From Representation to Political Empowerment: Analyzing the Role of Political Parties and Women Leadership in Azad Jammu and Kashmir

Dr. Noreen Saher, Tasmia Matloob, Shazia Safdar Ali

Faculty of Social Sciences, International Islamic University, H-10-Islamabad-Pakistan

Received: February 24 2014
Accepted: April 16 2014

ABSTRACT

Women have made remarkable inroads to more professional and challenging spheres traditionally considered as male domains. The political sphere remains an arena in which women have not gained comparably visible status especially in the context of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Women are highly under-represented in the political structure of Azad Jammu and Kashmir occupying only 10% representation in legislative assembly. This paper with a focus on social-political framework of South Asian region emphasized on the ways political parties restrained women’s access to political empowerment. This study looked at the management of political parties as gatekeepers to women’s access to political decision making. Present study provided a more holistic and in-depth insight about the experiences of women members of political parties through qualitative research approach. In-depth interviews were conducted from thirty women members of three different political parties in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Results showed that mechanisms and practices of political parties as well as the political culture and electoral systems fairly influence women’s access to political leadership.

KEYWORDS: Women Political Representation, Institutionalization of Political Parties, Nomination of Candidates, Access to Equal Resources and Opportunities

INTRODUCTION

Barriers to women’s political participation exist throughout the world. Scholarships highlight that despite having some positions of power in politics, women have not yet been able to get their true status and access to political decision making. Women’s subordination in politics is acknowledged to be more structural within the South Asian region. Sharma and Sharma identified ethnic and religious diversity, customs, use of religious interpretations, feudal and tribal laws regarding women’s rights as important factors that have strong effects on women’s access to political empowerment [1]. Muntaz argues that political context reflects the social framework of a particular region. Patriarchy and gender role ideology works as an organizing principle for women’s subservience in South Asian region that keeps women out of the public sphere of politics [2]. Political parties are greatly influenced by the political and socio-economic context of the state in which they operate. In turn, these parties have direct influence on women’s access to political participation and decision making process at party level [3] [4].

Political parties are crucial actors as they play fundamental role to bring women forward to different decision making positions not only within the party but also at national level [5][6]. Political parties are considered as the main "gatekeepers" to women’s advancement to power. Multiple discourses/theories are available on the nature of women’s political participation at party level in western countries. Women’s participation has been analyzed under multiple representation systems. Academic inquiry on the role of political parties for women’s access to political leadership has remained modest in the context of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. This study fill this research gap and try to analyze the role of political parties from women’s representation to political empowerment under a specific political system of Azad Jammu and Kashmir where women don’t have a defined quota or proportion at party level. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first academic research that explores how the functioning of political parties affects women’s access to political leadership in AJK. This study is a significant contribution as it provides a deep insight and a context specific understanding of the issue at hand. Consistently, it analyze the representation of women under a specific political system of Azad Jammu and Kashmir when there is strong influence of social system on its political system and where women don’t occupy a significant proportion both party and legislative level.
Profile of Azad Jammu and Kashmir

The state of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) is a self-governing state under Pakistani control but not constitutionally part of Pakistan. It has a parliamentary form of Government consist of its own elected president, prime minister, legislatures, high court, and official flag. The state is administratively divided into three divisions (Muzaffarabad, Mirpur and Poonch) which, in turn, are divided into ten districts. The pattern of the State of AJK is almost the same as established in Pakistan. Legislative Assembly comprises of 49 members, out of which 41 are directly elected and 8 are indirectly elected a member each from the technocrats, Mushaik, Overseas Kashmir and 5 females\(^1\). Currently there are more than seven political parties are active in AJK and among these, three parties are dominant and enjoy strong hold at assembly level. These parties include: All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference, Pakistan People's Party and Muslim League (N). At legislative level, the representation of women is only 10%. Women don’t have a defined quota/proportion at party level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Management of Political Parties

According to Kunovich and Paxton, level of institutionalization of political system of a country has direct influence on women’s political participation. The electoral process defines how an individual can move from meeting the legal criteria to participate in the politics to actually serve in the parliament [7]. According to Matlosa and colleagues, women’s political participation is constrained due to the institutional aspects, such as the internal functioning and culture of political parties [8]. Party’s efficiency, transparency, and management are imperative for democracy by bringing diverse group in the political processes. Transparency includes clear rules and procedure for candidates’ selection for different decision making positions and equal access to party resources and opportunities. Efficient management includes establishment of parties from national to village and community level, organizing day-to-day activities, managing party resources as well as organizing regular meetings at all levels [8][9].

It is observed that countries with more autocratic political leadership are less transparent and accountable to the party rank [8]. In Pakistan, the structure and internal process of political parties do not adhere to democratic norms. There is less priority for institutional building of parties, and no monitoring and accountable system exists within the parties [10]. Most of the party decisions are done in a non-transparent manner. Most of the political parties lack efficient mechanism and institutionalized structure and set up regarding women political representation [10][11].

Nomination and Selection of Candidate

Candidate’s selection is one of the key defining activity of political parties in all modern societies. Matland argues that women have to pass through three crucial steps/barriers in order to get elected in the parliament that includes i) women need to select themselves, ii) their selection by the parties and iii) their selection by voters. Matland further highlights the selection of women by the parties as the most crucial stage for women to access a political office [12]. Joni and Norris argue that highly institutionalized party system offers a detailed, explicit, standardized and authorized rules and regulations for candidate nomination and selection. On the other hand, in parties with less institutionalized system, rules do exist but never implemented explicitly [13]. Women’s access to power is greatly influenced by the level of institutionalization and distribution of power within the party. According to Ballington and Matland recruitment process is controlled by the faction leaders in less institutionalized party system. Candidate’s selection is reinforced by patriarchy, ethnic ties and loyalty [14]. During nomination and candidate selection, factors like personal connections, kinship considerations and access to “old boys” networks take precedence over party rules [5]. Institution of “Biradari” and Vartan Bhanji (social allegiance) also play significant role in the selection and promotion of a candidate in a formal setting [15][16].

Parties vary with reference to their internal rules for women’s representation that ranges from no rules to voluntary quotas. Bano highlights that women are under-represented on main active positions within the party despite their increase in numbers in these parties [17]. The report of United Nations Development Programme has declared that women’s proportion in decision making bodies at party level is miserably low. There is very small proportion of women who hold positions on the executive committees of political parties. It has no significant impact as nomination and selection largely depends on party leadership. There is absence of regular party elections

\(^1\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Azad_Kashmir
in most of the parties [10]. Candidate’s selection is usually done by male members of central executive committee within the party organization [18].

Access to Equal Resources and Opportunities

Political parties play crucial role to enhance the abilities of its members by giving them equal access to resources. An individual’s decision to run a public office is not only influenced by ambition and candidate’s political capital, but also resources, opportunities and support provided by the party leaders [19][20]. Dahlerup and Freidenvall highlighted that women experience direct and indirect discrimination in the form of less representation, invisible structural barriers in promotions and career opportunities at party level. Women generally face numerous obstacles in articulating and shaping their own interests in the political arena [21]. There is lack of party support for women to become an aspirant candidate. Lack of funding is the most contentious factor faced by women in the party organization. Men are invariably favored from their parties for national legislatures and executive positions. For a variety of reasons women are held back or face resistance for party tickets [22]. Women’s branches or wings within the party are considered as important tool to promote women’s demands and interests. But these branches are criticized by their members for having no real voices. According to Saint-Germain and Chavez, women’s wing or sections are taken as ghetto for women that are used to placate and contain women who could not place excessive demands on the party [23]. Women’s wings within parties in Pakistan have no visible and significant influence at central executive level. These wings are mobilized by parties during elections to work as polling agents in women’s booths and for demonstration [24][17][10].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In line with exploratory nature of the research, semi-structured interview guideline was developed and used to get an in-depth insight of the study. Women of three different political parties were purposively selected from Azad Jammu and Kashmir. These parties includes i) Muslim Conference, ii) Pakistan People’s Party, and iii) Muslim League (N). Currently there are more than seven political parties active in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The reason behind selection of these parties was their strong hold in the political history of Azad Jammu and Kashmir as compare to other parties. At legislative level, the representation of women is only 10%. There are only 5 seats for women in Azad Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly. The list of women representatives at party level could not be obtained from a single party to broadly analyze women’s share and positions within the party. It was surprising to know that even a single general secretary of these three parties didn’t have any party list with them. It was told that the record is in process of up gradation. However, they provided few contacts of prominent women of their parties. Furthermore, the contacts of other women at different levels were obtained from these women. Snow ball sampling technique was used to gather data. Thirty (30) in-depth interviews were conducted through telephone and personal visits in different districts of AJK. These members occupy different positions within the parties. The data collection process lasted for seven months. Thematic analysis has been applied to comprehend the findings according to the theoretical framework.

For analyzing the existing data, we conducted deductive qualitative content analysis as proposed by Leedy and Ormrod [25]. The themes were generated and field data was coded. For the validity of the coding process, two different groups independently coded the data and differences were mutually discussed and consensus was developed. The data then received from the respondents was coded. The responses also helped to develop new themes and confirm the initial themes. Selected quotes from these interviews are used to support both findings and discussion of the results. Some of the quotes are also included in the research for further clarity. The name the respondents are kept confidential as per their instructions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positions within the party</th>
<th>Party President at District level</th>
<th>City President</th>
<th>Political worker at union level</th>
<th>General Secretary</th>
<th>President women wing</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muslim Conference</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan People's Party</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim League (N)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Management of Political Parties
Findings highlighted that women’s role in party organizations is strongly influenced by the social and political context of this region. Woman members showed their strong concerns regarding the organizational system of their parties. Differences are found in responses of the members. Common party members at union level had strong concerns regarding management of the political parties. Members holding some positions in the parties came up with more diplomatic answers. Respondents highlighted that parties are dominantly patriarchal in their party rules and regulations. Majority of the respondents shared that parties did not have effective mechanism to promote women leadership at party level. Parties are poorly institutionalized and least concerned about women’s representation and participation. Women members at union level shared that they are remained un-aware about the important political activities of their parties. They are not formally informed about the party meetings, schedules and the major agenda of the party meetings. As many of them said they didn’t attend any party meeting at union and district level.

“I have experience of participating in only one party meeting in 6 years. I don’t have any experience of participation in party meetings at district level and even I don’t know the party president of my district”.

“For me, we have a system, a model which is never implemented”.

Regarding the internal management of political activities, general secretary of one party shared,

“Despite having a public office, I am not given enough facilities and I am not at all satisfied with the facilities provided to me. There is a dire need to upgrade the entire official set up of the party. I have asked for technologically institutionalized set up for our party but didn’t receive any response yet”

Another woman member shared that she didn’t receive any acknowledgement from party leaders despite arranging very successful and expensive processions for the party. There is strong influence of “Biradari” (caste system) that play significant role in personal promotion of a member in a political party as reflected by Saher and Mayrhofer. [15][16]. Politics and power positions are mostly taken as inherited and seats are already specified for the members of these families.

“We don’t receive appreciation that we deserve from party leaders. Party doesn’t have any kind of mechanism to evaluate the performance of two members on the basis of performance and merit. Strong influence of Biradari/ caste matters a lot to have power in the party”.

Nomination and Selection of Candidate
Vivian Roza highlighted that the party general framework (rules and norms) are important to recruit and select candidates and it has effect on the actual process of nomination [9]. The interview data highlighted the absence of regular party elections in entire three parties of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Nomination and selection of candidate for party positions/party tickets are done by central executive committee/board. As revealed by research data, women are rarely part of the boards in the entire three parties of Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

“We have traditional system of candidate’s selection. I didn’t have any kind of experience of party elections in my 18 years of political career. “This system has no transparent rules and regulations to select a member for a party position”.

Respondents highlighted that the recruitment process for different positions are not transparent. Biasness exists in the form of ‘Biradarism’ where most positions are favored and supported by party leaders. Mostly argued merit and performance of a party member is ignored and un-recognized by the party leaders. Positions are kept within their own personal connections/circle. Representatives at district level explained that they are discriminated for party tickets for party’s owns interests. Whenever, there is a situation where party has to compromise a seat with other party for political purposes, they always prefer the women’s seat.

“Yes I have some concerns for my party’s management and leadership. It happened twice that my seat has been compromised with other party for the party interest. As I am more concerned with
political ambition and ideology. I have sacrificed this for my party’s benefit. Otherwise discrimination does exist in our party system”.

Women at party executive committees of parties shared that their opinion had no significant impact on candidate’s nomination and selection process as they were just informed about the decision by their party leaders. It was shared by one of our respondents:

“Being a member of party’s central executive committee, and president of women wing of my party at district level, I am not empowered enough to select any woman for party positions at district level. Nomination is dependent on the male who is or expected to be the next member of the legislative seat from that particular district. How can a male member select a person with whom he doesn’t have any interaction and working experience”?

Regarding the question about proportion given to women for legislative seats by party, most of the respondents shared parties did not have any specific quota for women in the parties. They criticized the role of parties for not maintaining specific quota for women at party level. Actually these women politicians have only marginalized status in politics with their less proportion both at party and legislative level.

Access to Equal Resources and Opportunities

Women at party level experienced direct and indirect discrimination in the form of less representation, invisible structural barriers in promotions and career opportunities as highlighted by Dahlerup and Freidenval and Matland [19][21]. Women faced a serious challenge of lack of financial resources by party. Arranging a party meeting is a difficult challenging task for women as it requires extra financial resources. Mostly associated this with the nature of political culture in this region where strong financial and social position is crucial for survival in politics. Party resources are invested on people who are close to party leadership. Some shared that it was a game of money and power, where women were held back due to their weak economic standing in the society. Some members shared that they did not have specific funds for their women’s wings in the party organization. Positions are nominal and they have to utilize and run the system by their own financial resources. As it is shared by some members:

“I am given a separate section under women wing to mobilize young girls. I don’t have any administrative and physical infrastructure for this section. I have to arrange and establish new section all by myself. It is a laborious task especially when on one hand you don’t receive any financial assistance from your party and on the other hand when there is no one ready to work voluntarily. It is not only about political commitment and spirit; I think a common worker needs at least a supportive working environment.

“Biases do exist even at the executive level. Women are mostly discriminated during election campaigns and for financial resources. Party shows resistance for woman candidacy”.

All three parties had specific women wings in their party organization. Respondents shared that meetings are held just for registration processes. They are not provided enough opportunities by their party organizations to expand the nature of their political activities to attend workshops and seminars for their political training. Most of women members at union level didn’t have any experience of attending party meeting at executive level.

Respondents shared that not a single meeting is organized on women’s issues from the platform of women wings by all the three parties. Many associated effective networking of women’s members with their sound position in their party for claiming different resources and opportunities for women.

CONCLUSION

The present study explored the prodigy of the women representation in the political process through their participation, involvement and status in the entire three political parties of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. It has been found out that women politician experienced serious biasness to actively participate in the party activities as well as the general political process. The proportion of women in political parties is miserably low and they don’t have a healthy and supportive environment in their party organizations. Women have very limited access to power as there is lowest level of institutionalization and distribution of power within the party. Culture of political parties is dominantly patriarchal which is reflected in terms of internal functioning (rules and norms, party elections, selection and access to
opportunities) where women face discrimination at all levels. Parties don’t have efficient mechanism to promote women leadership at party level. Women’s less proportion in the party organization directly affect their access to party resources and other opportunities. This study is valuable contribution in the context of Azad Jammu and Kashmir where there is no academic research available on topic at hand. This study is helpful for policy makers, women politicians and general public to understand the social-political barriers in effective participation of women in politics.

Acknowledgment:
The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest in this research.

REFERENCES


