

How far have women legislators come? A performance assessment 2018–20

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The Constitution of Pakistan commits to women’s empowerment through special measures if required, to achieve citizens’ equality. Gender equality is an essential element of a responsive and accountable democratic structure, and women’s political participation is an important mechanism for achieving this goal. Although women legislators actively participate in political activities, they continue to face a number of constraints to conducting their parliamentary functions effectively.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has conducted a study to assess women legislators’ political participation over the first two parliamentary years (2018–20) of the current national and provincial assemblies (2018–23), focusing on the functions of legislation and oversight across political parties.

The performance assessment below is based on data obtained from the assemblies’ websites, indicators developed by the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN), and interviews conducted with members (men and women) of the four provincial assemblies and the National Assembly.

Key findings

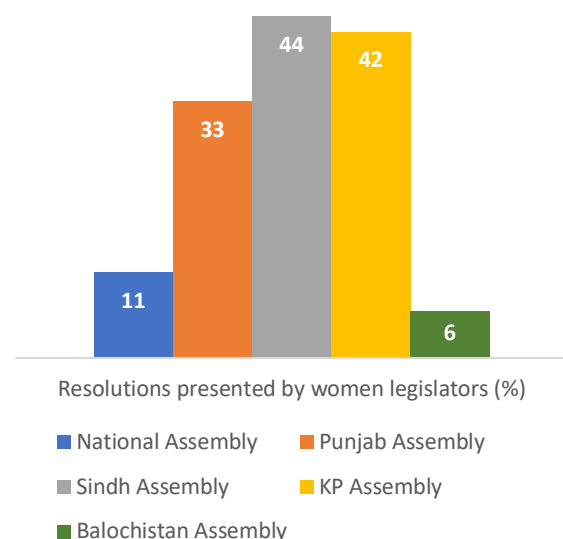
The assessment framework measures legislators’ performance based on eight indicators: attendance, chairing committees, presenting resolutions and call attention notices, asking questions, introducing bills, and passing adjournment motions, all of which have broadly been included under three categories, representation, oversight and legislation.

Women’s representation as committee chairpersons in the National Assembly was equivalent to one third of their proportional strength. Similarly, women remained

underrepresented in Sindh and KP in chairing standing committees. However, they accounted for twice their proportional share in the Punjab Assembly. In the Balochistan Assembly, women had an additional 50% share in chairing standing committees.

During 2018–20, despite accounting for only a fifth of the numerical strength of the assemblies, women parliamentarians outperformed their male colleagues based on most of the criteria applied, including attending parliamentary proceedings.

Women MNAs tabled more than twice their proportional share of resolutions, as did women MPAs in the Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) assemblies. Women MPAs in Punjab surpassed their proportional share in terms of tabling resolutions. In Balochistan, however, women MPAs tabled a third of their proportional share of resolutions.



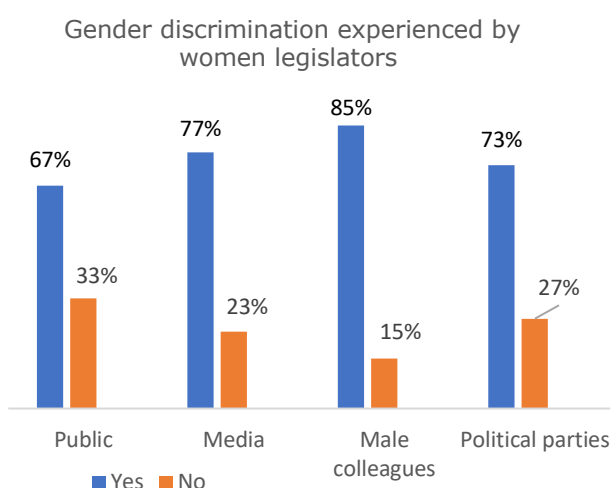
Comparative data on legislators' performance in 2018–20, by gender

	National Assembly		Punjab Assembly		Sindh Assembly		KP Assembly		Balochistan Assembly	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Membership	20	80	20	80	19	81	19	81	17	83
Attendance	80	67	77	48	-	-	68	65	-	-
Standing committee chairpersons	6	94	42	58	14	86	14	86	29	71
Resolutions	44	56	33	67	44	56	42	58	6	94
Call attention notices	30	70	47	53	35	65	28	72	14	86
Questions	36	64	37	63	42	58	25	75	2	98
Private members' bills	24	76	0	100	38	62	0	0	-	-
Adjournment motions	-	-	47	53	25	75	24	76	-	-

Note: All figures in percentages.

Key barriers to women legislators' effective legislation and oversight

Discriminatory cultural norms. Women legislators identified discriminatory cultural norms and stereotypes of women in society as one of the most significant barriers, which not only hindered their entry into politics but also continued to affect their performance in the assembly. Additionally, biased media coverage depicts politics as a masculine profession and women legislators are often asked regressive or discriminatory questions that focus less on their work as a legislator and more on their personal lives.



Discriminatory party behavior. Women legislators repeatedly highlighted the unwillingness of political parties to promote women in their ranks. Thus, women are often left out of key decision-making positions in the assemblies and in their

parties. Political parties are also reluctant to allot election tickets to women for winnable general seats, while women who are elected to reserved seats are looked down on and marginalized by their peers (both men and women) who have won general seats.

Gender equality policy gaps. Women legislators said that gender-blind institutions (government, parliament, political parties) and processes (elections, judicial appointments) made it harder for women to enter and excel within the political arena. Moreover, the absence of gender equality policies, a sexist working culture, and lack of safety and respect for women in the political sphere make it difficult for women to perform their legislative functions effectively.

Capacity-building challenges. Lack of political education and knowledge of processes among women, and the absence of research support or access to relevant information makes it difficult for women legislators to propose evidence-based reforms or to conduct effective oversight.

Lack of research support for legislators. Insufficient staff, offices, researchers, and other support infrastructure are a key barrier to the increased effectiveness and improved performance of legislators.

Recommendations

Empower women and enhance their participation in politics

- Increase the number of general seats allotted to women under the Elections Act 2017 to at least 15%.
- Provide an enabling environment for women by building supportive, gender-sensitive infrastructure.
- Highlight the role of women politicians by asking pertinent questions related to their work and increasing their presence on current affairs programmes.

Increase educational campaigns

- Collaborate with civil society and women's caucuses to increase educational campaigns in order to reach out to more women, especially those in rural areas.

Increase support within political parties

- Increase the proportion of women's seats to 33% across all local governments.
- Allocate at least 15% of all winnable tickets to women in the general elections and provide support (financial and other) to ensure their success.
- Increase the number of women on executive committees and other decision-making positions within the party.

Promote women's participation within the assemblies

- Make a gender-based performance tracker available on the websites of all assemblies to increase gender sensitivity.

Develop a legal framework to promote gender sensitivity in legislatures

- Amend the Rules of Procedure to incorporate gender-sensitive language, which includes differentiating between male and female legislators by using the appropriate pronouns.

- Allocate a time slot to women legislators for speeches, questions and other assembly matters.
- Strengthen and enhance the role of women's caucuses through legal cover.

Develop legal provisions for improved oversight

- Enable improved input by reducing the number of participants in matters of public interest.
- Strengthen the role of committees by granting suo moto powers to committees in all the legislatures.

Capacity building

- Provide high-quality, mandatory induction and continuous professional development training for new and continuing legislators, with a focus on assembly business, communications, lobbying skills, and strategic oversight.

Networking and mentoring

- Encourage active networks among legislators and the assemblies to enable the exchange of information, issues, and experiences, and strengthen women's parliamentary caucuses.
- Organize structured mentoring programs for women legislators and cultivate links to gender equality advocates and experts outside parliament to support legislation and oversight work.

Provide legislators with research support

- Provide easy access to well-resourced libraries (physical and online) with digital and physical records.
- Create a digital portal for budget information (allocations and expenditures).
- Establish a technical gender research unit.
- Provide staff, offices, researchers, and other support infrastructure to legislators for increased effectiveness and improved performance

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