

Political parties as workplace

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Political parties are the gateways that facilitate access to a political career. For a political worker, being a part of this space entails a commitment much deeper than a traditional professional one. Because of the nature of the job – entailing endless public dealing, a demanding work schedule dependent on leaderships' whims, active participation on all fronts including constituency, media, policy, legislation - political workers are required to dedicate themselves to their party responsibilities beyond the confines of time and space.

How does such a system work for women? The question is important to ask because of specific context attached to women's participation in public life. The female labour force participation rate is merely 24 percent. Around 800 women contested elections in 2013 as against 16,000 males. Despite much social and economic development, women's access and mobility in public spaces is restricted and frequently challenged.

For women, being in political party also comes with its own set of challenges. The public dealing aspect of a political engagement attracts a security baggage, with Pakistan's politics being deeply attached with violence. Moreover, political parties leadership – even for a Benazir Bhutto led party – is dominated by males. Additionally, being a public field, the issues of sexism, gender discrimination and harassment stay.

There have been numerous studies that seek to analyse women's position vis a vis politics. This looks at them as voters, political leaders, workers and legislators. There is unanimous conclusion that quotas and reserved seats in assemblies have played a positive role in facilitating women's access in politics. From 3 percent quota in the first legislative assembly to periods with zero representation of women to times when their strength in legislature increased because of enhanced quota and reserved seats – 10 percent in 1988 and 17 percent in 2002 - it has been observed that political parties have displayed limited affirmative action to encourage women's participation in politics.

Women's experiences of working in a political party demand them to think outside of a gendered framework. As a political worker, their job responsibilities include responding to a diverse range of the issues of the members of their constituencies. "People come to us for everything from water and sewerage problems to police cases and divorce settlement. As political workers, it is our job to deliver on public service and do what it takes to resolve their issues" shares Tehzeeb Khan, President Ayub Goth, UC34, Karachi for Pakistan Peoples Party.

Parties expect their workers to respond to constituents' issues while also promote party agenda and support electioneering activities. Women workers are particularly required to mobilize women voters. Moreover, the job also involves travelling, field work, representing party at various forums, responding to media, and be more than present in public life.

While these requirements are the same for both men and women, women have to make an extra effort to get things done as both cultural norms and institutions are unaccommodating. Women politicians interviewed for the article repeatedly mention "ghar walon ka trust" as the most important factor helping them continue in politics. One has never heard male political workers being worried about it.

"It is very important for families to be supportive," observes Nusrat Seher Abbasi, associated with politics for 20 years, with PMLF. "In politics, you could be called anytime for any job. We work very closely with men. There is a possibility of loose talk. Your family must trust you and accommodate the demanding nature of your work. Only then you can really deliver."

Another concern attached to women political workers is "reputation". This seems to feature as a more important consideration than harassment and gender discrimination. Women politicians emphasise that the responsibility of protecting their "izzat" is in woman own hands and there is no question of anyone harming you unless you invite.

However, despite this being a common strategy espoused by women political workers, everyday sexism, gender discrimination and harassment are unavoidable. Nusrat Seher Abbasi herself has been a sexism victim. And she put up a brave fight against the concerned PPP Minister. Tehzeeb Khan, being attached to her party for almost two decades, recalls how she was turned down for the position of General Secretary of the UC Office – despite informally performing this role for four years – as the party leadership responded with a "Yeh post ladies ke liye suitable nahi," to her application.

Another challenge typically faced by women is managing care responsibilities with demands of their work. As majority of the political parties workers come from low and middle income backgrounds, support in terms of domestic help, or social infrastructure is not entirely possible. Political parties – in general - do not seem to have any formal structures in place facilitating women to manage care work as well as party work. Women workers do cite flexible work hours as an advantage. In addition, party colleagues extend moral support too. However, like other professions, care responsibilities do come in the way of women's progress in the party hierarchy. And like in other areas of life, women workers feel that the onus of managing both is on them rather than on families and parties. "You have to learn to manage time," says MNA Shahida Rehmani of Pakistan Peoples Party, recalling how she used to take her children to party meetings. MPA Naila Munir goes as far as saying "Jo aurat ghar nahi sambhal sakti woh Party kaise sambhaley gi?"

With an environment and debate emphasizing greater inclusion of women in politics and national life, political parties are beginning to become more accommodating to women's inclusion. Women workers bring numerous advantages. They help capturing the local women vote bank better. Their presence at the grassroots helps with the resolution of female constituents' issues. Besides, women's participation advances the positive image of the party.

To facilitate women, political parties tend to find Women Wing as one of the important solutions. The wings are headed by females office bearers and their primary job includes mobilizing women workers and voters, and addressing women party workers' and constituency members' issues. They work within the party set up and may have a separate work space. There has been debate on how effective the strategy of confining women in a separate wing has been. An NCSW study observes that head of women wings are marginalized and under-resourced as compared to male office-holders. The same study notes that less than 5% women are members of CEC, which indicates that political parties have been unable to find adequate space for women in decision making processes. ANP has had an experience of avoiding a Women's Wing for its segregating tendencies for a long time, only to realize that this hinders mainstreaming of women in the party. MNA Shahida Rehmani, who heads the PPP's Women's Wing feels that the specific culture of Pakistan does need separate spaces for women. "They work more comfortably within the Women's Wing."

Political parties' role in mentoring, grooming and building capacity of women workers is constricted by the absence of organised training programmes within the party set up. Since 2002 elections, there has been much donor support for capacity building for political parties leadership and workers and these programmes, mostly imparted through NGOs, have benefitted political workers, particularly female workers. On party's front, personal interest of the leadership in mentoring and supporting individual party workers counts. Moreover, serving at different party positions and councilor and government posts also helps with capacity building.

While political parties are explicit about the need for women's representation at various levels in the party ranks, when it comes to rewarding women with leadership position, or tickets for provincial and national assemblies - even on merit – there seems to be hesitance. Nusrat Seher Abbasi very vocally says how women are sidelined when it comes to awarding positions and tickets to women, even if they work dedicatedly for the party's cause. MPA Shahida Rehmani too shares that she worked for 15 years for the party before being awarded the reserved seat for MNA – most of the political workers deem reserved seats as a liability. This can be attributed to the general working style of parties that ignore merit when it comes to assigning important positions and nominations. However, the fact that women workers have also not been able to put up a fight against this tendency suggests that political parties, without democracy, will continue to reinforce exclusion – gendered and other.