

# Role of Women Parliamentarians and Research Practices in Pakistan

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## Abstract

*The Parliamentary Elections for National as well as state legislators in 2008, proved to be a watershed for a greater, more informed and effective participation of women parliamentarians in Pakistan. This article is an appraisal of the evolving role of female parliamentarians, the constraints that they face and steps that can be taken to enhance their engagement in national debate on peace and conflict. The article provides lessons learned in the capacity building of female parliamentarians in Pakistan, with a focus on the research practices and institutional mechanisms that have been developed to support their engagement on national security issues and conflict resolution strategies. The article emphasizes the importance of developing a network of women parliamentarians, academia, civil-society organizations, indigenous parliamentary institutions and international donors to effectively focus and work together in creating a sustainable knowledge-based paradigm of accurate research and analysis that is necessary to empower parliamentarians in general and women MPs in particular with regard to their effectiveness as mediators and ambassadors of peace, conflict management and human security.*

**Keywords:** women parliamentarians, capacity building, research practices, Pakistan.

## Introduction

The parliamentary elections held on 18 February, 2008 for national as well as state (provincial) legislators proved to be a defining moment for a greater, more informed and effective participation of women parliamentarians in Pakistan. Following the increase in the quota for women representatives, 77 female parliamentarians were elected to the legislature and 17 to the Senate. This increase in the representation of females was seen as an historic moment, with the rise in the number of women MPs addressing the founding ideals of the nation, as expressed by the Father of the Nation, Quaid e Azam (great leader) Muhammad Ali Jinnah. For Jinnah, no nation could be strong unless its male and female citizens worked together for the achievement of common goals, the most important at the time being independence from Britain which was finally achieved in 1947.

Muhammad Ali Jinnah encouraged women to join the struggle for independence and to participate in the political arrangements of the newly independent Pakistan. As a result of his support, a

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number of women assumed important positions in the All India Muslim League, which campaigned for a separate Muslim-majority state and in negotiations with the British administration.<sup>1</sup> From this position of political prominence, individuals such as Mohtarma Fatima Jinnah, the sister of Muhammad Ali Jinnah led the opposition to military dictatorship in Pakistan after the first intervention in the politics of the newly independent state by the armed forces in 1958. According to Syed:

"The constant presence of Fatima Jinnah, the Quaid's sister, was not accidental, but a message by this visionary leader that women should be equal partners in politics and that they should not be confined to the traditional home-bound role of a wife and a mother."<sup>2</sup>

However, as a result of the political turbulence that followed over subsequent decades and which saw Pakistan swing from governments of the political right to left, from democracy to dictatorship, Muhammad Ali Jinnah's vision of an inclusive polity with full representation of women was frustrated. The legacy of Brahman culture further impeded women from exercising full and effective citizenship after Independence. There was social and family pressure to exclude and seclude women, regardless of class, colour or religion, a practice deeply rooted in the Indo-Pak subcontinent.

## Supporting Female Parliamentarians

There has been a tradition of seeking to address the under-representation of women in public life through the use of 'affirmative action' including through reserved seats in the national and provincial legislatures. In response to local political pressures, the 1935 Government of India Act introduced three per cent reserved seats for women, to be voted only by female members of the electorate. This was a modest quota given demands for a 10 per cent seat reservation. Any net gains for women's representation were offset by other sections of the Act that introduced new proscriptions on female employment in the Imperial civil service including the foreign and penitentiary services.<sup>3</sup> Until election law changes in 2002, women made up only 2.3% of Parliament, and Pakistan was ranked 105<sup>th</sup> among countries world-wide for female representation.<sup>4</sup> Major change came with an increase in reserved seat numbers, and elections in 2008 in which the countries fractious political parties put aside boycott and spoiler strategies in order to participate.

Subsequently, 225 women MPs were elected to national and state legislators. This strongly improved Pakistan's position in the Inter Parliamentary Union's table of female representation, lifting the country to number 46 worldwide with 22.5 per cent of women MPs. By comparison, in neighbouring Sri Lanka, only 5.8 per cent of MPs were women and just 10.7% in India, ranked respectively at 122<sup>nd</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> For example Begum Maulana Mohammad Ali Johar who was appointed to the Central Working Committee of the All India Muslim League) and Begum Jahanara Shahnawaz who represented Indian women at the Second Roundtable Conference in London in 1932. See for example the Pakistan parliament publication Syed, D. An *Introduction to Womens Parliamentary Caucus*. Parliament of Pakistan. Islamabad: Pakistan. <http://www.wpcp.org.pk/UserFiles/PRPFiles/94.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Syed. Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Mohapatra, P. and Mohanty, B. (2002). *Elite Women of India*. S.B.Nangia. New Delhi: India.

<sup>4</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union website information and IPU reports: *Is Parliament Open to Women? An Appraisal*. 28-29 Sept., 2009, and *Equality in Politics: A Survey of Women and Men in Parliaments*. 2008. <http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/wmn09-e.pdf>

100<sup>th</sup>. While an advance for Pakistan, the country still trailed others with problems of poverty and problematic legacies of conflict and division such as Rwanda and South Africa, which led the list impressively with 56% and 44% of parliamentarians being female.

**Women’s Representation in Select Parliaments of Developing Countries**

Country	2008	1999
Rwanda	56.3% (1st in ranking)	17.1% (31st in ranking)
South Africa	44.5% (3rd in ranking)	30% (8th in ranking)
Nepal	33.2% (17th in ranking)	5.9% (84th in ranking)
Afghanistan	27.7% (30th in ranking)	NIL
<b>Pakistan</b>	<b>22.5% (46th in ranking)</b>	<b>2.3% (105th in ranking)</b>
Bangladesh	18.6% (62nd in ranking)	9.1% (64th in ranking)
India	10.7 % (100th in ranking)	8.4% (65th in ranking)
Sri Lanka	5.8% (122nd in ranking)	4.9% (92nd in ranking)

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union website information

The increase in female representation in Pakistan's Parliament has made it possible for women to achieve prominent positions in the legislature and government, in turn providing a platform to influence positive change. The incumbent Speaker of the National Assembly Dr Fehmida Mirza, made history in March 2008 when she was elected with an over two-third majority, to become the first woman speaker of a democratically elected legislature, not only in Pakistan but in the entire Muslim World. Female MPs chair nine significant committees in the national parliament and state legislatures, as well as holding the two most important portfolios in the federal cabinet: Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Information respectively. Similarly the Benazir Income Support Programme, which remains one of the key mechanisms of poverty alleviation and employment creation for the poorest women and their families is also headed by a women MP, and the present Pakistani ambassador to the US was a member of the thirteenth National Assembly.

National parliaments are vital symbols of, and provide a critical forum for, leadership and safeguarding of the rule of law and human rights. The legislative and oversight roles of MPs provided the elected women with an important platform to influence social change and contribute to peace,

security and development debates.<sup>5</sup> However their capacity to perform this role effectively was contingent upon access to sound knowledge and information through accurate and objective research support. Only with this facility would female MPs be positioned to gather facts, seek solutions and make decisions in light of factual analysis. The need for credible research and analysis support to MPs is particularly important for a developing parliamentary democracy such as Pakistan. Strengthening parliamentary capacity is profoundly important in the context of three periods of military rule (the last ending in 2008) and with the country becoming the front line state in the global war on terror. Popular expectations of the democratic Parliament elected in 2008 were elevated. The two biggest questions were: could Pakistani legislators fulfill the Independence vision of pluralistic parliamentary governance based on rule or law and justice for all, and would they be able to act as conflict managers and transform the political space for the achievement of peaceful outcomes.

"Parliaments often manage disputes in the political space, thus avoiding violent conflict [...] Parliamentary debate, agreements and dialogue between political parties and parliamentarians, and interaction between parliament and constituents, all contribute to keeping the peace."<sup>6</sup>

Due to a checkered history of democracy marred by long dictatorships, the Parliament of Pakistan could not develop an institutionalized system of undertaking research and analysis to support legislators.<sup>7</sup> In 2004, the Speakers Conference of the National Parliament and provincial (state) assemblies raised the issue and expressed the need to establish an exclusive and indigenous parliamentary institution or think tank to cater to the research and capacity building needs of Members of Parliament. This emerged in December 2008 with the creation of the Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services, PIPS:

"an exclusive and independent, first of its kind research and capacity building facility for the parliamentarians...the Parliament in Pakistan had remained deprived of the power of knowledge that comes from timely, accurate and credible information and objective nonpartisan analysis on the most sensitive of national matters till the establishment of PIPS."<sup>8</sup>

Speaker Fehmida Mirza inspired the creation and development of the Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services (PIPS) and she presides over the Parliamentary Board, comprising Honourable Speakers of the four provincial assemblies, four Senators and eight MNAs, to work in unison and draft, debate and approve comprehensive sets of financial and recruitment rules for the nascent PIPS. This work has laid the foundation for a centre of excellence based on professionalism and merit based on integrity and accountability in its functioning.<sup>9</sup> PIPS researchers following key principles of legislative research while working and delivering the requests of parliamentarians, which include:

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<sup>5</sup> Fish, M. (2006). "Stronger Legislatures, Stronger Democracies," *Journal of Democracy*. Vol. 17. No. 1, January. [www.journalofdemocracy.org](http://www.journalofdemocracy.org).

<sup>6</sup> *Parliaments, Crisis Prevention and Recovery, Guidelines for International Community*, UNDP, 2007. p. 4. See at: <http://www.undp.org/governance/sl-parliaments.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Pakistan has witnessed military coups and government under Gen Ayub Khan and General Yahya Khan from 1958-71, General Zia ul Haq from 1977-87 and General Pervez Musharraf from 1999-2008.

<sup>8</sup> Karim Kundy, F. (2011) (2011) Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services, A New Beginning. *The Parliamentarian*. Issue 1, pp. 48-52 .

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p.50.

- be objective, non-partisan, balanced and fair in treatment of various points of view;
- provide accurate and reliable research (quality control and review);
- timely delivery of research products to parliamentarians;
- maintain confidentiality;
- provide summaries and abstracts for quick reading;
- use charts, graphs, tables, text boxes, diagrams ;
- anticipates issues;
- institutional memory (researcher must know history of an issue and how it has been dealt within the legislature).

## Rights Based Knowledge

The Parliament of 2008 was elected in the context of major human security crisis in Pakistan, a country where poverty and under-development were significant problems before the displacement and deaths of 35,000 civilians attributed to the post 9/11 'war on terror' and experience of political extremism and militancy. Approximately 32% of the population of 187 million people live below poverty line, with women and girls experiencing particular threats to their development and security. Despite advances addressing female exclusion in line with the Millennium Development Goals, Pakistan has the highest maternal mortality rate in South Asia at approximately 25,000 maternal deaths per year,<sup>10</sup> while only 45 per cent of the female population is literate.<sup>11</sup>

International treaties have had an important impact on national policies affecting women in Pakistan and globally. This is despite women's marginalised status in most national political systems and the absence of formal sanctions in the treaties that can lever pressure on states. The significance of international accords are that firstly, they provide normative resources that allow local activists to describe their actions in terms of moral and legal imperative rather than sectarian or individualistic interest. Secondly, international treaties provide structural resources to activists and parliamentarians, such as periodic reporting requirements that provide opportunities to denounce slow-moving governments and accelerate responses and action.<sup>12</sup> To develop the UN Charter into an international code of human rights law, the international community created a number of multilateral human rights treaties. The international human rights framework includes the following declarations and treaties, which most members of the United Nations have ratified and implemented through national laws to ensure protection of all sectors of society:

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<sup>10</sup> Maternal and Neo-natal child health, Government of Pakistan, <http://mnch.gov.pk/overview.php>

<sup>11</sup> <http://tribune.com.pk/story/119101/rural-women-uphold-pakistans-literacy-rate/>

<sup>12</sup> Dongxiao, L. and Heger Boyle, E. (2001). Making the Case: The Women's Convention and Equal Employment Opportunity in Japan. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*,

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UDHR (1948)
- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, ICERD (adopted 1965<sup>13</sup>)
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ICESCR (1966)
- International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, ICCPR (1966)
- Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, CEDAW, (1979)
- Convention on Rights of the Child CRC, (1989)

#### **Comparison of Ratifying Dates of Rights Treaties<sup>14</sup>**

Country	Date of Rectifying the Treaty				
	ICERD	ICESCR	ICCPR	CEDAW	CRC
Pakistan	1966	2008	2008	1996	1990
India	1968	1979	1979	1993	1992
Indonesia	1999	2006	2006	1984	1990
USA	1994	Only signed in 1977 not rectified	1992	Only signed in 1980 not rectified	Only signed in 1995 not rectified

The above table demonstrates that despite its political turbulence, Pakistan has a policy of early response to UN standards on human rights. However, there is inevitably a distinction between declaratory statements and implementation, and between being a signatory only rather than ratifying a treaty. A signatory country reflects that it agrees with the concept and principles of the treaty without any clear commitment to implement the same in due course. By contrast a country ratifying the treaty expresses its commitment to include the treaty in its constitution and/or its implementation through law/s within a span of four years of ratification. The shift in Pakistan from signatory to ratifier status can only be possible in Pakistan if MPs in general and the newly rising number of women MPs in particular are familiar with these international commitments of the country and accordingly take initiatives in Parliament to implement them for improving the rights, security and development of all Pakistanis. This in itself enhances the need of MPs being familiar and equipped with the tools of research and analysis to transform these commitments into national laws and policies to improve the human rights for its citizens, with positive implications for conflict reduction and peace building.

The Fundamental Rights and Principles of Policy as envisaged in the first two chapters of Pakistan's Islamic, Parliamentary, Federal, Welfare and Democratic Constitution reflect the state's role to provide basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing, housing, education and medical relief, for all

<sup>13</sup> Note list relates only to year of adoption and not implementation.

<sup>14</sup> <http://treaties.un.org/Pages/Treaties.aspx?id=4&subid=A&lang=en>

such citizens, irrespective of sex, caste, creed or race, as are permanently or temporarily unable to earn their livelihood on account of infirmity, sickness or unemployment; in addition to various economic, social, cultural and political rights of the citizens.<sup>15</sup> Articles 34 and 35, imply steps be taken to ensure full participation of women in all spheres of life, protection of marriage, the family, mother and child. These Fundamental Rights are constitutionally justiciable, which means any citizen can move the Court for violation of any of his or her fundamental rights.

The human rights treaties and the fundamental rights as envisaged in the Constitution, provided a strong basis for pro-active steps by Pakistani legislators to implement them in the favorable context of an Islamic society where significant importance is attached to the Last Sermon of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him), which remains a precise document of basic rights and responsibilities. It clearly identifies the need for freedom to all; sanctity of life, wealth and property; equality of all races; justice in front of the law and in front of Allah; women's rights and obligations, prohibition of exploitation and monopoly and rights of others, respectively.

But the move from statement of intent to recognition and protection of fundamental rights was not a priority during military dictatorship. Earlier periods of democracy also proved unfavourable, with rights based agendas a marginal issue and particularly as these related to women and girls. However, the surge in the number of women parliamentarians in Pakistan's national parliament and provincial (state) legislatures after the 2002 changes had the effect of moving the rights based agenda into the political mainstream and particularly as these relate to women and girls. Although new to the rules, politics and processes of Parliament and its various standing committees, the female parliamentarians were highly pro-active:

"They showed a keen interest in learning and applying the rules; and as the National Assembly completed its five-year term in 2007, they were carrying an enviable record as compared to their male colleagues in key areas of legislative and non-legislative interventions, for example they asked 27% of the total questions; 30% of the total calling attentions notices; 42% of the total private members bills; and 24% of the total resolutions."<sup>16</sup>

The similarly pro-active intake of female parliamentarians elected in 2008 were supported in their legislative and oversight functions by the Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services.

## Supporting Women Parliamentarians on Gender, Peace and Development

Female parliamentarians elected to the 13<sup>th</sup> National Assembly of Pakistan, have sought and utilised information, research and analysis provided by parliamentary as well as civil society organisations to understand, deliberate and take up issues of public importance.

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<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/part2.ch2.html>

<sup>16</sup> Mirza, N. (2012) Role of women parliamentarians and need for internal party quotas. *Aurat Foundation Report on the Performance of Women Parliamentarians 2007-2012*.  
[http://www.sdpi.org/sdc/12thhdc/role\\_of\\_women\\_parliamentarians.html#1](http://www.sdpi.org/sdc/12thhdc/role_of_women_parliamentarians.html#1)

Ms Yasmeen Rehman, who was ranked first among 25 top Pakistani MPs in 2010 in a report by the Aurat Foundation<sup>17</sup>, believes that "women in Parliament have to prove themselves and work twice as hard to be taken seriously." Rehman was helped by a three-month gender mainstreaming, policy planning and development fellowship in the UK in 2005. According to Rehman "It was an absolutely marvelous mentorship and I came back armed with a newfound enthusiasm and oodles of confidence."<sup>18</sup>

A 2011 report published on International Women's Day by the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN), a group of 30 civil society organisations working on democracy and governance, found that:

"women parliamentarians are bringing to the floor of the House issues directly affecting the lives of the people such as the energy crisis, increase in power tariff, dilapidated condition of national highways, violence against women, draft electoral list, disaster management, and increase in prices of petroleum products."<sup>19</sup>

The report detailed that in 2011, the fourth parliamentary year of the female parliamentarians, four pieces of pro-women legislation had been passed. The Prevention of Anti-women Practices (Criminal Law Amendment) Act; Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Bill; Women in Distress and Detention Fund (Amendment) Bill, and approval of the National Commission on the Status of Women Bill 2012.<sup>20</sup> This was seen to "exemplify female parliamentarians' active role in bringing up Private Members' Bills."

During the third parliamentary year, 2010, 17 bills out of 34 were authored by single female MPs.<sup>21</sup> Of the Private Members' bills tabled by women parliamentarians, 14 were introduced in the House, five not taken up while two were passed. Dr Fehmida Mirza's leadership as the Speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan, provided a great opportunity for women parliamentarians to work on policies that focus on women's rights and empowerment. It was with the same intention that women in the Parliament set up a Women's Parliamentary Caucus, WPC, uniting women beyond party lines, and to build a consensus on issues concerning women to ensure that gender concerns are adequately transformed into legislation, policies and programmes.

A Caucus or a cross-party parliamentary group brings together like-minded MPs and gives them "a framework within which to engage with civil society groups, academia and private sector partners, who jointly raise the need to legislate on public interest matters such as women and gender equality, domestic violence, healthcare and women rights."<sup>22</sup> A caucus provides a mechanism for a relatively smaller number of MPs to advance their policy agendas and find knowledge-based research that

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<sup>17</sup> Aurat Foundation, an independent civil society organization committed to work for women's empowerment and citizens' participation in governance for creating a socially just, democratic and humane society in Pakistan <http://www.af.org.pk/mainpage.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Ebrahim, A. (2009) Women in Parliament Push for Space. Inter Press News Agency. June 1. <http://www.ipsnews.net/2009/06/politics-pakistan-women-in-parliament-push-for-space/>

<sup>19</sup> See [http://www.fafen.org/site/v5/detail-women\\_legislators\\_assert\\_lawmaking,\\_oversight\\_roles!475](http://www.fafen.org/site/v5/detail-women_legislators_assert_lawmaking,_oversight_roles!475)

<sup>20</sup> Sana Jamal, The Pakistan Observer, <http://pakobserver.net/detailnews.asp?id=143953>

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Palmieri, S. (2011) *Gender Sensitive Parliaments – a Global Review of Good Practise*. Inter Parliamentary Union, No. 65, p. 2. <http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/gsp11-e.pdf>

assists them in their work. It is noteworthy that women MPs are emerging as catalysts for cross party dialogue on social issues through all-party parliamentary groups that bring together male and female MPs such as the Young Parliamentarians Forum and the Parliamentarians Human Rights Forum. Such cross party parliamentary groups are a new phenomenon in the country's parliamentary history opening new avenues for public-interest legislation, conflict reduction and peace building.

Activities around UNSCR 1325 on Women and Peace and Security have been a success story in relation to research support and cross party co-operation on issues affecting women and girls. Pakistan endorsed UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women and Peace and Security<sup>23</sup> when it was adopted in 2000. The UNSCR 1325 represented a united acceptance of the:

- Disproportionate effects of conflict on women
- Need to take gender into consideration in all areas of peacekeeping, and
- The crucial need to involve women's experience and knowledge in peace-building.

The resolution increases the relevance of women, and the importance of gender concerns, in areas including planning peace keeping operations, running refugee camps, negotiating peace agreements, and re-constructing societies after the cessation of conflict. With UNSCR1325, women are encouraged to be part of solutions to lasting peace. A decade after Pakistan endorsed UNSCR 1325, the National Convention of Women Parliamentarians was convened in May, 2010 on the role of women MPs in peace building and reconciliation.

The research and training wings of the Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services (PIPS), conducted pre Convention workshops/dialogues with women MPs of the four provincial (state) legislators in respective capital cities of Quetta, Karachi, Lahore and Peshawar to brief them regarding the UNSCR 1325 and the other human rights commitments of the country. It was the first instance in Pakistan's parliamentary history that research-based orientations were prepared and presented to women MPs in the state assemblies. The MPs were also trained regarding techniques of assessing draft bills and improving legislation under review. The dialogues helped MPs to prepare for the national convention held in the capital Islamabad, where women MPs took a focused approach to finalise their way forward on fulfilling international rights treaties especially regarding women, children, minorities and the elderly.

The Caucus comprised six working groups at the May 2010 convention, which recommended that role of women legislators should be enhanced in peace building and that they play a proactive role in conflict resolution. Illiteracy and poverty were identified as the root causes of insecurity and instability, with the Caucus committing to addressing these problems.<sup>24</sup> The participants recommended enactment of legislation for protection of women's rights, building of alliances to ensure peace in the

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3b00f4672e.html>

<sup>24</sup> The Daily Times, dated May 27, 2010. See at: [http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2010%5C05%5C27%5Cstory\\_27-5-2010\\_pg7\\_30](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2010%5C05%5C27%5Cstory_27-5-2010_pg7_30)

country and the implementation of ten percent quotas for women in police, security agencies and judiciary and that authorities should prioritise housing provision to protect vulnerable women.

The working groups emphasized the importance of expanding and improving women police stations and the need to provide more opportunities for women and girls to improve their leadership skills. One of the groups focused on issue of internally displaced people (IDPs). It called for improved measures to protect and rehabilitate internally displaced women and their families and for a greater focus on education and skills of children, especially girls. The Convention urged the media to play a positive role in empowering women.

The National Convention based on a research-based preparation by PIPS as well as international agencies such as the UNDP and Pakistan Legislative Strengthening Project paved the way to the significant public-interest bills as mentioned above, including the establishment of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan as well as enactment against Harassment of Women at Work Place in 2011-12, which may prove to be a landmark with regard to securing a more progressive, tolerant and sensitive society with regard to its female population.

Pakistan's women MPs also played an important role in peace-building and conflict management during the escalation of insurgency in the Af-Pak region following the US led intervention in Afghanistan in 2001. Government anti-poverty initiatives like the Benazir Income Support Program,<sup>25</sup> led by Farzana Raja, Member of the National Assembly, dedicated significant resources to peace-building and support to victims of conflict (such as IDPs and bomb blast injuries) and communities affected by natural hazards in the conflict-ridden state (province) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and earthquake victims of Balochistan. Funding for support of projects in these provinces for the period 2008-9 totalled \$34 million.

During the 2008-2012 legislative period: "The performance of women MPs within the Parliament has improved appreciably."<sup>26</sup> Women introduced 12 out of 18 private member bills and assumed prominence through their active role as members in legislative and non-legislative business of the House, in standing committees as well as promoting and advocating public-interest agendas outside the Parliament. A large number of these active female parliamentarians rely on information, data and research from PIPS as well as NGOs and civil society groups in order to develop informed and viable policy options for promoting gender equality and women's interests.

It is noteworthy that women MPs are emerging as catalysts for pro-people interventions by the Parliament and more importantly through rise of all-parties parliamentary groups including men and women MPs such as the Young Parliamentarians Forum and the Parliamentarians Human Rights Forum. Such cross party parliamentary groups are a new phenomenon in the country's parliamentary history

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<sup>25</sup> BISP website: <http://www.bisp.gov.pk/Default.aspx>

<sup>26</sup> Mirza, N. and Wagha, W. (2009) Performance of Women Parliamentarians in the 12th National Assembly: a Five Year Report. Aurat Foundation. Islamabad: Pakistan. See also Pakistan's social journalism website Infochange News and Features Network <http://www.infochangePakistan.net/a-report-on-the-performance-of-female-parliamentarians-during-the-fourth-parliamentary-year-of-the-13th-national-assembly.aspx>

opening new avenues for public-interest legislation as with the enactment of Human Rights Commission Act 2012.

## Enhancing Parliamentary Research Quality

This article has focused on the positive aspects of female representation in the parliament. This is not to downplay the challenges that female parliamentarians have faced, or the challenges ahead in embedding observance and popular respect for new laws and rights. But the positive changes of the last four years have been significant and they highlight the importance of accurate and quality oriented research and analysis. This needs to be strengthened if Members of the Parliament can be fully effective in their legislative, oversight, and representational work.

The information demands of parliamentarians takes different forms. In some instances, they may, for example, need quick facts, or they may want to improve their understanding of a complex set of issues through a credible presentation of research findings.<sup>27</sup> Others may need information to help them draft legislation or plan parliamentary oversight hearings. Similarly, parliamentarians often have to decide, which bills to support and so may want to enhance their grasp of the similarities and differences among them. This requires a mechanism for preparation of position papers, summaries and research papers. Alternatively information or research sought from PIPS might be needed to answer questions raised by constituents.

In order to improve the research and analysis support that PIPs can provide to female parliamentarians, a network of cooperation between parliamentarians, academics, parliamentary research bodies, civil society and international donors is needed. This would enable information sharing and data collaboration on the issues that are particularly important for women MPs and for peace and security in the country.

Similarly, academics and universities must align their research efforts with parliamentary needs by interacting with legislators and parliamentary institutions including the Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services, PIPS. For example, the joint INSPIRE project undertaken by Peace Studies at Bradford University with the Department of Defence and Diplomatic Studies at Fatimah Jinnah Women University, FJWU, is a new beginning with regard to donor support to public educational institutions that must continue. Furthermore, it is advisable that universities encourage students to undertake Master's dissertations on legislative topics. Young executives from different fields such as economics, political science and international relations, law, finance, may be offered and encouraged to apply for internships with legislators in order to develop sustainable knowledge and research skills.

International donors should design and sponsor projects with concerned universities, civil society organisations, think tanks and research institutions serving the needs of legislators. Targeted support such as funded PhDs on parliamentary topics (gender, peace) where there are knowledge gaps are important for strengthening the quality of information. Quite a few non-governmental and civil society

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<sup>27</sup> Muhammad Rashid Mafzool Zaka, *Advanced Legislative Research Module*, Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services, Parliament of Pakistan, July 2010. p. 3.

organizations in Pakistan are led by retired civil and military bureaucrats and their families, who seldom possess sustainable commitment or credible academic standing for any substantial change in the society.

Parliamentarians must seek information, research and analysis from parliamentary research cadre who are accountable for their performance. In addition, liaison and interaction with genuinely focused NGOs who have an enhanced and credible system of research and data collection techniques can facilitate public hearings on matters of national importance and issues of human security. Civil society organisations could usefully produce simple bilingual advocacy briefs so that MPs who come from different geographical regions, may be able to easily understand the key concepts under discussion at a hearing or a policy dialogue.

## Conclusion

The Pakistan case demonstrates that measures to improve the representation of women in legislatures can create a critical mass capable of guiding changes that are favorable to women in girls in countries where they face gender based discrimination and violence. This in turn requires political leadership and a willingness to co-operate across partisan, religious and geographical lines.

Women MPs have come a long way after the 2008 parliamentary elections in Pakistan. However, their effectiveness and that of their male colleagues as legislators, conflict manager and peacebuilders depends on the committed willingness of MPs to seek solutions through accurate knowledge-based research and analysis that is steered by parliamentary support institutions such as PIPS and reinforced by academics in universities, NGOs as well as international donors. Integrity, non-partisanship, professionalism, accessibility and anticipation are the cardinal principles, which need to be practiced by researchers and civil society initiatives which intend to substantially contribute in supporting the parliamentarians of Pakistan in work on peace, conflict and gender. The only straight path towards securing the rights of women in Pakistan and to ensure human emancipation and peace building in the society at large is through accurate, relevant and timely knowledge to legislators about the challenges faced by the people and the policy options available to the state to promote justice, prosperity and good will grounded in respect of fundamental rights and freedoms.