



## Beyond Malala: Progress for Pakistan's Women

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Saturday's elections may show the huge gains that Pakistan's women have been quietly consolidating. Share

A few months ago, international news about Pakistan was dominated by the chilling and inspiring story of [Malala Yousafzai](#), a courageous 14-year-old who spoke out about girls' education, faced down the Taliban to go to school in the Swat Valley, and was nearly murdered for her efforts.

It is important that her story was told. But the Western media's fixation on it also continued the portrayal of Pakistan as a country where terrorism and the forced repression of women reign supreme. Surely this is part of the story: More than two-thirds of the five million Pakistani children who do not attend school are girls. Pakistani women are more likely than men to be illiterate and are frequently victims of domestic violence.

However, there is simultaneously a different, more hopeful story for Pakistani women. This story often remains invisible, and unfortunately skews U.S. policymaking in the region, because it furthers the misconception of Pakistan as a "lost cause."

At a recent, thought-provoking Asia Society Women Leaders conference, I met intrepid parliamentarian and Federal Minister for Women's Development, Attiya Inayatullah. In 2002, she pushed through a reform in 2002 that set aside 60 of the 342 seats in the country's National Assembly (parliament's lower house) for women. Just a decade after the bill was implemented, Pakistan's parliament is 21.2 percent female—22.4 percent in the lower house and 16.4 percent in the upper house. This is significantly higher than 18.3, the percentage of women in the U.S. Congress.

Dr. Inayatullah, who continues to serve in parliament, says that while Pakistani politics is still largely a man's world, filled with "money, muscle, and manipulation," the female quota has fast-tracked women's political participation in Pakistan. She adds that this is "changing the perception in Pakistani society of what women can achieve, has created role models for younger women, given visibility to the condition of women in society, and advanced the human rights agenda." Since then, Pakistan has elected a woman, Dr. Fehmida Mirza, as speaker of the National Assembly (the first female speaker of a parliamentary democracy in the Muslim world), and passed reforms so that women who report rape do not have to produce four witnesses to prove their case.

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Veero Kolhi, a former bonded laborer, escaped from her landlord 20 years ago and is now contesting a Provincial Assembly seat in Sindh province to end what amounts to modern slavery for eight million others in Pakistan. She is unlikely to win but has galvanized support for her cause.

Two women from Pakistan's notoriously backward tribal areas who are running for National Assembly seats also stand out.

The first, Badam Zari, is from Bajaur in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)—a loosely governed region of Pakistan that has become a hotbed of Islamist militancy. Zari is the first woman from FATA to run for parliament but seems undeterred by that precedent, granting interviews to the press and campaigning door-to-door. She has said she wants to be “a voice for women, especially those living in the tribal areas” and advocates providing better roads, drinking water, health services, and education, particularly for women. Both Zari's husband and at least some tribal elders in FATA support her candidacy. However, she is running as an independent, which will make it difficult for her to win in Pakistan's political party dominated system.

Nusrat Begum is the second tribal woman making headlines. She is contesting the Lower Dir district in Pakistan's northwest Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (formerly known as the North West Frontier Province and home to Malala's Swat Valley). Begum previously served as the district vice-president of Pakistan's Tehreek-e-Insaf party (PTI). Her party has attracted considerable populist support—thanks in large part to founder and legendary cricket player [Imran Khan](#)—but has so far won limited seats in parliament. Begum says the party asked her to withdraw from the election because it had already tapped a man for the seat. However, she is appealing that decision and plans to run as an independent candidate if her party won't support her.

Even if none of these women win a seat in parliament, their candidacies are a step in the right direction. Global research has found that countries with more gender equality also have higher levels of competitiveness, GDP per capita, and human development. Studies have also suggested that female legislators are more likely to introduce legislation that promotes education, health care, the environment, and perhaps obviously, specifically aids women.

Dr. Inayatullah concludes that the pressure placed on the Pakistani government by Western countries, including Europe and the United States, and the support of their civilian aid dollars, has done much to promote women's rights and other improvements in Pakistan.

May's election could be the first time Pakistan transitions peacefully from one elected government to another and will be closely watched because of this. Veero Kolhi, Badam Zari, and Nusrat Begum's candidacies give Pakistanis and advocates of women's rights around the world another reason to pay attention to the vote. These incremental but important gains for Pakistani women are too often forgotten in the media coverage of suicide bombings and drone attacks. They are also a reason for the United States to continue its involvement in Pakistan—at least on the civilian side—even as the military drawdown in Afghanistan accelerates.