

Sociological Research and Innovation (SRI)

Volume 2 Issue 2, Fall 2024

ISSN(P): 3007-3251, ISSN(E): 3007-326X

Homepage: <https://journals.umt.edu.pk/index.php/SRI>



Article QR



Title: Exploring Quota and Non-Quota Women MPs Membership in Parliamentary Committees: A Case Study of the Punjab Assembly, Pakistan

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/sri.22.05>

History: Received: September 5, 2024, Revised: October 10, 2024, Accepted: November 15, 2024, Published: December 20, 2024

Citation: Javed, N., & Malik, R. (2024). Exploring quota and non-quota women MPs membership in parliamentary committees: A case study of the Punjab Assembly, Pakistan. *Sociological Research and Innovation*, 2(2), 84–104. <https://doi.org/10.32350/sri.22.05>

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Conflict of Interest: Author(s) declared no conflict of interest



A publication of

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Exploring Quota and Non-Quota Women MPs Membership in Parliamentary Committees: A Case Study of the Punjab Assembly, Pakistan

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Abstract

Parliamentary committees are significant for an understanding of gendered politics in legislatures. The underlying question is the extent to which quota and non-quota MPs are being included in decision making through various parliamentary committees. In this article, the Punjab assembly (largest provincial assembly of Pakistan) is used as a case to understand the assignment of reserved and directly elected women MPs in different committees based on gender and prestige type. By using quantitative methods, the secondary data sets accessed from the web site of the Punjab assembly during (2002-2023) legislative assemblies were used. Additionally, interviews from the women MPs were also used as complementary data to support the findings of a quantitative data set. Results showed that women MPs on reserved seats are over-represented in feminine committees/low prestigious committees and under-represented in medium/neutral and masculine committees. In contrast, directly elected women MPs are preferred, and are assigned to high prestigious/masculine committees disproportionately to their strength in Punjab assembly.

Keywords: committees, directly elected MPs, parliament, Punjab, reserved seats

Introduction

Globally, an increase in women's descriptive representation ensures their presence in national legislatures by enforcing quota laws. Hence, women are less likely to be incorporated in the decision-making process and getting equal access to powerful committees within the legislature. In addition, as newcomers, women are participating in a patriarchal legislative system so they may face structural barriers to entering the powerful committee positions within the legislature (Barnes, [2014](#)). However, the integration of women in legislative committees in key policy areas still needs to be

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emphasized. Previous studies available on gender gaps in legislative committees' allocations and assignments (Carroll, [2008](#); Coffe & Schnellecke, [2013](#); Schwindt-Bayer, [2010](#)) were mostly conducted in Western countries (Barnes, [2014](#); Espirito-Santo & Sanches, [2020](#); Mickler, [2018](#); Murray & Senac, [2018](#); Pansardi & Vercesi, [2017](#)), while very few have been conducted in Asian countries (Prihatini, [2019](#); Yoon & Osawa, [2017](#)) and Pakistan (Javed & Malik, [2021](#)).

Legislative committees are honored institutions that are further divided into different sub policy areas (Mickler, [2018](#)), playing a significant role within legislatures to influence policies (Longley & Davidson [1998](#); Strom, [1998](#)) and other institutional work including legislation, administrative tasks, and budgeting (Mattson & Strom, [1995](#)). Furthermore, they may have the right to initiate, revise and provide guidelines about policies according to their relevant areas (Murray & Senac, [2018](#)). Moreover, members of legislative committees work on different policy issues within the assigned committees (Mickler, [2018](#)). The allocation of members in legislative committees is recently getting attention to review the gendered division within the committees. Since all committees are not equal in power and prestige, some committees are considered more active, valuable, powerful and prestigious than others (Baekgaard, [2014](#); Frisch & Kelly, [2006](#); Heath et al., [2005](#); Munger & Ide, [1988](#)). Hence, committee allocations were important to understand gender dynamics in the legislature (Murray & Senac, [2018](#)).

This article argues that women are less likely to have powerful committee appointments and more likely to become members of low status/feminine committees. Moreover, over the years, women's appointments in power committees have increased with their numeric representation in the Punjab assembly. Further, it is argued that quota and non-quota women have different patterns of allocations in power and low-status legislative committees. For getting the evidence of the above arguments, the Provincial assembly of Punjab, Pakistan has been taken as a case. Original secondary data of the Punjab assembly from 2002-2020 and interviews of 15 women MPs is used to complement findings obtained from a quantitative data set. Interviews of MPs revealed the gender dynamics within committees from their personal perspectives regarding structural barriers in gendered allocations of committees and women's marginalization within the legislature.



By doing so this article contributes in two different ways; it is a novel study in the local context of Pakistan to look at women's descriptive representation within the legislative committees. Moreover, it aims to contribute to an existing body of international literature by focusing on both women MPs who came through reserved seats and by contesting general elections in the Asian context.

Literature Review

A large number of previous studies have reported gender gaps in legislative committee allocations in the United States (Bolzendahl, [2014](#); Carroll, [2008](#); Frisch & Kelly, [2003](#)), Europe (Baekgaard & Kjaer, [2012](#); Coffe & Schnellecke, [2013](#); Crawford & Pini, [2011](#); Mickler, [2018](#); Murray & Senac, [2018](#); Pansardi & Vercesi, [2017](#)), Latin America (Funk et al., [2017](#); Heath et al., [2005](#); Schwindt-Bayer, [2010](#); Kerevel & Atkeson, [2013](#)), Australia (Sawer, [2000](#)), Argentina (Barnes, [2014](#)), Asia (Yoon & Osawa, [2017](#); Joshi & Goehring, [2018](#)) and Pakistan (Javed & Malik, [2021](#)). Moreover, existing studies also establish the distribution of committees on the basis of prestige. Studies have recognized that some committees are important and known as powerful and prestigious (Frisch & Kelly, [2006](#); Heath et al., [2005](#); Hansen, [2010](#); Kerevel & Atkeson, [2013](#); Franceschet, [2011](#)) including budget, foreign affairs, defense (Franceschet, [2011](#); Hansen, [2010](#)), agriculture (Barnes, [2014](#)) and the economy (Hansen, [2010](#)), while others are low status committees with high work burden (Bolzendahl, [2014](#); Coffe & Schnellecke, [2013](#); Crawford & Pini, [2011](#)) such as social affairs, education, culture, equality issues (Baekgaard & Kjaer, [2012](#); Bolzendahl, [2014](#); Coffe & Schnellecke, [2013](#); Crawford & Pini, [2011](#); Krook & O'Brien, [2012](#)), health care, welfare, women's issues (Bolzendahl, [2014](#); Coffe & Schnellecke, [2013](#); Crawford & Pini, [2011](#)), human rights, family and youth (Heath et al., [2005](#); Kerevel & Atkeson, [2013](#); Schwindt-Bayer, [2010](#); Towns, [2003](#)).

Additionally, growing literature also well documented that power committees deal with policy areas of men's interest (Franceschet, [2011](#); Schwindt-Bayer, [2010](#)) however, low-status committees were associated with feminine interest (Bolzendahl, [2014](#); Coffe & Schnellecke, [2013](#); Crawford & Pini, [2011](#)). However, women had been allocated more to committees with low power, and the ones that were considered to be feminine in nature (Bolzendahl, [2014](#); Franceschet, 2011; Javed & Malik, [2021](#); Pansardi & Vercesi, [2017](#); Prihatini, [2019](#)). They were stereotypically

assigned to social issues committees (Heath et al., [2005](#); Schwindt-Bayer, [2010](#); Towns, [2003](#); Javed & Malik, [2021](#); Krevel & Atkenson, [2013](#)). Importantly, a small number of women were getting access to power positions and did not have access to power committees like their male colleagues (Heath et al., [2005](#)). The scholars established the positive relationship between women participation in parliamentary business and head of the parliamentary committees (Taylor-Robinson & David, [2002](#)).

Previous studies measured committees' allocation from two important variables including level of prestige, powerful/low status, and nature of gender, masculine/feminine (Druckman & Warick, [2005](#); Krook & O' Brien, [2012](#)). In line with previous literature, the following hypotheses were developed:

Hypothesis 1: Women MPs are more likely to be assigned to less prestigious and feminine committees in Punjab assembly.

Hypothesis 2: Women MPs on reserved seats are more likely to be assigned to less prestigious and feminine committees in Punjab assembly.

Case of Punjab Assembly

The Punjab assembly is a supreme political institution that governs under the Punjab government that further formulates relevant laws aligned with the constitution of Pakistan, 1973. This institution ensures that all the citizens enjoy fundamental human rights, constitutional freedoms and rights regardless of any sex, religions, ethnicity and other factors.

Moreover, the Punjab assembly has completed its seventeen legislative tenures. Below, mentioned table 1 clearly states the women representation in different tenures in the Punjab assembly.

Table 1

Women's Descriptive Representation in Different Tenures in the Punjab Assembly

Legislative Tenures	Male MPs	Reserved	Directly Elected	Women MPs	Total
First Assembly 1947-1949	100	-	2	2	102
Second Assembly 1951-1955	171	-	3	3	174

Legislative Tenures	Male MPs	Reserved	Directly Elected	Women MPs	Total
Third Assembly (Interim)	-	-	-	-	-
Fourth Assembly 1956-1958	275	-	4	4	279
Fifth Assembly 1962-1965	129	-	2	2	131
Sixth Assembly 1965-1969	148	-	2	2	150
Seventh Assembly 1972-1977	172	-	3	3	175
Eighth Assembly April 1977-May 1977	232	-	11	11	243
Ninth Assembly 1985-1988	199	-	11	11	210
Tenth Assembly 1988-1990	189	-	12	12	201
Eleventh Assembly 1990-1993	194	-	3	3	197
Twelfth Assembly 1993-1996	165	-	1	1	166
Thirteenth Assembly 1997-1999	200	-	0	0	200
Fourteenth Assembly 2002-2007	297	66	8	74	371
Fifteenth Assembly 2008-2013	279	64	7	71	350
Sixteenth Assembly 2013-2018	292	67	9	76	368
Seventeenth Assembly 2018-2023	295	66	7	73	368

Note. Source: *Official Website* <https://www.pap.gov.pk/en/members/past-members>

Women's representation increased in 2002 with the introduction of women quota at the provincial level, including the Punjab assembly. Moreover, the article considers four consecutive legislative tenures from 2002-2023. However, it is taken into consideration that women joined

Punjab assembly from two different systems including quota/reserved seats and by contesting general elections. Furthermore, it was established that more women came through reserved seats, while very few contested general elections, as seen in table 1.

Additionally, the Punjab assembly has two types of standing committees including one that allowed them to work for different government departments, and the other includes special committees. Committees with various government departments perform business on regular basis, however other committees are constituted to deal with special issues. In this study, the authors have taken parliamentary committees with government departments, because they work on regular basis and are directly concerned with legislative procedure.

Method

For this article, the authors used unique secondary data accessed from the official website of the Punjab assembly, Pakistan. Mainly the data set from 2002-2023 was used. The purpose of taking data from 2002 was due to a 17% increase in quota in the Punjab assembly. The research observes the pattern of incorporating women legislators in the legislative committees related to different policy areas after increasing quota. However, the number of committees vary in four legislative periods: during first tenure (2002-2007) 38 committees were working with government departments, 38 in (2008-2013), 36 in (2013-2018), and in the seventeenth legislature (2018-2023) the number of committees were reduced to 21. Moreover, the criteria of committee distribution as high and low status committee, feminine and masculine committees was used according to Krook and Brien (2012).

Table 2

Division of Committees by Prestige Type (2002-2023)

	Excise & Taxation	Finance
	Local government & Rural Development	Religious Affairs & Auqaf
High Prestigious	Revenue, Relief & Consolidation	Zakat & Ushr
	Public Prosecution	Home Affairs
	Agriculture	Services & General
Medium	Commerce & Investment	Administration
		Forestry, Wildlife & Fisheries



	Communications & Works	Health/ Primary & Secondary Health Care
	Education/Higher Education/School Education	Housing, Urban Development & Public Health Engineering
	Literacy & Non-Formal Basic-Education	Industries, Commerce & Investment
	Special Education	Information
	Environment	Information & Technology
	Food	Irrigation & Power /Energy
	Labour & Human Resource	Livestock & Dairy Development
	Law & Parliamentary Affairs	Mines & Minerals
	Cooperatives	Management & Professional Development
	Colonies	Transport
		Planning & Development
		Chief Minister's Inspection Team
	Culture & Youth / Youth Affairs Sports, Archaeology & Tourism	Women Development /Gender Mainstreaming
Low Committees	Population Welfare	Human Rights & Minority Affairs
	Social Welfare & Bait-ul-Maal	
	Information & Culture	

Table 3

Division of Committees by Gender in Punjab Assembly (2002-2023)

	Agriculture	Excise & Taxation
	Food	Transport
	Forestry, Wildlife & Fisheries	Religious Affairs & Auqaf
	Information	Zakat & Ushr
Masculine	Information & Technology	Public Prosecution
	Finance	Local government & Rural Development
	Revenue , Relief & Consolidation	Labour & Human Resource

	Home Industries, Commerce & Investment Services & General Administration Irrigation & Power /Energy Environment Mines & Minerals Law & Parliamentary Affairs Human Rights & Minority Affairs Livestock & Dairy Development Colonies Information & Culture Education/Higher Education/School Education	Communication & Works Management & Professional Development
Neutral		Culture & Youth / Youth Affairs Sports, Archaeology & Tourism Planning & Development Housing, Urban Development & Public Health Engineering Cooperatives
Feminine	Literacy & Non-Formal Basic-Education Special Education Chief Minister Inspection Team	Health/ Primary & Secondary Health Care Population Welfare Social Welfare & Bait-ul-Maal Women Development /Gender Mainstreaming

For Primary data, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 15 women MPs. The elite interviewing method was used to access the politicians and gain rich and detailed data about particular issues (Mcevoy, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

Written consent was taken from all the participants of the study, to ensure their voluntary participation in the research. The researchers ensured the participants anonymity and confidentiality with the allocations of fictitious names. Moreover, the secondary data was accessed through the official website of the Punjab assembly, publicly available to all citizens, however it was ensured that the data is not manipulated, and is used for academic purpose only.



Findings

The authors followed the criteria of distribution of committees by prestige and gender type given in tables 2 & 3. To begin with the presence of women legislators as heads/executives in different legislative, the representation of women MPs was analyzed (directly elected and quota women) as heads in committees in the Punjab assembly from the perspective of gender and prestige of committees.

Women MPs in Committees as Executives (2002-2023)

The trend of appointment of women MPs as heads has been changed during four legislative tenures. During the first tenure (2002-2007) quota was increased up to 17% in the Punjab assembly for the very first-time, and 9% of women MPs served as heads of different committees including environment (Neutral and Medium Prestigious), planning and development (Neutral and Medium Prestigious), and population & welfare (Feminine / Low prestigious). During the second tenure (2008-2013), women MPs' representation declined from 9% to 5% with a -4% difference. The committees headed by women legislators during this period including commerce & investment and special education. These committees were considered as (Masculine / Medium Prestigious and Feminine /Medium prestigious) respectively. Moreover, in the third legislative period, the percentage of women legislators reached 8%, with a declined by -1% as compared to the first one. During this period, women were heads of different committees including Gender mainstreaming (Feminine /Low Prestigious), zakat & ushr (Masculine /High prestigious), and information and culture (Feminine /Low prestigious).

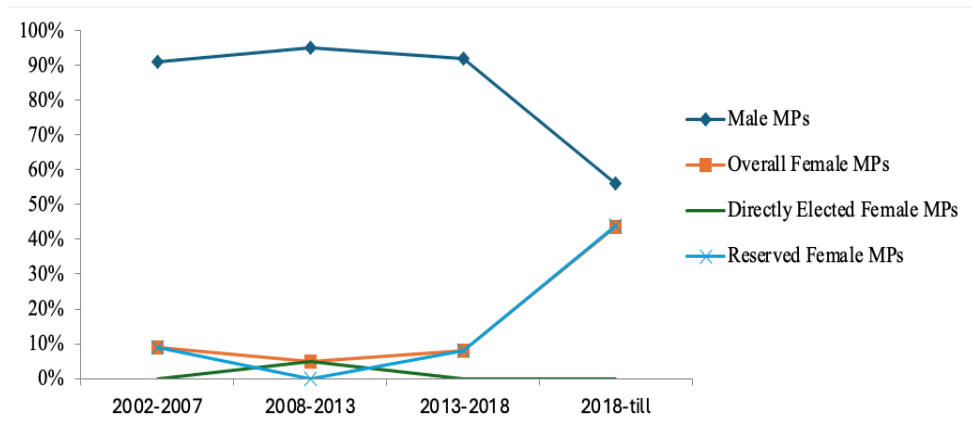
In comparison with the seventeenth legislature (2018-2023), the situation of appointment of women MPs is better than the previous three consecutive legislative periods regarding women's headship in committees. During 2018-till, 44% women have been appointed as heads of different committees including Environment, gender mainstreaming (Feminine /Low Prestigious), higher education (Feminine / Low Prestigious), school education (Feminine / Low Prestigious), Chief Minister inspection team (Feminine / Medium Prestigious), law (Neutral/ Medium Prestigious) and excise and taxation (Masculine/ High Prestigious).

The evidence highlighted that women MPs were leading high/medium prestigious and masculine committees. Apart from this, women MPs'

headship was more visible in low prestigious and feminine/neutral committees. Moreover, participants also highlighted the procedure to allocate women MPs as heads of the different committees. MPs highlighted that “heads of committees are being selected by voting method of all committee members” (p1, 4, 9, 12). Furthermore, they also emphasized that “women MPs are less likely to be appointed as masculine or power committee head because of patriarchal hegemony in power committees” (p3, 6, 7, 10). Moreover, each committee has at least 10 members but in the current legislature (2018-2023) 11 members were allocated to each committee. Comparatively, in the previous three legislature tenures (2002-2018) 9-10 members were allocated to each committee.

Figure 1

Women MPs in Committees as Executives (2002-2023), till (2023)*



For the most part, women MPs on reserved seats (quota) were more likely to be appointed as heads of committees as compared to directly elected women MPs as seen in figure 1. Though, in the first, third and fourth (seventeenth legislature) tenure, directly elected women MPs were not appointed as head of any legislative committee. By contrast, during the second legislative tenure, directly elected women MPs were appointed as heads of committees including commerce & investment, and special education. Findings also emphasized that “women MPs on reserved seats are more allocated as committee heads as compared to directly elected women MPs because non-quota women MPs are also appointed on other prestigious positions in Assembly” (p 4, 8, 9, 12). Also, explained that

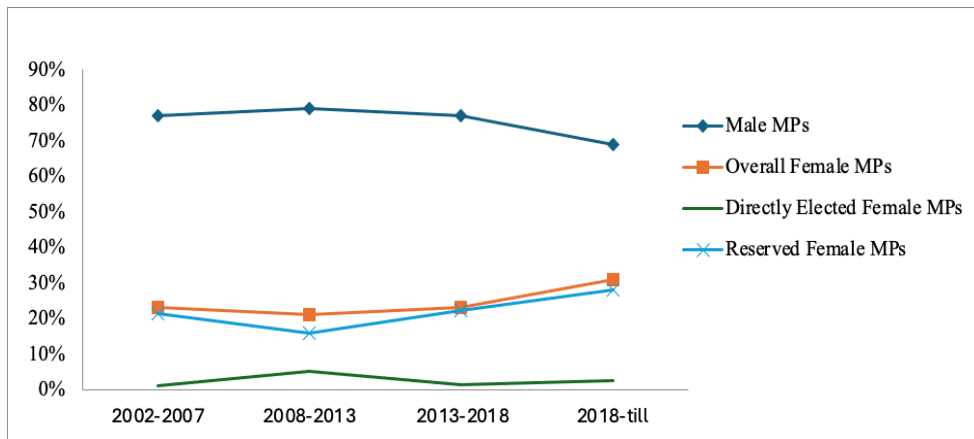
“Quota MPs have no vote power and less connections with party leaders” (p1, 5, 10).

Women’s Descriptive Representation in Committees (2002-2023)

The representation of women MPs in legislative committees showed different patterns during four legislative periods. Figure 2 highlights overall women’s over and under-representation in legislative committees in each tenure. Women’s presence in different committees has overall increased. Interestingly, in the first tenure (2002-2007), women MPs’ representation was 23%, and during that legislative period women’s quota increased up to 17% in the Punjab assembly as stated previously. Furthermore, during the second tenure (2008-2013), women MPs’ representation declined to 21% with -2% difference, and in the third tenure (2013-2018), this representation rose to 23% with 0% difference, and in the fourth tenure (2018-2023), this representation rose to 31% with 8% difference.

Figure 2

Overall Women MPs in Committees (2002-2023), till (2023)*



However, the seventeenth legislature (2018 to 2023) ensured a 31% increase in women MPs’ representation, with an + 8% increase in different committees. Currently, the position is better to guarantee women's descriptive representation in decision making in different policy areas by assigning more women MPs in different legislative committees. Besides, women MPs on reserved seats are more likely to be assigned to committees as compared to directly elected women legislators. As shown in figure 2, during the first tenure (2002-2007) only 1% of directly elected women legislators were assigned to committees, which increased 5% in the second

tenure (2008-2013), while there was a decline in the third tenure (2013-2018). In recent legislative tenure (2018-2023), however, a 3% decline can be observed. From the above discussion, it is clear that women MPs on reserved seats are more likely to be allocated in committees as compared to directly elected women MPs, and reserved MPs presence in committees has increased but directly elected assignment has decreased.

Committees Appointment by gender, prestige type, and legislature (2002-2023)

This section highlights women’s appointment in parliamentary committees by prestige. The findings reveal that women were being appointed more to low ranked committees than high and medium prestigious committees. The data showed women’s appointment in low ranked committees included social welfare & Bait-ul-Maal, archaeology & tourism, gender mainstreaming & human rights/ minority affairs, information & culture and culture & youth/youth affairs and sports. Comparatively, women’s appointment in medium ranked committees included environment, health, food and development, Chief Minister inspection team, and education. Furthermore, high status parliamentary committees included local government and rural development, excise and taxation, religious affairs, revenue, finance, zakat and ushr, relief and consolidation, and home affairs.

Figure 3

Overall Women MPs with Gender, Prestige Type, and Legislature (2002-2023), till (2023)*

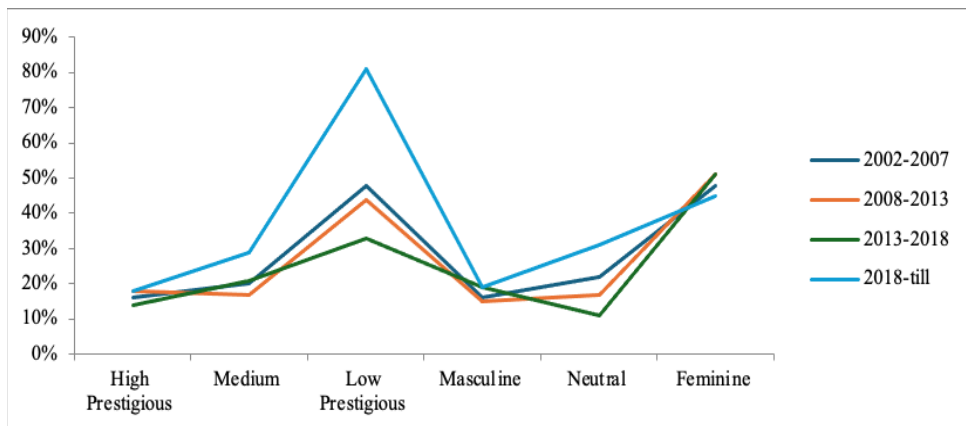


Figure 3 also indicates women’s assignment on the basis of gender, as committees are categorized as masculine, neutral and feminine. Data showed that women were assigned to feminine parliamentary committees (including women development, education, gender mainstreaming, population welfare and health) as compared to neutral (human rights & minority, planning & development) and masculine committees (agriculture, food & home & religious affairs, finance and environment,) see figure 3.

Furthermore, women MPs emphasized that committees’ appointment was not done as per the preference given by them. One woman MP highlighted that she gave preference to be appointed in finance, health and agriculture but was appointed in literacy committee (P2). Committee assignment was done by party elites as per their own choice and prestige (P2, 7, 9, 12, 5, 3 & 14).

Reserved and Directly Elected Women MPs with Respect to Gender, Prestige Type and Legislature (2002-2023)

Figure 4

Reserved and Directly Elected Women MPs with Prestige Type and Legislature (2002-2023), till (2023)*

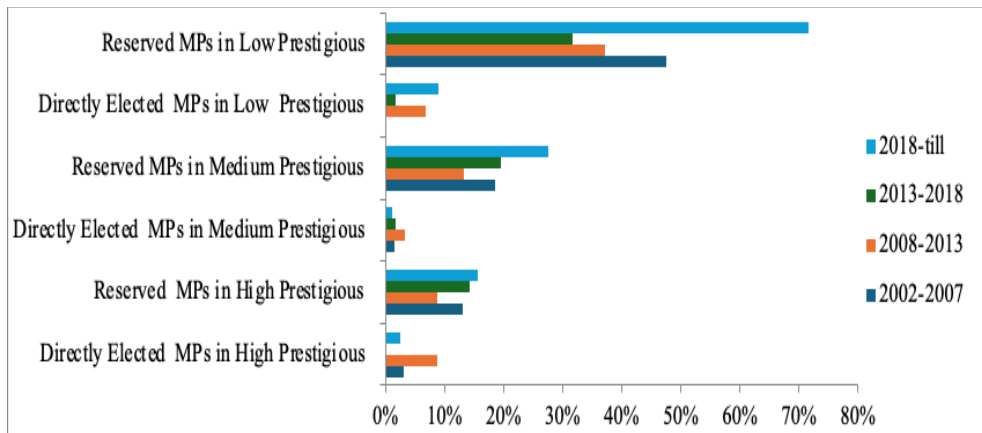
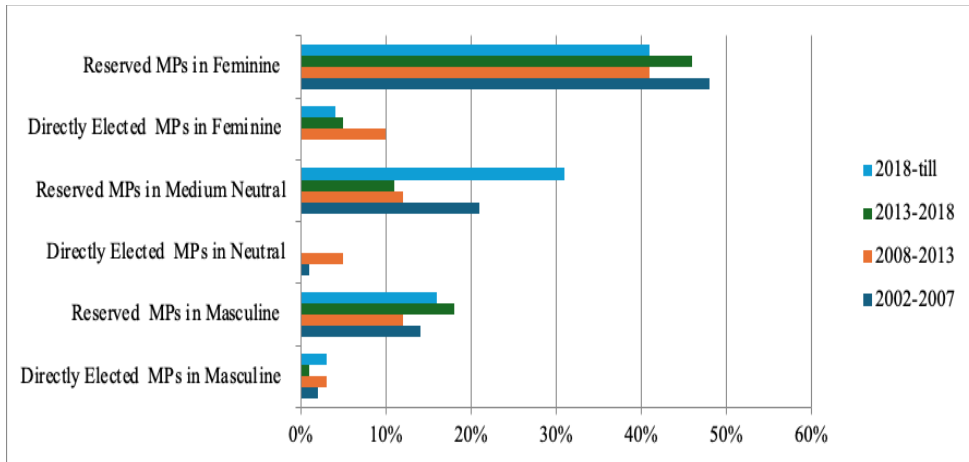


Figure 4 and 5 elucidate the relative analysis of committee assignment of women MPs selected on reserved seats and directly elected by rank and gender. Findings revealed that directly elected women MPs are more likely to be appointed in powerful and masculine parliamentary committees. However, the quota MPs are less represented in masculine and high-status parliamentary committees.

Figure 5

Reserved and Directly Elected Women MPs with Gender Type and Legislature, till (2023)*



Furthermore, interview findings revealed that directly elected women MPs had more power because they came through by contesting general elections, so the party was obliged to appoint directly elected women MPs by assigning them to high prestigious and masculine committees. On the other hand, women on reserved seats were assigned to low prestige and feminine committees as the party was already giving them chance to participate in parliament.

Discussion

From the above findings, it can be concluded that over four consecutive tenures, women's representation in legislative committees has been increased progressively. Consistent with the case of Canada and New Zealand those women's appointments to powerful committees have improved over time (Beckwith, [2007](#); Grey, [2006](#)). However, from the above-discussed results, it is evident that overall increasing quota had a positive impact on women's representation in legislative committees. Findings reveal that women legislators are more likely to be appointed as heads to low-status committees, and are less likely to be appointed as power committee heads. In contrast to the case of Costa Rica, there is no gender discrimination in committee heads appointments (Funk & Taylor-Robinson, [2014](#)).

This article focused on two major hypotheses. The findings have confirmed the first hypothesis by asserting that women MPs were more likely to be assigned to less prestigious and feminine committees in Punjab assembly. In line with previous studies that reported women not having equity in legislative committees (Heath et al., [2005](#)) Women are increasingly being assigned to lower-status committees focused on social issues or those related to traditionally feminine topics, such as health, education, and culture, (Bolzendahl, [2014](#); Fransceschet, [2011](#); Javed & Malik, [2021](#); Pansardi & Verseci, [2017](#); Prihatini, [2019](#)). Furthermore, it was revealed that women MPs were less likely to be accommodated in power committees including economy, finance and agriculture (Heath et al., [2005](#); Kerevel & Atkeson [2013](#); Schwindt-Bayer, [2010](#); Towns, [2003](#)). However, in the case of Mexico, women could not be appointed to economy committee, while the rest of the power committees could be equally accessed by men and women legislators (Kerevel & Atkeson, [2013](#)). In contrast with other cases, Britain, Mexico, Scotland, Sweden, and Wales where men and women had equal access to be appointed in legislative committees (Kerevel & Atkeson, [2013](#); O'Brien, [2012](#)). In contrast to evidence which presented that few women had also been assigned to masculine committees. Finding supported by previous studies that a small number of women are getting access to power positions (Heath et al., [2005](#)) and did not have equal access to power committees like men (Heath et al., [2005](#)). As we discussed in the previous sections, those women may learn and get access to masculine committees over a period of time.

The second hypothesis was confirmed by the findings because they established the more likelihood of women MPs on reserved seats to be appointed to less prestigious and feminine committees in the Punjab assembly. It had been demonstrated that the hypothesis is generally supported by the evidenc. Another key finding showed that women MPs were overrepresented in committees related to social and gender issues, which aligned with their preferences and interests. However, they were underrepresented in power committees, which did not reflect their choices or preferences. In line with the Latin American case, findings demonstrated that women's allocation to feminine committees was more likely with their preference, however in masculine committees, it was based on discrimination (Schwindt-Bayer, [2010](#)). In contrast, in the United States, women's appointments to the committees were according to their given preferences (Baekgaard & Kjaer [2012](#)). Further results revealed that women

legislators were likely to show their interest and request committee assignments related to social (education, health, agriculture, social welfare) and women issues (gender mainstreaming), and were less likely to be appointed to male-dominated domains (finance, excise and taxation, and revenue). Consistent with previous findings, women preferred to be members of committees that had a significant impact on women's development (Rosenthal, [1998](#)).

Furthermore, the committee's assignment of women legislators was based on party leaders and hegemonic masculinity in Punjab assembly. In contrast, in the United States, Canada, and Germany members were assigned to committees depending on the governing party and their leaders (Bolzendahl, [2014](#)). The evidence presented indicated that committee allocations are strongly gendered, though there is a gradual shift towards more gender-sensitive committee assignments.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that men are more likely to be appointed on executive positions than women. Furthermore, women are more likely to be assigned to low ranked and feminine legislative committees. A comparative analysis of quota and non-quota women MPs highlighted that non-quota MPs have been assigned to prestigious and power positions in the committees and legislative assembly. In contrast, quota MPs are allocated to less prestigious and feminine positions in legislative assembly because of no vote bank and less liaison with party leaders and visibility in electoral structure in Pakistan. This study also explains how legislature addresses quota and non-quota MPs differently, while assigning the tasks in one of the biggest legislative assemblies of Pakistan. This study recommends that power dynamics within and across genders should also be addressed through gender mainstreaming in political institutions of Pakistan.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

Funding Details

No funding has been received for this research.

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