

Chapter 1

Women's Parliamentary Caucus, Pakistan

1.1 Context

In the new millennium, Pakistan has increasingly recognised the historical exclusion of women from political structures and actively committed to address gender imbalance in politics (Bari 2005). It has adopted international policies for gender equality and women's empowerment,¹ and vowed to increase the political participation of women, both by encouraging women to contest elections and hold office, as well as fighting sociocultural barriers that confine women to domestic life (UNDP 2005). Aligning with international conventions, the National Plan of Action for Women (1998)² and National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women (2002), led by the Ministry of Women Development, have driven the economic, social and political inclusion of women and minorities onto the nation's developmental agenda. The National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) was established as a statutory body through an ordinance in July 2000 to combat discrimination against women. In 2012, the Pakistan Senate unanimously approved the National Commission on the Status of Women Bill 2012, which replaced the NCSW Ordinance from 2000 and strengthened the commission by giving it financial and administrative autonomy through an independent secretariat (the Gazette of Pakistan 2012).

As a result of active efforts, the gender gap in women's political participation has narrowed at an accelerated pace in the last decade. In 2008, for the first time in the history of independent Pakistan, there were more than 22 per cent women in parliament in general and reserved seats. During the 2013 general elections, there was a 130 per cent increase in the number of women contesting general seats, notably with a growing participation from under-represented and minority groups (UAF 2013). However, the mere increase of women in provincial and central political parties is not enough. Evidence shows a need for active efforts to transform potentially hostile political spaces (Rai 2000). A majority of women entering politics in the last decade have been first-time entrants, with no background or training in governance. With no prior affiliation with political parties, women's groups or civil society organisations, many members have found their voices and opinions being ignored. They have also been side lined within their own parties (Bari 2005).

1.2 Key institutional actors

A comprehensive initiative to promote the role of women in parliament was the introduction of the Women's Parliamentary Caucus (WPC) in 2008.³ The caucus is a national cross-party platform for female politicians to network, advocate and lobby for governmental compliance with international gender equality indicators, as well as to address contextual roadblocks to equality. WPC has successfully united

women parliamentarians across political parties and strengthened their collective power and influence. Although an informal body, WPC has grown rapidly and soon assumed a defined structure, including a General Body and Working Council. The former, a larger forum of 93 members, includes 76 female members of the National Assembly and 17 female senators; whereas the Working Council comprises ten members, including two office-bearers (secretary and treasurer), one member each from seven major political parties, and one member from the independents. WPC has collaborated with other organisations like the National Commission on the Status of Women to create safe spaces to push for legislative reforms, stand up against active and passive discriminatory practices in the allocation of development funds, and have a voice within political parties.

1.3 Theory of change

WPC challenges male privilege and domination in political structures and within political parties, which are often hostile towards women and hinder their political participation (IPU 2011). It was felt that the formation of a cross-party caucus was the most effective strategy to push a women's agenda and to protect their interests in the parliament (Bari 2010). WPC recognises that the growing participation and organisation of women in the political sphere, despite severe obstacles – such as cultural resistance, discrimination, patriarchy, religious extremism and misconceptions, and unequal social power structures (Pakistan Today 2013) – can trigger positive changes in the larger society. WPC's theory of change is:

- That capacity building for female parliamentarians – including organising, providing support and training – creates competent members and strong leaders (IPU 2008). Strengthening leadership skills will increase the voice of female parliamentarians in political decision-making.
- The influence of female members of parliament (MPs) on policy-making will increase through an enabling environment of solidarity and belonging, bridging the gaps of political ideologies and party differences.
- By creating a cross-party platform to bring female MPs of all parties together, strong advocacy groups can be fostered through which women's and minority issues can be rapidly and effectively mainstreamed into public policy.

1.4 Social institutions and discriminatory norms

Women's and men's consciousness: There is a discrepancy in power sharing and decision-making between women and men within households and communities. While women are given a large share of the responsibility for caring for the household, children and subsistence production systems, they are not given equal control over productive resources. In many villages it was collectively determined whether or not women should vote in the general elections. WPC, in collaboration with other women's machineries such as NCSW and provincial Women's Development Departments, have spearheaded initiatives whereby extremely poor and marginalised women have contested seats and won.

Women's access to resources and opportunities: Apart from having difficulty getting funding to run political campaigns, fewer political seats are made available to women (Rai 2000). Within parties, there is male domination over resources and opportunities. WPC has provided access to resources and opportunities to women parliamentarians in many ways – through mentoring, capacity building, networking and information sharing. The capabilities of women parliamentarians have been strengthened through training programmes, study tours and conferences. WPC has also pressed for increased female representation in special committees dealing with constitutional amendments, electoral reform, and peace and security, including space in the peace jirga and other national structures (ICAN 2014).

Formal laws and policies: The last decade has been the most progressive in terms of introducing new laws aimed at preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG). Several older laws have also been amended to make them more comprehensive. Since the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality began in 2005, more than seven legal and constitutional amendments have been made. These legal provisions aim directly at increasing women's political participation as voters and contestants, as well as indirectly by addressing economic and social barriers that exclude women from decision-making.

Informal cultural norms and exclusionary practices: With political inclusion, many cultural notions and traditional misconceptions around women's role outside the home, especially doubts around their competence as political leaders, have been challenged. During the 2008 and 2013 general elections, women in several of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) voted for the first time. This trend has continued to grow. Currently, there are ongoing debates about penalising those using informal ways of discouraging women to vote (e.g. threats, loud speaker announcements) (NCSW 2012a). The presence of an active women's network within parliament reflects a transformation in the broader political culture, although there is still a lot to be accomplished. For instance, WPC Secretary Syed Shamoona said: 'the caucus is a watershed. This is the first of its kind in Pakistan's political history ... a mechanism that has enabled quantitative and qualitative input for women in the proceedings of the House' (International Crisis Group 2015).

There are ripple effects of changes in 'formal' and 'informal' institutions/norms. For instance, WPC-led bills on prevention of workplace harassment and domestic abuse have enabled a shift in the public-private divide, and have positively influenced women's 'informal' experiences of violence and abuse. There have also been debates and discussions on the role of sociocultural practices in keeping the gender divide intact.

1.5 Strategies

Decades of political exclusion have made many newly elected female parliamentarians determined to open more doors for women through the WPC, both by engaging with formal legislative institutions, as well as enabling a broader environment for breaking sociocultural barriers that keep women confined to domesticity. WPC's objectives include:

- Attaining a broad-based consensus among all female MPs on an agreed agenda for women's development, empowerment and emancipation.
- Enhancing the role of female parliamentarians in proposing gender-sensitive legislation, and reviewing and amending discriminatory laws and policies.
- Ensuring effective parliamentary oversight of implementation of international and regional gender equality commitments, national policies and programmes.
- Facilitating exchange of views and information sharing on critical areas of concern, particularly social discriminatory practices, both nationally and internationally.
- Liaising and building working relationships with key state and civil society institutions and organisations in order to contribute towards national and international efforts to promote women's rights, empowerment and gender equality.
- Reviewing rules and procedures in order to ensure women's continued access to and participation in the National Assembly.
- Working jointly for the achievement of social indicators so that the MDGs are within reach (Bari 2005).

All female parliamentarians in the National Assembly and Senate are eligible to become part of WPC.⁴ Members take up individual as well as collective issues faced by local women. Through regular knowledge exchange with international organisations and monitoring effective implementation of inclusive policies, WPC serves as a kind of a 'watchdog' in parliament, ensuring compliance with institutional measures for women's inclusion. With the aim to institutionalise an agreed-upon agenda for women's empowerment, WPC has rapidly become a vital platform for female parliamentarians to collectively contribute to making parliament gender sensitive, and increase its influence and interaction with organisations working both nationally and internationally (Legislative Watch 2009).

Pakistan now has four provincial WPCs in addition to a federal one – the first initiative of its kind in South Asia. At the time of writing, 85 women parliamentarians and around 130 women members of provincial assemblies from more than 20 political parties are working together to advance gender equality and women's rights by enacting new laws and promoting effective implementation of laws and policies (UNDP 2014). There has been a gradual shift from the centre to the provinces in terms of advocating and lobbying for women's rights. With provincial caucuses, the process of identifying and addressing context-specific gender issues should be easier and more efficient.

1.6 Outcomes to date

Since its inception in 2008, WPC has been striving to promote women's empowerment and to build consensus in parliament on issues affecting women and children. Successes include:

Initiating new members and strengthening their voices: WPC offers a trusted platform, especially to women serving their first political mandate (Agora 2015),

for finding support and connecting with other MPs. WPC has strengthened the capabilities of members, both formally in terms of networking with other members and sharing party experiences, as well as informally in terms of gaining confidence, particularly for first-time contestants. It has also ensured effective oversight of national and international commitments on gender equality, working closely with NCSW and other allies.

Addressing formal and informal aspects of political exclusion: WPC and its collaborators recognised that many women did not have a computerised national identity card (CNIC) and/or were not registered as voters, leading to political exclusion. The National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) and Electoral Commission of Pakistan (ECP) responded to advocacy campaigns led by WPC by setting up registration camps before the 2013 general elections. The camps issued identity and assisted in making ration cards and other proofs of identity. NADRA also recognised that there were gaps in accurate representation of the electorate and initiated computerisation of census data and electoral rolls.

At the community level, there were many incidents where women were barred from voting for cultural reasons (conservative attitudes towards women being involved in political decision-making). In the last two general elections, conscious attempts have been made to fight these biases. In Peshawar during the 2013 general elections, the Peshawar High Court Chief Justice ordered ECP to stop the results of two constituencies where women were not allowed to vote; ECP organised re-polling in these constituencies (Saleem 2013). The NCSW is currently in the process of framing a bill calling for civil and criminal repercussions for invoking disenfranchisement, with punishments ranging from suspension of political candidates to prosecution. Once framed, the bill will be launched via WPC.

Towards gender-sensitive legislation: A significant impact of WPC lobbying efforts has been to make 'the woman question' indispensable to public policy. The caucus has led discussions in support of legislation and played an instrumental role in garnering political and civil consent. The following are the laws and frameworks comprehensively addressing VAWG (NCSW 2012b): Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010; Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2010; Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act 2011; Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2011 (prevention of acid crimes incidents); Women in Distress and Detention Fund 2011; National Commission on Status of Women Act 2012; and Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2012.

VAWG and police reforms: In order to strengthen the process of seeking legal aid, WPC has simultaneously engaged with women police stations in Islamabad. In 2008, a report brought out by WPC highlighted issues and concerns that kept police stations from being safe for all women, and also highlighted the plight of women police stations, which are staffed only by women police officers. WPC members have played an active role in lobbying for an increased role of and support to women police officers, with the following results: increased salaries; officers are now motivated to be proactive in offering legal aid to women and children; and the safety of officers is ensured when travelling in conflict areas.

WPC has been paying particular attention to the situation of victims of acid burning, which has resulted in reforms in police procedures and in intensified state efforts to bring perpetrators to justice. Acid violence is the deliberate use of a corrosive substance/fluid to inflict injury. The victims of acid violence are overwhelmingly women and children, and attackers often target the head and face in order to maim, disfigure and blind. Acid attacks occur across the globe, but are more prevalent in South Asia. Reports indicate that acid attacks are on the rise in Pakistan (Ilahi 2014). In 2014 alone, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan found that 232 women in Pakistan suffered acid attacks or were burned, the majority by someone they knew (International Crisis Group 2015). Eight female parliamentarians have dedicated the development funds allocated to them to establish burn units in their respective district hospitals.

National and regional engagement with peacekeeping: WPC has also initiated discussions on the gendered impacts of conflict and state-sanctioned violence. For example, in 2010 WPC convened the first Convention of Women Parliamentarians on ‘The Role of Women Parliamentarians in Peace, Security & Reconciliation’, which included women legislators from federal and provincial assemblies. In another example, in 2011–12 WPC held two meetings with female parliamentarians from Afghanistan to discuss the role of women in peace and security, progressive legislation for women, areas for increased collaboration to support women parliamentarians, women’s full inclusion in security decisions, and women’s roles in promoting a culture of peace (ICAN 2014).

Knowledge exchange among women parliamentarians across countries: WPC has facilitated knowledge exchange among parliamentarians from various countries by organising conferences and seminars, hosting women parliamentarians from other countries and organising multi-country study tours. WPC has also initiated solidarity action within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), undertaking a number of regional programmes. For example, WPC was instrumental in organising the ‘South Asia Regional Exchange Meeting of Women Parliamentarians, National Women Machineries and Commissions, and Election Management Bodies’, which was held in Nepal in 2014 for representatives from South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka). Similarly, an Afghan women’s parliamentary delegation visited Pakistan in June 2011 and there was a follow-up visit of Pakistan’s WPC delegation to Kabul in 2012.

1.7 Lessons learned and the way forward

Throughout its seven years of existence, WPC has influenced other nations across the globe to adopt parliamentary caucuses. The following are some lessons learned:

- Encourage local and state/regional governments to build their own respective caucuses.
- Invest resources in identifying, evaluating and monitoring formal and informal structures responsible for low voter turnout.

- Strengthen legislation to account for all acts of violence and abuse on all people, especially women and girls, and introduce criminal prosecution for acts of violence.
- Simplify bureaucratic procedures with the aim of easing access to electoral procedures. For instance, the government is currently working towards merging CNICs and voter registration procedures, which would reduce the additional step of getting oneself registered to be able to vote.
- In the case of very low representation of women in parliament, introduction of quotas per political party may be employed. Further, imposing quotas on directly elected candidates is known to be more effective.
- Accelerate attempts to ensure that all people vote, especially women, by recognising and responding to issues keeping women from voting (e.g. setting up women-only polling booths in certain rural communities) (NCSW 2010).
- Invest in building a computerised electoral database if one is not already in place.
- There is a need for an improved and effective relationship between provincial and federal governments, including fairer redistribution and exchange of funds, resources and support.
- Continue capacity-building training in existing areas, while also expanding the scope of training on other relevant issues, like gender-sensitivity training.

There must be proactive changes in other areas where the gender gap plainly persists, namely: economic participation and opportunity (e.g. in salaries and access to highly skilled employment); educational attainment (i.e. access to basic and higher levels of education); and health (e.g. life expectancy and sex ratio).⁵ The following recommendations aim to guide the future course of action at the national and international levels to achieve a more integrated approach to gender equality, which also translates into further engendering access to traditionally closed public spaces for women:

- Systems of incentives for provinces and nations should be developed, motivating them to close the gender gap in an integrated manner – including indicators of education, health and employment.
- Incentives for governments need to be created, to break the glass ceiling within government organisations and ensure more women assume positions of power.
- The collaboration of political caucuses internationally should be continued, with increased focus on implementation of existing gender mainstreaming policies to remove hurdles to women's participation in the public sphere.
- Sex-disaggregated data should be acquired, along with strengthening national and provincial electoral databases to ensure effective analysis of actual political participation, thus enabling better informed policy-making.
- There needs to be a revival of the 33 per cent representation of women at all tiers of local government, with repercussions introduced for less than 33 per cent women in National Assemblies.

- There should be continuing research, documentation and dissemination of successful experiences within the Commonwealth, to promote women's participation in politics and development.

Notes

- 1 Pakistan has signed and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as of 12 March 1996 and is a signatory to the Beijing Platform for Action, as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UNDP Report 2005).
- 2 The National Plan of Action for Women, with a 15-year perspective, was launched August 1998 as a follow-up to commitments made at the Beijing Conference. Covering the 12 Critical Areas of Concern identified in the Beijing Platform for Action, it was finalised after a long consultative process involving government and outside experts. The Pakistan NPA has an additional chapter on women and girls with disabilities.
- 3 The establishment of WPC was a long-standing demand of women's rights groups, which picked up momentum soon after the entry of more than 74 women parliamentarians in the 12th National Assembly (2002–07) in reserved and general seats. In 2008, the number of women contesting elections and running for office further increased. Dr Fehmida Mirza became the first female Speaker of the National Assembly in Pakistan's democratic history, and initiated the network to harness their collective ability and start a dialogue on women's rights and empowerment.
- 4 The majority of the women in the National Assembly are from reserved seats mandated by law – i.e. 60 of the 66 women elected in 2013.
- 5 Sex ratio is used to describe the number of females per 1000 of males.

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