



# Political Participation of Female in Pakistan: Prospects and Challenges

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## ABSTRACT

Owing to gender imbalances and the patriarchal system, females in Pakistan are considered minorities in the political process. The quota system has increased female representation in the parliament. Nonetheless, it is imperative to implement effective strategies and policies to empower women and to improve their engagement in Pakistani politics. The main objective of this study was to explore the major challenges and prospects of female participation in politics in Pakistan. Additionally, this study investigates the obstacles and opportunities for female participation in leadership. A qualitative research method was adopted in this study, relying on a desk-study approach and utilizing various secondary sources such as articles, research papers, government reports, and official websites. The main findings of the study indicate that economic dependency, lack of education and literacy, gender segregation, male domination, traditional beliefs, financial issues, limited awareness of political rights, political parties, social and cultural norms, and religious interpretation are the major challenges faced by women in Pakistan when it comes to participating in the democratic process and governance system. Furthermore, the underrepresentation of women in politics reflects complex and mutually reinforcing social dynamics, highlighting the need for concerted and collaborative actions and measures to address these challenges. In conclusion, women's participation will lead to improved decision-making concerning gender-based laws and regulations in various sectors, including education, health, the workplace, and society.

## Keywords

female empowerment; Pakistan; political participation; systematic literature review

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## INTRODUCTION

Political participation involves a wide range of activities that are not restricted to voting. According to the United Nations (2005), political participation is considered as “the freedom to speak out, assemble and associate; the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs; and the opportunity to register as a candidate, to a campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all levels of government.” Similarly, Jahan (2016) also explained that female participation in politics means the ability of the female to correspondingly contribute to the male at all levels in all decisions that affect them. Female political participation is also considered to be a milestone in female empowerment. It also refers to the ability and freedom of females to peruse their choice and freedom to vote and participate as candidates in the election process. Women’s political participation is considered a pivotal moment in their empowerment. Women’s political empowerment entails their capacity and freedom to exercise their right to vote, run for office, participate in political protests, and make decisions (Panday, 2008; Luka, 2011; Alexander et al., 2016; Adamu, 2023).

A higher number of females in politics may contribute to more attention towards female issues in the country. Female participation is considered an essential prerequisite for gender equality and unpretentious democracy (Mayo & Borg, 2007; Ramkarran, 2014; Kassa, 2015; Funk & Mueller, 2018). It also facilitates the direct involvement of females in the public decision-making process and ensures better accountability to females. The extent of females’ participation in politics and access to the decision-making process is a major indicator of gender equality in society. In 1995, the Beijing Platform emphasized that gender equality also matters and influences public decisions on a similar foothold as men; hence, equality in public decision-making is vital for the betterment of females’ rights. The “Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women” has already mentioned women’s political equality (Articles 7–9) and discussed women’s equal participation at all levels (Article 7b). It has been stated:

*“States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women on equal terms with men, the right to participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government (Part II, Article 7b)” (The United Nations, 1995).*

These assurances jointly expressed that females’ right to equality cannot be touched without equivalence in the political decision-making process. Therefore, according to Bari (2005), females’ participation in public decision-making is not only a

query of unpretentious justice or democracy but also compulsory for females' interests that should be taken into account. It is believed that the nature of politics requires a masculine ability, such as confidence, activeness, and not feminine individualities of indifference and submissiveness; hence, females are discouraged and kept out of politics. The outcomes of active and positive involvement by females in politics determine their role and influence on the decision-making process, which may lead to political representation (Miranda, 2005).

Approximately 48 percent population of the country's population consists of females until 2020; however, it has been evident that the role of females has not been significant participation in politics, irrespective of their size (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2014). The increased representation of females in politics can show a clear image for the near future, and the ground realities show that equality between males and females has not yet been attained. In Pakistan, females are considered minorities in the political process due to gender disparities and the patriarchal system. The quota system has raised the representation of females in the parliament, however; it is the need of the day that there must be proper plans and measures in order to empower women and improve their participation in the politics of Pakistan.

Women's participation will lead to better decision-making related to gender-based laws and regulations in different sectors, such as education, health, workplace, and overall society (Bari, 2010). Gender quotas are increasingly being recognized as crucial policy tools for promoting female representation in decision-making bodies. The main objective of this study is to increase the recruitment of women in political positions and break their political isolation. However, quotas were employed as temporary measures until the barriers faced by women were eliminated. Many developing countries have implemented quotas at both the national and sub-national levels to achieve equitable participation by women in the government. However, increasing the quota for females does not guarantee that they will remove all barriers. Females have a limited role in the development of social and economic policies, and their exclusion from decision-making bodies will not give any change to increase their ownership to encourage their involvement in politics (Shaheed, 2017; Sharif & Hina, 2018).

Although there are no constitutional barriers for a female to take part in mainstream politics, there is no potential presence in politics remains not significant due to social, cultural, and economic constraints and challenges. Awan (2016) and Latif et al. (2015) highlighted that the major obstacles that consider the serious difference of perspective to challenge the gender discrimination throughout party system in politics of Pakistan, because female's participation is characterized as individuals, not as members of a group. Furthermore, female participation has remained very low at

provincial and national levels thought out history (R. Jahan, 1987; Omvedt, 2005; Durrani & Halai, 2018; Zakar et al., 2018; Khayyam & Tahir, 2019). Awan (2016) highlighted that the female participation rate was different for different governments; for instance, at the first legislative assembly (Aug 1947 to Oct. 1954), females achieved only 3 percent of the total seats; however, during the second legislative assembly (May 1955 to Oct. 1958), females had no representation.

Another shift in the political structure was observed after the Zia era, which continued from 1978 to 1988. By 1988, the 3 percent assigned quota rose to 10 percent and females acquired 22 seats in the National Assembly, along with 5 percent of the seats in provincial assemblies. However, no seats were allocated to females at the provincial and national levels in 1990, 1993, and 1997 (Awan, 2016). Under military rule in 2000, females' quota in political participation increased to 33 percent at the local government level (Khattak, 2010; Nazir et al., 2019). This quota was effective at the conical union, tehsil, and district levels. Furthermore, the number of females was increased to 17 percent in national and provincial assemblies before the 2002 election. Fluctuations were observed in the 2008 and 2013 elections. Females accounted for almost 20.5 percent of the total number of seats in the lower house of the national legislature, whereas they accounted for 17 percent of the total number of seats in the upper house in 2013.

Presently, females constitute 20 % of the parliament, with 17 seats in the Senate and 70 in the National Assembly. Even, the "Elections Act 2017" has made it compulsory for political parties to issue a minimum number of representation female in local election. The Act stated to "ensure at least five percent representation of women candidates" in political parties while making the right selection of candidates on general seats for national and provincial assemblies (Awan, 2016; Latif et al., 2015). Throughout Pakistan's history, women's participation has been limited at both provincial and national levels. Socioeconomic constraints have hindered women's involvement in mainstream politics, relegating them to supporting roles within their political families in Pakistani politics (Devlin & Elgie, 2008; Bano, 2009; Allauddin et al., 2020; Rubab et al., 2020). Political leaders are unable to establish a balanced political framework.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Female Participation in Politics***

Female leadership in political domains is considered socially advantageous across all cultures as it is associated with ensuring equal opportunities, resources, and participation in the decision-making process for women (World Economic Forum, 2022; UN Women, 2023). Furthermore, female political participation has demonstrated

several benefits, including reduced inequality, increased cooperation across parties and ethical lines, and amplification of female voices at the national level. It also leads to a greater prioritization of social issues, such as health, education, and pensions (Markham, 2013). Female voter turnout, public sector responsiveness to women, and overall female participation contribute to the presence of women in positions of power at the municipal, provincial, and national levels (Burns et al., 2001). Inclusion of women's viewpoints and experiences in the decision-making process is crucial for achieving gender equality, sustainable development, peace, and democracy (Porter, 2003; Baksh-Soodeen, 2005; Dar & Shairgojri, 2022).

However, females continue to face numerous challenges and obstacles to their political contributions worldwide, particularly in poorer nations (Kumar, 2017; Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019; Mosier et al., 2022). Women are underrepresented in parliament and decision-making positions globally. According to the United Nations, women's equal participation in power and decision-making is a fundamental right central to gender equality and women's empowerment. Strategies aimed at promoting female participation have progressed through conventions, protocols, and international agreements for gender mainstreaming, but achieving gender parity at the highest levels of government remains a challenge (Morobane, 2014). Despite constituting half of the global population, women hold only 23% of the total number of seats in parliaments and senates worldwide (Chalaby, 2017; Radu, 2018).

### ***Socio-Economic, Cultural, Religious and Political Challenges***

Several studies have emphasized institutional restraints that hinder female political participation, including political systems that operate on tight timetables without considering women's household duties, quota systems, and gender preferences (Kangas et al., 2015). Due to the male-dominated political system, contemporary forms of political empowerment often result in women being relegated to lower levels of leadership rather than reaching top positions in political and legislative systems (Miller, 1994; Kassa, 2015). Iwanaga (2008) identified numerous barriers to female political representation, including political engagement challenges associated with cultural, religious, and social norms (Lopez-Claros & Zahidi, 2005; Bari, 2005; Dababneh, 2012; Shalaby, 2016). Siddiqi (2015) outlined two types of barriers to female political participation: barriers at the household and social levels. Additionally, although political parties have designated female wings, they often have fewer female members than male ones (Naz et al., 2010).

Female participation in assemblies, from the local to national levels, is often tied to political family lineages and ancestral heritage. However, promoting female political engagement should go beyond temporary measures to address the systemic barriers

that hinder female empowerment and democratic contributions (Morobane, 2014). Political parties hesitate to embrace or implement changes or policies that may challenge their power and traditional beliefs, resulting in a preference for male members over female members (George, 2019). Patriarchal and corrupt practices further influence these parties. According to Bano (2009), Khan & Naqvi (2018), and Hussain et al. (2017), male-dominated cultural norms and stringent family obligations limit women's regular lives, as parents are concerned about potential marital issues.

Early marriage has been associated with women's roles as homemakers, although it has hindered their liberation in a society that emphasizes reproductive roles (Ghafoor & Haider, 2018; Adil et al., 2021). Gender-based harassment in non-segregated settings is a significant barrier to female political participation because Pakistan's patriarchal system lacks structures to ensure the safety and security of women within political parties. Alston (2005) also noted that women pay a higher price to participate in policies that promote national development, highlighting the need for greater support and resources for women in top positions (Fleschenberg, 2013). Education is considered essential, but in remote and rural areas, girls are often denied basic rights and limited to Quran recitation without translation (Afza & Rashid, 2009).

Buzdar & Ali (2011) argue that the Quran and Sunnah explicitly prohibit gender inequality and treat men and women equally. Islamic teachings emphasize the equal treatment of men and women, as reflected in verses such as Surah Al Ahzab, which promises rewards and forgiveness based on devotion, belief, and other virtues, regardless of gender (Habisch & Schmidpeter, 2016). The Quran devotes a whole surah, Al Nisa, and other verses to address female rights and resolve concerns. Awan (2016) highlights social barriers that hinder female participation in the political system. Political involvement encompasses women's ability to be elected to national assemblies, their role as voters, members of political parties, and other aspects of the political process.

Ghafoor & Haider (2018) also acknowledge that sociocultural and economic constraints limit active female participation in politics in this male-dominated society, undermining the equal opportunities provided by law. Latif et al. (2015) further identify religious, economic, and patriarchal thinking as key barriers to female political participation. They emphasize the importance of raising awareness at the grassroots level and developing relevant legislation to promote female participation in national decision-making. Shami (2009) explores the historical aspect of female political participation in Pakistan, noting significant female involvement during the Bhutto regime but low participation during Zia's Martial Law. Musharraf's reign was crucial for female politics, as he increased female seat allotments at the district and national levels. Sumbadze (2009) investigated the discrepancy between female representation

and its actual impact, highlighting the existence of two parties that address female representation and women's issues. While female representation in politics allows for the discussion of women's issues and the inclusion of a gender perspective, it does not guarantee desired outcomes.

Shedova (2005) identified three categories of barriers to female political participation: political reasons (e.g., the masculine model of politics, lack of party support, cooperation with women's organizations, and the electoral system), ideological reasons (related to traditional gender roles, lack of trust in women, the perception of politics as dirty, and the role of the media), and socioeconomic challenges (including poverty, unemployment, low literacy, dual burden, education, and training). Kangas et al. (2015) argued that traditional obligations and gendered work distribution, along with social norms, make it difficult for women to participate in public roles outside the home. The perception of female gender identity as primarily domestic continues to act as a barrier to female participation in formal politics.

According to Kassa (2015), women's socioeconomic status significantly affects their involvement and representation in political institutions. Economic barriers, such as high campaign expenditures, often hinder women's participation because elections are costly (Kayuni & Chikadza, 2016; Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019; Wang et al., 2019; Prihatini, 2020; Bernhard et al., 2021). Umer et al. (2016) explore how social-cultural norms in remote or rural locations impede women's participation in political activities. Zafar (2016) highlighted geographical and religious obstacles, including limited access to education and cultural, economic, religious, and political restrictions that disadvantage women. Hussain et al. (2017) found that misinterpretation of religion, male dominance, patriarchal society, education, and lack of political party support are key factors that influence women's participation in local body elections in Pakistan. Matloob et al. (2021) also noted various challenges related to campaign financing and the nomination of female candidates for party positions, which act as significant barriers to female political participation. "Biradari support," "patronage reference," and limited economic means further constrain women's progress in political processes."

### **Current Study**

The main objective of this study was to explore the major challenges and prospects of female participation in politics in Pakistan. This study identifies the major challenges hindering female participation in politics. Ultimately, this study also provides policy-based recommendations for uplifting and improving female involvement in politics. The specific objectives are as follows:

- a. To observe female participation in politics in Pakistan.
- b. To identify the major challenges hindering female participation in politics.

- c. To provide valuable suggestions based on the findings to uplift and improve women's political participation.

Based on the research objectives, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

- d. Research question 1: What are the major prospects and challenges related to female participation in Pakistan?
- e. Research question 2: What policies should be considered to improve females' roles and participation in public decision-making?

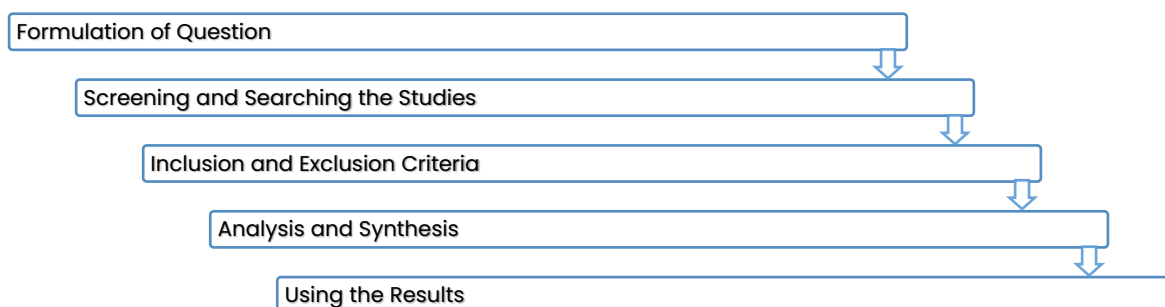
This study will help to explore the major challenges behind the under-representation of females in politics in Pakistan and develop ways to increase female participation in democratic governance. Furthermore, it provides several policy implications for academicians, policymakers, social activists, and other stakeholders to address the challenges that have posed serious problems for females in Pakistan and restrict their participation. Addressing these challenges will provide policy guidelines for all stakeholders to consider when formulating policies and legislation. Governments can also initiate policies and legislation to actively support females in contributing to the political domain.

## METHOD

To answer these research questions, this study employed a research method known as a systematic review. According to Higgins et al. (2008), a systematic review is a literature review that identifies, critically evaluates, and integrates available research findings of sufficient quality concerning a specific research question or subject, with the ultimate aim of providing informative and evidence-based insights (emphasis added). In this study, a systematic literature-based strategy was employed. This approach was based on the five steps presented by Denyer & Tranfield (2009). This study aimed to avoid the perceived weaknesses of narrative reviews. The five phases involved in conducting a systematic review of the existing research are outlined in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Systematic literature review stages*



Source: Denyer & Tranfield (2009)

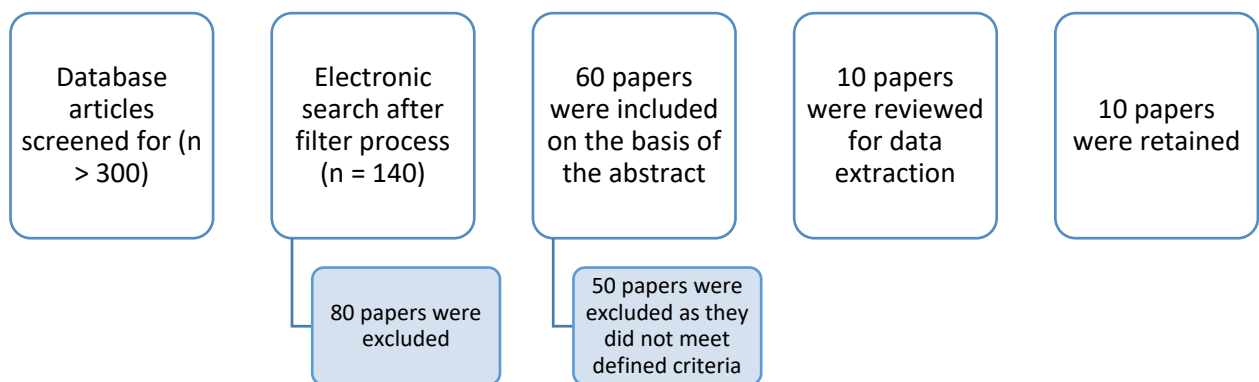


### **Screening and Searching the Studies**

After the formulation of the research question, online sources have been used to find the relevant studies using an electronic database such as "Research Gate," "Google scholar," "Emerald," and "Wiley Online." In order to find the most relevant literature related to "female participation in politics," "politics and female in Pakistan," "challenges related to female political participation," etc. Although female participation in politics is not relatively new in the context of national studies, there is a lack of distinguished research areas that have particularly explored prospects and challenges in the context of developing countries, such as Pakistan. Articles published after 2011 were selected for this study. Six studies were selected from Google scholar, three from the research gate, and 1 from Emerald.

**Figure 2**

*Screening process*



Source: Primary data, author's processing.

Figure 2 shows the screening process used to search for the most relevant articles. More than 300 papers were initially searched using keywords. Based on titles and abstracts related to the subject matter, 140 papers were selected. To select the most relevant studies, a duplicate removal process and an abstract-based screening of the review of findings were performed, and 60 papers were excluded. During this process, 50 articles were excluded if they did not fulfill the inclusion criteria. The major reasons for excluding the articles were that they did not reflect or address the research subject, the full text was not available in the English language, or addressed urban sprawl that was not related to the objective of the study. Furthermore, based on the full-text screening of the studies, 10 studies were finalized.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Initially, the titles, abstracts, summaries, and full texts of the studies were reviewed to select relevant materials. In the next step, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were

determined for the screening process of articles. Based on the inclusion criteria, all studies that explored female participation in politics in the context of South Asian countries were conducted. The criteria were linked to the research questions, study discussion, trends, and challenges. However, all studies related to female participation in Pakistan have been conducted. Several studies have explored major factors and challenges that have been considered in the literature review. Studies on gender idealists in political participation have also been taken that also highlighted the major constraints and challenges behind the lack of female involvement. This study did not consider those studies that were related to developed countries because there are huge differences in cultural and socioeconomic conditions as compared to developing countries, particularly Pakistan. Furthermore, all studies that have been published after 2000 have been considered, whereas; screening and search of articles were limited from scholarly, peer-reviewed journals in the English language

### ***Analysis and Synthesis***

The literature examined descriptive and thematic content using two reviewers who revised a considerable sample of the studies' earlier discussion of findings and separated studies. The descriptive analysis focused on categorizing the studies by years and journals and the key findings of each study. Thematic analysis has been used to explore and understand the prospects and challenges related to the political participation of females in Pakistan and policies and strategies to uplift and improve females' involvement in politics.

### ***Using the Results***

In the final step, all selected studies were critically evaluated and reviewed with respect to the topic and main objective of the study. Thus, the literature was explored, analyzed, and reported as the final tomes using thematic analysis derived inductively from selected studies.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the findings and thematic analysis of the study. It can be observed that with the quota system, female participation in politics has increased. According to World Bank data, Pakistan and Bangladesh have a 20 percent share of seats held by females in the national parliaments. On the other hand, Pakistan has been ranked as 93 among 153 countries in terms of female political empowerment where almost 20.2 percent of females are legislators whereas; 12 percent of females have been appointed at ministerial positions ([World Economic Forum, 2022](#)). The representation of females in Pakistan is higher than that of neighboring countries such as India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, and it also stands ahead of many developed countries.

**Table 1***Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%)*

Years	Bangladesh	Bhutan	India	Sri Lanka	Maldives	Nepal	Pakistan
2005	14.782	9.333	8.28	4.889	12	5.8536	21.34
2010	18.55	8.51	10.825688	5.333	6.493	33.164	22.222
2013	19.71	6.382	11.00	5.7778	6.493	-----	20.743
2018	20.285	14.89	11.80	5.777	5.882	32.72	20.23
2019	20.63	14.89	14.391	5.333	4.597	32.72	20.23
2020	20.91	14.89	14.36	5.381	4.597	32.72	20.17

Source: The World Bank

After 2000, an increase in female participation in formal political institutions was realized by initiating the quota system for females from the national to the local level. A historical review of female political participation highlights two notable periods. The first period is from Pakistan's independence until 2000. After 2000, the second period began after 2000. The characteristics that differentiate these two periods are based on the number of female representations in the senate and local bodies of the national and provincial assemblies. During the first period of 1947 to 2000, the number of females was marginal; however, after the second period from 2000 onwards, constitutional and legal initiatives were taken to enhance females' quotas in political forums to enlarge females' political representation.

During the Musharraf era, positive measures were promised to improve females' status in the country. The government circulated a "Legal Framework Order" in 2002 to reserve a 17% quota for women in upper and lower houses. Furthermore, the quota was reserved for females in provincial assemblies in all four provinces. The highest ever quota was allocated to the lowest political tier, which was 33 percent reserved seats for females at all tiers of the local government. So that 17 in the Senate, 60 in the lower house and 128 in four provincial assemblies were reserved were under "Local Governor Ordinance, 2001" indicating that there are more opportunities for female top take participate in decision-making at the local level. Even in the election of 2001, almost 36187 females were selected on reserved seats; however, they had no previous experience related to the governance system and knowledge regarding their fundamental rights, roles, and responsibilities. With time, significant development was observed in the elections of 2008, 2013, and 2018. Based on the "Constitution of 1973" Pakistan's Parliament is bicameral whereas; parliament comprises two houses known as "National Assembly" and "Senate." According to available statistics on the websites of the National Assembly and Senate, women hold 60 seats, representing 17 percent of the total seats. Punjab has the largest representation of females were followed by Sindh. Furthermore, 17 seats have been reserved for females in the Senate, representing 17 percent of the total number of seats.

**Table 2***Female participation in National Assembly of Pakistan*

Provinces/Territories	Punjab	Sindh	KPK	Baluchistan	Federal Capital	Total
General	141	61	45	16	3	266
Women	33	14	10	4	0	60
Total	176	75	55	20	3	276
% of Women	18.1	18.6	18.1	20.0	0	22.5

Source: National Assembly of Pakistan (2023)

**Table 3***Female participation in Senate of Pakistan, 2019*

Provinces/Territories	Punjab	Sindh	KPK	Baluchistan	FATA	Federal Capital	Total
General	14	14	14	14	8	2	66
Technicrats/Ulema	4	4	4	4	-	1	17
Women	4	4	4	4	-	1	17
Non-Muslims	1	1	1	1	-	-	4
all	23	23	23	23	8	4	104
% Women	17.39%	17.39%	17.39%	17.39%	0	25%	16346%

Source: Senate of Pakistan (2023)

Over time, female participation in politics is increasing as voters, candidates, and political activists; however, many hurdles have created barriers for females. The involvement of females in decision-making will also help raise the voices of females and issues while taking gender-based policy measures.

### ***Descriptive Analysis***

#### *Years of Publication*

All the selected studies were published since 2009. It can be seen that two papers were published in 2009, 2016 and 2020 whereas one paper was published in 2014, 2017, 2018 and 2019 respectively. It is believed that publications will increase in the context of female participation in politics in developing countries, such as Pakistan. With time, it is expected that publications will increase in the context of exploring the causes, consequences, and policies in Pakistan.

#### *Name of Journals*

These selected studies were published in different journals, such as "Global Islamic", "Journal of Business and Management", "South Asian Studies", "Women's Studies Journal", "Pakistan Vision", "Journal of Gender and Social Issues", "Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies", Intl J Business Soc Sci" and "Pakistan. Review of Economics and Political Science", whereas one article has been published by Shahida Wahid Gender Initiatives, LUMS. All journals are related to the subject area linked to the assessment of females' participation in politics and the major challenges that females face in Pakistan.

Furthermore, several other dimensions of female political participation have been covered by journals that have significantly contributed to the literature for further analysis.

**Table 4**

*Number of articles based on years of publication*

Years of Publication	Number of Articles
2009	2
2014	1
2016	2
2017	1
2018	1
2019	1
2020	2
Total	10

Source: Primary data, Author's compilation.

#### *Name of Journals*

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#### *Overview of the Selected Studies*

Ten articles were selected for a systematic review of the literature. [Table 5](#) presents a brief overview of these articles in terms of author names, study objectives, research methods, and data collection and analysis.

**Table 5**

*Overview of the Selected Studies*

Authors	Objectives	Research method	Data collection and analysis
Bano (2009)	This study aims to identify south Asian countries while analyzing the factors that contributed to the increase in female participation in politics as in the case of Pakistan.	Qualitative	Literature analysis through secondary source

Latif et al. (2015)	The study aims to explore the perception and opinion of males regarding female participation in politics.	Qualitative	Primary data using a purposive sampling technique 20 in-depth interviews and 2 focus group discussions Thematic analysis
Ghafoor & Haider (2018)	The study aims to identify the major root cause of the slow growth of female empowerment in terms of political participation and highlight the ways to improve female empowerment for democratic governance in Pakistan.	Quantitative	Primary data through convenience sampling technique survey from 88 respondent  Descriptive statistics
Awan (2016)	The main purpose of the article s to analyze female participation in politics from a historical perspective. While exploring the development, and current situation, this study also explores the social barriers that have brought challenges for female participation in the political system.	Qualitative	Secondary data using literature and reports
Naseer & Kalsoom (2019)	The main objective of the study is to explore the multiple issues that hinder females to perform their role in national politics while suggesting strategies by political elites to develop a national integration without ensuring female participation in politics.	Qualitative	Secondary data using literature and reports
Hussain, et al. (2017)	This article aims to analyze factors that affected female participation in the electoral process in Pakistan that were low due to perceptions of people that it violates the predominant norms and values of the society.	Qualitative	Secondary data using literature review
Khan (2009)	This study examines the different barriers related to the political empowerment of females in Dir Lower while identifying several factors and barriers such as social, economic, political, religious and cultural that restricted females from taking part in political activities.	Qualitative	Primary data using a structured interview and focus group discussion  Thematic analysis
Syed & Tabassum (2014)	This study has analyzed and reviewed the unpredictable level of female participation at different periods and its impact on the female's status.	Qualitative	Secondary data using literature review

Umer et al. (2016)	This stud has investigated different socio-cultural barriers that restricted females' participation in politics in Baluchistan.	Qualitative	Primary data using snowball sampling for interviews for 10 respondents Content analysis
Matloob et al. (2021)	The main purpose of this stud is to analyze the role of a female in the political agenda at Azad Jammu and Kashmir.	Qualitative	Primary data using in-depth interviews from 20 respondents Thematic analysis

Source: Primary data, author's compilation.

It can be observed that the authors aim to explore the barriers, hurdles, and challenges that restrict female participation in politics in Pakistan, with three studies specifically focusing on underdeveloped areas of the country. Several hurdles were identified regarding these challenges, encompassing social, economic, religious, and cultural perspectives. Nine of the ten investigations utilized a qualitative research approach, which provides textual material related to the subject matter, while only one study employed a quantitative research method. For data collection, both primary and secondary sources, including published literature, interviews, focus group discussions, and surveys, were utilized. For data analysis, a quantitative study employs descriptive statistics, whereas qualitative studies employ various qualitative data analysis methodologies, such as thematic analysis, literature analysis, and content analysis, to analyze the results.

### *Main Findings of the Study*

In this section, we present the major findings that provide insights into major outcomes related to female participation in politics in Pakistan. The findings of this study have focused on highlighting the challenges that females face in the context of participation in politics. For instance, Bano (2009) found that unsatisfactory allocation of resources, lack of ritual and inspiration to aggressively intercept politics, the constituency's lack of self-assurance in females, and economic and social standards for political contention and emergencies of obtainability are major challenges for female in Pakistan. It has also been found that ideological, social, cultural, and religious elements are major hurdles hindering female participation in politics (Latif et al., 2015; Ghafoor & Haider, 2018). Furthermore, factors such as poverty, female education, gender discrimination, feudalism-based domestic violence, strict family obligations, harassment, and religious interpretations are major contributors to women's low representation in politics. These factors, combined with the existing political system, hinder women's participation (Awan, 2016). Additionally, Naseer & Kalsoom (2019) emphasized that political parties play a crucial role in the process of national integration and female participation in

politics, which are essential for the expansion of democracy and the development of national solidarity.

Hussain et al. (2017) and Umer et al. (2016) identified the misinterpretation of religion, male dominance, patriarchal culture, education, and lack of support from political parties as important variables that impact female involvement in local body elections. Both groups arrived at the same conclusions. Khan (2009) highlighted that "patriarchy, orthodox attitudes," "lack of education," and "misinterpretation and wrong practice of Pakhtunwali and Seclusion (Purdah)" are significant factors contributing to the under-representation of females in decision-making positions at all levels. Furthermore, societal perceptions of females' leadership abilities, socioeconomic status, and lack of education and skills have all contributed to the decreased political involvement of women. Syed & Tabassum (2014) and Matloob et al. (2021) have also identified that patriarchal family structure and controlling bi-male heads in remote areas are the major reasons restricting females from appearing and working in public places. Furthermore, "biradari support", "patronage reference, and " less economical means" to move forward in political procedures.

**Table 6**

*Challenges related to female Political Participation in Pakistan*

Author	Challenges related to female participation in Pakistan
Bano (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Political parties preferences for male or female</li> <li>✓ Religious parties and tribal and feudal structures</li> <li>✓ Quota system</li> <li>✓ Illiteracy rate or education</li> <li>✓ Lack of unity among women parliamentarians</li> <li>✓ Elite groups of class in politics</li> </ul>
Latif et al. (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Insecurity</li> <li>✓ Lawlessness</li> <li>✓ Religious orientation or affiliation</li> <li>✓ Finance issue</li> <li>✓ Male chauvinism and their ego</li> <li>✓ Restricted mobility</li> <li>✓ Weak decision-making power</li> <li>✓ Family responsibilities</li> <li>✓ Religious "norms" and practices</li> <li>✓ Gender segregate</li> </ul>
Ghafoor & Haider (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Cultural value</li> <li>✓ Female's wings have smaller membership</li> <li>✓ Lack of confidence in women</li> <li>✓ Exigencies of availability</li> <li>✓ Unequal distribution of resources</li> <li>✓ Lack of tradition and motivation</li> <li>✓ Literacy rate</li> <li>✓ Religious interpretation</li> </ul>



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Awan (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Male dominant culture</li><li>✓ Social status of female in urban and rural area</li><li>✓ Strict family obligations</li><li>✓ Sexual harassment</li><li>✓ Religious interpretation</li><li>✓ Structural discrimination in party organizations</li><li>✓ Discriminatory practices based on gender</li><li>✓ Male domination</li><li>✓ Sex segregation</li><li>✓ Illiteracy</li><li>✓ lack of awareness of their political rights</li><li>✓ Lack of political networks.</li><li>✓ Limited access to economic resources</li></ul>
Naseer & Kalsoom (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Collective identity</li><li>✓ Patriarchal society</li><li>✓ Men monopolization the political process</li><li>✓ Financial issues</li><li>✓ Gender disparities in society</li></ul>
Hussain et al. (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Misinterpretation of religion</li><li>✓ Male dominance</li><li>✓ Patriarchal society</li><li>✓ Illiteracy</li><li>✓ Purdah</li><li>✓ Lack of support from political parties</li><li>✓ Poor management</li><li>✓ Lack of security</li><li>✓ Confusing polling process</li></ul>
Khan (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Orthodox attitudes of the people</li><li>✓ Lack of education</li><li>✓ Misinterpretation and wrong practice of Pakhtunwali</li><li>✓ Seclusion (Purdah)</li><li>✓ Political party discrimination against women</li><li>✓ Wrong perception of women in politics</li><li>✓ Lack of family support</li><li>✓ Lack of media support</li><li>✓ Traditional belief</li><li>✓ Lack of financial resources</li><li>✓ Societal structure and religious argumentation</li><li>✓ Gender segregation</li><li>✓ Seclusion of women</li><li>✓ Reduced mobility and limited visibility</li><li>✓ Lack of information related to political process</li><li>✓ Male-controlled</li><li>✓ Conservative forces of religion and tradition</li><li>✓ Lack of awareness of their rights and unavailability of Resources</li><li>✓ Cultural practices and perceptions such as early, forced, And/or arranged marriages</li><li>✓ Structural factors including male resistance to females in Leadership positions</li></ul>

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Syed & Tabassum (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Absence of policies and legislation</li> <li>✓ Discriminatory appointment and promotion practices</li> <li>✓ Limited opportunities for gender mainstreaming</li> </ul>
Umer et al. (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Patriarchal structure of the family</li> <li>✓ Elite dominated culture</li> <li>✓ Lack of education and economic opportunities</li> </ul>
Matloob et al. (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Regulations and customs</li> <li>✓ Lack of awareness of their rights</li> <li>✓ Unavailability of resources</li> <li>✓ Social norms restrict women's mobility</li> <li>✓ Male domination</li> <li>✓ Misinterpretation of religious edicts</li> <li>✓ Nomadic way of life</li> <li>✓ Unethical and unreligious violation of Islamic rules</li> <li>✓ Lack of national identity card</li> <li>✓ Lack of access to polling station</li> <li>✓ Security issues</li> <li>✓ Politically compatible</li> <li>✓ Family, tribal, baradari and local customs</li> <li>✓ F informal power struggle at party level</li> <li>✓ Kinship network a</li> <li>✓ Less institutionalized party setup</li> <li>✓ More space for dynastic elite</li> <li>✓ Personal networking</li> <li>✓ Decision-making structure like <i>Jirgas</i> or <i>Panchayat</i></li> <li>✓ Lak access resource and lack social capital</li> <li>✓ Women's mobility</li> <li>✓ women's less access to ownership of productive</li> <li>✓ Resources limits their scope of political activities</li> <li>✓ Quotas system</li> </ul>

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Source: Primary data, author's compilation.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Long-term well-being in the demesnes of culture, society, economics, and politics can be attained if females are politically empowered and suitably represented in the decision-making process. Based on findings, six themes were developed that categorized different challenges into some particularly dimensions such as political Economical, Socio-cultural challenges, religious, contextual, and gender discrimination, harassment and Security Issues.

#### **Theme 1: Political Challenges**

Females face significant challenges when they want to be part of any political party or political activity. Findings have identified several issues within political practices, such as party preferences and discrimination for females, less institutionalized set-up, quota systems, elite groups, management issues, and networking issues.

### *Theme 1.1: Discrimination and Preferences by Political Parties*

The social and political structure of a region significantly impacts the attitudes and behaviors of political parties toward their objectives. Therefore, the social and political environment directly influences all the activities of political parties within that region (Naseer & Kalsoom, 2019). As a result, political parties tend to favor the recruitment of male members because of the influence of traditional views and attitudes on party dynamics. Moreover, political parties often exhibit weak and less democratic structures that negatively affect the representation of women. These parties are characterized by a "highly authoritative," "male-dominated," and "dynastic political culture" that restricts female participation in the political process (Khan, 2009).

Matloob et al. (2021) highlighted the significance of informal power struggles among party members, particularly in relation to the nomination and recruitment process. These struggles have created serious challenges for female representation within parties, indicating gender-based discriminatory practices. Additionally, the proportion of party nominations given to women for general seats remains extremely low, reflecting a lack of confidence in women's electoral potential (Awan, 2016). Furthermore, female wings within political parties lack effective decision-making input, highlighting the de facto lack of empowerment in party structures. Centralized party systems that emphasize equal opportunity, access, and choice in decision-making positions are essential in addressing these issues.

Even if party leaders desire to do so, they often face constraints in creating a fair and balanced political system that can effectively prohibit gender-based discrimination. Latif et al. (2015) emphasize the importance of formal political structures over organizational rules. However, alliances are often formed based on patronage systems that involve resource allocation and contact networks. Parties are formed on local foundations, and candidate recruitment relies on the influence and support of local biraderi, communities, and ethnic affiliations, among others, which limits female presence in politics (Khan, 2009; Matloob et al., 2021). This underrepresentation of women in politics is one of the key factors at play (Matloob et al., 2021).

### *Theme 1.2: Less Institutionalized Set-up*

In Pakistan, every political party has established a women's wing; however, the number of female members is significantly lower than that of male members. Furthermore, female members have little to no discernible impact on the decision-making process or other political initiatives within the organization. During elections, women are often assigned roles as polling agents or are tasked with influencing the voting behavior of female voters. However, it is a common practice for parties to allocate reserved seats to members of their own families, indicating a lack of genuine commitment to

integrating women into mainstream politics. Hence, the successful participation of women as political representatives is heavily tied to the "ancestor's heritage," as the majority of female assembly members belong to political families. Political families constituted the majority of female participants in the assemblies.

Matloob et al. (2021) highlighted that a "less institutionalized party setup" provides greater opportunities for individuals closely associated with the political group's core power. This dynamic poses challenges for women in Pakistan as these practices bypass and disregard established party norms, selection procedures, and recruitment processes, thereby negatively affecting the number of women holding various party positions. Another studies (Akhtar & Mushtaq, 2014; Akbar et al., 2022) also emphasized the significance of a less institutionalized party structure as a crucial factor contributing to the lower percentage of female representation at various positions at both the party and national levels.

### *Theme 1.3: Quota System Elite Groups and Networking*

According to Awan (2016), the effectiveness of political parties' strategies to increase women's participation in politics and the number of quota seats remains a topic of debate. Although women are allowed to participate in assemblies, they do not operate in isolation. Over a hundred countries have implemented quota legislation to enhance female representation in legislative bodies and political parties. This was seen as a positive step towards greater national-level political participation for women; however, it has also encountered challenges and opposition.

Matloob et al. (2021) and Bano (2009) suggest that quotas compel political elites to recognize biases in political representation and establish new standards for candidate selection. Despite the benefits of quotas in increasing the representation of excluded groups in politics, it is often male members or leaders who retain power to select women for reserved seats. These indirect selection methods present a significant problem for politically engaged women at the grassroots level, leading to discrimination during the selection process. Gender mainstreaming policies through gender-based quotas have had limited success in accomplishing Pakistan's intended goals.

Furthermore, Matloob et al. (2021) indicate that a Democratic Party system with less dominance by political dynasties allows personal networks to play a role in the candidate selection process. These personal networks offer significant advantages to the party, such as constituency services, party funding, direct vote buying, and other specific favors. The dynastic control exerted by a few members within the party creates a favorable environment for female members of their own families, enabling them to occupy more positions and seats in party affairs. Consequently, individuals with

personal networks or dynastic connections have more opportunities to benefit from the candidate selection process (Syed & Tabassum, 2014). On the other hand, grassroots-level women face difficulties due to a lack of networking and connections, as the dynastic political system favors women with a strong political background. This informal characteristic of the political system presents numerous challenges to female workers at different levels (Syed & Tabassum, 2014). These dynamics contribute to the favoritism of females with political backgrounds in dynastic political systems.

#### *Theme 1.4: Management Issues*

Several other challenges have been highlighted by Khan (2009) such as "lack of national identity cards," "lack of access to polling stations," and confusing polling process have also brought challenges for females who belong to remotes and rural areas. Furthermore, the failure to provide security to female candidates and voters has also restricted females from contributing to the democratic process (Hussain et al., 2017).

#### *Theme 2: Religious Challenges*

Islam enjoins equality between males and females; however, its rules are often misinterpreted by males; thus, it has become biased against females and in favor of males. This is due to a male-dominated society in which the interpreters of Islamic laws have not received any significant theological education. Furthermore, the religious affiliation of political parties has created hurdles for female representation in politics.

##### *Theme 2.1: Religious Affiliation and Religious Practices*

According to the findings of Latif et al. (2015), a woman's religious and political affiliation strongly influences her political participation. The prevailing assumption that religious obligations hinder active involvement of women in public life is a major contributing factor. Religious considerations are primarily responsible for the low percentage of women in politics, as those who are more religious tend to restrict and oppose women's political engagement.

Moreover, in many countries, religious groups, tribal structures, and feudal systems have curtailed women's voting rights. During local elections, religious parties convene meetings where representatives from various political parties sign agreements to prevent challenges to the election results. In certain remote and tribal communities, women are not even allowed to submit their candidacy papers despite being deprived of their right to vote. Furthermore, the conservative forces of religion and tradition have created significant barriers for women in redefining their societal roles (Khan, 2009; Awan, 2016).

### *Theme 2.2: Misinterpretation*

Another significant barrier to women's engagement in politics is rooted in the misinterpretation of "Islamic" edicts, particularly related to the term "Sharia law." Some religious parties and pseudo-religious individuals impose restrictions on women's participation in politics, while religious extremists actively hinder their progress (Ghafoor & Haider, 2018). Although Islam promotes perfect equality between men and women, certain religious parties and individuals enforce these limitations.

Umer et al. (2016) state that Islamic teachings, as revealed in the Quran and Sunnah, explicitly prohibit gender-based inequity. The Quran and Sunnah emphasize that both males and females are treated equally without any exceptions. However, most interpretations of Quranic verses have been conducted by male scholars, allowing for biased misinterpretations that disadvantage females and favor males (Khan, 2009; Hussain et al., 2017).

### *Theme 3: Ideological and Psychological Challenges*

Some ideological and psychological aspects also lead to a low level of female representation in the democratic process. With confidence and determination, a female can attain high levels in the political process; however, due to a lack of confidence, females do not believe in themselves (Awan, 2016; Ghafoor & Haider, 2018). They should change the perception that men only have the right to lead or make decisions. Females are equal to and have the same capabilities as men; however, they have to fight for their rights. Females are good organizers and supporter mobilizers; however, fear and lack of confidence prevent them from taking part in elections and from participating in political life. Furthermore, due to the constraints of availability demanded by political activities, it is also a major barrier for females. Furthermore, Bano (2009) highlighted that female has lack motivation to enthusiastically interfere with politics. It has also been found that political parties do not have confidence in female members for top-level positions in the parties. In addition, the female has to lack awareness regarding their rights and are assumed to be deprived of their fundamental rights in all spheres of life. Moreover, the perception that "politics is a dirty game" is also incorrect because it can be a difficult game that is fraught with dangers; however, it does not restrict females from being part of it. The issue of "Corruption", "bribery, 'and 'extortion' has created erroneous perceptions regarding politics that prevented females from coming into politics (Latif et al., 2015).

### *Theme 4: Gender Discrimination, Harassment and Security Issues*

Gender discrimination is widely recognized as a primary obstacle to women's authority and involvement in decision-making bodies, spanning various levels, such as family, society, and the state. The absence of women in political and administrative positions

is perceived as a significant barrier to the nation's overall consolidation and societal progress. Naseer & Kalsoom (2019) emphasized the argument for the inclusion of women in the institutional structure based on the application of instrumental rationality. Within the framework of human rights, initiatives and organizations advocating for women's rights have challenged male dominance and the culture of masculinity, stressing the importance of increased female participation in democratic processes.

According to Naseer & Kalsoom (2019), the instrumentalist rationale for the inclusion of females assumes that females have a distinct political standpoint due to their caring nature. Moreover, females have different needs, concerns, and interests; hence, female representation can segregate and present the collective interests of females. Gender discrimination at the electoral process is also one of the major challenges for female due to which political parties resist selecting female candidates (Ghafoor & Haider, 2018). Gender disparity also exist at the party level why also impact how political parties illustrate female participation as an "individual" not as a member of the party. On the other hand, sexual harassment in "gender non-segregated" environments is also a major challenge for females' political participation; however, there is no mechanism for the protection of females within and outside political parties.

Khan (2009) also argued that females pay more costs for engagement in the political process and national development. Female candidates and voters have also complained about the threat and harassment they have to encounter during the election, which becomes an important challenge behind less female participation. Furthermore, there are other major challenges related to security and lawlessness are also big barriers that restrict males from not allowing their female family members to participate in politics. Fear of terrorism and political party disputes have hindered female participation. Even Latif et al. (2015) mentioned that the "overall political party" environment is not friendly hence female has to struggle hard and face multi-dimensional issues in order to create space for them in the party (Matloob et al., 2021). Even after entrance into political, female faces issues from the beginning because people create hurdle in her way and discourage her even do "character assassination" of her. Furthermore; security issues such as rape cases, bombing, terrorism have hindered the way of females to participate in politics as the security issues such as extremism in the name of religion, "restricted flexibility", "lack of resources" and "education" and "political experience" (Latif et al., 2015).

### *Theme 5: Socio-Economic Challenges*

Socioeconomic challenges are one of the major hurdles for a female to enter politics. Female participation remains insignificant at the provincial and national levels. Socioeconomic obstacles restrict females in mainstream politics.

### *Theme 5.1: Literacy, Resource Allocation, Poverty, and Job Opportunity*

Awan (2016) indicated that female challenges due to low-level literacy or education, unequal distribution of resources, and social status of the female are also a major hurdle for females in Pakistan. Education is most important, as it can enable the female to attain their right with proper justification. The literacy rate in Pakistan remains stagnant at 60 percent in 2021, which shows that the level of education is also a major cause of lack of awareness regarding their political rights and opportunities. Moreover, the educational gap between the male and female literacy gap is also linked to female status in society, which disheartens women's participation in the formal economic sector. On the other hand, a female have less access to economic resources and ownership over productive resources, which limits their scope to participate in political activities as politics has become more commercialized (Matloob et al., 2021). Thus, female participation is impacted by the competitive nature of politics, where access to economic resources is considered lucrative income and power that males attempt to hold and control (Hussain et al., 2017; Ghafoor & Haider, 2018).

Females' limited access to economic resources and less capability to increase funds for the party have put them in a detrimental place, particularly when selecting candidates for party tickets. On the other hand, in rural and urban areas, females have limited access to education and economic resources (Khan, 2009; Syed & Tabassum, 2014). Urban females have more access to education and economic resources due to the advancement of traditional beliefs related to the female party in politics. Moreover, females enter the labor market based on unequal terms, and their occupational selections are also limited due to cultural constraints. Furthermore, poverty and the lack of economic opportunities for females in the labor market have also been major challenges for a female who resisted not taking part in politics. There are several reasons behind the feminization of poverty such as "family composition", "inequality in the access to public services", "inequality in social protection" and "cultural constrains in public life" that has increased the distorted the status of female (Syed & Tabassum, 2014; Awan, 2016).

### *Theme 5.2: Financial Issues*

Naseer & Kalsoom (2019) highlighted that financial issues are also a major hurdle that creates challenges for females as females are more dependent on the male. It is also believed that lack of finance is one of the most important factors for females entering politics. The lack of financial resources negatively impacted the decision-making power of females within the family and community. In Pakistan, females are financially dependent on their males; hence, they cannot challenge elections without the approval of their families. Khan (2009) stated that, female need financial support from their



families to participate in an election, which is a basic hurdle for them. On the other hand, females endeavor to raise the funds needed to run a political campaign; however, females commonly gather self-effacement or have no financial support from their political parties. Politics is a commercial game that requires money and other economic resources; however, females in Pakistan are not economically emancipated, thus posing major challenges for their political participation. Females also face discrimination related to the allocation of funds and resources by their political parties (Latif et al., 2015).

### *Theme 6: Socio-Cultural Practices Challenges*

Several sociocultural challenges have limited female participation in the political system. Beliefs, perception and local customs, cultural norms and practices, patriarchal system, and male-dominated society hindered the political empowerment of females.

#### *Theme 6.1: Beliefs, Perception and Local Customs*

It is generally believed that females are made to stay at home to take care of their children and do home chores rather than contribute to outside home activities. In many countries, tradition stresses and dictates female's primary roles as mothers and housewives (Khan, 2009). It is also a common perception of society regarding leadership ability that females are not supposed to lead the group; even stereotyped nations related to females constitute major challenges for females. Even traditions have stressed and dictated the female's main role as a mother and housewife. These strong traditional favored gender-segregated roles in the context of so-called "traditional cultural values, which influence the progression, evolution, and contribution of females in the political process. Traditional societies are dominated by an ideology related to "a female space" which assume that female should only play the role of "working housewife or working mother."

Awan (2016) has also pointed out that it is very common acuity is that women's primary duty and the task is to work in the home. There is a strongly held belief that women should work inside the house rather than take part in politics. Furthermore, customs and norms have a greater impact on females' lives, particularly in rural or tribal areas. Bano (2009) has also explained that local customs norms and practice prohibits females' education, mobility, right of voting even females are restricted to come outside of the house with male members of the families in tribal areas. The voice of females is deeply preoccupied and entrenched discriminatory customary norms and practices which have limited females' participation in the decision-making process (Matloob et al., 2021).

### *Theme 6.2: Patriarchal System, Male-Domination Society*

Male domination is referred to as complete superiority and authority possessed by men over women". In this context, males exercise all power and females are considered subordinate. Naseer & Kalsoom (2019) explained that a male-dominated society and patriarchal system are also considered major reasons for the lack of female participation in politics. The subordinate social and legal positions of females and the domination of male members in the family have also hindered their participation in public life. Moreover, subordinate social and legal status and domination by men in the family, society, and state obstructs their participation in public life. Hence, a patriarchal mindset is considered a key issue in limiting women's political participation in public life (Awan, 2016). However, the degree and nature of oppression are not the same based on regions and classes. According to Syed & Tabassum (2014) and Hussain et al. (2017), the patriarchal structure is strong in the tribal area of Pakistan, where local customs have established male authority and power over females' lives.

Females have limited rights and opportunities for their lives to bring about positive change and betterment. According to Latif et al. (2015), the most ignored dimension of the social and cultural context is the internalization of norms, which is usually not considered by the development initiatives in the country. In addition, the social and institutional amalgamation process is also authorized to support the protection that political power in this world is under the control of males. On the other hand, the male-dominated political structure has also discouraged females in terms of lack of party support, perception of females, and misinterpretation of religious quotes (Khan, 2009; Umer et al., 2016).

### *Theme 6.3: Cultural Norms and Practices*

According to Awan (2016) and Bano (2009), Pakistani society is influenced by social norms and cultural values, and their social lives, status, and role are significantly inclined by prevailing cultural thought and a biased social structure. It has also been explored that several cultural practices have been followed for instance early marriage of girls, restriction on mobility, strict family obligations and seclusion, have impeded female participation in politics. The status of rural females is more adverse than that of urban females in terms of mobility (Ghafoor & Haider, 2018). The concept of purdah also negatively impacted females in rural areas due to Islamic obligations (Khan, 2009; Hussain et al., 2017). Females are also not traditionally permitted to appear in public places, which poses a severe challenge for them to actively participate in political life (Umer et al., 2016). On the other hand, the insights of females' mobility, interface, and communication arrays also destructively stimulate party officials' selections of potential candidates for the position of the party (as well as the strict norms of

discouraging female voting behavior, party association, and administrative demonstration and stimulating elections, since it is considered a menace to integrity and dignity (Ghafoor & Haider, 2018; Matloob et al., 2021).

### *Theme 7: Lack of Support*

Due to traditional beliefs, customs, and male domination, female have no family support, which is also a critical challenge for female actively participating in politics in rural and tribal areas, even though political aspirants lack support from their fellow females (Bano, 2009). According to Khan (2009), male members of their families should support female aspirants with pertinent consent so that females can take part in the political and democratic process. Another serious challenge to female's participation in politics is the lack of media support, because journalists sometimes do not cover issues related to female candidates in remote areas.

Furthermore, Khan (2009) highlighted that media could support female candidates in remote and tribal areas while presenting their positive females with increasing awareness regarding their political rights, stressing the significant role and contribution of females to national development and deploring discrimination against females; furthermore, media can also support and promote all laws that are related to equal opportunities and inclusion of females in the political process, election, and voting. Females have no access to "informal power This non-state institution such as panchayat which is a prime factor that hinders female entrance to political process. These non-state institutions such as "panchayat," "Jirga," "salish" or "biradari" are also considered as challenges because they have right to control female's life's which created serious threat to confine female's participation. Hence, females also lack the support of female networks, which weakens their position in enduring political processes (Umer et al., 2016; Matloob et al., 2021).

### **Policy Suggestions**

Table 7 provides some suggestions proposed by the authors to increase female participation in political processes and public decision-making.

**Table 7**

*Suggestion of the study*

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Suggestions / Recommendations</b>
Bano (2009)	The concept of raising the level of females' involvement and representation in decision-making bodies that needs well-developed strategies. It also pursues quality in female representation, opportunities for female's informal education, training and scholarship grants to prepare females to efficiently contribute to political accomplishments.

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- Latif et al. (2015) In order to address the negative perspective, there is a need to bring change at the family and household level where such perceptions are sustained due to social conditioning. Furthermore; focusing on education and awareness can also change the of society. Religious aspects could also be appealed and females with philosophical religious awareness and knowledge can also come forward to interpret the relevant Quranic text.
- Ghafoor & Haider (2018) Improving education and literacy can influence female participation. With time, all parties have created female political wings hence, educational development must be sustained for moderating enlightened nation. Particular training organizations are also mandatory in order to develop the leadership abilities of females. Current female wings should be reinforced with a noticeable effect on the decision making by removing antecedent's factor towards a political position of female.
- Awan (2016) Without progressive socio-cultural change, female participation cannot be effective which should be started through a bottom-up approach. Most of the initiatives are based on a top-down approach like a quota, which is affected through legislative measures. Furthermore; structural discrimination is embodied in socio-cultural practices based on a normative set of practices within political parties. The distribution of roles, responsibilities and nominations are actual illustrations of such behavior and attitudes.
- Naseer & Kalsoom (2019) Through, openly and formally supporting female participation through reforms, political parties can change the views and perspectives of a female while making a new basis and increasing the flow of community financial support to the party.
- Hussain et al. (2017) It is recommended that for ensuring female's involvement in local bodies elections, there is a need to develop separate polling stations or booths whereas; security should also be provided to the female polling station. Furthermore; formal and informal education to people and the role of media are very important for creating awareness related to female political rights
- Khan (2009) There is need a need for the educational qualification that will enable them to consider uses and enhance the chance of their political empowerment. Discriminatory socio-cultural and religious practices against females should be reviewed by all relevant stakeholders.
- Syed & Tabassum (2014) It can be suggested that increasing the quota for females at all levels should be given constitutional support. The grass-root level of involvement of females in politics is also very crucial for bringing and giving training to non-elite females for their involvement in formal politics. There is a need to give changes to female candidates in general seats to mainstream their female members. The authors also suggested revising laws and policies from a female's perspective. Moreover; there is also a need to take collaborative efforts among female wings of government and oppositions for formulating legislative measures to remove discrimination against females.
- Umer et al. (2016) There is a need to change the traditional perspective related to male domination along with raising awareness. The female must take part even during the political process related to voting. Due to the
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Matloob et al. (2021)	<p>government's failure for providing security to the female candidates and voters particularly in remotes and rural areas.</p> <p>There is a lack of a formal way to run party affairs whereas; less institutionalized set-up of parties has also created challenges for females' participation in a different decision-making position. There should be no influence of powerful people regarding the selection of females for different positions. It has also been found that those female members who have no political family background have no access to informal social networking and support of another traditional medium therefore they are lagging in the political representation in the existing system.</p>
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Source: Primary data, author's compilation.

## CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study was to explore the major challenges and prospects of female participation in politics in Pakistan. This study adopted a qualitative research method based on a desk study using different secondary sources through articles, research papers, government reports, and other official websites. The findings of the study highlight that due to economic dependency of women, education, literacy, gender segregation, male domination, traditional beliefs, financial issues, lack of awareness regarding political rights, political parties, social and cultural norms, and religious interpretation are major challenges that female of Pakistan is facing for taking the part in democratic process and governance system. Furthermore, the under-representation of females in politics reflects the complex and mutually reinforcing social dynamics; hence, addressing challenges requires concerted and collaborative actions and measures. Women's participation will lead to better decision-making related to gender-based laws and regulations in different sectors, such as education, health, workplace, and overall society. However, the gender gap remains wide and has narrowed over the last two years ([World Economic Forum, 2022](#)).

Despite this slow rate of progress, the government has implemented various laws and policies to support women and advance their participation in politics. These initiatives aim to enhance women's political engagement. The establishment of quotas specifically allocating seats for women has resulted in an increased percentage of women holding positions of authority in legislative bodies compared with previous years. This can be directly attributed to quotas. Furthermore, there has been a significant rise in the number of women exercising their right to vote compared to the past. In the 2013 election, there was an increase in the participation of women, both as voters and candidates, compared to the 2008 election. During 2000 and 2002, under the government of General Pervez Musharraf, several changes were introduced,

including a constitutionally mandated quota for women's representation in legislative research seats, as part of efforts to promote democratic development.

Although the increased quotas for females in elected bodies, such as 33 percent in local government bodies and 17 percent in assemblies, have contributed to higher female representation in politics, the number of women still falls below the "critical mass" of 30 percent and remains only half of the 33 percent quota that the women's movement has been advocated since the 1980s (Khan & Naqvi, 2018). The implementation of reserved seats as part of the policy measures is connected to new regulations on gender equality, violence against women, and harmful cultural practices. It is worth noting that, following the 2018 election, there was a decrease in the number of women elected on general seats compared to previous elections, despite the electoral reforms in 2017 that political parties allocated 5 percent of their tickets to female candidates for general seats. This trend was observed even after the implementation of 2017 reforms.

Female participation can be effectively increased through sociocultural transition, while empowering females socially and economically using a top-down approach. Recent indicators of political empowerment are entirely based on a top-down approach, such as quota, which can be affected through legislative measures only. To enhance women's empowerment, the role of females should be more focused through normative practices at the local and social levels through the promotion of education and awareness. There is a need to bring change from the grassroots level by changing the perception of society related to male domination, the traditional role of females, and removing mobility barriers. Furthermore, a lack of education and awareness are major reasons that can also increase female participation in politics. Females have also faced several challenges due to lack of support from families and "Baradari" which is very necessary for the female to actively participate in politics at all decision-making levels. Furthermore; there is also a need to institutionalize the party system in order to engage females and reduce their perception of being "politically invisible." Effective female participation in the political system and structure should also be improved through changes in normative practices at local, provincial, and national levels. Religion can also be invoked, and females with profound religious knowledge and education should also come forward to interpret the relevant Quranic text, as well as reduce biases against females and reinforce the current patriarchal system, which only served the interest of male and marginalized females.

This study is based on qualitative research, which limited the research due to time constraints. Another limitation of this study is that it focused only on exploring the major challenges and prospects of female participation in politics in the context of Pakistan. In addition, this study has considered challenges related to the political participation of

female candidates; however, there are also limited studies related to female participation as voters. Future researchers can conduct quantitative research method in order to identify the social, economic, political, and religious factors that restrict females from taking part in the political process. Furthermore, in-depth interviews and focus discussions can also be conducted on female and female members of political parties in order to highlight the issues that females face, particularly in remote areas. Future studies can also be conducted while considering all aspects and dimensions of female participation in the overall democratic system, either as a candidate or a voter.

### Author Contributions

Conceptualization: A.B.; Data curation: A.B.; Formal analysis: A.B.; Funding acquisition: A.B.; Investigation: A.B.; Methodology: A.B.; Project administration: A.B.; Resources: A.B.; Software: A.B.; Supervision: A.B.; Validation: A.B.; Visualization: A.B.; Writing – original draft: A.B.; Writing – review & editing: A.B.

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### Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was approved by the Department of Economics, University of Karachi, Karachi, Pakistan.

### Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was not required for this study.

### Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available because of the institution's policies.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest.

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