Socio-Cultural Constraints to Women's Empowerment
By

Saima Rani
Department of Pakistan Studies,
Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Pakistan

Abstract

Women's empowerment is an important global objective, and it is connected with sustainable development, inclusive governance, and human rights. The key dimension to this is political empowerment: women's opportunity to participate equally in leadership, decision-making and policy formulation. On a global level, there has been much progress made. However, there are still many challenges facing some countries, such as Pakistan; socio-cultural dynamics play a huge part in affecting gender equality. Patriarchal norms, traditional practices and religious interpretation shape Pakistan's socio-cultural landscape in a way that debilitates women. Honour culture, limited mobility and deep-seated gender roles inhibit women's participation in political processes. The social barriers, such as educational disparities, economic dependence, and political violence, intensify this exclusion. These barriers work together to create an insurmountable obstacle to significant women's representation in governance and, consequently, to democratic progress. In Pakistani politics, this article examines barriers to women's participation and leadership. It also looks at successful case studies, grassroots movements, and voting participation over time as evidence of progress in facing challenges. According to the article, systemic reforms are essential to make such reforms effective, from strengthening gender quotas to preventing political violence to creating a welcoming political environment. Gender equality as a priority can lead to Pakistan having more excellent political representation and moving the country in a direction that carries the daydreams of a democratic and forward Pakistan.

Key Words

Women's Empowerment, Gender Equality, Cultural Barriers, Pakistani Politics, Gender Quotas, Political Violence

Introduction

In a political context, women's empowerment means ensuring they have a vocal and active role in political decision-making, governance, and leadership. It covers the participation of women in political rights, equal representation in government structure, and removal of system barriers hindering women's participation in the

political realm. Gender equality and inclusive governance require political empowerment.[1]

Women in Pakistan inhabit a complicated, forbidding land made up of both opportunities and barriers for women. On the one hand, constitutional provisions that provide reserved seats for women in the National Assembly, Senate, and local government structures have operationalized female representation.[2] On the contrary, patriarchal norms tend to run deep and have the power to severely limit many women's participation in political processes because of culture and little or no education and resources. The vertiginous world of these challenges is set to be accompanied by threats of political violence and harassment, which alienate women once they gain political power in this already unfriendly environment.[3]

However, to achieve stability and democratic progress, it is critical to address women's empowerment in politics in Pakistan. Legitimacy of governance, tighter connection between policy outcomes and the diverse needs of all citizens, and a more inclusive political system.[4]

II. POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT AND FEMALE VOTING PREFERENCES

Principles of political socialization, as expounded on by scholars, allude to the early life-shaping (family and male dominance) of women's political orientation. Jaros claims that political ideology in people is formed early in life through these familial ways, especially in traditional societies where traditional male family members hold the decision-making process.[5] In the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, the situation is acute. By describing patriarchy as a hierarchical society where women are socially conditioned as politically inert, reinforcing their subservience to male authority, Eisenstein puts into perspective the forces that constrain female political

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[1] Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).

[2] Munazza Mirza and Wagma Wagha, "Gender and Governance in Pakistan: Exploring the Political Participation of Women," *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies* 16, no. 2 (2009): 75–92.

[3] Ayesha Jalal, *The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[4] Shirin M. Rai, *Gender and the Political Economy of Development* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002).

[5] Dean Jaros, *Socialization to Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 15.

agency.[6] Cultural constructs, such as the Pakhtun proverb, Khaza ya da kor da Goor (a woman is either at home or in the grave), exemplify the gender expectations instrumental in limiting female political agency in conservative societies such as Buner, where women are more likely to vote as an extension of familial obedience rather than a civic exercise.

III. Historical Context of Women in Pakistani Politics

Throughout Pakistan's political history, women have been pivotal in the nation's founding and governance but have done so despite significant cultural and social barriers. Their participation in some of the first battles to gain independence through the latest politics has reflected women's tenacity and the need for equitable representation in governance.

Fatima Jinnah, the sister of Pakistan's founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, symbolized Pakistan's female political potential. Fatima Jinnah was the 'Mother of the Nation 'and supported the independence movement. She contested the 1965 presidential election against Ayub Khan, a military dictator. She lost this battle, but her campaign radicalized women's political activism and the women's capacity to challenge Patriarchal norms.[7]

The second was Benazir Bhutto and her leadership, which further strengthened the sense that women were to remain integral to Pakistani politics. Bhutto was the first female prime minister in a Muslim-majority country. Her championing of women's rights, education, healthcare, and political acumen as a leader elevated her to the global go-to symbol of female empowerment. Undoubtedly, many opponents of Bhutto's plans and conservatives resisted her, but this exemplifies the structural issue women leaders also deal with.[8]

Key political movements have played their role in bringing women's rights forward in Pakistan. A strong feminist voice to challenge the regressive Hudood Ordinances

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[6] Zillah Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (New York: Longman, 1981), 87.

[7] Farida Shaheed, "The Other Side of the Discourse: Women's Experiences of Identity, Religion, and Activism in Pakistan," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 1 (2002): 125–147.

[8] Anita M. Weiss, *Interpreting Islam, Modernity, and Women's Rights in Pakistan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

and demand for women's political and legal rights developed during the Zia-ul-Haq era through the Women's Action Forum activity. Through its activism, WAF proved the efficiency of collective action in resisting such oppressive policies and contributed to advancing gender equity.[9]

Constitutional provisions have changed to create ways for women's political participation. According to Articles 25 and 34 of the Pakistan Constitution, the government has guaranteed gender equality and participation of women in public life. Beginning in the early 2000s, gender quotas, among other factors, have succeeded in increasing female representation in the National Assembly, Senate and local government institutions. Today, women occupy 60 reserved seats in the National Assembly, accounting for about 17% of the total membership. Though this is a step forward, there is still a long way to go between what is on paper and what is practised.[10]

IV. Cultural Barriers and Their Political Implications

1. Patriarchal Norms in Political Leadership

Despite extensive legislation, patriarchy is an important, often dominant, force in shaping political leadership in Pakistan; this is because it reinforces gendered expectations which constrain women's role in governance. What is more, women are practically consigned to symbolic posts or positions utterly contrary to conventional gender roles, which shadows their credibility as leaders. Women are treated as vote bank mobilizers rather than leaders, and their contribution to decision–making is marginalized by political parties. It makes it hard for women to be represented and included in critical policy-making roles because they are permanently excluded under this practice.[11]

Additionally, there is no strong support for them in political institutions to continue leadership. Female politicians suffer discrimination and resistance from male

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[9] Farzana Bari, "Women Parliamentarians: Challenging the Frontiers of Politics in Pakistan," *Gender, Technology and Development* 14, no. 3 (2010): 363–384.

[10] Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre, *Gender-Based Political Participation in Pakistan: Issues and Challenges* (Lahore: Shirkat Gah, 2012).

[11] Ayesha Naz, H. Ibrahim, and W. Ahmad, "Socio-Cultural Impediments to Women's Political Empowerment in Pakhtun Society," *International Journal of Social Science Studies* 4, no. 2 (2012): 56–68.

colleagues, which stifles their ability to shape political agendas. It has become quite discouraging for many capable women to pursue political careers because many women are underrepresented in governance structures.[12]

2. Honor Culture in Political Campaigns

Societal attitudes about women's political participation are deeply influenced by the concept of "honour". Restrictions on women's public appearances and campaign activities exist because of fears that this will destroy family or community honour. Such constraints are keenly evident in the more conservative rural societies in which women who oppose the moral order of such communities have to contend with opposition against their challenging of the societal norms to which they are subjected.[13]

Female politicians face harsher societal criticism with the help of the media. Many stories about women involve their looks or personal lives rather than policies or accomplishments. The portraits discredit female politicians' credibility, making it less likely that other women will carry out politics.[14] One significant cultural barrier to women's political empowerment in Lebanon is the persistent association of women with familial honour, not individual agency.

3. Religious Misinterpretations in Political Discourse

In political discourse, religious misinterpretations are often weaponized to suppress women from political participation. However, conservative groups often abuse religious texts to deny opportunities for leadership roles to women. These narratives further strengthen the view that an ideal political decision-maker and a governable body is male.[15]

These misinterpretations also block legislative reform that would end well of women's political rights. For instance, many religiously framed arguments cite

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[12] Meher Khan and Marium Naqvi, "Structural Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Pakistan," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 27, no. 2 (2021): 145–160.

[13] Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre, *Gender-Based Political Participation in Pakistan: Issues and Challenges* (Lahore: Shirkat Gah, 2012).

[14] Gul Noreen and Rubina Musarrat, "Role of Media in Gender Representation in Politics," *Journal of Gender Studies* 22, no. 3 (2013): 173–186.

[15] Afshan Jafar, "Misinterpretation of Islam and Its Impact on Women's Political Participation in Pakistan," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 31, no. 4 (2020): 45–60.

Islamic principles, which distort them, to oppose women-specific bills, like those proposing laws regarding violence and harassment.[16] However, the politicization of religion restricts the discourse of the progressive and consolidates the cultural barriers that prevent women's access to politics.

4. Traditional Practices

Even traditional practices based on tribal and feudal practices further limit women's political engagement. In much of Pakistan, it is tribal custom for women not to vote or to stand for election, further marginalizing them. In rural constituencies, women are prevented from accessing the polling station through a threat or an informal agreement among the male community leaders not to violate their constitutional rights.[17]

This also enslaves Women's political agency in feudal systems which govern rural Pakistan. Often, it is the feudal families who decide which women will be involved in politics, usually those who will uphold patriarchal norms and will not rock the boat. The selectivity of this empowerment reinforces systemic inequality and limits accurate political representation for women.[18]

V. Social Barriers with Political Repercussions

1. Educational Disparities

In Pakistan, women's political empowerment is yet to overcome educational disparities. Women's limited ability to participate meaningfully in political processes stems from the country's low female literacy rate (51 percent) against 71 percent for men.[19] Women with little or no literacy skills are bereft of access and

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[16] Sehrish Khan, "The Politics of Religious Interpretation and Its Impact on Women-Specific Legislation in Pakistan," *Pakistan Journal of Politics* 18, no. 1 (2022): 67–85.

[17] Saima Ali and Muhammad Akhtar, "Gender and Political Participation in Pakistan: A Case Study of South Punjab," *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences* 41, no. 2 (2021): 231–245.

[18] Ayesha Naz, H. Ibrahim, and W. Ahmad, "Socio-Cultural Impediments to Women's Political Empowerment in Pakhtun Society," *International Journal of Social Science Studies* 4, no. 2 (2012): 56–68.

[19] UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report: Gender Equality in Education* (2021), https://unesco.org.

poor understanding of political information, and their capacity to participate and influence through elections and other decision-making structures is insufficient.

In addition, women have received insufficient political education. Many civic education programs and voter awareness campaigns do not focus on women, particularly in rural areas where women are still discouraged from participating in public life. The absence of this experience in political knowledge further excludes women from governance and decision-making roles.[20] Eliminating these educational disparities is important in enabling women to participate in politics actively and effectively because it creates incentives and the ability to acquire the necessary political skills for each woman.

2. Economic Dependence

Another factor is women's dependence on (especially those in poor, rural areas) other economic factors that stifle their political agency in Pakistan. Women are dealt with financially in a way that will not enable them to run for office or to fund their political campaigns. In particular, these limitations emerge more strongly in rural areas where women do not have access to income-generating and financial activities.[21]

It is made worse still by the gender-based economic disparity. According to the World Economic Forum (2022), women earn 34% less than men on average in Pakistan, making them less financially and politically autonomous.[22] This dependence on economics prevents women from doing politics and intensifies the male grip on their decisions since they are economy-dependent on male family members.

3. Political Violence and Harassment

Women who dream of a political role are subject to political violence and harassment. The threats, intimidation and physical violence directed at female

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[20] Saima Ali, Hafsa Hassan, and Aisha Zia, "Educational Disparities and Women's Political Participation in Pakistan," *Pakistan Journal of Social Issues* 10, no. 2 (2019): 89–105.

[21] Saima Siddiqui and Saba Hamid, "Economic Challenges to Women's Empowerment in Pakistan," *South Asia Economic Journal* 21, no. 1 (2020): 1–15.

[22] World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2022* (2022), https://www.weforum.org.

politicians and their candidates have created an environment in which they are discouraged from participating. These incidents are not alone but part of a broader pattern of gendered gendered violence in the political space.[23]

Case studies demonstrate the severity of these problems. In 2018, a female candidate from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa withdrew from elections as she had received death threats for campaigning in a conservative area.[24] The examples add up to a strong case for stronger protections for women in politics and more vigorous enforcement of laws against political violence and harassment.

4. Underrepresentation in Political Decision-Making

Pakistan's political institutions are still deficient in women, although there are constitutional provisions for gender quotas. The quota system, which reserves 17% of seats in the National Assembly and Senate for women, represents women as less than half of the quota since male-dominated political parties nominate many female legislators and do not have much decision-making rule with their mandate.[25]

Moreover, the ascent is problematic, from the rank of women leaders to the positions of political parties and local government bodies. However, their influence on policy and governance is restricted by structural barriers, such as patriarchal party hierarchies and cultural biases.[26] However, maintaining gender quotas is not enough for women's political significance to be strengthened; women's work must still be done to create the context for women to influence the political agenda.

VI. The Role of Political Parties and Policies

Early in the 2000s, Pakistan introduced a gender quota system, which reserves 17 percent of women's seats in the National Assembly and the Senate, and has extended quotas to local government levels. This initiative also has women's representation

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[23] Farzana Bari, "Women Parliamentarians: Challenging the Frontiers of Politics in Pakistan," *Gender, Technology and Development* 14, no. 3 (2010): 363–384.

[24] Human Rights Watch, "Shall I Feed My Daughter, or Educate Her? Barriers to Girls' Education in Pakistan" (2019), https://www.hrw.org.

[25] Ayesha Naz, "Women's Underrepresentation in Pakistan's Political System: An Analysis of Gender Quotas," *Journal of Political Studies* 28, no. 1 (2021): 55–72.

[26] Meher Khan and Marium Naqvi, "Structural Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Pakistan," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 27, no. 2 (2021): 145–160.

up by a wide margin, with women holding more than 60 reserved seats in the National Assembly. However, these quotas usually do not empower women politically. Instead, many female legislators are selected through party nominations, which often restrict their autonomy of influence. Leadership is generally reserved for men, for whom party leaders choose women with familial or feudal connections in preference to those with genuine grassroots support or leadership.[27]

Only internally biased political parties still bar women from leading. However, women do not occupy top-level positions in major political parties because they hold positions in legislative bodies. Women tend to get marginalized in male-dominated party structures that continue to keep female candidates as symbolic or supportive rather than arbiters of power and influence.[28] Moreover, women's inputs to party agendas are ignored, and women rarely receive the kind of support that a party high-profile aspirant demands during an election campaign. The lack of institutional encouragement continues to exclude women from meaningful political engagement.

Pakistan has initiated progressive laws empowering women, such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) and the Election Act (2017), which lays down the condition of inclusivity in the political process. Although these are the laws, the enforcement of these laws is weak, especially in rural areas where patriarchal norms are dominant. These policies are not overcoming structural barriers because of cultural resistance, limited awareness, and inadequate institutional capacity.

VII. Impact of Barriers on Women's Political Empowerment

Women's political engagement in Pakistan is constrained by a multitude of cultural and social barriers that beset their efforts to engage in politics and promote social justice, therefore furthering gender inequality while maintaining the idea that substantial democratic obligations are missing in our country. Patriarchal norms and

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[27] Shirin Rai and Fatima Ahmed, "Gender and Representation in South Asian Politics," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43, no. 3 (2020): 381–396.
[28] Saima Siddiqui, "Women's Leadership in Pakistan's Political Parties: Challenges and Opportunities," *Journal of Gender Studies* 29, no. 1 (2020): 97–112.

traditional practices run deep, discouraging women from participating in politics, ensuring their low visibility and absence as part of the decision-making processes. They limit women's access to their political rights as measured through their presence or absence from leadership positions and political influence over outcomes.[29]

The challenge is exacerbated by educational disparities and economic dependence as women with limited access to education and resources are often excluded from political opportunities. Political violence and harassment of women are hyperendemic, causing a hostile environment, which makes women feel disenfranchised from entering or staying in careers in politics.[30] All of these have combined to weaken women's agency, such that political institutions throughout the world remain overwhelmingly male-dominated.

These information blockades have implications beyond individual seclusion; they affect Pakistan's democratic growth in general. A dearth of diverse representation in governance undermines the inclusivity of — and legitimacy of — democratic institutions that pass policies that do not meet the needs and concerns of women. This continuing inequality perpetuates systemic inequality that hinders the country's progress towards its potential relative to sustainable development goals, particularly gender equality and inclusive governance.[31] These barriers must be addressed so Pakistan can grow through democratic means and equitable governance.

VIII. Case Studies and Evidence

Despite significant barriers, women in Pakistan have stepped forward, making great strides in politics and with great success stories showing resilience and women's leadership. Benazir Bhutto is one of the most prominent women on the list, as she became the first female Prime Minister in Pakistan and the Muslim world. She broke

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[29] Sehrish Khan, "The Politics of Religious Interpretation and Its Impact on Women-Specific Legislation in Pakistan," *Pakistan Journal of Politics* 18, no. 1 (2022): 67–85.

[30] Ayesha Naz, "Women's Underrepresentation in Pakistan's Political System: An Analysis of Gender Quotas," *Journal of Political Studies* 28, no. 1 (2021): 55–72.

[31] UN Women, *Women in Politics: Global and Regional Trends* (2020), https://www.unwomen.org.

down stereotypes by becoming the first woman in her country to lead men and by opening the way to enter politics more mainly to women. Also, names like Sherry Rehman and HinaRabbaniKhar have become faces in the international debates and global forums of policy-making and diplomacy, able enough to appear there.[32]

Strong grassroots political movements have also pushed for women's political empowerment. Women's Action Forum (WAF), which emerged in the Zia-ul-Haq era, has variously protested against discriminatory laws and pressed for women's rights. Grassroots organizations have helped to activate communities, raise awareness regarding women's political rights and create venues through which women and their concerns are brought to the forefront.[33] The work of ShirkatGah and Aurat Foundation in empowering women's suffices through political training and crusades.

Information about female voter turnout and participation data affirms progress and challenges. With a record-breaking female turnout of 46% in the 2018 general elections, the Elections Commission of Pakistan (ECP) declared that the results were historic in the country's history. However, women's participation is still limited in rural areas plagued by logistically and culturally limiting obstacles. Local agreements prohibited women from voting in some constituencies, representing ongoing systemic issues.[34]

IX. Strategies to Address Barriers in the Political Context

1. Policy Reforms

One important step to combating low representation by women in politics is the strengthening and expansion of gender quotas. However, current quotas reserve 17% of seats in the National Assembly and the Senate, and reforms should concentrate on the number of women elected as senators in direct contests, not the

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[32] Anita M. Weiss, *Interpreting Islam, Modernity, and Women's Rights in Pakistan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[33] Farzana Bari, "Women Parliamentarians: Challenging the Frontiers of Politics in Pakistan," *Gender, Technology and Development* 14, no. 3 (2010): 363–384.

[34] Election Commission of Pakistan, *General Election 2018: Statistical Report* (2019), https://www.ecp.gov.pk.

party that nominated them.[35] Local government reforms can also boost women's representation at the grassroots level.

Equally important is that political spaces are safe for women. There must be mechanisms to combat political violence, harassment and threats. This can be achieved by having political spaces where laws such as the Protection Against Harassment Act (2010) are enforced, allowing women to campaign and lead without fear.[36]

2. Media and Advocacy

The media is important in helping people understand how women are viewed in politics. Positive narratives on female politicians' achievements make women come out and participate in governance. A way ahead is to shift the focus of campaigns to removing stereotypes and encouraging the idea that women are as capable of political leadership as they are.[37]

Essential are the advocacy campaigns meant to spur support for women voters and leaders. In such campaigns, special attention should be given to enhancing female participation in elections and governance in rural and conservative areas where cultural barriers have been entrenched.[38]

3. Engaging Civil Society

Civil society organizations, especially non-government organizations (NGOs), empower women politically. Female leaders have training, mentorship and resources as aspiring female leaders to be trained with the help of the political institutions and the NGOs as it offers a collaborative effort.[39] Specifically,

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[35] Ayesha Naz, "Women's Underrepresentation in Pakistan's Political System: An Analysis of Gender Quotas," *Journal of Political Studies* 28, no. 1 (2021): 55–72.

[36] UN Women, *Women in Politics: Global and Regional Trends* (2020), https://www.unwomen.org.

[37] Shirin Rai and Fatima Ahmed, "Gender and Representation in South Asian Politics," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43, no. 3 (2020): 381–396.

[38] Saima Ali, Hafsa Hassan, and Aisha Zia, "Educational Disparities and Women's Political Participation in Pakistan," *Pakistan Journal of Social Issues* 10, no. 2 (2019): 89–105.

[39] Meher Khan and Marium Naqvi, "Structural Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Pakistan," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 27, no. 2 (2021): 145–160.

grassroots initiatives targeting community culture are the most successful in creating women's participation and leadership.[40]

4. International Support

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the UN developed provide sound guidance and support in the drive towards gender equality in politics. The partnerships for technical assistance, funding and best practices for women's political empowerment with global organizations fortify Pakistan's overall women's political empowerment. Pakistan can learn from countries where gender inclusion models have become successful and use this knowledge to adapt its strategies to its cultural and political reality.[41]

X. Conclusion and Recommendations

The problems of cultural and social barriers still stand in the way of women's political empowerment in Pakistan. Women's political participation and representation are, however, still constrained by patriarchal norms, honour culture, and misinterpretations of religion and tradition. It does not help that the social barriers — including educational disparities, economic dependence, political violence, and underrepresentation in decision-making — make the system perpetuate gender inequality. In addition, these barriers constrain women's potential in politics, and they are also in contradiction to Pakistani democratic ideals and governance.

However, strong political will and systemic changes are needed to meet these challenges. In order to do so, gender equality must be included in the government's priority of passing national agendas through the introduction and implementation of progressive policies that can disrupt patriarchal structures to create opportunities for women to serve as effective leaders. Making sure people have the opportunity to

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[40] Saima Siddiqui and Saba Hamid, "Economic Challenges to Women's Empowerment in Pakistan," *South Asia Economic Journal* 21, no. 1 (2020): 1–15.

[41] UN Women, *Women in Politics: Global and Regional Trends* (2020), https://www.unwomen.org.

expand gender quotas, feel safe on the political front and have educational and economic opportunities are vital discussions.

It requires a collective effort of political parties, civil society, the media, and the international community to crush cultural and social barriers. For political parties to commit to the cause of women's leadership, media and advocacy campaigns promoting good stories about women in politics should be done to counter negativity. There is a need for grassroots initiatives involving the community to challenge cultural norms and international frameworks and resources to sustain progress.

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