Femininity, Patriarchy and Women Political Representation in Pakistan

By: Akhlaq Ahmad & Haq Nawaz Anwar

Abstract

Drawing on the in-depth interviews with the 10 women political representatives; elected directly from the constituencies or selected on women quota from the Punjab provincial assembly, we looked at their experiences in the dominant masculine political structure of Pakistan. This research explains the ways femininity of the women representatives is used for their subordination within the power structure. The results show that women representatives under the strong hold of domesticity ideology and traditional gender roles submit to the patriarchal stances of the Pakistani politics. However, sometimes they bargain their patriarchal dividends by emphasizing their femininity and endorsing the male supremacy.

Keywords: Femininity, Patriarchal politics, Power hierarchies, Patriarchal dividends, Women political representation

Introduction

Gender is a socially constructed binary (Butler, 1990) and places “women” and “men” into distinct social categories. This discursive construction assumes that certain bodies, behaviors, personality traits and desires are contrasting and different for both (Lippa, 2005; Spence & Buckner, 2000; Mahalik, et al., 2005). The whole panorama of gender differences is translated through symbolic meanings and becomes basis of social practice in society. The socially constructed qualities of “maleness” and “femaleness” not only represent gender identities but also “a collective iteration in the form of culture, social structure and social organization” (Schippers, 2007, p.87). Masculinity and femininity becomes cultural standard of conduct at all levels from the self to collective (Levant, 1996; Thompson & Pleck, 1995). These standards are taken for granted and unchallenging and hence, make gender differences institutionalized (Lorber, 2000; Martin, 2004). The dominant socially designed attributes a woman should possess in Pakistani society are childbearing and rearing, love and care for parents/husband, home making, submissiveness, passivity and dependence. The home/private sphere becomes ideal, normative space for women to operate. And men are characterized with decision making, production, independence, assertiveness, violence and wider interaction. The men are associated with public and public sphere. These feminine/masculine ideals are the basis of social practice and social relations in society. These are internalized, taken for granted and imbedded into culture, social
structure and social organization of Pakistani society. Thus, politics becomes the public concern and male prerogative ignoring women, considering women out of concern and preventing their participation (Philips, 1998; Arneil, 1999; Rai, 2000; Holmes, 2002; Bari, 2010). Gender practically cuts across every aspect of social life and results in obvious inequality between men and women in Pakistan. Gender gaps in education, health employment and legal system are quite visible in Pakistani society. Women have lower literacy rate, school enrolment, life expectancy, access to basic health services, access to legal rights and labour force participation than men (Kazmi, 2005; Sheikh, 2009; UNDP, 2013). Pakistan is ranked 147th out of 188 countries and territories with Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.538 and 121st out of 155 countries in terms of Gender Inequality Index (GII) and women labour participation is 24.6% as compared to 82.9% male (UNDP, 2015). Bari and Khattak (2001) narrated the cultural patterns and social structure restricting women to become the part of the public sphere and exercise their legal rights. Women low participation in economic and social sphere results in their low social status and graved dependence on men (Kazmi, 2005). Thus, patriarchal normative structure of Pakistani society excludes women from politics (See also Isran & Isran, 2012; Ibrahim, 2005).

Femininity and Political Participation

Feminine/ gender identity refers to the degree to which a female identify herself with the socially constructed characteristics designed by a specific society. The feminine identity is largely influenced by the prescribed gender roles and inculcated by the process of gender socialization. Strict adherence to designated gender roles is ensured by the gender division of labor and gender norms set the rules of the game.

Feminine characteristics distanced women from political engagements and made them out of the political sphere (Cole & Sabik, 2010). Women’ passivity, submissiveness and dependence was associated dominantly with the femininity they posses. Feminist and political science literature supports the same contention and held patriarchy responsible for this inculcated oppression (Hollows, 2000; Jackman, 1994). Women were carrying the political attitudes of their men. They were nurtured to perform their gender roles. Thus, femininity precluded women from political participation (Sigel, 1996; Bourque & Grossholtz, 1974).

Pakistani political history has witnessed the active political participation/ representation by women e.g. Begum Shah Nawaz was very active women leader in united India. She participated in the round table conferences of League of Nations in Geneva in 1931 and 1935. She was very vocal for women’s quota in legislative assembly of united India and women inheritance right. Begum Ra,aana Liaqat Ali was the first lady of Pakistan. She, throughout her political career,

Pakistan also holds distinct position in the other Muslim countries and became trendsetter when Benazir Bhutto was elected as the first prime minister and Dr. Fehmida Mirza as the first speaker of the national assembly (Repila, 2013). Similarly, Samina Khalid Ghurki was appointed as minister for social welfare and special education, Sherry Rehman as minister for information and broadcasting, Dr. Firdous Ashiq Awan as health minister, Hina Rabbani khar as minister for foreign affairs, Anusha Rehman khan, led ministry of information and technology and Saira Afzal Tarar was a state minister for national health services (Saeed, 2008; Ali, 2015). However, most of them belong to politically influential families with a very strong support of their men who are already in politics. It is important to point out that in some cases the male members were unable to manage the qualifications imposed by the election commission so they brought forward the female members as substitute/ replacement candidates, just to continue the political legacy of that family/ party in that constituency/ area. Quota/ reserved seats paved way of entering into politics for selected women, however, their presence in the politics posed serious question of representation of majority of the women of Pakistan and the very effectiveness of quota system itself (True, et. al., 2014).

Methods

Participants

For the current study ten (10) political representatives from different political parties were recruited. The political representatives’ aged from 32- 62 years. Political affiliation of the representative was; 4 from Pakistan Muslim League, Nawaz (PMLN), 4 from Pakistan Tehreek –e-Insaaf (PTI), one from Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) and one independent member. Four political representatives were from political family back ground. One of the representatives was experiencing the first term of the assembly. Four of the political representatives were selected on women quota in the provincial assembly, while six were the directly elected. All of the representatives were married and were having children. The six belonged to upper class, however, four members were from middle class family background. All of the respondents were educated upto graduation level. Three of the respondents had more than 30 years of experience in political work and political affiliation.
**Procedures and Materials**

Description of the femininity and its scope in the larger political structure calls for the in-depth analysis of the experiences of women rather than mere numeric narration. Similarly, intention was to provide a holistic view of social phenomena (Marshal & Rossman, 2006; Hatch, 2002), focus on participants’ perspectives, their meanings and their subjective views (Hatch, 2002) and framing of human behavior and belief within a social-political/historical context or through a cultural lens (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Thus, in-depth and rich data remains the focus of this part of the study rather using broader research methods associated with positivist approach offering less in-depth information (Padgett, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

For interviews with political representatives, the key informant facilitated the meetings and agreed upon time. We briefed the political representatives about the research and questions to be asked. They agreed to talk, however, two political representatives were little skeptical about the recording of the interview. All of them did not find it objectionable to take notes during interviews. The tentative date and time was scheduled with their consent. The time was rescheduled with three respondents due to their political engagements.

Interviews with political representatives took place at the place decided by them. Six interviews were held at their political offices while four at home. Although it was requested to avoid the interruption during the interviews, however, during three interviews there were some of the interruptions. One respondent has to take an important call while some guests jumped into the office, however, it was managed after a little while.

Each interview began with demographic information such as age, education, number of children, husband’s education and employment. The questions which followed were open ended and gave them liberty to discuss their experiences and narration of feminine characteristics, identity, private/public femininity, ideal characteristics for politics, process of negotiation, threats to femininity and masculinity in the politics. A series of probes were used to make the understanding of women experiences more clear and comprehensive.

The interviews ranged forty minutes to one an half hours in length. After each interview notes were made covering both content and process. Emerging themes and our personal impressions were also noted down. The taps were transcribed. Each respondent was given a code to protect the identities of the respondents.
Data Analysis

In addition to the notes made after the end of each interview with participants, each transcript was reviewed many times; themes, their patterns and discourses were documented. After this process, similar themes and discourses were grouped together and given a unique code. Conceptual framework of the research also served as the source of code titles. Subthemes and relationship between subthemes were identified and summarized. Unique, dissimilar or contradictory information was also noted. Derived themes from the in-depth interviews from women voters are analyzed and discussed as following subheadings:

Negotiating the Public and Private

Women representatives were asked about their everyday experiences of public and private worlds. The responses vociferously indicate the traditional gender roles obligations. Women were very conscious of their roles and feel continuous pressure upon when moving in public sphere. A 52 years old selected (women quota) parliamentarian told that;

“As a politician I have to travel a lot. I have to meet many people. I have to interact with party workers. I hardly ignore my family responsibilities. I very carefully take care of my husband, my children and other family members. I keep frequent contact with my family and instruct where ever I feel there is something wrong. I never neglected my role as female and although very difficult sometimes but I try to come up with my home duties”.

Another 46 years old selected parliamentarian shared that;

“When I got married I was an enthusiastic political worker. Whenever I have to go to party meetings, I used to cook very earlier and manage all the home activities before leaving home. Many a times when I got late or have to attend unscheduled meeting, there was a fight in my home. My mother in law used to curse me. I am very happy that I managed both politics and family at the same time. Now my daughters are married and sons are settled. I feel proud of now”.

A 38 years old elected parliamentarian informed that;

“Most of the time I have to attend people either in or out of the home. My schedule remains very busy. I have to ignore my family. I feel very miserable and guilty. I usually compensate my husband and children by cooking the food of their choice and spending time with them. I take keen interest of activities my children are involved in. I am a woman and my family is everything to me. How can I claim myself a good politician if I am unable to manage/ take care of my family well?

The responses of the women parliamentarians/ representatives point out the conflicting experiences of the public and the private worlds. Moving between the
public and private exert a pressure upon them. Women are quite aware of the conflicting realities of both the worlds and realize the demands. Complying with the demands of the both worlds women have to negotiate the demands on daily basis.

**Masculine Political Structure**

Women representatives were asked how they see the political structure of the Pakistani politics and their space in this. The responses dominantly reveal the masculine nature of the political structure of Pakistan. The over representation in the every part of the structure and their stances normalizes their aspiration and designs. They hold the important positions and tailor the decisions into their own way. They leave minor spaces for women to exercise their power and route the benefits in their domination.

A 41 years old representative responded that;

“Politics is all about the men. They lead the political parties. They are the custodian of our (Pakistan) politics. They plan, they execute, they mend and they amend. They hold everything in the party. They hardly hear the others and women are out of the context. They do not consider the opinion of women important and worth listening. We are the followers only”.

Similar views displayed by another representative as;

“Important decisions are made by the selected, closed and trustworthy male members of the top leadership. They even do not bother to call the female representatives. They bound everyone including women to follow the instructions of the leadership only. Many times it happens we (women) are unaware of the policy. Media tell us what is happening and party/ leadership policy is upon some issue”.

A 36 years old selected representative conveys;

“Women are not taken into confidence and elaborated even on the issues pertaining to women. Party leadership (male) is the responsible for the policies and decision. If something went wrong they have to face. We (women) have to follow the party leadership stance. I trust the abilities of the leadership (male). Why I should be worried about?

Above responses pointed out the male control over the political affairs of the political parties. Women are not given the status of potential member to consult. The responses also identified the hegemonic control of a special group of people in the parties. This also shows the hegemonic masculinities prevalent in political system.
Women are considered less skillful, incompetent and unreliable part of the political system. They are more evaluated on their feminine traits. They are believed suitable for political leadership. Parties take them the paralyzed part of the system. A representative revealed that;

“We are the part of the politics just because of the party have to save its face. They can claim that we are having women representation in the system. The overall hold of the politics is in the hands of men. I once asked party leadership that why we (women) are not called for the important meetings and not included in the important decisions he replied that we (male) gave you the ticket. What else you deserve us for? Enjoy the status of parliamentarian. We (male) know how to deal with politics”.

**Emphasized Femininity**

Women representatives were asked about their relationships with other women representatives. The responses brought forward interesting findings. The representatives revealed that women representative coming from political families and from direct elections are more assertive and they keep distance however women who are selected on quota system were having cordial relationships amongst them. There comes another important finding that women with strong economic background are the distinct among all representatives. A 48 years old selected representative told that;

“After the male members in the political system come the women relatives of powerful male. They are the privileged women in the party. The leadership gives them the priority over the others and they also take benefit of this position. This elite group is proud of their position and relation with men. They take themselves as good as the top male leadership. Many times we have to beg for some favor to these representatives. They are the second boss to us in the party”.

She further highlighted the hostility of relationship in a different way;

“These young heirs of the political elites have least contact with party workers and even do not know the ground realities of the constituencies. Their men are managing political affairs and contact with workers. What they are good at, is the use of modern technology and keep updating their activities on hourly basis. The leadership takes them very active and appreciates them”.

An elected representative expressed that;

“Normally we do not have very good relationships amongst us. There are groups in every party. The group having more members is powerful and closed to the leadership. Women cannot form a group. They need male member to bargain power. We are surviving through male power groups in the party. We have to follow whatever they plan. Women groups do not mean anything in our system”.
Women with strong economic background and from politically strong family background are actually strengthening the male hegemony in the political structure of the Pakistan. These women borrow the power from the male members and exert it over the fellow women. They are hegemonic femininities or what Connell (2005) called it the emphasized femininity. This was also stated by a parliamentarian:

“There are four to five women parliamentarians who are from very politically influential families. They behave as if they are the male. They are enjoying the high status and very visible in the politics. I can guarantee she would not have been able to win a town committee seat (member of local government) if she is not the wife of Mr. X-an influential politician and a closed, reliable person of the leadership. There is another example of Mrs. A, her husband and father is very powerful politician”.

Women from political elite families are endorsing the patriarchal values and practices in Pakistani politics. Their representation either from direct election or selection is the extension of male power hegemony. They support and perpetuate the male agenda in the political realms.

**Power Hierarchies**

When asked if they can influence the policy/ies. The responses affirmed power hierarchies in the political system. Hierarchal power structure was trumped up of representation, financial status and affiliation with power groups. An elected representative expressed that:

“There are groups in every party. The group having more members is powerful and closed to the leadership. Women are not the power group. They need male member to bargain power. We are surviving through male power groups in the party. We have to follow whatever they plan. Women do not mean anything in our system”.

A parliamentarian selected on woman quota indicated;

“We are neglected and under privileged. Party leadership and other power groups in the parliament consider us the appendicitis. They have to carry us because of the quota. We are placed very lower at the power ladder. In the assembly we are called as quota women. In the party meetings we are taken as least concerned members. Our comments/suggestions are taken as serious”.

Another selected woman parliamentarian told that;

“It was unbelievable that party has nominated me for the seat. The nomination list was shuffled many times just to accommodate the women relatives. Quota is blessing for the top leadership. They bring forth the women of their own choice. There are many women who do
have huge money and do not know the politics but they are now the parliamentarians”.

Political Culture

Women were asked about their experiences in the political culture. They were of the view that control of men over the political sphere leave meager space for women to come forward. They are designers of the system and women have to be molded according to their designs. Parliament, government, committees and other public offices are their prerogative. Men occupy political sphere in Pakistan. A women parliament member expressed that;

“They (Men) are very clever and shrewd. They know how to run the politics and political affairs. Politics is male property. Although they sometimes consult with us but all the time doing whatever they perceive good and right. Truly speaking politics is very pressurizing and its men who can bear that. For women it is not possible to handle the issue”.

A women parliamentarian stated the interesting fact as;

“We are supporting the male members and there is nothing wrong. We have to work together. What if they are leading us? They are experienced, trained, hard workers and they have spent their lives in this field. I believe we are not experts to the extent as the men are. We are in the training process. We should acknowledge our limits and deficiencies”.

Experiences show the prevalent gender ideology and the masculine normative stances ingrained in the political culture of Pakistani politics. Women feel themselves less skillful and less trained to handle the issues in politics. They are admiring the patriarchal tactics played in the politics and are aware of patriarchal dividend. Another woman pointed out that;

“Without the party support (Male) it is hardly possible to survive in our political culture. They (male) trust us as candidates; grant us party tickets to contest election. They run our political campaigns. They actually motivate/ convince the voters to vote for us. They carry our burden and take us to parliaments. Vulnerable women (expression), what they can do”.

A selected woman on quota emphasized the same;

“Top leadership (male) has the prerogative to nominate any women. The nominees should be obliged to the party leadership (male). Who know them as politician? What skills they have? They should be loyal to top leadership (Male). They should get ready for any sacrifice for party. Whatever agenda they have, we are no one to object. We are to support the leadership (male)”.
Women experiences very loudly show that women have learned/trained to submit the political order maintained by the men. Their views vividly point out to the fact that political favors/ benefits are linked with the willful acceptance of the patriarchal norms of Pakistani politics. Their support for the system is making their presence meaningless and their visibility the bleak.

Socio-cultural Environment

Women parliamentarians were asked about socio cultural challenges posed to them by society. The views endorsed the existing gender realities. Women pointed out that masculine characteristic of political leaders is very much supported and they are supposed to show the same. They also expressed that they have to adapt the popular masculine traits but at the same time they feared that these traits may cause them negative evaluation of them as women. It was told by a parliamentarian that;

“Our people are very much used to male members. They feel very comfortable with their style and modus of doing things. They can maintain contact with them. They can seek help. They invite them anywhere and go with them at anytime. There are many odd situations in politics where the male members can deal with efficiently”.

Similar views shared were shared by another respondent,

“Our politics is revolving around Thana (Police station) Kachehry (court) and Patwaar (revenue). The male politicians are perfect for this. They can very comfortably deal with police, court and officials from revenue departments. People consider the person ideal for politics if he can deal with these departments and male politician are best suitable.”

The views show the routine activities of the majority of the politicians in Punjab. Every day they have to deal with dozens of individuals and cases. They have to go to police station/court for the settlement of personal to communal disputes. Women’s least public exposure and presence make it very difficult for the voters to consult women politicians. The women politicians find it difficult to go to public places/ departments for the settlement of people issues. This disconnects makes women politicians less popular.

Woman parliamentarian described the masculine characteristics of politician as;

“Males are assertive, firm, aggressive and sometimes violent. Masses like these characteristics in politicians. Male assert their wish and impose their decisions wherever it is necessary. They can use danda, souta (stick) when it is appropriate. They can go to odd places at odd times. Submissiveness is not trait of politicians (laugh).

Another explanation was;
“Politicians should be bold, brave, assertive and popular. They have to manage many disputes among people and communities. They should be assertive enough to mediate between the parties. Their popularity is very much important. They have to attend khushi (Marriage) and Ghami (death) ceremonies. They have to be very public and keeping close contact/link with his voters and supporters”.

Men over presence in the politics design the political discourses/practices. Their visibility in public and frequency of interaction set the standards for political conduct. Masculine characteristics prove the added value to the political persona of male. Women politicians have to go long to meet the standards. They show their masculine conduct sometimes but at the same time have to save their feminine identity to safeguard their political dividend.

Discussion

Using the interpretativist approach, our study highlighted the experiences of women political representatives. The study provides insights into the fact that women representatives are facing challenges though exercising their agency and have higher status. A key challenge was the overall women subordinate position of women in the society that echoes around every corner of personal and professional lives. The permeating influence of societal context of gender was found to be very obvious during the study and was confirming the existing scholarship of gender and politics (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Fish, 2002).

Women responses have very cogently demonstrate the domestic ideology and performance of traditional gender roles. Willful observance of sex based division of labor indicates the women position with respect to men in the society. Women not only taking their gender roles happily but also safeguarding power relations by creating justification for men to domesticate them shows the reproductive power (Foucault, 1977).

Description of responses summarizes and justifies the home and homely chores and activities as women’s domain while public domain as the men prerogative. It points out the power of culturally designed discourses of gender in Pakistani society which sets the rules for both women and men. Feminist post structuralist stance demonstrates the power of male who are getting the benefits from the gender/power discourses prevalent in Pakistani society. Women were complying with the designed stances of femininity, subordination and traditional gender roles and also protecting masculine ethos. This obedience yields social acceptability, security and adjustment in the masculine political structure of Pakistani society.

Inability of women to become political leader has roots in the strong believe in the women week biology and idealized masculine traits popular in politics. Standardized masculine political leader’s traits are male designed and propagated.
These are set yardsticks to measure the women’s capacities and capabilities in politics. Women, with limited resources, to excel in the politics feel for behind these milestones.

Patriarchy combines morality, religion and cultural interpretations to justify its existence and perpetuation. Women under the strong hold of patriarchy are tailoring the justification for their own subjugation and supremacy of men. The patriarchal interpretations become reality and ultimate truth and the women have to go with this reality/truth. They are even unable to think of behaving otherwise. It can be argued that women have been subjected to the false consciousness and thus contribute to their own subordination.

Conclusion

We have shown that women representatives from different political parties elected from their constituencies or selected by their parties, were facing challenges both from the culturally designed standards by the society at large but also the patriarchal, hegemonic structure of political parties adhering to the same gendered spirits in the politics. Women were complying with the social stances of femininity, subordination and traditional gender roles and also protecting masculine ethos. This obedience yields social acceptability, security and adjustment in the masculine political structure of Pakistani society and helping them bargain their patriarchal dividends.

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**About the Authors**

Akhlaq Ahmad is teaching at the Department of Sociology, International Islamic University, Islamabad. He can be reached at gaddafiii@yahoo.com

Haq Nawaz Anwar is a Professor at the Department of Sociology, Government College University, Faisalabad.