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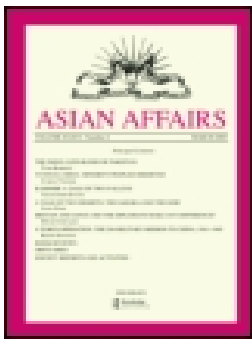
**More details/abstract:**

Recognizing constraints Pakistani women legislators face despite their entry into politics on a 17 per cent quota in national and provincial assemblies, it is time to rethink how quotas can lead to their political mainstreaming. This article explores quota legislators' views on their own accountability and empowerment based on the first online survey in Pakistan with 200 women in the assemblies (2013-18). Findings show quota legislators resist classification as male proxies and view themselves as accountable to notional voters, although they are indirectly elected. Many report silencing and harassment by male colleagues. Cross-party women's caucuses in each assembly have a mixed track record of facilitating substantive representation, undermined by religious parties and class differences. Respondents favoured further affirmative action mechanisms to increase their political voice, e.g. additional quota requirements within parties, more tickets for general seats and participation in key decision-making bodies of parties. A trajectory for women in politics to move from quota seats (in local bodies and assemblies) to general seats is not yet in place.

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# DILEMMAS OF REPRESENTATION: WOMEN IN PAKISTAN'S ASSEMBLIES

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## Introduction

Pakistan has held three successful democratic national elections (2008, 2013, and 2018) for the first time in its history. While initiating the democratic transition, the military government of General Pervez Musharraf restored a lapsed constitutional quota for women's reserved seats in the assemblies through a series of reforms in 2000–2002. Enhanced quotas for women at all levels of elected bodies (33 per cent in local government and 17 per cent in elected assemblies) increased their political representation dramatically. Still, their numbers remain below the so-called 'critical mass' of 30 per cent<sup>1</sup> and remain only half of the 33 per cent quota which the women's movement has demanded since the campaign for women's reserved seats began in the 1980s. The reserved seats policy initiative is nonetheless associated with a new wave of gender equality legislation on sexual violence and harmful cultural practices. Women have utilized their increased political voice effectively, but the broader contextual constraints are not giving way.

Women's political participation has been an important area of funding and programmatic focus within the international donor community. Pakistan's Sustainable Development Goals include a continued commitment to achieving gender equality, recognizing the state's responsibility to "ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and

public life”.<sup>2</sup> The UNDP supports women legislators by funding extensive training and capacity-building opportunities, often implemented through non-government organizations. This is based on a linear pathway approach<sup>3</sup> to women’s political trajectories, that begins with support for advocacy for a gender quota in elected bodies, followed by funding to train candidates and then build the capacity of elected legislators – with the process repeated for each election cycle.

The performance of Pakistani women as legislators has been well-documented in three substantial ways. Their high attendance and contribution to assembly debates has surpassed that of their male counterparts.<sup>4</sup> The women’s caucuses in the national and provincial assemblies are the only functioning cross-party fora in the nation’s turbulent legislative environs. These caucuses worked together with male politicians and women’s movement activists from civil society to achieve new laws to curb domestic violence, child marriage, honour killings, sexual harassment, acid crimes and rape.

Yet after the 2018 national elections fewer women were elected on general seats than before. This was despite a 2017 electoral reform mandating political parties to grant five per cent of their tickets for general seats to women, a reform that was supported by activists, women legislators, and international donor organizations providing support to democratic processes. Those who supported the 2002 reserved seats quota now increasingly call for “unmaking the political patriarchy” through rethinking if and how quotas can lead to women’s political mainstreaming.<sup>5</sup>

This article adds depth to this discussion by presenting the views of women quota legislators regarding their own political accountability and empowerment. It is based on the first-ever survey of women legislators (2013–2018), along with supplementary key-informant interviews. It begins with a review of findings from existing literature around the dilemmas of representation for quota women, with particular reference to findings relevant to strengthening their political empowerment and the effectiveness of their caucuses. The second section presents our survey findings regarding these dilemmas, pointing to contradictions between how male colleagues view quota women and how they view their own role. Next, this article describes their experience as legislators, framed by both exclusion on the part of colleagues and inclusion through cross-party women’s caucuses. This framing reveals how limits to their substantive representation have been enforced. The final section explores whether women who enter the assemblies on quota seats follow a trajectory of increased political empowerment, and what policy measures they believe would support such

a process. The article concludes by suggesting further policy reforms and affirmative action will be needed to enable women's political mainstreaming and support their substantive representation together.

The debate over how women's descriptive representation leads to substantive representation has been enriched more recently by research that argues women seat-holders in legislative assemblies are "a necessary but not sufficient condition" to ensure attention is paid to women's interests.<sup>6</sup> Quotas provide an institutional context that mediates the "incentives and capabilities" for them to represent these interests with results that can bring a broadening of the political culture and inclusion of women's issues in the legislative agenda.<sup>7</sup> As research on Uganda finds, factors such as the mode of election to quota seats could strengthen women's ability to represent women's interests if they are directly elected and accountable to voters.<sup>8</sup>

However, research shows there may be a backlash in some contexts, leading to marginalization of women seat-holders and women's issues. There may also be a stigma associated with the affirmative action beneficiaries that reduces their effectiveness.<sup>9</sup> In India, one argument against a quota voiced by many women is that it would herald broader negative consequences by bringing in women related to upper-caste and elite male politicians, rather than serving the interests of poor or lower castes in politics.<sup>10</sup>

In highly patriarchal and fragile contexts the exercise of women's political agency even with quotas in place can be particularly challenging, even if they belong to elite networks. Once women enter politics on quota seats they face myriad entrenched obstacles that limit their effectiveness, depending on the nature of the electoral system, political will, and sustained pressure from women's organizations and the international community to help them work.<sup>11</sup> Their own empowerment as women politicians becomes secondary to achieving visible legislative policy outcomes that activists and donors may advocate. Women's political effectiveness depends on a complex chain of responsibility and exchange, which draws in state institutions and coalition-building elements that interact with and strengthen the credibility, voice and effectiveness of elected women.<sup>12</sup>

Pakistan shares similarities with countries struggling to build democratic institutions in such contexts. In Palestine, extreme polarization amongst political parties can make it difficult to overcome political and ideological differences to work towards a common goal, rendering the quota an almost meaningless, "facelift for a political authority that pays lip service to women calling for more political participation".<sup>13</sup> In Sudan the

introduction of a quota through separate women's lists dramatically increased the numbers of women in government, but they found themselves isolated and marginalized within their parties and legislatures, indebted to the men who nominated them without their own a constituency on the ground, and in some cases subject to intimidation and harassment.<sup>14</sup>

One issue in the quota debate in South Asia is that elected women can be portrayed as little more than male proxies, since they may owe their election to male relatives who have earned political credentials in their own right and also possess the requisite class and kinship ties to succeed.<sup>15</sup> Women resist the spectre of being dismissed as male proxies and to some extent have been successful. The experience of quota seat-holders in local government in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan demonstrate women can work around structural and attitudinal obstacles and still make important contributions to their communities.<sup>16</sup> Survival and trajectories of political empowerment, therefore, require women to draw on a wide number of social and political repertoires. Their positioning within networks, access to resources, and interaction with male colleagues are often critical to their political trajectories.<sup>17</sup>

It would appear that women on quota seats in Pakistan have been highly effective in representing gender interests. [Table 1](#) shows the wave of legislative reform that ensued since the restoration and increase of the quota in 2002, which was in fact passed by presidential ordinance. This wave marked the first new progressive laws for women since the 1961 Muslim Family Laws Ordinance that expanded women's rights in marriage and divorce. The legal reform continued despite changes in government with lowered levels of stated commitment to gender concerns under the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML(N)) than during the Pakistan People's Party (PPP's) tenure in power. The collaboration between women legislators, support from civil society organizations, a newly-established National Commission on the Status of Women, and funding from donor agencies helped to win political support for the new laws.<sup>18</sup> After a 2010 constitutional amendment most current and future law-making has been devolved to the provincial assemblies, making it more complex to build political support for gender equality legislation in more conservative parts of the country.

Some women politicians deploy their positioning within kinship and other networks to great effect and over time have developed a national profile. Benazir Bhutto attained global fame as the youngest and first Muslim woman prime minister when she was swept to power in 1988, on a

Table 1 Gender equality legislation in Pakistan (2000–2018)

Years	Government type	Gender equality legislation
2000–2002	Direct military rule under General Pervez Musharraf	Ordinances to restore and increase reserved seats quotas Citizenship Act amended, Family Courts Act 2002 Local government elections held with 33% women quota
2002–2007	Managed democracy under President Musharraf  Pakistan Muslim League (Q) wins elections	Honour Killing Act 2004 Protection of Women Act 2006 Laws passed to simplify bail for women prisoners Criminalization of customary laws Human Trafficking Ordinance 2002
2008–2013	Democratic transition post-Musharraf  Pakistan People’s Party wins elections	Domestic violence laws begin Sexual harassment laws 2010 Prevention of Anti-Women Practices 2011 Acid Crimes Laws 2010 Women in Distress Fund and Detention Act 2011
2013–2018	Democratic transition continues  Pakistan Muslim League (N) wins elections	Anti-rape law Anti-honour killings law Provinces review marriage laws Provincial domestic violence laws Electoral law reforms mandate 10% voters per constituency

groundswell of support generated by Zia’s execution of her father, former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Her assassination in 2007 brought her Pakistan People’s Party to power, again on a wave of public sympathy.

A number of key women who entered the National Assembly on quota seats belonged to different parties yet worked collaboratively to build political consensus for gender equality legislation. This was partly motivated by a shared history of women’s rights activism that served as another type of network which they utilized. Nafisa Shah of the Pakistan People’s Party was the first journalist to write about honour killings and a member of Women’s Action Forum (WAF), the group which spearheaded the modern women’s movement in opposition to General Zia ul-Haq’s Islamisation policies during the 1980s. She became General Secretary of the first Parliamentary Women’s Caucus (2008–2013) and worked closely with other activist-politicians such as Bushra Gohar, a quota seat-holder with the Awami National Party (ANP), Shahnaz Wazir Ali (former advisor to Benazir Bhutto) and Sherry Rehman (PPP) who all had a shared history in the WAF.

Shah was elected to a general seat in 2018, but most other women politicians have been unable to make this transition despite their strong legislative performance. Sherry Rehman, former ambassador to the United States and current Senator with the PPP, is a consistent voice for electoral and policy reforms to support women and the marginalized, with a strong national media profile – yet she, too, does not possess an electoral constituency of her own. Gohar was recently expelled from her party for voicing support for a banned social movement from her native Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Women politicians contend with unwelcome and misogynist media coverage. Shirin Mazari, who sat in opposition on a quota seat in the National Assembly (2013–2018), endured sexist comments from the speaker of the house and mockery regarding her physical appearance. Another quota seat-holder from the same Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) party, Ayesha Gulalai, was vilified within her own party, on televised news programmes, and on social media when she accused Imran Khan, now elected Prime Minister, of sexual harassment in 2017. The absence of effective accountability mechanisms within political parties and the legislative assemblies to process harassment complaints contributes to a hostile work environment for women politicians.<sup>19</sup>

This article builds upon these insights to seek further contextual and empirical evidence from Pakistan about the effectiveness of quotas in relation to women's political empowerment as a goal. The research asks how women politicians view their constraints and what they need to strengthen their ability to negotiate around these obstacles. It concludes quotas will need subtle and broader application to support further transformation in democratic institutions and achieving women's political empowerment.

## Methodology

This research is based on data from the first-ever survey with women seat-holders in the legislative assemblies of Pakistan. Prior to the survey, we conducted qualitative interviews with politicians and women's rights activists about their experiences and advocacy for increased political participation.

The Women Parliamentarian Survey (WPS) was based on a purposive sampling of all women in the National Assembly, Senate and provincial assemblies elected during the 2013–2018 tenure of government. We received a total of 200 responses (85 per cent) out of 234 questionnaires



Table 2 Women Parliamentarian Survey (2013–2018)

House/Assembly	Total women seat holders	Responses by seat type			Total responses
		General	Reserved	Other	
Senate	20	2	13	3	18
National	70	5	43	3	51
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	21	1	20	0	21
Balochistan	13	0	11	1	12
Sindh	30	0	28	0	28
Punjab	75	7	56	2	65
Gilgit-Baltistan	6	0	5	0	5
Total	235	15	176	9	200

Note: 'Other' includes quota seats for minorities, technocrats, and those who did not identify seat type.

administered online (Table 2). Most respondents were elected on reserved seats (176 women, or 88 per cent); there were only 15 women on general seats, and three holding seats reserved for religious minorities.

## Dilemmas of representation

After a long campaign by the women's movement to enhance the gender quota in legislative bodies,<sup>20</sup> women on reserved seats are today elected to the Senate, National Assembly, and provincial assemblies through a party list system of proportional representation. That is, the reserved seats are divided across parties in proportion to their total general seats won after an election. Fellow party members elected on general seats vote for candidates to the reserved seats. They do not represent any geographical constituencies.<sup>21</sup>

Interviews with women activists and politicians (male and female) suggest a lack of clarity about whose interests women on reserved seats represent. This impedes their agency in the assemblies, adding to the impression they are simply proxies for male relatives who are unable to contest for various reasons.<sup>22</sup> This stereotype echoes the reality that in Pakistan both men and women's entry into politics, as with other professional opportunities, is often facilitated by familial support or connections, particularly that of male heads of families.<sup>23</sup>

To explore this further we probed women legislators about their views on the reasons for their successful election. They were given five options and

asked to respond affirmatively or negatively to each (Figure 1). Seventy-seven per cent of quota seat-holders attributed importance to their standing as long-time party workers. Over half (54 per cent) believed they enjoyed strong support in their constituencies, even though technically quota women are not elected from geographical constituencies at all. This finding suggests that many quota women still think of themselves as representing voters from what would be their constituencies if they were elected on general seats. Only 22 per cent of quota women cited their experience in local government as a reason for their election, possibly because few had this background. Quota women were clearly reluctant to link their election to being proxies for male relatives (27 per cent). Instead, women held their own professional accomplishments (36 per cent) and experience as party workers (77 per cent) in higher regard.

When we asked quota legislators whose interests they believe they represent (Table 3), 65 per cent said they represented other women and another ten per cent cited “people” more generally. Only 19 per cent said they represented the interests of the (mainly male) legislators from their own party who actually elected them. This means that 75 per cent of quota women viewed themselves as accountable to notional voters (male and/or female).

Quota legislators are concerned the indirect mode of their election undermines their credibility as politicians.<sup>24</sup> Women claim they are often ignored within their political parties and during assembly proceedings because they lack (geographical) constituencies of their own, and did not go through the rigour or expense of campaigning amongst the public.<sup>25</sup>

These findings gain added significance given the long-standing demand of the women’s movement for a direct modality of election for

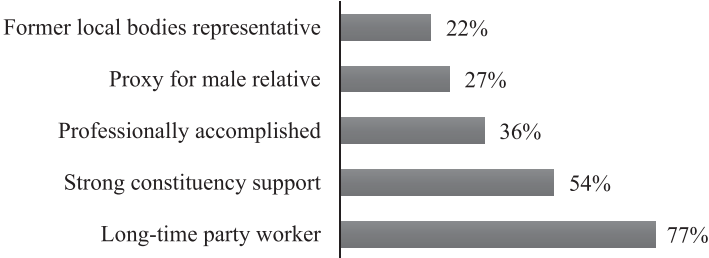


Figure 1 Reason for election (Source: WPS. Respondents were 176 quota seat-holders. Multiple responses possible)

Table 3 Whose interests do you represent?

Interest groups	Total	
	<i>N</i>	%
Women of Pakistan	64	36
Women in home province/region	51	29
Legislators in my party	34	19
People of Pakistan	18	10
Women's wing of my party	3	2
Women activists	1	1
No response	3	2
Other	2	1
Total	176	100

Source: WPS. (Quota seat-holders; one response only.)

women's reserved seats. This was provided for once under the 1956 Constitution, but due to a military take-over elections were never held and this Constitution was subsequently revised. Since the 1980s both the women's movement and successive Commissions of Inquiry recommended a direct modality of election to reserved seats and a minimum of 33 per cent quota in legislative assemblies.<sup>26</sup> Research into the behaviour of women elected on reserved seats since the provision was restored have also found that "serious contenders of political power are working hard to build their imagined constituency",<sup>27</sup> which included voters from their home base, all women of Pakistan, and the membership of their political parties.

### Being a legislator

As in other countries, once women enter the assemblies they face numerous obstacles to effective and substantive participation. Quota legislators lack campaign experience and knowledge of issues, legislation or policies.<sup>28</sup> The indirect mode of election has reduced their effectiveness and credibility, though the recent wave of progressive legislation for women coincided with the increase in their representation.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, women's exclusion from powerful domains, such as standing committees and decision-making levels of their political parties, has persisted despite three recent successful cycles of elections.

These obstacles may be exacerbated by the complexities of the wider political context, in which the democratic transition is undermined by the

growing shadow of military interference. The polarization between parties, particularly the obstructive role of religious parties in blocking socially-progressive legislation, prevents women from working together towards a common goal. As in other countries, the internal dynamic within political parties plays a role as well.<sup>30</sup> Internal party class and caste differences create distance and difficulties in collaboration.<sup>31</sup>

The work environment for women in the assemblies is hostile and unwelcoming. Thirty per cent of WPS respondents (all seat-holders) reported silencing (30 per cent) by male colleagues (Figure 2). This is a problem described by women in local government as well, who report being excluded from meetings or disallowed from speaking when present.<sup>32</sup> While the WPS found that women experienced lower levels of direct verbal insults (11 per cent) and physical threats (six per cent), the most commonly reported form of harassment was through the use of texts and social media (26 per cent).

Activists believed women politicians’ potential for substantive representation would be supported if they formed cross-party women’s caucuses in the legislative assemblies.<sup>33</sup> The first Women’s Parliamentary Caucus was high-profile and successful under the leadership of the first-ever woman Speaker of the National Assembly, Fehmida Mirza, during the Pakistan People’s Party (2008–2013) government. It is credited with ushering in important legislation for women’s rights, including laws against sexual harassment, rape, and honour killings. The next Parliamentary Caucus (2013–2018) supported some progressive legislation despite enjoying less support by the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (N) party.

The provincial assemblies’ caucuses have a mixed track record of facilitating gender equality outcomes, although it may be premature to evaluate their record. The Punjab assembly’s caucus, formed in 2009, enjoyed the support of a strong provincial commission on the status of women and consistent political backing for its legislative agenda by the Chief

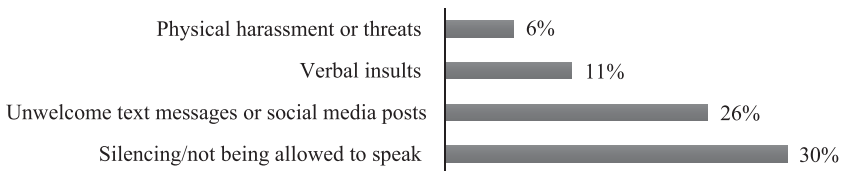


Figure 2 Types of harassment (Source: WPS. Respondents were 176 quota seat-holders. Multiple responses possible)

Minister himself. It successfully brought new legislation, including anti-sexual harassment and domestic violence laws.<sup>34</sup> Individual women politicians interviewed in the provinces of KP and Sindh believe their respective caucuses lack the status to function to their full potential. Interviews from Sindh revealed that class differences amongst women legislators from the ruling Pakistan People’s Party inhibited some from developing closer ties within their own caucus.<sup>35</sup>

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) provincial caucus was formed to strengthen the voices of “ignored and sidelined” women elected on reserved seats, most of whom entered the assembly for the first time and lacked confidence to demand their rights.<sup>36</sup> However, during its first tenure (2014–2018) the KP caucus lacked internal cohesion and political support from the provincial ruling party. It failed to accommodate successfully the objections of religious parties and draft domestic violence legislation agreeable to all political stakeholders.<sup>37</sup> This revealed the limited room for negotiation and decision-making on women legislators from religious parties.<sup>38</sup>

Respondents across all assemblies (Figure 3) ranked their work with their caucuses similar to other contributions, such as tabling resolutions. These findings tally with those of independent observers, who report that women’s attendance and participation in the assemblies has surpassed that of their male colleagues.<sup>39</sup> WPS respondents felt their participation in assembly debate and regular attendance counted as their most valuable contributions as legislators.

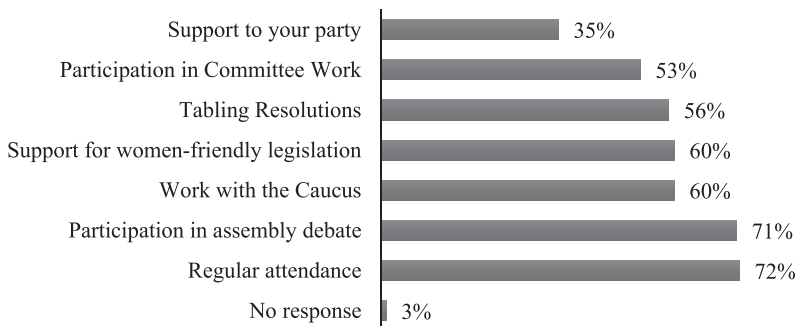


Figure 3 Most valuable contribution to the house (Source: WPS. 200 respondents, all seat-holders; multiple answers possible)

These findings indicate significant constraints to women’s voices and influence (including that of the caucus) in the assemblies. We asked women legislators (all seat-holders, not only quota women, since all women are de facto caucus members) about measures to strengthen their respective caucuses (Figure 4). Sixty per cent wanted to incorporate each caucus into the assembly’s rules and procedures, giving it the constitutional status of a permanent standing committee.<sup>40</sup> Each caucus would thus have powers of oversight over relevant government ministries, the right to examine and reject bills, and summon individuals to testify. These powers would allow each caucus to push for greater legal provisions for women and monitor their implementation.

There were some variations by assembly. The highest proportions of Senators (61 per cent) and National Assembly women legislators (49 per cent) felt that a woman in the position of Speaker or Deputy Speaker would strengthen their caucus. This view was based on the experience during the previous parliamentary tenure (2008–2013), when Fehmida Mirza led the first Women’s Parliamentary Caucus. Overall, WPS responses suggest women legislators believe their caucuses lack the necessary stature and political leadership to become more effective.

### Trajectories for political empowerment

Members of the women’s movement and civil society who campaigned during the 1990s for an increased quota of reserved seats in all elected bodies had a trajectory in mind for how women politicians could be trained and groomed to be effective legislators. The constituency-based political experience gained in local government, combined with party backing, was intended to lead to their election on quota seats in the assemblies. Here they would gain important legislative experience and

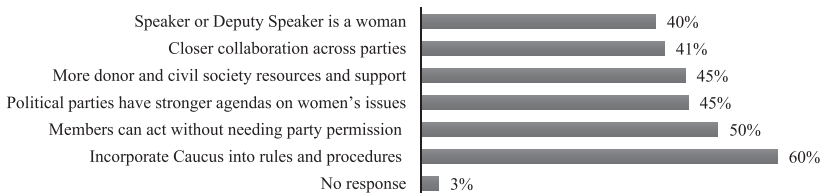


Figure 4 How to strengthen the Caucus (Source: WPS. 200 respondents, all seat-holders; multiple answers possible)

enhance their voice through joining a cross-party women's caucus. Finally, quota women would be mainstreamed in politics by running for directly elected general seats with party backing.<sup>41</sup>

Almost 40,000 women entered union councils through the 33 per cent reservation in local government bodies under the regime of General Pervez Musharraf in 2000–2001. Women's unprecedented engagement in local-level politics, including the subsequent transition of many from local to provincial government seats, was documented as a successful outcome of the quota policy.<sup>42</sup> Their numbers were halved when Musharraf abruptly reduced the total number of seats. When the constitutional quota provision for women in elected assemblies was made half that of the local government quota, activists suspected a political backlash from the initial impact of women's enhanced presence at the local level.<sup>43</sup>

Current moves to further amend the local government structures in the provinces reflect the politicians' tendency to keep the lowest tier of government weaker than the provincial level, so that its elected officials do not become rivals in their support bases.<sup>44</sup> New laws in KP and Punjab<sup>45</sup> will abolish the district tier as a representative arena of local government.<sup>46</sup> As a result, the total reserved seats for women will fall further after the next round of local elections, again reducing their numbers and decreasing opportunities for them to gain valuable political experience and training.

Our qualitative findings further reinforce the notion that women benefit from local government experience. Interviews with women politicians in Sindh indicate some who moved from local government to provincial seats in 2013 found the experience disempowering. In contrast to the local level, they were not directly elected to their provincial quota seats, had no financial resources to spend, and were constrained in their legislative work to vote in line with party policy.<sup>47</sup>

We explored women's views (all seat-holders)<sup>48</sup> on suggested policy measures to increase their political voice (Figure 5). The most favoured measures pointed to improvements in the affirmative action mechanisms. Sixty-four per cent cited additional quota requirements within parties. This measure was in reference to on-going discussions in advocacy and policy circles about increasing mandatory women's tickets for general seats and a gender quota for participation in key decision-making bodies of these organizations. The five per cent quota requirement implemented for the first time in the 2018 elections led to the largest ever number of

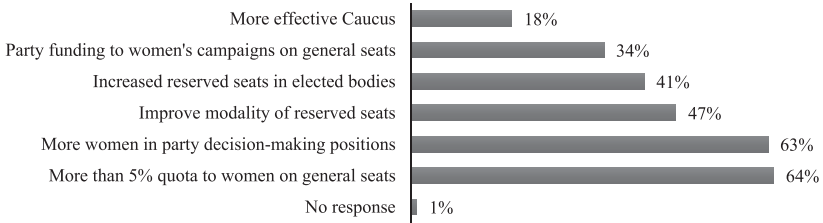


Figure 5 Policy measures to increase political voice (Source: WPS. 200 respondents, all seat-holders; multiple answers possible)

women contesting for general seats.<sup>49</sup> Parties fielded women candidates in constituencies they were sure to lose, so as to reduce their political risk. Fewer women were elected on general seats than in previous elections, even during the 1990s when there were no quotas at all.

47 per cent of women legislators wanted an improved modality for reserved seats. This, as discussed in key informant interviews, implied direct elections for quota seats. A direct election modality would reduce their dependence on party colleagues, and push back against the hostility they encounter for occupying “charity” seats. It would force their parties to support their electoral campaigns and make resources available, rather than forgo the seat. Finally, it would give them invaluable campaigning experience and cultivate their constituency-based ties, helping to further their empowerment along a trajectory that leads to election on general seats.

When queried about measures to empower them as politicians (Figure 6), 76 per cent of all women seat-holders wanted more training and support

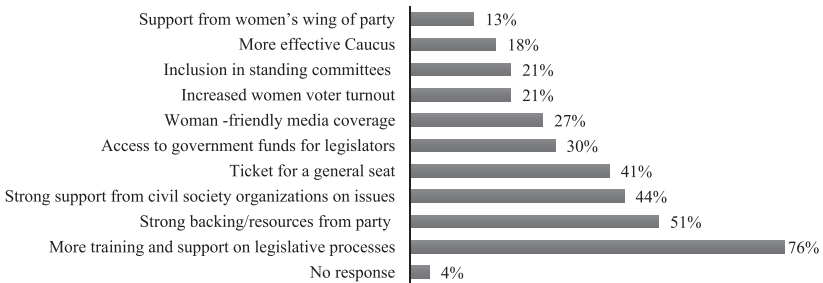


Figure 6 Most empowering measures (Source: WPS. 200 respondents, all seat-holders; multiple answers possible)



Table 4 Are you standing for re-election?

Response	Reserved seat-holders	
	<i>N</i>	%
Yes	126	72
No	40	23
None	10	6
Total	176	100

Source: WPS.

in legislative processes, reflecting the reality that most are new-comers to the assemblies. Other empowering measures included stronger civil society support (44 per cent). This includes donor-funded advocacy NGOs working on women's rights or political participation that build legislators' capacity. The need for more party support (51 per cent) and tickets for general seats (41 per cent) again reflects quota legislators' desire to be mainstreamed in electoral politics. Women in the National Assembly and Senate most strongly favoured better media coverage (not shown).

To check whether the trajectory for political empowerment, as activists envisioned, reflected the lived experience of quota seat-holders, we asked about their future plans for re-election. Seventy-two per cent of quota legislators were interested in standing again (Table 4); almost 90 per cent (112) of these wanted to stand for reserved seats again. Almost all (90 per cent) provincial legislators on quota seats standing again were interested in the same seats rather than contesting on general seats. Thus, provincial quota seat-holders are not setting their sights on moving to the more high-profile federal level, nor contesting for general seats.

We could not track whether respondents actually ended up standing for re-election because the survey was anonymous. Nonetheless we examined how many women on quota seats (2013–2018) were re-elected in the 2018 elections (Table 5).

There was a slight decline across the assemblies in percentage of quota women who were new, the only exception being Balochistan, where all of those recently elected are newcomers. This phenomenon is perhaps one of the reasons why parliamentarians chose the option of more training when asked what measures would be most empowering to women

Table 5 Newly elected women in parliament on quota seats

Assembly	2013			2018		
	New	Total	Percentage	New	Total	Percentage
National	45	60	75% <sup>a</sup>	36	60	60% <sup>b</sup>
Punjab	58	66	88% <sup>c</sup>	49	66	74% <sup>d</sup>
Balochistan	8	11	73% <sup>e</sup>	11	11	100% <sup>f</sup>
Sindh	19	29	66% <sup>g</sup>	17	29	59% <sup>h</sup>
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	18	21	86% <sup>i</sup>	17	22	77% <sup>j</sup>

<sup>a</sup>National Assembly of Pakistan, ‘Former Members 14th Assembly’. *National Assembly of Pakistan*, December 26, 2019, <http://www.na.gov.pk/en/former.php?id=11> (accessed 27 December 2019).

<sup>b</sup>National Assembly of Pakistan, ‘Women Elected on General Seats’. *National Assembly of Pakistan*, December 26, 2019, [http://www.na.gov.pk/en/mna\\_list\\_w2.php?list=women](http://www.na.gov.pk/en/mna_list_w2.php?list=women) (accessed 27 December 2019).

<sup>c</sup>Provincial Assembly of the Punjab, ‘Members’ Directory’. *Provincial Assembly of the Punjab*, <https://www.pap.gov.pk/members/listing/en/20?bygender=Female> (accessed 27 December 2019).

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parliamentarians (76 per cent). Still, more than half of women in these assemblies are there for the first time, but full analysis of this finding would require knowledge of each individual legislator’s previous experience (e.g. in local government).

## Discussion

Women legislators have had a mixed experience since the quota was restored in 2002. Although the increased presence of women can be

linked with a series of progressive new laws, the outcomes clearly vary amongst the provinces. Focus on increased representation alone may draw our attention away from more significant pathways to political empowerment.<sup>50</sup> In Pakistan, as elsewhere, this would involve an engendering of governance institutions, tackling the patriarchal culture of political parties and addressing the lack of autonomy of their women's wings.<sup>51</sup> Without tackling these obstacles, we may continue to see barriers such as those faced by women legislators in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province as they unsuccessfully tried to pass a law against domestic violence during 2013–2018.

The opportunity to develop as politicians afforded through the restoration and increase in reserved seats for women in legislative assemblies is both facilitated and undermined by the indirect mode of their election. The absence of a constituency constrains the trajectory of their political empowerment and contradicts their sense of accountability to notional constituents. It deepens resentment against them amongst politicians (mostly male) holding general seats, reinforcing the political arena as a hostile work environment in which silencing and harassment impede their full participation.

Women's legislative caucuses have proven useful but insufficient on their own as a means leading to substantive representation. Backing amongst their parties and from political leaders is an important contributor to their success, as have been the linkages with the women's movement in helping to shape and support a gender equality agenda. Since most quota legislators are newcomers in each assembly, their stated need for support on legislative processes must be taken into serious consideration if they are to overcome other considerable obstacles, and increase their political voice. So too must be their intention to remain in politics and stand for repeat elections, as must their demand for increased quotas leading to more general seats, and their call for increased voice within political parties.

The women's movement and civil society groups, which advocated for the restoration of quota seats for women and setting up cross-party caucuses, are now pushing for further affirmative action measures. The first is direct elections to quota seats, for which modalities have already been recommended but not adopted because they are deemed expensive and cumbersome to implement. The opportunity to canvas directly with voters for their support would give women candidates the experience

they need to develop into mainstream legislators on general seats, and earn them important political credibility.

The second measure is to bring quotas for women at decision-making levels within political parties to ensure women's voices are heard in all matters, including the selection of women as candidates for quota seats. At present most women members of political parties operate only within segregated women's wings, whose role is to canvas support for (male) politicians, not to play a role in crafting party policy. While the Election Commission of Pakistan is prepared to amend the election rules to introduce quotas within parties, it would require legislation first.

Finally, activists and women politicians alike are concerned about the vulnerability of cross-party women's caucuses to hostile political influence, particularly in provinces where the religious right enjoys more power. This can be countered to some effect by having a woman speaker of the relevant assembly, but even that is only possible if a progressive party has a majority of seats. Since the caucus is intended to be a voluntary assembly-based body, it is unlikely to be conferred the status of a standing committee, and ultimately its influence will depend on the power its members can wield within the parties they represent.

WPS findings indicate where democratic institutions need a further opening up to ensure that women's foothold in electoral spaces is strengthened. As long as there is a constitutional quota in place, women legislators are not going home. The rules of the political game must change to reflect the terms in which they have framed political empowerment and accountability. In Pakistan's highly patriarchal context with evolving democratic practices, it appears that more quotas for women, not less, will be required as a means to women's political empowerment.

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