

YOUNG WOMEN VOTERS

CONTEXT:

Young women face innumerable challenges navigating and influencing the social norms and the political climate of society. Despite it being one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by all member states of the United Nations, gender equality remains a distant goal as, girls and young women continue to be the single most discriminated against and excluded group today.

Pakistan is a country with a youthful demographic profile. The total population of Pakistan is 208 million of which 49% are women (Census 2017); an estimated 29% of the total population is in the age group 15-29 years, almost half are female. Women's involvement in politics is a prerequisite for achieving gender equality, as is the participation of young women. Though often overlooked in the political realm, their participation is vital for democracy. Young women's participation in politics allows them to gain a platform in the decision-making process. Moreover, the political participation of these young women can inspire and sensitize other young women who have previously been uninterested or felt marginalized.

To ensure the participation of women as voters, a significant effort was made during the elections in 2018 to ensure women cast their votes, by facilitating access to CNIC and including automatic registration as voters on the issuance of the CNIC. Recent Electoral Rolls Released by Election Commission of Pakistan shows that the total registered voters till October 2020 were 115,748,753 million showing an increase of 9.793344 million from 2018; The total number of male voters across Pakistan is 64,078,616 (55%) while female voters number stands at 51,667,599 (45%) with an increasing gap of over 12.4 million. These female registered voters comprise 85 percent of total women ages 18 years and above. While the percentage of registered female voters has increased, as have the votes polled by them, only 21.6 million (47%) voted for the National Assembly elections, comprising approximately 40% of the total (female and male) votes polled.

Of all young women (ages 18-29) in Punjab, 48 percent are registered voters and of these almost three fourths (78 percent) voted in General Elections 2018, as compared to 47 percent in 2013). As a percentage of their age group, 69 percent of young women voted in the 2018 elections as compared to just 32 percent in 2013 in Punjab. In the absence of adequate documentation or policies that address young women's low participation in decision making and ensures their equal participation in the electoral process across the country, this policy brief aims to shine a spotlight on the aspirations, commitments and hurdles faced by

Before I had my CNIC, a vote was being cast in my place anyway.

(FGD participant Hyderabad)

young women voters, explores the trusted means through which political education and information can be extended to them, reaching out to the government and other concerned departments in this regard. The policy brief uses the findings from Focus Group Discussions held in 2018 with the Awaz-e-Niswan (AAN) chapter members in 10 districts, and in-depth interviews conducted for the Young Women Status report, excerpts from informal discussions with AAN college session attendees, national and international reports.

Young Women Voters

One of the most efficient ways to empower girls and young women is to enable them to have a voice. When they actively participate in social and political life, they become drivers for change in their own lives and their communities. Early experiences in political participation build their confidence, allow them to take action on issues that matter to them, and empower them to stand up for their rights. During the FGDs held with young women, it was clear that a significant number of young women have realized the importance and power of the vote for their demographic. Young Women need to vote for numerous reasons because it is the only way to make your voice heard in the corridors of power and influence life choices and opportunities because of how you are governed. A young FGD respondent from Gilgit was of the view “It’s more imperative than ever for us to vote. We are facing multiple threats in our communities. Poverty and unemployment are on the rise and its time for things to change”.

I have realized that young women in my area have started taking interest in politics. They make their own decisions while voting and are not being influenced by the opinion of others.

FGD Respondent (Multan)

While discussing the push factors behind their interest in politics and advocating for the right to vote, the majority of women stated lack of awareness about their political rights, health and education conditions, stagnant cultural practices as reasons why they want to bring change through their votes. Women discussed at length how they were being held from practicing their basic political rights, they had no access to CNIC and other important documents. They were being married off without valid marriage certificates and their children had no B-form. These were some of the reasons which moved them to understand the political process, exercise their right to vote and raise their voice. Furthermore, during the discussion with young girls and women, an evident change was observed where young women were able to cast vote for their favorite candidate without facing any major opposition from the family. They voted in hope of getting desired change and kept in mind the attributes and qualities of candidate during voting. A respondent from Rawalpindi who considered vote a personal choice informed that she voted for one party while her whole family voted for the other party. A participant from Hyderabad who was

initially not willing to vote said “my family made me realized that my vote will be wasted, and this is my right”.

However, this was just one side of the picture. Some young women were hopeless with the political system of the country and do not foresee any change in the upcoming days and consider voting as a waste of their time and resources. To them, participation in the electoral process or the vote doesn't hold any influence to bring about change in their lives and country. Surprisingly, the young, educated women also subscribed to these views, using phrases such as “politics is a waste of time” “all politicians are the same” “our vote cannot bring change”. These young women appear not to understand the significance of their votes. One of the respondents from Hunza said “Many girls still do not have or know about CNICs. If they are not aware of the importance of CNIC then how would they elect the right leader?”. Respondents from Multan, Abbottabad and Hyderabad informed that they were not permitted to vote in elections. In some cases, permission was conditional to voting in favor of the husband/brother's preferred candidate or completion of household chores. Women are discouraged from getting their CNICs; AAN members from Abbottabad the story of a woman who lost her *Nikahnama* and her husband had convinced her that if she went to NADRA for her CNIC, she would be arrested.

Perceptions about female politicians

Discussing the importance of a politically aware woman and her participation in political activities, the majority of the young women agreed with the fact that women must get involved in politics as only a woman can understand the nature of women problems and will be more dedicated and effectively advocate for addressing them. Young women believed that it is so heartening and encouraging to see a woman from their community representing them on a national or provincial level and highlighting their problems there. A respondent from Abbottabad said, “our lady councilor listens to us and tries to help us. For women, it's always best to have a woman in power because woman understands women”. Women feel relaxed around other women, respondents believed that a woman will share more with another woman than she would share with her husband. Women should participate in politics so they can meet with community women and discuss their issues. One of the respondents said “no community woman would take her problem to the male elected representatives. She would contact a female to solve her issues and problems, we believe that a woman can understand another woman better.”

Respondents agreed with the fact that in the past few years, women interest has developed more in politics. A few years back, they were being selected on reserved seats but now they are being

elected on general seats which is a positive change. Women's confidence has increased after watching other women running their election campaigns. They felt happy that women are being represented on different public forums these days.

Reaching out to young women

To involve young women in the political arena and imparting political information and knowledge to help them become valuable citizen, there is a need to go beyond the traditional source of information like radio, newspaper, pamphlets and TV. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have transformed the way politicians interact with citizens, and vice versa. They are a resource with an incredible political impact, and unlike other resources (such as campaign financing, professional networks or traditional media coverage,) they have a very low entry cost. This means that women who are frequently at a disadvantage otherwise, can potentially have equal access to social media. It is a popular mode of political participation among young women. The internet and social media offers national and international solidarity or connection over women's issues. The younger generation receive most of their information from social media which also creates a greater sense of unity. Likewise, social media allows political issues and activism to spread rapidly while offering little participatory transaction costs. Additionally, the internet allows women who want to participate in political issues to do so by helping them overcome societal or physical constraints.

The three identified areas where social media has enabled women's political activities are

- Hashtag activism bringing women's issues to the forefront of political agendas.
- Tackling violence against women through social media tools.
- Public accountability towards gender equality.

Youth participation in political matters has gained attention among people around the globe where youth involvement in certain political activities has been witnessed. A survey conducted in Pakistan and Indonesia at the time of general elections in both countries, 2018 and 2019 respectively, aimed to identify the influence of social media in enhancing youth involvement in political learning, participation and political efficacy. The results show that the use of social media facilitates youth to participate in political activities and such activities in turn increase their knowledge, provide a chance to participate and build the capacity of political efficacy.

Internet penetration in Pakistan has seen a significant increase in recent years, from 15.5% in 2017 to 31.19% in 2019. According to figures provided by the Pakistan Telecommunications

Authority (PTA) in June 2019, there were 65.13 million Pakistanis accessing the internet through mobile and fixed broadband. With the increase in internet access, the nexus of offline and online violence is manifesting more significantly online. The threat of online violence forces women to limit their online activity, often self-censoring themselves. Results of a survey “Measuring Pakistani Women’s Experience of Online Violence” conducted by DRF in universities across Pakistan showed that 70% of the young women surveyed did not feel comfortable posting their pictures online for the fear of them getting misused, depicting the hostility they experience in online spaces. In Pakistan, social media has altered the communications landscape for every sector, including politics. For young women, however, the gender/class/ literacy/ rural divide puts significant limits on their ability to participate. For those who access the social media platforms, political engagement takes many forms, and important gender issues are raised, despite the inevitable risks of cyber-bullying and trolling.

To conclude, young women, are an important demographic in Pakistani politics. Together they can change the fate of the nation. Effective measures should be taken to ensure their political participation. Their voice, interests, and concerns must gain the attention of political institutions nationwide, as this is the first step towards attaining gender equality.

Recommendations

- ✚ Government and other relevant departments should take measure to improve the quality of data on girls and young women and identify additional obstacles faced by women with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds in accessing the political and civic spheres.
- ✚ NADRA should take steps to eliminate the gender gap in CNIC and voter registration through extensive outreach campaigns, especially in educational institutions (public and private).
- ✚ Federal and Provincial governments should create an enabling environment (legal framework and policies) for young women’s participation in a broad range of processes (electoral and parliamentary)
- ✚ All the relevant ministries should have an active presence on social media platforms, where feedback and grievances are timely addressed.
- ✚ Key messages from policy documents and bills should be timely disseminated through social media by government and CSOs.
- ✚ Federal and provincial governments should ensure civic education in the curriculum, including on basic constitutional rights and obligations. They should facilitate CSOs to hold sessions with youth in educational institutions to make them aware of the importance of

meaningful civic engagement and involve them in community engagement activities to build their skills and capacities as informed citizens.

- ✚ Raise awareness of the importance of promoting gender equality among men, especially youth.
- ✚ Facilitate women to make greater use of information technology for communication and the media.

This policy brief has been produced by Urooj Obaid

End Notes

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