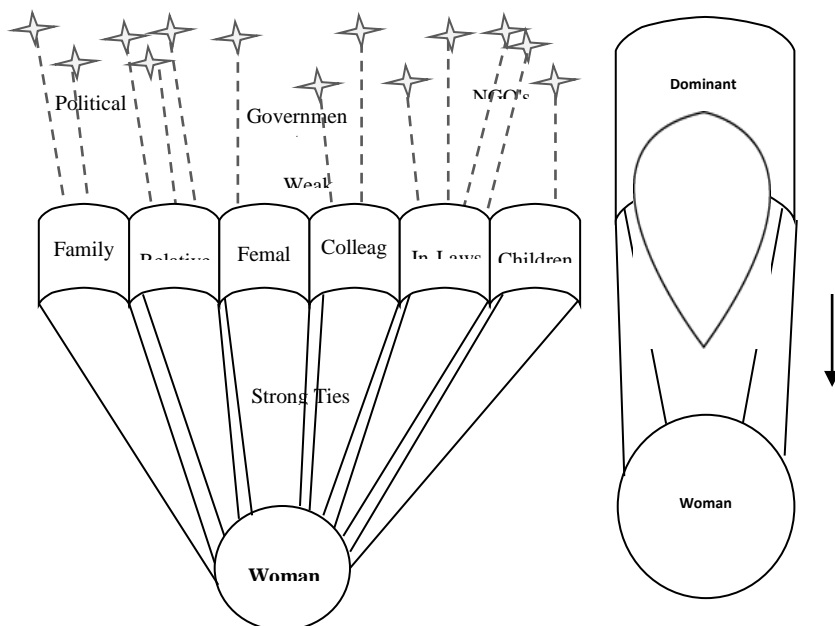


Figure 2: Solo flights of female representatives detached from their own communities

Similarly, attaching too many hopes with quota system is over optimism as it takes time to adjust a top-down plan to the local cultural context. The incumbents, who must be accompanied by male family member, considered their limited mobility as positive cultural trait. Many of these women representatives’ votes were taken as commodity to be bargained for monetary gains in District/Tehsil elections where they even did not know how to caste vote, for whom and why. They just stamped the election symbol in the presence of agent of the

concerned political party. The resulting pseudo-democratic alliance would automatically cater for non-democratic practices inside councils. Hence, no female representative talked on the floor of the Councils in their entire tenure about women-friendly policies lest they could have initiated any such resolution. In the prevalent scenario, it was pertinent that District/Tehsil *Nazim* would exploit local resources to please his party workers. In other words, getting the seat of *Nazim* was an investment strategy of the local elites to strengthen the base of their political party. Although, they categorically denied and declaring it as allegations and baseless assumptions. The *Nazims* said that they had exercised their powers as described by the policy and tried their best to truly enact it.

Conclusion

While the provision of quota for women in politics is globally supported but no attention is given to its critical analysis. If it is supposed to provide numerical strength in electoral bodies then fast track is fruitful as it has increased the number of female parliamentarians in many countries. On other hand, if we examine whether these so-called empowered women have changed rules of the game; then of course the answer is in negative. Although few cases may speak for some development, yet, at large, quota system for women is not a success story. In Pakistan, the movement towards women's empowerment has been spasmodic in nature. Feminists and women's rights activists have been fighting the cause of women's social inclusion, to which end the government of Pakistan implemented the policy of 33% representation to women in local government. However, it was more due to donors' pressure as the government showed little interest in the realization of its stipulated goals. For political parties it was a willy-nilly option, accepting its benefits but hesitant to provide proper environment for female representation. The elites were unwilling to introduce women from their own

families in politics as role models. The existing patterns advocate the cause of gender equality in superficial way, providing more space for opportunists to pursue their own interest. As this study showed, even the (s) elected women representatives failed to connect with the networks of power that may have contributed somehow for the encouragement of women. Hence, in the absence of access to social capital, fast track for women's empowerment is a failure instead of instrumental in gender equality in politics.

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