

Women's Political Participation in Pakistan's Big Cities: Evidence for Reform

Why did 11 million fewer women than men vote in Pakistan's 2018 general elections? Contrary to conventional wisdom, there is a much higher gender gap in each province's largest metropolitan city compared to its remaining constituencies. This gap relates to men's views about women's vote and women's knowledge of politics and the electoral process. Poor knowledge is, in turn, associated with a low interest in politics, which links to the failure of political parties to directly engage women and address their issues. These challenges can be addressed with better targeted voter education campaigns and a concerted effort by political parties to engage women directly and reduce their perception of being 'politically invisible'.

Pakistan adopted universal adult suffrage in 1956, granting all women and men aged 18 and above *de jure* right to vote. However, severe gender inequalities in electoral participation have persisted since 1970 when the first national assembly elections were held on the basis of universal franchise. The male–female gap in voter turnout in the 2018 general elections stood at 9.1 per cent, with 11 million fewer women exercising their right to vote than men. Cross-national survey data from the World Values Survey (2010–14) show that Pakistan has one of the highest gender gaps in self-reported turnout among democracies around the world.

The high gender gap in turnout is usually attributed to community-based restraints associated with tribal and communal customs in rural constituencies. This prognosis resulted in the previous parliament passing the Elections Act 2017 that enables the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to order re-polling in a set of constituencies or polling stations if it finds evidence 'of an agreement restraining women from casting their votes'.

This progressive legislation has been effective in rural constituencies, but there is limited understanding of how large the gender gap in turnout is when it comes to the metropolitan cities. Analysing gender gaps in these contexts is important because the population of Pakistan's million-plus cities grew at close to 4 per cent per annum, double the national population growth rate, between 1998 and 2017.

Methodology for IDEAS–A4EA household survey

A recent IDEAS–A4EA (Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives–Action for Empowerment and Accountability) study conducted an original household survey of 2,500 randomly selected households in Lahore, Pakistan's second largest city with a population of 11 million residents. Within each household, one man and one woman member were randomly selected to be interviewed, giving a total sample of 5,000 respondents. The survey sample was spread across seven of the city's 14 national assembly constituencies and consisted of one third of the city's local government electoral wards. The main survey was completed less than two months before the 2018 election day. In addition, the study validated the actual turnout of women in the election by observing the indelible ink mark on the thumbs of the respondents within two days of the election. It was able to verify the ink marks for 81 per cent of the sample of 2,500 women. The results on female turnout presented in this briefing include the sample for which indelible ink marks were verified. The quantitative survey was complemented by qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with close to 250 men and women in ten local government electoral wards.

Figure 1 Gender gap in voter turnout between largest metropolitan cities and rest of their province, 2018

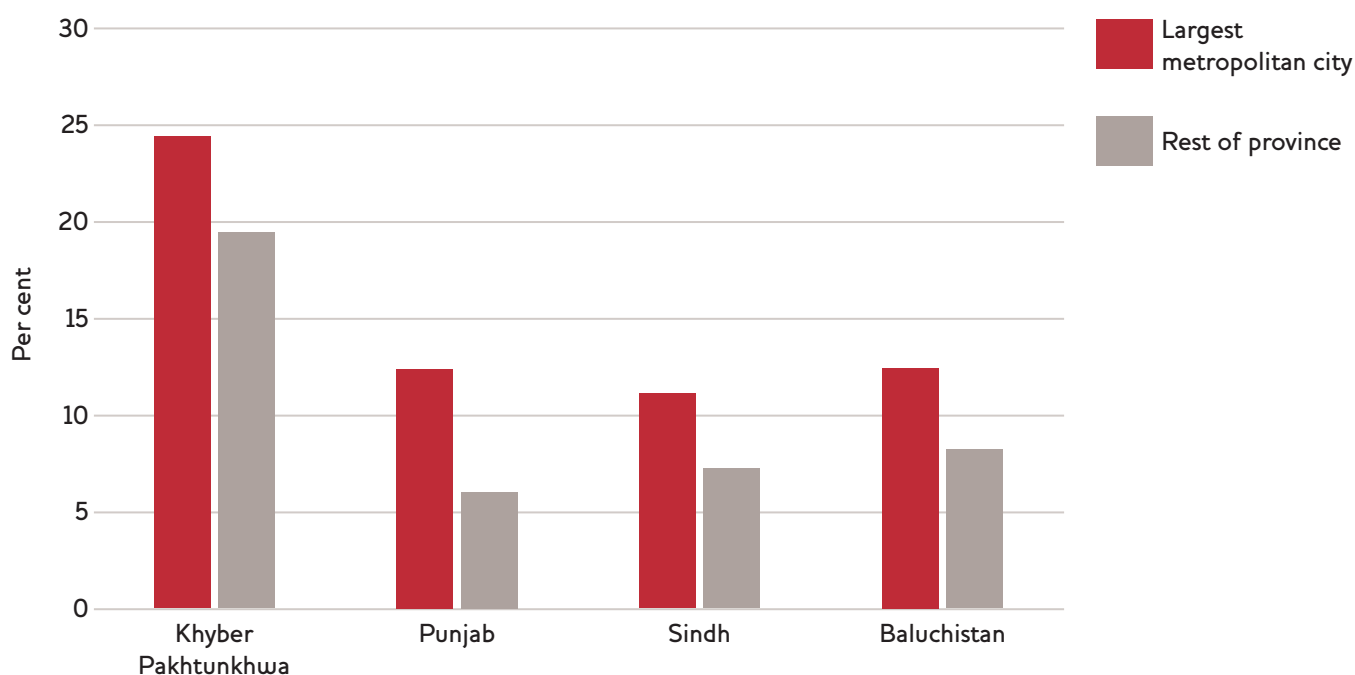


Figure 1 compares the gender gap in voter turnout of the 2018 general elections in each province's largest city with the average for the remaining constituencies in the province. It shows a much higher gap in the largest metropolitan cities compared to each province's remaining constituencies. The difference is highest in Punjab, with the gender gap in turnout in Lahore (12.5 per cent) being double that in the rest of the province (6.3 per cent).

This significantly higher gender gap represents a serious challenge for democratic consolidation in Pakistan. It is also a puzzle because restraining women from voting through consensus between local elites and political actors is very rare in metropolitan cities. Of the 564 polling stations identified by the ECP where no women were allowed to cast their vote, less than 9 per cent were in metropolitan cities.

What explains the high gender gap in electoral turnout in Pakistan's large metropolitan cities?

A recent study by the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives (IDEAS) conducted as part of the Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) programme has found that Lahore's high gender gap in voter turnout can be explained by a combination of household and individual factors.

Men's views about women's political engagement and when it is appropriate for them to vote

The most important household factor relates to men's views about women's political engagement and the conditions under which it is appropriate for them to vote. The A4EA study found that 8.3 per cent of men thought it was not appropriate for women in their household to vote in a general election, and this finding can be associated with an 11 per cent lower turnout of women compared to other households.

Findings also show that 30.4 per cent of men thought it was not appropriate for women to speak their minds about politics and 64 per cent thought it was not appropriate for women to become political party workers. These households had a 7 per cent lower turnout of women. While household norms are an important explanatory factor, the study did not find instances of community-based restraints. There is, however, considerable variation in household norms across communities in the sample: 54.9 per cent of men thought it was *not* inappropriate to stop women in their household from voting if they voted differently from them and 43.4 per cent thought it was *not* inappropriate to stop women from voting if there were chances of fights breaking out at the polling station. Households where men hold these views had a 4.5 per cent and

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8.6 per cent lower turnout of women respectively. Interestingly, the women were less likely to think it was not inappropriate for men in their households to stop them if they voted differently (30 per cent) or if there were chances of fights breaking out at the polling station (36.4 per cent).

Men remain important gatekeepers mediating women's exercise of their right to vote and individual attitudes and social norms upheld by men are an important determinant of women's turnout in metropolitan cities.

Women's own knowledge of politics, elections, and the voting process

The most important individual factor affecting women's turnout was their knowledge of politics, elections, and the voting process.

A survey, which formed part of the IDEAS–A4EA study, asked respondents whether they knew that national and provincial elections were being held at the same time, whether the ballot paper had pictures of candidates, whether the voter had to sign the ballot when casting their vote, and whether a fresh delimitation had occurred before the 2018 election. Answers were combined to create a Knowledge of Election Process Index, where a higher value indicates higher knowledge based on correct answers to these questions. One standard deviation increase in knowledge among women about the election process is associated with a three-percentage point higher turnout.

A Political Knowledge Index was also created, based on respondents' knowledge about slogans and electoral symbols of Pakistan's four main political parties. Again, a higher value indicates higher knowledge based on correct answers to these questions. One standard deviation increase in women's knowledge about politics is associated with a three-percentage point higher turnout. These findings suggest that knowledge about politics among women is an important correlate of turnout.

There are also large gender gaps in knowledge about politics and electoral processes within the sample households. Poor political knowledge among women strongly correlates with their interest in politics and that, in turn, appears to be a result of the low contact between political parties and women voters. A common refrain heard from women in focus groups is that 'they feel that they are invisible to political parties and that their issues do not

matter'. Low contact between political parties and women is due to the gendered nature of political party workers – who typically rely on men in households to mobilise their women. In the sample, 22 per cent of women reported that a political party representative had visited their household in the days leading up to the previous 2013 general election. Out of these, almost half (47 per cent) reported that the party representative did not attempt to speak to the women in the household. This was much more likely to happen when the party only sent a male representative. The failure of political parties to deepen the base of women workers and leaders is an important facet of the disengagement of women from politics in metropolitan cities.

Why does women's turnout matter?

As recognised by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, 'gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world'. Ensuring gender equality in political participation is also important because, as the IDEAS–A4EA survey found, at least in some public policy domains in metropolitan cities, the issues that matter to women are different from the issues that matter to men. Women are an important constituency for the provision of clean drinking water and curbing inflation, with 18.3 per cent and 16.1 per cent respectively citing these as the most important public policy issue in the run-up to the 2018 election compared to 9.2 per cent and 9 per cent of men in the sample. This suggests that greater gender equality in electoral participation could substantively change what issues are represented in the political arena, and strengthen a constituency for critical issues such as SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation).

Similarly, 61 per cent of women in the sample said that it is appropriate for women to stand as candidates in elections compared to 34.5 per cent of men. This suggests that women are a significant untapped constituency for equal representation of women in parliament, which is an important demand of the Women's Parliamentary Caucus of Pakistan and the National and Provincial Commissions on the Status of Women. Greater gender equality in electoral participation may translate into a larger political constituency in support of gender equality in parliamentary representation.

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Policy recommendations

The gender gap in electoral turnout in Pakistan's metropolitan cities reflects complex social dynamics, and addressing this challenge requires concerted and collaborative action by ECP, political parties, and civil society organisations (CSOs).

Voter education campaigns targeted at both men and women should be used to help increase women's turnout in the metropolitan context. The IDEAS–A4EA study evaluated a non-partisan voter education campaign conducted by two reputable CSOs, Aurat Foundation and South Asia Partnership Pakistan (SAP-PK), in Lahore, before the 2018 general election. The 20-minute campaign was designed to educate women voters and contained messages to motivate them to vote. It included an additional component that targeted men and was designed to motivate them to act as enablers for women exercising their right to vote on election day.

Using a randomised control trial (RCT) design, three variants of the campaign were evaluated: variant 1 targeted only women in a random set of the sample households, variant 2 targeted only men in a random sample, and variant 3 targeted both. It was this last variant which had the greatest impact and increased women's turnout by eight percentage points.

Increasing women's turnout in the metropolitan context will require a concerted effort by political parties to engage with them directly and reduce their perception of being 'politically invisible'. It will be difficult for political parties to reach women voters, however, unless they deepen the cadre of women workers and give women greater representation in the pool of candidates that they nominate to contest elections on general seats. Evidence from a study of women's mandated representation through local-level gender quotas in the context of India suggests that having a woman representative in an area can lead to greater provision of goods prioritised by female citizens, and raise adolescent girls' aspirations and educational attainment. Moreover, exposure to women representatives can also lead to long-term transformation of stereotypes about women in leadership roles. It is important for ECP to create greater awareness among political parties about the importance of women voters for governance as well as their potential to act as pivotal voters.

Another instrument that may have promise in reducing women's 'political invisibility' is the institutionalisation of women citizens' collectives that give them voice as citizen auditors of public service delivery and in budgeting. In India, other studies have found that women's participation in economic networks (self-help groups) with other women increased their activity in local politics, through channels of increased civic skills, greater information, and higher capacity for collective action; or that women's engagement in a participatory community-driven development project increases the likelihood of women attending and speaking out at village meetings. In parallel, they find that in village councils with women representatives, women citizens who speak are more likely to be heard.

Further reading

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Credits

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