WOMEN IN POLITICAL RALLIES OF PAKISTAN: 
IT COUNTS BUT DOES NOT WEIGHT

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Abstract

The large number of female participants in political rallies is often cited as a political party’s success in making women more active in the political sphere. However, there is not much research, in Pakistan, examining whether these women have gender consciousness and motivation to extend their political activity beyond participation in a rally. The study involves interviews of women attending political rallies in Pakistan during the election campaign of 2018 to inquire about their purpose of attending the rally and their motivation to run for office for the same party. The research found that high political activity of females in Pakistan provides no guarantee for women’s political empowerment. Women lacked gender identity but are extending their familial and other social roles in the political arena. While they are willing to become political leaders, they lacked enthusiasm and their goals of joining politics are subject to either mobilization by the political party or performance of that party in the future. This study concludes that while increasing the number of women voters and political activists is important, equating it with women’s empowerment leads to misinterpretation in the form of comprehension and factual flaws.

Keywords

Political participation, gender identity, women’s empowerment, political motivation, gender consciousness
Introduction

For a person living in the 18th century, it was as hard to understand the individual political rights of women as it is for a person in the current era to be convinced that a newborn child should get voting rights. With a family being the main social unit, presided over by fathers or husbands, it was a normal understanding that males can secure the interests of all members of the family (Yun 2011). Now, as women have gained the right to participate in politics around the world, the debate among feminists is whether this shift has contributed to securing women’s political rights and making society more secure for women. While some consider the inclusion of women in political activities to be a major success (Uteng and Cresswell 2016), others are concerned over the ability of these active women to secure women’s interests (Sapiro 1981).

If women participate in democracy as individual citizens, the importance naturally goes to their numbers: voter turnout, count in political rally, etc. However, if their participation is as a member of their gender group, the number alone cannot make a difference. As put by Sapiro (1981, 702), “the real question is not whether my representation looks like me – it is whether my interests are being represented.” Hence, for the representation of women as a group with some specific interests that need protection, a large number of women voters or legislators is not the ultimate goal. The eventual parameter is whether the woman casting a vote, attending a political rally or running for the office is well aware of these interests and has the political motivation to present them.

In countries like Pakistan, where society openly describes chaddar (veil) and chaardewari (home) as necessary for the protection of a female, the large number of female participants in street politics appears as a huge achievement. For instance, in a Pakistani newspaper’s editorial, the editor praised Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) for bringing women to the public sphere in “a country in which female participation has historically been lackadaisical” (The Daily Times 2016). As a result, political leaders of different parties often equate their contribution to women’s empowerment with the number of female participants in their political rallies. There is not much focus on the objective of the participation of these women or their motivation to extend their political roles from participation in a rally to running for office.

The objective of this research is to examine the purpose and motivation behind the political participation of women in Pakistan. The study was conducted with women attending political rallies in Pakistan during the election campaign of 2018, to examine the main purpose behind their activism and motivation to increase their political participation from attendance at a rally to becoming a candidate in future elections. A motivation to resolve women’s issues and an intention to increase their political activism as workers are
important uses of political activism for securing women’s rights. Such research is also important to understand the degree to which women’s presence at political rallies can contribute towards women’s empowerment in Pakistan.

**Political participation of women**

Women’s participation in politics has received little attention from political scientists because of an inexplicit consensus that it is a job only for feminist scholars. Mainstream theorists prefer not to look into the philosophical basis of women’s political participation, or to answer questions like whether women’s participation in politics is a matter of universal suffrage in democracy or an issue of protecting of women’s rights.

However, public participation in politics has been a central matter of interest among scholars of the democratic age. Academics from varied disciplines such as Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology, Political Science, Economics, and others have highlighted multiple factors that can predict whether a person will participate, in which form, and how intensely or frequently. Han (2009) summarized the outcome of this diverse body of research in one sentence, ‘people participate in politics because they can (resources), they were asked (recruitment/mobilization), and they want to (motivation)’ (p.18). The review of literature published on political participation, however, reveals that it has mostly conceptualized the process of participation on the basis of a resource-mobilization model, asserting that public participation is the result of the presence of resources like money, time and the information and mobilization efforts by political parties (Jenkins 1983; Vráblíková 2014). There is a much lesser emphasis on the role of motivation – the intrinsic factors that make a person invest the available time, knowledge and other resources in politics, instead of other activities.

Han (2009) held that neglect of the role of motivation in political participation literature can be attributed to studies focusing on why people having political interest and knowledge do not participate in politics. Hence, these scholars consider motivation to be a constant factor and focus on other factors related to resources and recruitment. In the case of current research, however, the problem is reversed. Studies have reported that females lack the resources required for political participation: they are usually less educated (Berinsky and Lenz 2011; Cooray and Potrafke 2011), have lower political knowledge (Dolan 2011), have less available time for political activity (Welch 1977), and lack freedom of political speech and mobility (Uteng and Cresswell 2016). Even then, women chose to participate in rallies and, hence, the question before the researcher, in the current case, is why women lacking resources and mobilization to participate in politics attend a political rally. Taking resources and mobilization as weak or absent, this research focuses on the causal relationship between political motivation and participation.
The relationship between political participation and motivation has mostly been treated in the research as a relationship between orientation and action, where motivation is usually operationalized through measures of political knowledge and partisanship (Shineman 2018). This understanding of political motivation seems to be rooted in a resource-mobilization model which assumes that partisan interest and knowledge are closely linked with political education and socio-economic background (Kern, Merien and Hooghe 2015). Motivation ought to be viewed in the psychological domain, focusing more on intrinsic elements rather the external ones. Han (2009) held that the perceived benefits obtained from political participation, be they ideological, material, or emotional, are more suitable to measure a person’s motivation.

Recent studies that have focused on the benefits obtained from participation have found that social identity is one important intrinsic factor that motivates a person to participate in the public sphere (Bartle and Bellucci 2014; Huddy 2001). Citizen participates with a motivation to gain communal certainty by associating themselves with a particular social group (Hafer and Ran 2016). However, each person has multiple social groups with which to “self-categorize”. Gender is just one possible group to relate among many others, like family, ethnicity, and religion. Women participating in a political rally can be expected to have a stronger familial identity or religious identity than their gender identity. In that case, the political motivation for them could be rooted in safeguarding the interests of their religious or ethnic group, or of their family, instead of women in general. Research examining social identity as a motivation for political participation needs to keep in consideration this prioritization of social groups among the participants.

On the other hand, research on poor representation of women in legislative bodies has mostly cited the external elements hindering women from joining politics. According to Bari (2005), the issue is rooted in the traditional definition of politics that puts private and public spheres of life at bay. As a result, she wrote, “when women are brought into politics, they are entered as mothers and wives” (Bari 2005, 4). As per Shvedova (2007), the political limitation of women’s participation in politics includes the male-dominated structure of political parties, lack of support from political leaders and parties, lack of cooperation among women organizations and electoral laws and systems supporting male candidates. Castillejo (2009) noted that a political system that works through patronage and networking discourages women’s participation in electoral politics.

In the case of Pakistan, Moghadam (1992) blames the patriarchal structure of Pakistani society for the politics of gender and anti-feminist legislation in the country. McCarthy and Sultana (2004) reported similar results and found that women growing up in Pakistani families, where they had supportive and subordinate roles, feel socially restricted to participate in the public sphere as leaders. Zakar (2014) reported that
leadership positions within political parties are filled mostly by male members, who support female political workers in specific tasks like organizing party events, media management, and mobilizing female voters. The only criterion for selection of a female electoral candidate is her political family background. In other words, males working behind a female still hold more power than she does. (Zakar 2014).

Interestingly, Islam has been presented as a powerful force for political activism among females in a number of studies (Ababneh, 2009; Wiktorowicz 2004). Ababneh (2009) wrote a detailed paper on the topic, focusing on women members of the Islamic Action Front. She linked the personal, familial and political life of these females with one specific objective of serving Islam. Similar results were reported by Jamal (2009) who noted while interviewing women supporters of Jamat-e-Islami (JI) - a religious political party in Pakistan. She found that these women join politics as a duty assigned to them through religion and, therefore, keep their activities restricted to the boundaries defined by their religion for females. For these females, it is hard to separate their roles as Muslims, as wives or mothers, and as political activists because Islam serves as linking factor between these.

These studies clearly miss looking at one important factor that can possibly result in a lack of women’s presence in legislative bodies. In recent years, multiple research studies have cited that women lack interest in politics (Fraile and Gomez 2017; Preece 2016). These studies noted that even after controlling the external factors that might hinder women from participation, women are less likely than men to be politically engaged (Preece 2016). Based on this conclusion, there is a possibility that women do not have the career goal of joining politics beyond participation in rallies. Hence, the role of their motivation needs to be explored further to truly diagnose the problem.

Data and method

The current research employed a qualitative method of inquiry with an explanatory research design. The rationale for selection of the qualitative method was to ensure an in-depth understanding of why women attend political rallies in Pakistan, and whether and how they want to extend this political activism to a higher level by joining political parties and running for office. The targeted population for the research was female participants in political rallies conducted during the electoral campaign of the 2018 general elections. Since the research is qualitative in nature, the research sample was kept small. It was composed of only eight such participants. The researcher visited political rallies of four major political parties of Pakistan namely, Pakistan Tahreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), Jamat-e-Islami (JI), and Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), and interviewed two participants from each rally. Two participants of PTI and one participant of JI were interviewed through social media, after their participation in the political rally, as per their
convenience. The interviews were in the Urdu language and were audio-recorded. Later, the researcher transcribed them and translated them to the English language.

The consent was taken verbally from the participants, as these participants were sceptical of signing the consent form. All the information was also provided verbally by reading the information sheet attached to the consent form. However, women who were interviewed through social media were also sent a copy of the information sheet, which they were asked to read before the interview. The name and personal details of respondents were not used in the study to ensure anonymity. They have been cited in the paper with respect to the political party’s rally they were attending like a participant of PPP rally or a respondent from MQM rally.

The interview was semi-structured. A list of pointers was prepared prior to data collection, which was revised after each interview. This constant comparison allowed the researcher to collect richer information while skipping the questions that did not produce any relevant data (Gibbs 2008). Since the purpose of this study was not to compare the responses of different participants and each participant was treated singularly, this revision of the question did not affect the quality of research findings.

The collected data was analysed through thematic analysis. Each transcript was read and coded with open themes. Later these themes were refined through constant cross-case and within-case comparison. The researcher also kept recording memos related to the observation during rallies and important concepts that came across her mind during open coding. The final list of themes was organized in accordance with the two main research questions: the objective behind participation in rally and political motivation to run for office.

**The objectives behind participation in rally**

As expected, social identity was one major reason behind the political participation of women in rallies. For almost all, the participation was well rooted in family values and practices. Ethnicity, religion and socio-economic class also played their roles in motivating supporters of particular political parties. It was hard for women interviewed for the present research, irrespective of the party they support, to differentiate between their roles as political activists, family members and members of other social groups. It was observed that while responding to questions about their individual purpose in attending a rally or the factors motivating them to come out, many respondents replied using “we” not “I”, indicating their perception that they were representing a group. It was interesting that when they used the term “we” they usually referred to the women supporters of that particular party or their family, and not to women in general, despite knowing the
objective of the research. Overall, no female reported having a feminist agenda for her participation in the rally. Not a single reference was made to the need for an increased presence of women in street and formal politics.

**Blurred boundary between family and political party**

“Family” appeared to be the main binding force for all respondents surpassing all other roles in life, including the role of political worker. While respondents at the MQM rally had an ethnic motivation behind participation, JI supporters showed religious objectives and PTI supporters talked about the nationalist agenda; what bound them all together was a motivation associated with their families. A PPP respondent held that love for her party was similar to feelings towards her parents. She explicitly said the party was “like a family.”

Respondents identified partisanship towards political party as a familial value they had adopted from their ancestors and were transferring to their future generations. “It runs in the family” was a common attitude towards their support of the political party. A respondent explained that love for PPP was in her family even before her birth. She reported,

“When we were born and, later, had become more self-aware and conscious, we had to say *leeye Bhutto* (Long Live Bhutto – a Political Slogan of PPP) because we were called PPP supporters by birth.”

An attendant at the JI rally also claimed that she had been coming to political rallies of the same party since her birth, as her entire family supported the party. On the topic of transferring partisanship towards JI to the next generations, she merged religious and familial responsibilities into one:

*We are very strict towards kids’ education and training. We have taught them the significance of Islam since their birth. Kids do what they see their parents doing. Our families are very careful about what their kids believe in. We cannot let kids chose their own ideology. Parents are answerable before God as to what their kids believe in.*

Similarly, both attendees at the MQM rally reported having adopted support for the political party from their families. While one was younger and unmarried and, hence, did not have a childbearing role, the married one emphasized that the young ones in her family cannot support other political parties because they tend to learn from their parents,
Our small kids are observing us and taking mental note of what our parents are doing and with whom they are having a relationship; then definitely they will be involved in the similar direction they saw their parents going.

Since PTI is a relatively new party, its supporters are mostly from families with political diversity. They did not report adopting their support for the party from their parents. Yet both respondents from PTI had active political workers in the family and had a strong intention to transfer their support for the party to the next generations. A PTI supporter held that her main objective for attending the rally was to let her kids celebrate the victory of PTI in the election.

We were celebrating victory in the elections and I wanted to show my kids how it is in Pakistan. I was there with my two kids and two nieces. Not all are eligible to vote. But yes, they're a huge fan of IK (Imran Khan).

This blurred boundary between a familial and political role was observed in particular when two women pointed out specific family-oriented objectives as their purpose in attending the rally. One PPP supporter held that she has been attending the rallies in order to get her son employed. She was of the perception that by showing her support for the political party, once in power, the party leaders could arrange a job for her son. This role as a mother was her only reason for attending the rally. Similarly, an MQM supporter pointed out a few other women attending rallies to be there in order to continue the struggle initiated by their martyred husbands or sons. In that sense, the political role of these women can be viewed as an extension of their roles as wives or mothers.

Another important aspect of the interrelation between family and political roles is that all women interviewed for the research had visited the rally with their family members. Also, when asked about rallies in the past, except for one supporter of MQM who held that she attended rallies both with the family and individually, all others reported attending rallies with some family members and never alone. A PTI supporter whose father was not supporting the same party allowed her to visit the rallies because her uncle and his family could accompany her.

“...my uncle is active in such things, so my father always allowed me to go with him and his family.”

A supporter of MQM also reported attending rallies with her uncle’s family who were active members of the party.
However, the most serious account was of a JI rally attendant who agreed to give the interview after the rally through social media and revealed that her in-laws forced her participation in the rally. By the time of her interview, she had been divorced and was of the opinion that although it did not matter much to her in the initial days of marriage, this forced support to a political party became an issue after some time.

My ex-mother-in-law was one of the active working members of JI and she dragged me along to all major rallies...Not me, the whole family attended those rallies... I never supported JI.

It is important here to take into consideration that she was able to describe this forced participation openly because she had been divorced. If she were still in that marriage or if the pressure had been from her own family with whom her relationship is naturally stronger, she might not have disclosed it so openly.

Even in cases where participation was not forced, there was an obstruction within families to allowing their members exposure to opposing political views. Of the eight women interviewed, five openly stated that no one in their families supported any opposing party, and they do not let their kids follow other parties. The intensity of partisanship was so high for a PPP supporter that she reported switching off TV channels if there is a rally of any other political party. However, there is a possibility that women did not acknowledge the presence of opposing political view within the family intentionally.

This is because all three women who were interviewed after the political rally through social media agreed that there was political diversity within their families, but all five who were interviewed during the rally reported having full family support for their parties.

Political participation as a social duty

Apart from their familial role, the women participated in the rallies in order to fulfil certain duties as members of other social groups. Interestingly there was a clear difference among the supporters of different political parties concerning the type of social group they link their party with. For JI supporters, religion was the main motivating factor. When referring to their attendance at the rallies, they repeatedly mentioned the term “Muslim”, focusing on the wide political purpose of serving the religious group they belong to. One JI supporter was very explicit about this social duty as a Muslim to attend rallies of JI. She said,

Islam never made women stay in homes. Yes, family is our preference but we are Muslim and being Muslim, we have certain duties. Making sure you have a
religious political leader is important. Women, being Muslim, must come out and make sure Islam wins in every front; elections are just one part of it.

The second attendant at the JI rally was interviewed after the rally, and it turned out that she was not a supporter of the party. Despite this point, there was an implicit reference to religious social duty when was asked which party she would support in the future. Her reply was,

[I will attend the political rally of a party in future] if it's to the standard of the initial Muslim League led by Quaid e Azam who really worked for the betterment of Muslim and the nation they formed (emphasis added).

She also reported that before her marriage she chose to attend a political rally of JI by her own will, because it was about an issue she considered important; the issue was religious.

I attended the first one when there was the cartoon issue of the Prophet (SAW). I thought it was a cause everyone should stand for.

However, this JI supporters' motivation to participate could be seen as a merger of religious and nationalist agendas. She said.

If somebody is working for the prosperity of my country and I believe them, then I would try my best to make them strong.

This could be because she claimed to have a soft corner for PTI at the time of the interview and attendants of PTI rallies made references to nationalist motivations behind participation. A PTI supporter held that “change” was something Pakistan needed, so she supported the party and voted for this “change.”

In contrast, one attendant at a MQM political rally talked about her duty as a “Muhajir” – a politico-ethnic group supported by MQM. The other one was more focused on socio-economic identity. She held that she supported the party because it is not an elitist party and lets people from lower socio-economic background climb the ladder of political leadership.

Look the most important feature of our party is that it takes people from ground to sky. They do not see the [socio-economic] background of the person, how rich one is and how much wealth one owns. Even if he has no slippers and wears torn clothes, our party selects him as a representative and this is one thing we like about our party.
Interestingly, women did not relate to the gender group they belonged to, and no reference was made of a social duty to serve other women and present their issues. Even when a PTI supporter was asked her opinion about a controversy surrounding her party for not adhering to the promised percentage of women running for office in the 2018 election, she openly dismissed this a less significant issue: “PTI has fewer females than males. And also it didn’t matter to me.” Later she justified this point by showing how the party had given tickets to some prominent females in the past but did not refer to women as a social group she identified with.

It’s not like they haven’t given any tickets to females. They tried their hardest to elect Dr. Yasmin Rashid last time, and this time too, but she couldn’t win.

Taken together, while it is clear that women participate in politics because of social identities and loyalties, they lack a gender-based group consciousness and had no motivation attached to serving women as a social group.

Political motivation to extend their political role

Contrary to expectations, the majority of women had a positive intention of joining the political party and becoming a legislator. Just one respondent had not planned to join a political party or even attend a political rally in the future. This could be because she was forced by her ex-in laws to attend political rallies in the past and had a bitter experience of it. In addition, she explained that she has other important roles to perform, which are far more critical for society than attending a rally or participating in politics.

I'm a lecturer. I deal with a lot of [young] people daily...I think we need a moral and ethical dose for [people of] Pakistan before we need any good mayor or political leader.

It is clear from her conversation with the researcher that she has ample knowledge and understanding of her civic and political duties. She seemed to prefer her civic role as an educator to her political role as an activist.

All other women did not consider their role limited to participation in rallies and were willing to extend support for their chosen political party to other forms of public participation. However, these women provided certain conditions, which are important for them to join the party, to become a political agent or to run for office. Interestingly, these conditions were not linked to the familial and social responsibilities of women, which they will have to manage if they try to adopt a political goal. There were mainly two such
conditions: one was linked to mobilization and the other one was based on the party’s performance.

**Political motivation as subject to mobilization**

Women in political rallies of MQM and PPP were of the opinion that they are willing to serve their political parties in other roles if the party needed them in those roles. They held that to earn a party ticket for an election, all they were supposed to do was to keep working for the party; it was up to the leadership of the party to decide whether to select them or not. The respondent who had previously served as a counsellor said, “If Allah gives the honour and if our leaders want that we ride up [the political ladder], then we will not disappoint Allah and our leaders.”

The first MQM respondent had a similar opinion, saying she would definitely run for office on an MQM ticket provided she got a chance. The other respondent at the MQM rally explained that since MQM does not discriminate based on social background, she had a better chance of getting a ticket or becoming a political agent. Her perceived obstacle in becoming a political leader in the party was not her being a woman, but her socio-economic background. This concern is understandable as the majority of political parties in Pakistan have a monarchal setup where the allocation of party tickets is based on links with particular families. Yet, she was not clear on what needs to be done in order to win the party’s support. All these women at the MQM and PPP rallies were dependent on the party’s decision for their selection and were not very enthusiastic or competitive towards their future political roles.

**Political motivation as subject to party performance**

Comparatively, women at the PTI rallies were focusing more on the future performance of their party. Since PTI is a relatively new party, its supporters do not have much information from the past performance of the party to predict the future performance. this gap was reflected in the responses of both female attendants at its rallies who held that they would only extend their political role to a higher level if the party fulfils its promises of good governance. One held that at the time of the interview she has no political goals to become a legislator or party member. She explained that her support is for the leader of the party – Imran Khan – for his vision; “it’s too early to say” if she will extend this political support to other forms of participation or not. The other PTI rally attendant also held that she will formally join the party “only if they will prove what they have promised in upcoming years.”
Interviews during political rally vs. after political rally

While the study treats each case to be inimitable and exclusive, certain differences in the political motivation can be observed with respect to where the interview was conducted. In interviews conducted in the rally, other supporters and family members of the respondents were around the respondents. In comparison, when they responded through social media after the rally, they were free from peer pressure. The environment during a political rally is usually intense, and that factor appeared to increase the partisan attitude among respondents. Also, during the rally, the interviews were conducted in a crowded place where respondents were surrounded by political activists and were more attentive to peer approval of their responses. As a result, they tended to give responses praising their party and exaggerating their support for it. In contrast, when interviews were conducted through social media, the respondents were usually alone before their screens. They were at their homes in a less intense environment and could openly disclose information about their support for the political party. This setting allowed them to share their scepticism towards party performance in future. They also openly divulged the political diversity in their families.

Hence, a clear difference was observed in both political purpose and motivation of these respondents. Those who were interviewed during the rallies talked more about the social identity based on the political identity of the party. For MQM supporters it was middle class or Muhajir identity, for JI it was Muslim identity. In contrast, when respondents were interviewed after the rally, they were more vocal about the nationalist issues. Similarly, women interviewed during the rally linked their political goals with the party’s decision, but ones that were interviewed after it chose the criterion of party performance.

Unfortunately, the researcher could not establish whether the differences in political motivation were truly the outcome of a change in setting. Since two of the three post-rally interviews were of PTI supporters and one was of an attendant at a JI rally who had partial support for PTI, there is a possibility that the difference was with respect to the political party they support. Yet, taken together, the researcher felt the post-rally interviewing to be better for such studies, as the attention to people surrounding an interviewee was observable in all respondents who were interviewed during the rally.

There is another important reason why the researcher chose not to conduct all interviews during the rally. The interview with a JI rally attendant, who revealed how her attendance was forced, made the researcher realize that she could not have disclosed the truth during the rally while surrounded by her in-laws. The researcher realized that these women are usually surrounded by people who had made them attend the rally and cannot
express their opinions openly in front of them. Hence, for PTI rally attendants, the researcher chose to conduct interviews through social media, and they turned out to be better in terms of giving space to respondents to express their individual political opinions about the party.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The research shows that while women are recognized as individual political actors, their political activity is motivated by social, rather than individual interests. In particular, the family still holds a central position in providing resources and mobilization for participation, giving intrinsic motives to be supportive of a particular political party and keeping a check on women’s political knowledge and opinions. Other social groups formed on the basis of ethnicity, religion or socio-economic class can also influence women’s purpose of participation. Women attending political rallies have high group consciousness and act according to the interests of the social group they belong to. Yet they have not yet recognized gender to be one such social group and are not concerned over the interests and rights of women in general.

This social motivation for political participation is not limited to women alone. Multiple studies have recognized that people participate, not as individuals, but as members of a social group (Bartle and Bellucci 2014; Huddy 2001; Hafer and Ran 2016). The findings of this study corroborate well with studies on political motivation with a sample composed of both males and females (Huddy et al. 2015; Fedderke and Giannaros 2017). In this sense, women are no different from men in linking their familial and social roles with their political roles. Yet this recognition that women lacked the group consciousness towards gender to act for securing women’s rights is a matter of concern for feminists who have led a decade-long movement to enfranchise women.

The present research is not the first to reveal this absence of gender consciousness or feminist identity among female political activist. Yet it is among the few to highlight that a patriarchal social setup and strict demarcation around women’s roles in Pakistani society do not always result in a reduction of political participation. Instead, it can promote political participation among women, provided that female participants remain loyal to the familial and social objectives defined for them by society.

The present study also clarifies that female political activists in Pakistan are willing to extend their political careers and want to become legislators or political workers. These women do not perceive the male domination in political parties or the patriarchal structure of society as factors hindering them from becoming political leaders as was highlighted by Shvedova (2007) and McCarthy and Sulatana (2004). They might encounter these issues
once they are seriously pursuing politics as a career choice. However, at this level, their wish to become political leaders lacks enthusiasm, and their political goals depend either on recruitment by the party or performance of the party. This submissive attitude of women political activists, that they will extend their political roles only if the party leadership offers them such roles, could be one important impediment towards lack of female political leadership in Pakistan. Zakar (2014) has previously reported that political leadership in most parties is male-dominated, and they often prefer males for electoral politics.

To deal with this problem, the Election Commission of Pakistan passed a law for the 2018 elections ensuring that at least five percent of each party’s candidates for the general election must be female. Yet most political parties could not adhere to this percentage, and in some cases, they consciously fielded female candidates for seats they were sure of losing or intended to make seat adjustments with other political parties (Jahangir 2018). Therefore, unless women have a very clear agenda to become legislators and a willingness to consider male leadership as competitors rather decision-makers for their political destiny, women are less likely to secure leadership positions within a party.

The research clarifies an important boundary between female participation in political rallies and actual empowerment of women. Linking the number of female participants in political rallies with women political empowerment has two major flaws. First, it neglects important elements of women’s empowerment such as the gender ratio in party leadership or support for pro-feminist laws by the party. Second, it allows parties to take false credit for achieving something historical by bringing women to rallies, neglecting the that many other political parties have already achieved this goal in the past. I named these two errors as the comprehension flaw and the factual flaw, respectively; the former is linked to a flawed understanding of what is empowerment, and the latter results from failure to recognize historical facts.

Comprehension flaw

The comprehension flaw lies with defining political empowerment of women in terms of their attendance at rallies and ignoring other important factors. The physical presence of women at rallies can be misleading, as their presence alone cannot ensure their ability to make political decisions. This comprehension flaw enables political parties to propagate themselves as empowering females without making any real effort for actual political liberalization of their female activists.

For this reason, it was not surprising when the same PTI supporters who had voiced their disapproval of the PMLN misogynist stance on social media and the streets,
chose to remain silent when a member of PTI used sexism to counter harassment allegations put forward by a PTI member, National Assembly (MNA) Ayesha Gulalai, against party leader Imran Khan. Fawad Chaudhary, an active member of PTI, insulted the sister of Gulalai – a sportswoman – for wearing shorts. The party's women, known to be more educated, young and active, however, remained tongue-tied; no rally or social media campaign was launched against Chaudhary asking him to apologize. Similarly, despite PPP’s claim of liberalizing women, Begam Nasim Jahan – a dominant political leader of PPP – failed to revive the principle of female suffrage in the 1973 constitution (Saigol 2016).

A majority of female members in all political parties have familial relationships with male leadership in the party. It is hard to delineate their own political ideology from the ideology of their male relatives in the party. While JI is among the very few political parties of Pakistan where nepotism does not define the power structure, female MNAs and MPAs of the party are selected based on their blood relationship with male leadership (Jamal 2009). Combining these factors, it appears that no political party in Pakistan has a clear understanding of what needs to be done for the purpose of empowering women; their contribution is limited to the political activism of women.

**Factual flaw**

The factual flaw in treating women’s presence at rallies as an historical achievement leads to stagnation in women’s empowerment efforts. Recognizing that women have been actively attending rallies since the creation of Pakistan allows understanding that political parties now need to move beyond the presence of women at rallies to their presence in decision-making committees and the law-making parliament.

Female presence at political rallies has been a dominant feature of Pakistani politics since its inception. There was a separate women’s section in the All India Muslim League (AIML) due to a large number of female members in the party. An unprecedented number of females attended the famous Pakistan Declaration of 1940 (Mirza 1969). AIML female members also arranged the very first female processions in the subcontinent against the banning of Khaksaar Tahreek, and despite receiving severe criticism from the press and society, continued their political struggle (Saigol 2016). Khaksaar Tahreek women were also the first women in subcontinent history who were arrested for political reasons (Mirza 1969; Saigol 2016).

However, as commented by Shami (2009, 141), these women were needed “for displaying numerical strength at the Muslim League’s rallies” and as soon as this need ended with the creation of Pakistan, these women left the political arena for males. In
addition, the majority of the female leadership during the Pakistan Movement was composed of female relatives, mostly wives, of male members of AIML. This makes it difficult to separate the familial roles of these women from their roles as political activists. Unfortunately, women like Fatima Jinnah and Rana Liaquat Ali, who are described as symbols of the powerful women of the Pakistan movement, had gained the respect and identity of the public, based on their familial backgrounds and not as individual political activists.

The second major phase of political activism of women in Pakistan was the result of PPP creation in the 1970s. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was very popular among women during his election campaign due to his liberal views (Shami 2009). Under the leadership of Benazir Bhutto, the party was able to produce notable female politicians, who were given important positions within the party and in the government structure (Shami 2009). The situation, however, changed after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. Also, critics raised concerns over how the female members of PPP, including Benazir Bhutto, received recognition and respect out of their relationship with male members and not as individual legislators.

The problem, therefore, lies not with bringing women into rallies or making them cast votes. These things were previously achieved in Pakistan. The problem lies with translating this political activism of women into their ability to bring real social change that can end the gender discrimination in society.

The findings raise intriguing questions regarding the claim of political parties to equate women’s political activism with empowerment. One can conclude that these parties have mainly mobilized certain social groups or families and have not specifically targeted women as a social group. Greater efforts are needed from political parties of Pakistan, particularly the ones who claim to follow a liberal political ideology, for ensuring that women have space and resources to make their own political decisions, instead of repeating the ones induced in them by their families.

The insights gained from this study are also of importance to feminists working for political liberalization of women in Pakistan. They need to understand that without inducing a sense of belonging to their gender group, women political activists cannot protect the interests of females. These women, even if they become legislators, cannot contribute much to the political rights of females, as they are more attentive to the interests of their ethnic and religious classes. It is important for both political leadership and women activists in Pakistan to understand that empowerment lies not in apparent political activity of women or of its presence in legislative assemblies; it is in developing a just society where gender does not serve as an impeding factor and where political leadership is decided based on merit.
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