

Kitakyushu Forum on Asian Women (KFAW) Online Newsletter

Contents

Women's Poverty and Economic Empowerment in Pakistan

– Shabana Mahfooz, Pakistan

Women's Representation in Fiji's Parliament: Could Quotas be the Way Forward? A Call for Action

– Zaynah Shameem, Fiji

Women's Poverty and Economic Empowerment in Pakistan

- Shabana Mahfooz, Pakistan

A few months ago, I would turn and watch in awe as well as pride a lone woman riding a motorbike on the busy streets of Lahore; the cultural hub and second largest metropolitan city of Pakistan. Now, although the pride remains, the element of surprise is decreasing.



A female motorbike driver with a female passenger

Source: Red Films

This may sound strange to the readers outside Pakistan, who may be wondering about the reason for my

excitement. The truth is, that in a country still struggling with fundamentalism, conservative ideas and a strong patriarchal system, a woman riding a motorbike alone or with passengers is actually a remarkable feat.

For we are a nation that still debates whether a woman should leave her house for education or employment, whether she should travel unaccompanied by a male relative, and whether any streak of independence that emerges in her personality is a step towards immorality.

Why may there be a shift in women's mannerism in Pakistan? Change in mannerism although directly implies only for the recent preference of women to be independent in traveling without feeling the need of a male companion, but this shift in the mannerism also indicates the sense of liberty women in Pakistan are

slowly experiencing, since even until recent years, every decision in their lives was dominated by males; whether parents or spouses or even brothers. Now, more and more women are becoming independent in their lives. While these may be positive improvements, most of these streaks stem from a need to break the shackle of poverty and achieve economic empowerment. A woman may ride a bike because she has chosen the bold profession of working as a delivery woman for online orders. A woman may also ride the localised combination of a car and a motorbike - the rickshaw - because she has taken charge of her household and is responsible for generating income.

This may be just a small example, but increasingly, women in Pakistan have started participating in work or business opportunities. While the country struggles with huge burdens of debt, increasing inflation and dismal growth, many female members of the society have decided to shoulder the household expenses with their parents or husband, or may simply have decided to take the plunge alone as their drug addicted husbands prove to be incapable of earning any income. The truth is, that the economic conditions of most households are so precarious due to the fragility of the country's resources that it has come upon many women to strive for a better future for themselves and their families. That is also the reason why there is an increasing turnout of young women in colleges and universities, who want to contribute substantially to their future.



A classroom in one of Pakistan's universities, showing a large number of female students
Source: Red Films

Despite this societal progress, women continue to earn less than men in Pakistan and consequently, remain poorer. According to the United Nations, ¹“Women’s labour force participation rate (21.5%) is among the lowest in the region, as are rates of gender parity in education.”



Female workers in a factory in Pakistan
Source: Red Films

¹ “One UN Pakistan : Annual Report 2021.” *United Nations in Pakistan*, 6 September 2022, <https://pakistan.un.org/en/197948-one-un-pakistan-annual-report-2021> . Accessed 13 November 2024.

²These facts show that there is still a lot more progress to be made in Pakistan for women to come out of poverty and achieve economic empowerment. ³Inclusive policies, increased opportunities, and above all, societal acceptance are the key triggers that can boost women's empowerment and help lift not only them, but also the stunningly high about 40% of the population of Pakistan living in poverty.

So the more we see women walking, riding and driving on the streets of Pakistan, the closer we get to an equitable and empowered nation, shrinking its poverty.

【Profile】



–Ms. Shabana Mahfooz

Shabana Mahfooz is an educator with an extensive background in Print and Broadcast Journalism. She writes about topics related to societal injustice, women's rights and culture.

² “One UN Pakistan : Annual Report 2021.” *United Nations in Pakistan*, 6 September 2022, <https://pakistan.un.org/en/197948-one-un-pakistan-annual-report-2021> . Accessed 13 November 2024.

³ Shaikh, Hina. “Women economic empowerment is key to Pakistan's development.” International Growth Centre, 13 March 2023, <https://www.theigc.org/blogs/gender-equality/women-economic-empowerment-key-pakistans-development> . Accessed 29 September 2024.

Women's Representation in Fiji's Parliament: Could Quotas be the Way Forward? A Call for Action

-Zaynah Shameem, Fiji

Despite making up half of the population, women in Fiji have long struggled to secure their rightful place in leadership roles, particularly in Parliament. Historically, their representation has lagged, reflecting a broader issue of gender imbalance in decision-making spaces. The contrast between past and present statistics is striking.

⁴In 1999, Fiji achieved a record high with 16 women in Parliament, making up 11.3% of the House of Representatives and 25% of the Senate. However, current figures are less encouraging. As of the third term of Parliament (2022–2026), women hold only 9% of the seats, a decline from 11% achieved in the 2022 general election. Women's representation is notably lower than both the Pacific average of 19.5% and the global average of 26.5%. The previous two parliamentary terms had seen slightly higher representation: 16% after the 2014 elections (the first term) and 19.6% after the 2018 elections (the second term).

The 2024 Fiji Women's Mock Parliament, themed "Women's Leadership and Political Representation," recently convened 58 women from diverse backgrounds for a two-day event. This initiative aimed to tackle the challenges women face in Fiji's politics, including the persistent lack of genuine political will to support female representation beyond mere policy statements.



58 women from across Fiji were part of the second "Women's Mock Parliament" 2024. Picture: Parliament of the Republic of Fiji

Building on the success of the 2016 Women in Parliament initiative, this event provided a valuable platform for women to gain practical experience in policy-making and parliamentary procedures. It offered hands-on opportunities to understand the political process, boost their confidence, and prepare for future elections. Notably, some participants from 2016 went on to run in the 2018 and 2022 elections. Today, one of them serves as the Honourable Minister for Women, Children, and Social Protection. The Mock Parliament has proven to be a crucial stepping stone for women aspiring to influence Fiji's political arena.

⁵According to the World Economic Forum, Fiji's political empowerment index is ranked 140th in the Global Gender Gap Report 2024.

⁴ Parliament of Fiji - Women's Representation in Parliament: <https://www.parliament.gov.fj/women-have-always-been-under-represented-speaker-hon-ratu-naiqama-lalabalavu/>

⁵ Global Gender Gap 2024: https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2024.pdf

Implementing gender quotas in Parliament could be a crucial step toward improving governance and representation. Gender quotas, while not a complete solution to entrenched patriarchal norms, offer a practical way to increase women's participation in decision-making processes. By reserving a minimum number of seats for women, quotas can address historical imbalances and ensure that women's voices are heard more effectively in legislative discussions.



Students and staff from Rara District School in Naitasiri Province visit the Parliament. Picture: Parliament of the Republic of Fiji

Such reforms have the potential to make governance more responsive to the diverse needs of the population. Women's perspectives on critical issues like health, education, and social welfare are often underrepresented, and quotas could help rectify this imbalance. More women in Parliament would likely lead to policies that better reflect the interests of the

entire population, fostering more inclusive and equitable governance. However, quotas alone may not suffice to entirely shift deep-rooted gender biases and structural inequalities. They need to be accompanied by broader efforts to address these issues at multiple levels.

In the context of Fiji, where gender disparity remains significant, adopting a national gender quota could catalyze broader social changes and enhance the effectiveness of governance. Thus, embracing gender quotas could be a vital step toward a more equitable and representative political landscape.

A national gender quota can be the way forward, but it must be part of a larger strategy to create a more inclusive political environment.



2024 Fiji Women's Mock Parliament. Picture: Parliament of the Republic of Fiji

【Profile】



-Ms. Zaynah Shameem

Zaynah Shameem works at an engineering firm, and has had a keen interest in politics and international affairs, women issues, gender equality, and inclusivity.

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