

# Devolution of Power in Pakistan: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

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Decentralisation may make it easier for Pakistan to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There is no straightforward answer to this question. This is largely due to the necessity of political will and institutional structures for attaining the SDGs. If the political will exists, there is no reason to believe that centralised ministries dedicated to eradicating poverty and inequality across the nation and making quality services accessible to all cannot do so through nationwide administrative networks. Even services typically viewed as ideal candidates for localised delivery, such as quality healthcare (Goal 3), education (Goal 4), and access to pure water and sanitation (Goal 6), require strong central policies and direction for effective local implementation. In addition, the same holds for the other Sustainable Development Goals concerning climate change, infrastructure development, and economic growth. However, for specific objectives, decentralisation may be more advantageous. Reduction of inequality (Objective 10) and gender inequality in particular (Goal 5) as well as the development of stronger, more resilient communities are among these. Decentralised and localised governance may be more advantageous for institutions that are inclusive and accountable (Goal 16). However, we typically view decentralisation as a method for improving the mechanisms of service delivery, as opposed to a method for reforming local governance to reduce spatial and group inequality and strengthening of representation. In this essay, I investigate the devolution process in Pakistan, as well as the issues and barriers to women's participation in local governance that inhibit gender equality in Pakistan.

## **HISTORY OF DEVOLUTION OF POWER AND WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM:**

The annals of local administration in Pakistan date back to 1959. Before 2013, only military regimes established municipal government systems, not democratically elected governments. It is encouraging that local governments have finally become a part of the narrative of civilian regimes, but the 2013 system was inadequately implemented and did not empower local governments to affect change.

In Pakistan's constitutional history, the Devolution of Power Plan (DOPP) of 2000 introduced remarkable political representation and advancement for women. Under this proposed constitution, the government held elections in 2001 and 2005. An extraordinary number of women participated in these elections and initiated inclusive campaigns throughout Pakistan.

The discussion of women dominated the election debates. Women were able to obtain a substantial number of reserved seats. Implementation of women's participation in local administrations is one indicator of women's empowerment. Even though the majority of DOPP 2000's content is devoted to conventional politics, several issues have become apparent. Despite having 33 percent representation at all levels of district governance, including union, tehsil, and district councils, they encountered problems.

DOPP 2000 was an effort to enable women to participate in the political process, but their absence in policy-making, financial management, and other socio-political matters has raised questions about the practice of women's participation. DOPP 2000 created positions for women in the local government system that had never existed before. The representation of women has never exceeded 10 percent. For the first time in history, women hold 33 percent of district governance positions at all levels. Through this legislative proposal, women participated in local government elections in 2001 and 2005 and obtained the majority of reserved seats. In the order of Punjab (1), Sindh (2), Baluchistan (3), and NWFP (4), Punjab ranks first with 97.7% and 99.4% of the vote in the 2001 and 2005 elections, respectively.<sup>1</sup> Women began to acknowledge their sociopolitical standing and rights following the implementation of DOPP 2000. Using local politics as a conduit, women infiltrated national politics. The participation of poor and middle-class women in municipal politics paved the way for their involvement in provincial and national politics.

## **CHALLENGES TO GREATER GENDER EQUALITY**

Our society is patriarchal, and women's participation in the political process is not completely supported. More than fifty percent of the country's population is female, but they are denied basic political rights. Article 25(2) of the Constitution ensures that women have the same rights as men and establishes the corresponding legislative parameters. Legislation is one of the primary concerns in the issue at hand, which has intersected with several other sociopolitical obstacles.

However, under the current decentralised system, the proportion of reserved seats for women differs by province. The indirect procedures used to allocate these seats are also problematic. Women councilors continue to rely on the nomination of elected representatives (union council chairmen and municipal committee members) to secure reserved seats, as very few of them have been able to compete for general seats directly.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, despite the inability of civil society organisations to assist qualified women in directly competing for local office, they have continued to encourage women to vote. However, the scope of these innovations remains limited, and a larger patriarchal structure continues to impede women's strategic advancement opportunities. DOPP 2000 offered women an outstanding opportunity to participate in local politics, local body elections, and local government administration, but they were unaware of or misinformed about the plan. It was a political dilemma that inhibited the advancement of women. If women were aware of the strategy, their involvement could be fruitful.

Men continued to dominate local council labor, policy formulation, and implementation – leading to the exclusion of women from policymaking. Due to a lack of capacity development, women were unable to take part in official local council activities. Local development budgets approved by provincial or district administrations did not allocate any funds to women councilors or nazims. They were unable to adequately feed the local population. 33% of district assembly seats were reserved for women, but all council seats were reserved for men, preventing women from playing effective roles in district governments.<sup>3</sup> Due to objections expressed by religious and tribal leaders, participation in local politics and elections was difficult for women. Citizen community councils and public safety commissions were essential district-level public institutions for implementing development programs and resolving public complaints, respectively, but women were not permitted to participate. Women cannot directly participate in local politics due to the implementation of indirect elections for allocated seats for laborers, minorities, and women.

## WAY FORWARD FOR INCLUSIVE GENDER APPROACH

Incorporating a 'zipped' closed-list proportional representation system for electing councilors at upper levels of local government will further the goals of gender equality and the representation of women.<sup>4</sup> This public relations mechanism will fill each closed-list alternate seat with a woman. This will ensure quotas while positioning women on the same ballot as other candidates, granting them equal access to party resources and other support mechanisms. This has the potential to have an even greater impact as the transition from reserved seating to general seating occurs.

Nonetheless, several revisions are required immediately to make devolution more meaningful and durable: Moreover, debt sustainability assessments (DSA) can be revamped by incorporating the assessments of gender equality, human rights, and climate related commitments. These assessments would broaden the narrow economic considerations of only incorporating the country's ability to pay without accounting for how debt servicing is undermining the ability to meet the needs of international human rights obligations.

Importantly, a consolidated global consensus can help restore transparency via debt audits in order to generate a more publicly accessible registry of debt data that can improve the methodology of debt sustainability analyses. It can also identify, through impact assessments, the trade-offs between meeting on the one hand, debt obligations, and on the other, national objectives such as economic and fiscal justice, gender equity, human rights, and climate mitigation, and other interests directly relevant to ordinary citizens.

- Establish a federal oversight agency for devolution.
- Ensure that marginalised groups occupy the seats designated for them.
- Ensure that local governments have the financial resources necessary to serve their constituents.
- Enable local governments to levy taxes and collect revenues.
- Establish mechanisms to ensure accountability.
- Permit local governments to participate actively in initiatives affecting them.
- Address the overwhelming demand for better-trained local officials by implementing initiatives aimed at enhancing capacity.
- Foster an atmosphere conducive to citizen participation and grassroots mobilisation

## CONCLUSION:

Local governments must be conceptualised not only as the structure of the government but also as a governance ethos. To institutionalise a culture of inclusive, representative, and responsive governance, local government systems must exist for an extended period. This endurance has been the greatest obstacle for the local administration in Pakistan. Even though the Devolution of Power Plan contains numerous flaws, it has inspired optimism and enthusiasm in the minds and hearts of women around the world. In the past, there were issues with financial decentralisation, an overbearing misunderstanding of boundaries, and political interference; the strategy was effective in many regions of the nation. Despite several positive developments, a large number of issues and obstacles concerning women's participation were anticipated. To promote women's participation in local politics, these concerns must be addressed.

<sup>1</sup>Bukhari, M. H., Nazir, A., and Mussarat, R., (2019). Women Participation under Devolution of Power Plan 2000: Issues and Challenges, *Review of Economics and Development Studies*, 5 (1), 205-216. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/8180/0193d99e78f1e15fb15c7b099d1a23e67bf.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>Ali Syed, (2018). Devolution of Power in Pakistan, USIP, file:///C:/Users/LENOVO/Downloads/sr\_422\_mohammad\_all\_final.pdf

<sup>3</sup>Muhammad, Sher & Feroze, Sajida & Jabeen, Humaira & Awan, Humaira. (2023). Women Empowerment and Local Government Reforms in Pakistan: A Study of Devolution of Power Plan. Vol 8 (3). 501-509. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368605641\\_Women\\_Empowerment\\_and\\_Local\\_Government\\_Reforms\\_in\\_Pakistan\\_A\\_Study\\_of\\_Devolution\\_of\\_Power\\_Plan](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368605641_Women_Empowerment_and_Local_Government_Reforms_in_Pakistan_A_Study_of_Devolution_of_Power_Plan)

<sup>4</sup>Khan Mohmand, (2021). Goals of Equality and Representation: Does Decentralization Work? UNDP. file:///C:/Users/LENOVO/Downloads/47Ed82326f4e8f550b71a44b897278863bc968e0327fa1b63fcaa4f15131c429.pdf

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