



UNDP PAKISTAN
JOURNEY-MAPPING
OF
TRANSGENDER POLITICAL CANDIDATES
Strengthening Electoral and Legislative Processes (SELP)



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FOREWORD

With the agenda of Leaving No One Behind, UNDP is committed to driving change through the inclusion of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups. This report demonstrates UNDP's dedication to helping marginalized communities gain visibility and support for an inclusive and equitable society. Equal access to political and electoral spaces is a right enshrined in the constitution of Pakistan and extends to everyone, including transgender persons who are legally protected. However, historical ostracization and discriminatory socio-cultural norms create a restrictive environment that hinders the inclusion of the transgender community. This report aims to highlight grassroots change-makers from the transgender community who, against all odds, have ensured their voices are heard in Pakistan's male-dominated political and electoral space. The report chronicles the political journeys of five transgender individuals.

This initiative represents UNDP's Strengthening Electoral and Legislative Processes (SELP) ongoing commitment to engaging with the transgender community. In 2023, development of the Strategic Framework for Transgender Protection and Political Inclusion marked a significant milestone. This framework, crafted through extensive provincial consultations, exists as a key document for enhancing political participation among transgender individuals in Pakistan. Previously, in 2018, UNDP SELP collaborated with the Election Commission of Pakistan and the transgender community to develop a Charter of Demands for Transgender Groups in Pakistan.

UNDP SELP together with the Election Commission of Pakistan and the National Database and Registration Authority, works on National Identity Card registration and civic and voter education initiatives for the transgender community.

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Additionally, we extend our appreciation to Sabahat Rizvi, Advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and Secretary of the Lahore High Court Bar Association, for providing expert legal perspectives that enriched the depth of analysis in this report. Lastly, special thanks go to Ms. Hafsa Khawaja for her meticulous documentation, drafting of case studies, and comprehensive background research on this critical issue.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pakistan officially recognized a third gender in 2009 but the community was only counted in the national census for the first time in 2017. According to the National Census of 2017, the transgender population stands 21,774 persons¹ although this number was considered a gross undercount by the community.² A seventh national census was conducted in 2023 but its complete results are yet to be fully released. Transaction Pakistan estimates that there are at least half a million transgender people in the country.³ Transgender individuals in Pakistan have been consistently pushed to the margins of society by being subjected to ostracization, stigma, harassment, and violence. The Transgender Persons Act of 2018 sought to remedy these circumstances by legally granting recognition for their identity and guarantees for their rights. Five years later, it is important to chart both the progress provided by the law and the problems that still persist for the community.

In 2023, Shahzadi Rai and Chandni Shah became the first individuals to occupy the two newly established reserved seats for transgender persons in the Karachi

Metropolitan Corporation City Council (KMC). This year, 3,000 transgender voters⁴ were registered on the electoral roll and three transgender women independently contested General Elections (GE) 2024 in Pakistan. Nayyab Ali ran for two national assembly seats, while Sobia Khan and Saima Shaukat ran for provincial assembly seats. Based on interviews conducted before and after GE 2024, this report maps and narrates the journeys of these five transgender political candidates for the purpose of drawing insights regarding the obstacles and opportunities their community finds in the political realm. Many of their experiences and observations overlap, while others are unique to the trajectories they inhabit. Some of the issues they identify include a lack of legal enforcement, resource limitation, dearth of sensitization among government officials, and the need for representation and mainstreaming by political parties. On the other hand, their proposals range from improved implementation of existing measures to the introduction of new interventions such as the creation of reserved seats and quotas in the provincial and national assemblies.

1 Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, "Salient Features of Final Results - Census 2017" (Government of Pakistan, 2017), https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2017/salient_feature_census_2017.pdf

2 Oonib Azam, "A Transgender-Blind Census," Geo TV, May 22, 2023, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/487921-a-transgender-blind-census>.

3 Roli Srivastava and Meka Beresford, "Pakistan's Transgender Community Says Faced Pushback at General Election," Reuters, July 26, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1KG2OS/>.

4 "500k Special People, 3,000 Trans Persons to Cast Vote," The Express Tribune, February 2, 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2455206/500k-special-people-3000-trans-persons-to-cast-vote>.

Collectively, the journey-mapping of these transgender political figures illustrates the possibilities for the community's inclusion, participation, and engagement as voters and candidates. The pathways to these possibilities of transgender political inclusivity and integration are laid down as recommendations at the end of this report.



DISCLAIMER: The designations employed and the presentation of material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations or UNDP concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

JAMMU AND KASHMIR: The grey dotted line represents approximately the line of control in Jammu & Kashmir. The state of Jammu & Kashmir and its accession is yet to be decided through a plebiscite under the relevant United Nations Security Council Resolutions.

Case Studies

SOBIA KHAN

Sobia Khan is the first transgender radio jockey in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In 2024, she ran as an independent candidate from PK-81, becoming the first transgender person to contest a provincial assembly seat from Peshawar. Hers is a story of breaking several stereotypes. “People think all that transgenders can do is dance and sing, but with my parents’ support, I obtained a bachelor’s degree in journalism,” she says. Her pursuit of education is a struggle she vividly remembers. When she was young, she was enrolled in a boys’ school where her classmates would tease her and steal her books but it didn’t diminish her desire for education. Instead, she was inspired to go to college. While she sat an entrance exam for college, one of the teachers told her that she would not be allowed to study in the institution as transgender persons “ruin the atmosphere and corrupt the environment” for others. Such attitudes affected her but

failed to break her spirit. Eventually she was able to enroll in a bachelor’s program at Allama Iqbal Open University in Hyderabad which offered free of cost education to the transgender community, but even on the day of the final examinations, both male and female students refused to let her sit with them, forcing her to plead with the teachers who then let her sit with them and take the exam. Although Sobia obtained her degree, she recalls that “acquiring an education as a transgender person was like walking through fire every day.”





Campaign poster for Sobia Khan (registered name Bilal Khan), who contested from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly PK-81, Peshawar

Her experiences of discrimination and difficulties shaped her decision to step into politics.

“

I used to think about all the issues our community faces, and I used to think that there will be transgender kids who will be born in the future too. I wanted to stand for elections and do something so that the future generations would not have to suffer. Not only do I want to work for my own community, but I also want to work for the wider society.

”

Her vision includes plans for establishing vocational training schools as well as equal opportunities, rights, and relief in healthcare and education for the poorest and the most

vulnerable groups which include transgender persons, the disabled, and women.

Regardless, political participation has not been easy for her. She went to vote for the first time in the General Elections of 2018 but neither the queues for male voters nor the queues for female voters would accept her. Eventually her mother accompanied her to the polling station and requested the polling staff to allow her to cast her vote. Section 10 of the Transgender Persons Act 2018 emphasizes the community’s right to vote and states that “access to polling stations shall be determined according to the gender declared on the CNIC of a transgender person.”⁵ The law, however, does not stipulate the arrangement of separate polling stations and queues for holders of the ‘X’ identity card for transgender persons. As a result, polling booths remain segregated into male and female sections which is a major obstacle for transgender political participation especially as voters. Sobia emphasizes the predicament transpersons encounter due to this order of segregation,

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The men ridicule and harass you in their queues and polling stations, and the women feel uncomfortable to have a transgender in their queues and polling stations.⁶

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Transgender individuals’ distressing voting experiences often discourage them from

5 Government of Pakistan, “Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018”, https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1526547582_234.pdf.

6 Sobia Khan, Journey-Mapping of Transgender Political Candidates, Interview by UNDP Pakistan, March 28, 2024.

taking part in the process again.⁷ The willingness to vote within the community is dampened by the denial of an accessible, safe, and comfortable environment to them.

In December 2023, Sobia petitioned the Peshawar High Court (PHC) for separate transgender representation on the basis of reserved seats.⁸ In February 2024, the Peshawar High Court issued a verdict⁹ acknowledging and highlighting the lack of any specific allocations for transgender persons within the electoral system. The PHC also ordered the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and relevant returning officers to arrange separate queues for transgender voters at PK-81 constituency polling stations, as well as security measures for Sobia during her campaign and on the election day. She laments¹⁰ that despite the verdict, separate queues for transgender persons had not been arranged for her constituency on election day due to which many members of her community could not cast their votes. Given the noncompliance with the court order, she filed a contempt of court petition at the PHC again and in one of the hearings, the PHC stated that since no legal provision exists for separate transgender voting queues, this issue can only be rectified by law-making at both provincial and national levels. Essentially, making provisions for separate queues for transgender persons would entail amendments to the Transgender Persons Act 2018.

While such settings serve as impediments to the transgender community's inclusion

as voters, further obstructions await them as candidates in the electoral space. One of the first obstacles Sobia encountered in her aspiration to contest elections was that of financial costs. Since she belongs to a low-income family, she resorted to selling her and her mother's mobile phones to arrange funds for kickstarting her campaign, while her friends pooled in money to print her posters. Even when she began her campaign, the social reaction she received was harsh. She mentions that she was met with ridicule and jokes when people learned that she was running for elections, "They would make fun of me, asking why would we vote for a transgender? What can transgender candidates do for us, they are an oppressed community themselves." On the other hand, what helped her was her massive following on social media. Sobia's radio show, which is associated with the Tribal News Network, has a Facebook page with over a million followers¹¹ where she would often post her campaign messages and videos. By conducting her campaign online and engaging with her supporters in digital spaces, she slowly built trust among people especially by sharing her own story of perseverance and resilience to demonstrate her determination and capability, "I wanted them to know that just as I had overcome the hurdles in my life, I would also overcome any challenges that may come my way in working for their betterment and prosperity," she asserts.

She was also approached by various political workers who advised her against contesting these elections and tried to persuade her to join their parties on the

7 Shakil Akhtar, Rabia Sadiq, and Junaid Mumtaz, "Political Marginalization of Pakistani Transgender Community: A Case Study of District Bahawalpur," *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Business and Government* 27, no. 05 (January 2021): 1074, <https://doi.org/10.47750/cibg.2021.27.05.069>.

8 Sajjad Haider, "Elections 2024: Transgender Sobia Khan Moves PHC for Seat Allocation," *Samaa TV*, December 23, 2023, <https://www.samaa.tv/208736692-elections-2024-transgender-sobia-khan-moves-phc-for-seat-allocation>.

9 "Peshawar High Court Makes History by Ordering Separate Queue for Transgender Voters," *Mashriq TV*, February 4, 2024, <https://mashriqtv.pk/en/2024/02/04/peshawar-high-court-makes-history-by-ordering-separate-queue-for-transgender-voters/>.

10 Sobia Khan, *Journey-Mapping of Transgender Political Candidates*, Interview by UNDP Pakistan, March 28, 2024.

11 "Sobia Khan Show," Facebook, accessed April 22, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/1888772968003203/335773111578973/>.

promise that she will be given a ticket for the next elections. She considered the option carefully before coming to a decision. “Parties in Pakistan don’t give any chance to transgender persons as they are worried about people’s reactions to it. I thought if I join them, who knows if I will ever get a ticket so I chose to contest these elections on my own instead,” she explains.

Her assessment of transgender persons’ presence and role in political parties reflects a broader problem. While some mainstream parties pledge to protect transgender rights in their manifestos and campaigns, it is worth noting that not a single transgender person was given a ticket by any of the parties for the elections this year. All three of the transgender candidates who participated in elections this year ran independently. This paints a bleak picture of the prospects for transgender inclusion and growth in Pakistan’s political spaces. Shahzadi Rai, who is associated with the Pakistan People’s Party, regrets that “No political party has held any meetings or announced reserved seats at the provincial and national level for transgender persons.”¹² Nayyab Ali’s point of view mirrors Sobia’s judgment about political parties sharing the societal mindset regarding transgender persons, “Parties assign tickets to candidates on the basis of their social standing and influence. Most parties fear that if they issue a ticket to a transgender candidate, either the public will ridicule them or the opposition will mock them,”¹³ she adds.

Transgender candidates who ran for elections this year believe that they must fight for their community’s rights on the political and legislative front. Contesting general election seats, however, is complicated by various limitations for any vulnerable community. Consequently, prominent

transgender organizers and activists such as Sobia are increasingly demanding affirmative action in the form of reserved seats and quotas, as well as a certain percentage of tickets within political parties, to ensure their representation in the political arena.

Sobia claims that she received 4,137 votes in her constituency, but the ECP’s official results record a total of 39 votes for her. She has disputed the ECP’s vote count by challenging it in the PHC. Despite not being able to win, Sobia appreciates the political exposure she gained, “Fighting an election is not an easy task but I am glad that I did it. I may not have won but I was able to gain recognition among other political candidates, I stood with them shoulder to shoulder.” She regards her electoral run as a victory because it defeated people’s prejudiced notions about transgender persons by showing that the transgender community is willing and capable of stepping up to contribute to society’s improvement and development. She also believes she learned immensely about various political processes through her experience and remains motivated to politically participate in the coming years. However, she hopes to contest the next elections on the platform of a party, “I’ve realized that a party is very important to contest elections, it strengthens and backs your campaign through all kinds of support, including financial. I wish to join a party that genuinely wants to work for the transgender community.”

Meanwhile, she continues to advocate for equal opportunities and rights for transgender persons at different forums and is pushing for law-making to ensure quotas and reservations for her community across various areas which she believes will rupture their cycle of marginalization.

12 Hamna Baig, “Pakistan Elections 2024: Widespread Exclusion of the Trans Community,” *The Daily Star*, February 7, 2024.

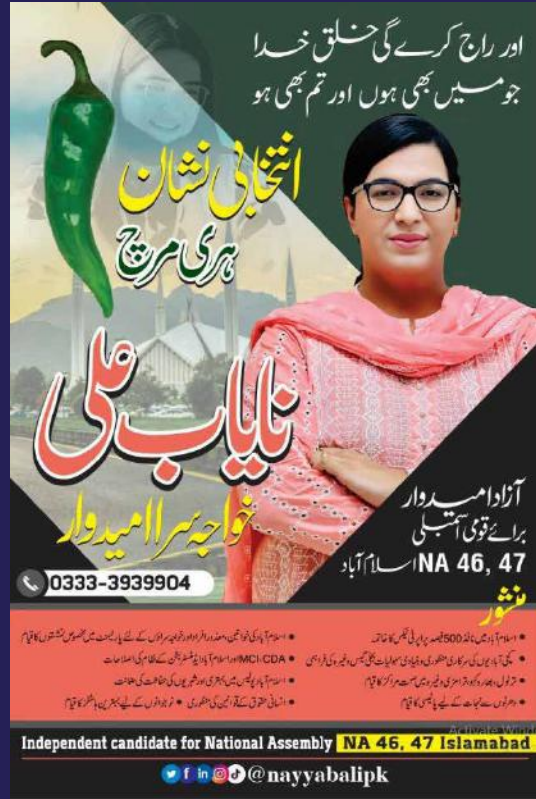
13 Asif Mahmood, Wisal Yousafzai, and Razzak Abro, “Parties Deny Representation to Transgender Community,” *The Express Tribune*, January 31, 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2455052/parties-deny-representation-to-transgender-community>.

NAYYAB ALI

Forced to leave her home at the age of 13 due to her gender identity, having survived abuse and an acid attack, Nayyab Ali's life is a lesson in valor and perseverance. Her persistence in the face of such challenges led her to complete her education and eventually obtain a master's degree in international relations. As a grassroots organizer and activist, she has been tirelessly involved in the struggle for transgender equality and dignity and has been internationally recognized for her work.

In 2018, Nayyab was one of the thirteen transgender candidates who stood for the General Elections in Pakistan. She independently ran from NA-142 in Okara. Although she garnered more than a thousand votes, she also faced harassment and threats which compelled her to leave her hometown after the elections and move to Islamabad. In 2024, she independently contested from NA-46 and NA-47 in

Islamabad, becoming the only transgender candidate in the country who was vying for a seat in the National Assembly.



Campaign poster for Nayyab Ali who contested from National Assembly constituency NA-46 and NA- 47, Islamabad

She describes Pakistan's politics as a domain of the wealthy elite which inhibits members of marginalized communities from joining it, but she also emphasizes political participation as a central condition for claiming transgender rights in the country. Her commitment to this belief is demonstrated by her efforts to raise political consciousness in her community and provide training about political processes and opportunities to them. According to her, transgender representation in the assemblies is vital to championing necessary legislative initiatives for their socio-economic uplift and she remains firmly committed to the cause of reserved seats for this purpose.

Nayyab has been closely involved with various legal efforts for advancing transgender rights. She has served on the Transgender Task Force which was formed by the Federal Ombudsman for review and recommendations regarding the Transgender Rights Protection Bill. She has also been a member of the Chief Justice of Pakistan's Special Committee on the status of transgender national identity card registrations. Despite her role in reviewing the Transgender Rights Act 2018 which guaranteed legal recognition and rights to the community, she clearly comprehends the loopholes and lacunas present in its current framework. Her own experiences and efforts underscore them.

She remarks that while the rights of transgender individuals have been explained by the law, there is no clarification about what the consequences or punishments will be if those rights are not enforced or if they are denied to the community. The Transgender Persons Act 2018 declares imprisonment for up to six months and a fine of fifty-thousand rupees for anyone who employs or compels any transgender individual to beg,¹⁴ but besides this, the Act does not include any punishments in case of other rights' violations. It is imperative for current legislation to be revisited and equipped with robust implementation frameworks that also prescribe penalties for violation, otherwise it will be rendered ineffectual and inadequate.¹⁵ "Many of the problems I've faced as a political candidate are systematic in nature," Nayyab shares. Section 6 of the Transgender Persons Act 2018 obligates the government to

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institute mechanisms for the periodic sensitization and awareness of the public servants, in particular, but not limited to, law enforcement agencies and medical institutions, relating to the issues involving the transgender persons and the requirement of protection and relief of such persons.¹⁶

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Nayyab shares that when she initially went to collect her nomination papers, the returning officer refused her stating that he was not certain whether transgender persons could participate as electoral candidates. It was only after she mobilized her supporters to protest that action was taken and she was given her nomination papers. This demonstrates how an inadequate understanding and implementation of laws for transgender rights¹⁷ among ECP officers can potentially

14 Government of Pakistan, "Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018."

15 Nayyab Ali, Journey-Mapping of Transgender Political Candidates, Interview by UNDP Pakistan, 2023.

16 Government of Pakistan, "Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018", https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1526547582_234.pdf.

17 "National Strategic Framework for Transgender Persons Protection and Political Inclusion in Pakistan" (UNDP Pakistan, December 5, 2023), 20, <https://www.undp.org/pakistan/publications/national-strategic-framework-transgender-persons-protection-and-political-inclusion-pakistan>.

hamper the community's political participation.

Moreover, entering the political space is not an easy endeavor for members of a marginalized section of society. A vast majority of the transgender community in Pakistan belongs to low-income groups¹⁸ and standing for elections is an expensive undertaking for them. The fees for submitting nomination papers are not only hefty, PKR 30,000 for a national assembly seat and PKR 20,000 for a provincial assembly seat, but they are also non-refundable. Out of the thirteen transgender candidates who initially contested GE 2018, nine eventually withdrew their nominations due to financial constraints and harassment.¹⁹ Similarly, all three transgender candidates who contested GE 2024 underscore the challenge of financial constraints. Nayyab specifies²⁰ that the taxes on putting up political banners and posters make it additionally difficult for candidates from vulnerable communities to contest elections. She echoes other transgender candidates in suggesting that the taxes and filing fees for their community should be waived or reduced, and particular accommodations should be made for those among them who also have disabilities, such as herself.

Equally alarming is the public perception and social treatment that the transgender community encounters when they attempt to participate in the political process. The experiences of transgender political candidates in Pakistan are often characterized by transphobia, threats, and demeaning stereotypes. In 2013, when Bindiya Rana fought from PS-115 in Karachi, the news was met with ridicule.²¹ Similarly, in GE 2018, when Nadeem Kashish ran against Imran Khan and Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, she was continually mocked by people.²² Sobia Khan's experience of campaigning for elections this year has been no different. While campaigning in Peshawar, she was often made the subject of jokes and jeers, which would dishearten her but she remained undaunted. These instances indicate that transgender candidates are often taken less seriously as political contenders by the wider public. Given her prior electoral experience, Nayyab's insights also illuminate the changes in the political landscape for transgender persons and the changes within the community itself. She shares an anecdote from her campaign which particularly illustrates these:

18 Sakina Riaz, "Gender Identity and Socio-Economic Status: Khawaja Sara Perspectives, Issues, and Challenges in Pakistan," in *The Routledge Handbook of Poverty in the Global South*, ed. Rajendra Baikady and John Gal (Taylor & Francis, 2023), 239.

19 Kamakshi Ayyar, "Pakistan's Transgender Activists Look Ahead to Elections," *Time Magazine*, July 19, 2018, <https://time.com/5324634/pakistan-elections-transgender-candidates-activists/>.

20 Nayyab Ali, *Journey-Mapping of Transgender Political Candidates*, Interview by UNDP Pakistan, 2023.

21 "Silent No More: Transgender Community in Pakistan" (Aurat Foundation, September 2016), 7.

22 Shakil Akhtar, Rabia Sadiq, and Junaid Mumtaz, "Political Marginalization of Pakistani Transgender Community: A Case Study of District Bahawalpur," *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Business and Government* 27, no. 05 (January 2021): 1068.

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The stigma associated with transgender identity has remained the same across the elections of 2018 and 2024. This stigma perceives and treats all transgenders as beggars, sex workers, dancers. Even today when I'm campaigning in Islamabad the problem persists, but the difference between 2018 and 2024 is that back in 2018, our community would ignore such behaviors, but now we know our rights. At one point during the campaign, my transgender supporters were canvassing but they were handed alms by some people. My supporters immediately responded by saying, 'excuse me, we are not here to ask for notes, we are here to ask for your votes.' It was such a powerful message to society that we want to claim equal rights which is why we have entered the political space.²³

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The ethos of Nayyab's fight for her community is encapsulated in an exchange she had with a justice of the Supreme Court in 2018 when she was lobbying for transgender rights and the creation of reserved seats in assemblies. She was told that transgender persons are too low in

numbers for such facilitations to be made for them, to which she responded, "We may be less in numbers but that does not mean that our rights are few too."

23 Nayyab Ali, Journey-Mapping of Transgender Political Candidates, Interview by UNDP Pakistan, 2023.

SAIMA SHAUKAT

Saima Shaukat has maintained an unwavering interest in politics for nearly two decades. It was in 2005 that she first followed it by contesting the local government elections. “People would often ask, who will even vote for you?” she remembers. At that time, she had no voter or supporter and would conduct her campaign and canvass for votes entirely on her own. “I was the only one putting up my banners and posters,” she shares. Except when the election results were revealed, it turned out that she had managed to muster more than two hundred votes. Heartened by this, she returned to the political field in 2018 and ran for local government elections again despite discouragement

and pressures from various people around her. She mentions that her motivation was simple,

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I wanted to work for my community and for the poor, I wanted to do something for them.

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Campaign poster for Saima Shaukat who contested from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly PK-46, Haripur

For GE 2024, Saima took her political campaign a level above and decided to independently contest the provincial assembly elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from PK-46 in Haripur. However, the contrast between running for the local

government and running for the provincial assembly was stark. The first difference was of scale. “For local government elections, the constituency was very small, but for the provincial assembly seat, I had to cover more than a hundred villages,”

she states. Irrespective of the challenge, Saima commenced her door-to-door campaign to convince people to vote for her. The second difference was the degree of financial resources which were required for a full-fledged election campaign. “You need crores (PKR 10 million) to run a successful election campaign in Pakistan, but of course I did not have that kind of money. My meagre savings amounted up to PKR 100,000 (\$340) and I spent half of them on my campaign while relying on my supporters’ help for arranging campaign materials such as posters, stickers, and banners,” she adds. Resource constraints also acted as a limitation for her campaign’s outreach. Her constituency contained 104 villages which meant that she could not access all potential voters without a vehicle. Saima, however, was quick to circumvent some of these limitations by actively disseminating her political messages and campaign materials through social media.

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I encountered individuals from the most remote villages who had received my campaign videos and posters via WhatsApp,” she shares.²⁴

She appreciates the ECP for their cooperative and supportive attitude during the process of her filing as an election candidate. “They guided me thoroughly and taught me about everything I needed to do,” she mentions. Saima’s political plans spanned various initiatives for the poorest sections of society, including setting up vocational institutes and public schools for them. She has also previously been involved in a similar engagement with the University of Haripur which had appointed her as a consultant in 2022 for an HEC-funded project focused on encouraging and galvanizing transgender persons in Hazara to obtain training and skills for jobs such as tailoring, plumbing, and cooking.²⁵

Saima is dedicated to becoming a part of the political system but she also recognizes that political participation is a distant prospect for transgender persons who are not registered for their national identity cards. They can neither vote nor stand for elections. According to her, the reasons for the negligible numbers of ‘X’ identity card registrations among her community are many. These include anxieties and fears of stigma and backlash stemming from their gender self-identification. Another reason is the helplessness they experience in official processes and their interactions with the government bureaucracy. With regards to this, she recognizes the consequential promise of winning an election for a member of a marginalized community. She recounts that whenever transgender persons visit government offices for assistance, whether those of NADRA or the police, they are left pleading because nobody listens to those who are powerless. The wider issue at hand here is of the necessity of training and sensitizing

24 Saima Shaukat, Journey-Mapping of Transgender Political Candidates, Interview by UNDP Pakistan, 2023.

25 “Transgender Person Gets Consultancy at Haripur Varsity Project,” Dawn, May 29, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1691961>.

government staff and officers about transgender persons and their rights, but Saima understands that winning an election would enable her to use her position and intercede on the behalf of her community whenever they encounter such difficulties. It is on this basis that she also insists on the creation of quotas for the transgender community in political bodies.

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People should be happy that we too have the desire and will to serve the nation.

““

Much like Nayyab, Saima emphasizes direct participation in political processes as a key avenue for claiming transgender rights through law-making, representation, and empowerment.

The past few years have seen violence against transgender persons in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa occur with perturbing frequency, manifesting in the rising numbers of trans murders and killings.²⁶ While Saima might not have been able to win, to openly make a bid for public office and representation as a transgender individual in such an environment is trailblazing bravery that both her and Sobia triumphantly achieved.

26 Manzoor Ali, “Men’s Jealousies Drive Murders of Trans Persons in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa,” Dawn, March 27, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1682017#:~:text=Murders%20of%20trans%20persons%20have>.



CHANDNI SHAH

In 2023, the Sindh Cabinet created two reserved seats for transgender persons in local councils. This decision led to the election of Shahzadi Rai and Chandni Shah as the first transgender members of the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation City Council (KMC).

Chandni is a long-time grassroots organizer working for transgender rights but she has also made choices which are considered controversial in her community. She is a member of the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), the largest religious political party in Pakistan. The JI supported the Federal Shariat Court's ruling last year which targeted and declared the right to choose your self-perceived gender identity, the cardinal and progressive principle undergirding the Transgender Persons Act 2018, incompatible with Islamic injunctions.²⁷ The ruling currently remains challenged in the Supreme Court of Pakistan and the law for transgender protection and rights remains in force until the SC issues a judgment. Given the JI's espousal of a conservative strain of politics, Chandni's decision to become a part of the party generated a great deal of backlash from her community.

Nonetheless, she has pragmatic reasons for joining the JI. She cites the difficulty of doing politics independently especially as a member of a marginalized community. "You face countless resource constraints, and you require technical and practical know-how of the system and processes to navigate and operate them. It becomes easier when you join a party. In fact, joining a party is essential if we want to become eligible for reserved seats," she elaborates. She also credits the local leadership of the JI for having welcomed her with respect into the party and attributes her political recognition to their support.

Moreover, she adds that she shares some of JI's beliefs especially when it comes to the boundaries set by Allah and the need to ensure that they are not transgressed. She stresses that the JI does not oppose the Transgender Persons Act 2018 but that it only disagrees with certain provisions within it. Chandni herself believes that the right to declare your self-perceived gender identity presents more harm than good to her community as it contains the risk of other groups misusing it for their own benefit. She asks,

27 Nasir Iqbal, "FSC Strikes Down Transgender Law for Being 'Against Islam,'" Dawn, May 20, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1754516>.

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Think about it, transgender persons have always had a hard time getting an education but ever since this law came into force, we have seen dozens of educated transgender people appearing and becoming the face of our movement. How does that happen?

According to her, numerous people from within the community wish to politically participate but they are not given any chance or space to come forward. She also directs some blame towards the government for creating this situation by prioritizing its convenience when involving members of the community. “Whenever the government engages with the transgender community, they choose to do through a select few non-governmental organizations. We claim that there are

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thousands of *khawaja sira*²⁸ but all we see are the same 8-10 people representing them in government meetings, stakeholder consultations, and public initiatives,” she expresses. She remains adamant that various other groups have infiltrated the *khawaja-sira* movement and are defaming the community with their actions and taking advantage of the measures meant for them. Not only does she believe that the provisions in the Transgender Persons Act 2018 must be tightened to prevent other groups from misusing them for personal gain, but she also maintains that the government must involve the *gurus*²⁹ and *deras* that anchor the transgender community even if they are not active or visible on media channels.

Chandni believes that the struggle for transgender rights must begin with changing and opening people’s hearts and minds for accepting transgender humanity and dignity. “On paper, we have rights but what rights do we really have? Transgender persons cannot eat at a nice restaurant, cannot shop in a mall, cannot go and sit in a park. All because they are still seen and treated with disdain and contempt,” she relates. She emphasizes the need for sensitization across society and deems it essential for transforming people’s attitudes and behaviors towards her community. While recalling her past voting experiences, she describes how frequently transgender persons are disrespected at polling stations, but she does not see separate queues as a solution to the problem.

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We do not want segregation, we want equality. The presiding officers and the polling staff should be sensitized and should include transgender persons too. That is how a comfortable and safe environment will be made for us.

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Her own vision for her community spans socio-economic initiatives, especially schemes for land allocation and loans for building their homes as she maintains that housing security will enable them to pursue education and employment in a stable fashion. But when asked if she has been able to commence any of these plans, she deplores that although reserved seats were created for transgender persons, there are no financial resources made available to them to undertake any such efforts. “We have no funds, no travel budget, no honorarium,” she reveals. In fact, she states that despite being a city councilor herself, she has been unable to have any of her own issues resolved, let alone resolve the community’s troubles. She laments that

28 *Khawaja-sira* is a term commonly used to refer to transgender individuals in Pakistan. They are a marginalized group of gender non-conforming individuals, including those who are intersex and those who experience a disconnect between the sex assigned to them at birth and their gender identity.

29 S. Azhar et al state that the hierarchal *guru-chela* (leader-disciple) relationship is considered a cornerstone of *khawaja-sira* culture and community in Pakistan. *Khawaja-siras* who are cast out by their families and socially ostracized often find refuge in a communal living space (*dera*) in groups of 5-25 members. The *dera* is a “tightly knit, seniority-based community” headed by an older transgender *guru* who has the multi-dimensional role of being their “mother, teacher, landlord, and pimp” and initiating younger members into the *khawaja-sira* ways of life.

they are only superficially included and made visible by the government for their own public image, “We’re only called for photo ops, but of course, what power would anyone from an opposition party have when they are not in government?”

Chandni’s experience as a local councilor on reserved seats for transgender persons lays bare a spate of realities about measures for the community. While the Sindh Cabinet’s decision to create two reserved seats was celebrated as a win for diversity and inclusivity, it is evident that inclusion without the provision of meaningful and material agency runs the risk of simply being token representation. Affirmative action policies such as quotas and reservations are important to mainstream an ostracized section of society, but they must also be buttressed by structural support which concretely empowers them in democratic decision-making. The deficit of substantive facilitation and the lack of implementation underlying interventions for the community is also instrumental in their disengagement with them. A major cause for confusion and concern pertains to the registration of transgender persons under the ‘X’ category of national identity cards which currently stands at a glaringly low number of approximately 3,000.³⁰ This directly impacts the status of transgender persons, their representation, rights, and the possibilities of their effective protection and participation as citizens of Pakistan, yet the registration numbers have barely grown among the community. Chandni offers some reasons for this. She explains that many Muslim transgender persons cannot perform the religious pilgrimages of Hajj and Umrah with an ‘X’ card as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia does not recognize a third gender. She mentions multiple cases of transgender persons being turned back from KSA upon examination of their ‘X’ cards. Additionally,

she questions the value of the ‘X’ card for the community by highlighting the lack of tangible relief it offers them, “We used to live and survive before this card too so what benefit is there for us to make it? Will the government give us jobs, will they give us homes?” Even initiatives that entitled ‘X’ card holders for benefits proved to be empty for them. Last year, the then Federal Minister for Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety Shazia Marri announced the inclusion of the transgender community in the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) which would entitle them to social protection cash transfers.³¹ After the announcement, Chandni mobilized 50 members of her community and had them registered for the program but she claims that, till date, none of them have received even a penny from it. In fact, she discloses that this plethora of problems, which paints the promise of an ‘X’ card hollow, led many members who had previously registered for it to officially reverse their gender identity to male on their national identity cards. Such drawbacks serve to underscore the gaps and leakages that need to be addressed in existing legal frameworks and policies for transgender persons in Pakistan to utilize them.

Chandni’s insights establish that transgender empowerment is not as easy or simple as creating reserved seats or issuing ‘X’ identity cards, instead it is linked to wider social and political environments and problems that the community is confronted with. It is a complex process that requires wide-ranging initiatives, measures, and structures which go beyond representation and into the territory of substantive support, tangible benefits, and evolving engagements with transgender persons to ensure that affirmative action is also effective action.

30 “National Strategic Framework for Transgender Persons Protection and Political Inclusion in Pakistan” (UNDP Pakistan, December 5, 2023), 11.

31 “Transgender Persons Included in Benazir Income Support Programme,” Dawn, January 30, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1734355>.

SHAHZADI RAI

Shahzadi Rai is a prominent activist, an organizer of the Sindh Moorat March and Aurat March, and a member of the Pakistan People's Party. She is also one of the members of the two reserved seats for transgender persons in the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation City Council (KMC). She maintains a dynamic presence on various social media platforms where her followers run into thousands and her posts evidence her sustained advocacy for the transgender community in their fight for gender equality and justice.

She traces her political awakening and consciousness to her life experiences. Born in a conservative family which refused to accept her transgender identity, she was cast out of her home and forced to make her living through precarious professions, but her endurance and courage drove her forward. She went on to complete her education as a certified neuro-linguistic therapist, became involved in grassroots organizing efforts for her community, worked on violence cases against transgender persons for fourteen years in Sindh, and she claims that in 2015 she also became the first transgender person in Pakistan who successfully lodged an FIR. In GE 2018, she was part of the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN)'s team for monitoring the treatment of transgender and disabled voters at polling stations. She narrates that she faced harassment and hostility at the hands of various party workers and staff who could not tolerate a

transgender person questioning them and trying to hold them accountable.

"I always had an interest in politics, and I knew I had to speak up for what is right, but it was only when I started talking about it on social media that people started calling me a political activist," she shares. She reveals that she lost jobs because of her political activism and that she was engaged in the non-governmental sector to lobby and develop initiatives for transgender rights but since many sectors and organizations purported to be apolitical, she became dissatisfied with them. In 2021, Shahzadi officially joined the Pakistan People's Party because she had faith in its leadership's commitment for transgender rights and because she wanted to be involved in legislative efforts to help her community. She believes that her ability to make a positive impact in this area has been largely supported by the PPP and that efforts of such nature can only be effectively pursued with the membership of a mainstream political party. On the other hand, despite being a party member and a local councilor, she constantly experiences transphobia and discrimination from opposition parties even within the Sindh Assembly, but she enormously credits the PPP for always defending her.

While she has been a part of the PPP for a few years now, the process of her selection by the party for the reserved seat in the KMC

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is a testament to the recognition and respect she has been able to carve out for herself. She explains that every party has a list of people for reserved seats and originally, the highly regarded transgender activist Bindiya Rana, whom Shahzadi terms a mother figure for the community, was at the top of the PPP's list. Bindiya, however, stepped aside and recommended Shahzadi instead because of her dedication and hard work. This paved the way for her nomination and set in motion a lengthy process of registration at the KMC which various PPP members crucially helped her with. She admits that



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Even with the due help of the party, the process was extremely arduous. I needed to have all the application forms, my birth certificate, my bank statements, a declaration of assets. I even needed my parents' national identity cards for which I had to secretly contact my mother who hid away her and my father's cards and handed them over to me at a stop near my old neighborhood since I am still not welcome at my family home.

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The submission of this long list of documents was followed by their scrutiny by KMC officials whom Shahzadi terms insufficiently sensitized towards transgender persons.

Despite all of this, she insists that individually her experience as a local councilor has been positive. “In 2011, a constable had thrown me out of the police station, but in 2024, the IGs of Sindh and Punjab Police promptly respond to me. That, to me, is a huge change and a huge achievement,” she expresses. Being a local

councilor is also allowing her to partake in various efforts for reform and change. Currently, she is designing a sensitization and anti-sexual harassment training program, relating to transgender persons and beyond, for implementation across every office, school, and medical institution associated with the KMC.

Although she terms her own experience in local government encouraging, Shahzadi sees various obstacles to transgender political participation in Pakistan:

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Firstly, our community needs political education and consciousness. Secondly, choosing politics is tough for transgender persons because frankly, only the elite can afford to do politics here. I am a local councilor but my earnings here are zero as KMC faces financial constraints. I often worry about how to pay my rent.

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She explains that for a transgender person to choose politics as a profession and to pursue it full time, they would have to forgo any jobs they have but they will need a source of earning to support themselves,

so stable income generation must be made possible within political memberships and government positions. Shahzadi's emphasis on this aspect not only echoes Chandni Shah's concerns but converts income

generation and financial security into a critical component of transgender political inclusion and participation, both for them to gain entry into the political realm and to sustainably remain engaged in it.

This is doubly important as many members of the transgender community occupy precarious financial positions owing to the ostracization they face in society. The Guardian reports that “trans people are typically cast out by their families, and many of the estimated 500,000 in the country end up as beggars or sex workers.”³² Aspirations to escape these conditions are often curtailed by their sense of alienation, and their need to constantly seek safety and sources of income for survival. This both feeds and translates into their political disengagement which is illustrated by an exchange recorded with a transgender individual in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: “Naina responds with laughter when asked about the upcoming elections. ‘What do I have to do with elections? It’s not our business,’ she jokes.”³³

Furthermore, Shahzadi mentions that despite being a local councilor and notable transgender figure, her vote is still registered among the list of male voters by the Election Commission of Pakistan, which she finds exceedingly excruciating. Her experience in this case unveils the continuing disjuncture between the provisions of the Transgender Persons Act 2018 and the state entities which are supposed to enforce and ensure them, creating a chasm of between what is promised to the community and what they are practically provided on ground.

Nonetheless, she stresses the significance of visibility which she has obtained and maintained through her social media profile. She asserts that her visibility has given her a voice and enabled her to reach various

high-ranking politicians and government offices. “All major figures in the PPP, including Bilawal Bhutto Zardari follow me, and whenever I raise an issue, members of both PPP and other parties reach out to me. It is because I am a visible public figure that I am able to get work done,” she insists. At the same time, visibility is also a double-edged sword. As much as it extends her reach and influence, it also brings targeted threats, harassment, and hate. Last year, a man located her apartment and reached it with a bottle of acid, threatening to attack and kill her. The PPP promptly took notice and pushed for the man’s arrest which soon materialized. According to her, the threats and pressures have deepened after the Federal Shariat Court’s ruling last year which declared the provision of declaring and claiming one’s self-perceived gender identity as incompatible with Islam. She is certain that she could not have dealt with these pressures independently without the PPP. She affirms that “For transgender persons to be able to do politics, having both visibility and a party’s backing and support are extremely important.”

She takes great pride in the status, standing, and visibility she has attained despite being from a highly marginalized community in the country. “When people see me on a major TV channel sitting with other political personalities and sharing my perspective on developments in Pakistan, they do not just see Shahzadi there, they see a transgender person with a seat at the table,” she states.

Shahzadi hopes to take the next step in her political aspirations by becoming a member of the Sindh Assembly in the future, and she remains confident that she will have legislation passed for creating reserved seats for transgender persons in both provincial assemblies and the national assembly.

32 Memphis Barker, “Once Ostracised, Now Pakistani Transgender People Are Running for Parliament,” The Guardian, August 23, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/23/pakistani-transgender-people-office-election>

33 Asad Zia, “Unregistered, Unheard: Elections and Transgender Exclusion,” The Express Tribune, December 24, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2450962/unregistered-unheard-elections-and-transgender-exclusion>.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are drawn from the case studies and cover key areas for effective transgender political empowerment and engagement as voters and candidates:

Legislative and Policy Initiatives

- Reserved seats and quotas at different levels of government and in various political bodies should be legislated for the transgender community.
- Amendments for separate queues and polling stations for transgender persons should be considered as a short-term policy on both provincial and national levels to create a dignified and comfortable environment for them to vote. It should eventually be phased out in favor of full-fledged integration pursued through a long-term policy of sensitizing and educating the public towards the community.
- Existing laws for transgender rights should be made stronger by adding clauses which criminalize their violation and outline punishments for them.
- The quota for the community should be increased to 5% across industries and fields in both the public and private sector. Failure to implement the quota should be met with hefty fines.
- Existing affirmative action policies, such as the two reserved seats for transgender persons in KMC, should be revisited and equipped with allowances for development funds and stable incomes.

Capacity-Building for Government Officials

- Government officials, especially those affiliated with ECP, NADRA, and law-enforcement agencies, should undergo comprehensive training. This training, facilitated through modules, manuals, and workshops, should enhance their awareness and understanding of the legal requirements for safeguarding the rights of the transgender community across different phases of the political process.
- Polling staff must undergo training to prevent any discrimination against transgender individuals, and to facilitate their full political participation both as voters and as candidates.
- NADRA should implement an extensive training program for its employees and officials. This program should include:
 1. Educating staff about the legal provisions concerning transgender individuals that they are responsible for implementing.
 2. Instructing staff about the processes and procedures for assisting transgender individuals and issuing 'X' category identity cards.
 3. Sensitizing staff about the rights of the transgender community.
 4. Establishing standardized protocols to ensure that staff treatment of transgender individuals is empathetic, supportive, and free from discrimination.

Awareness and Sensitization

- The National Commission for Human Rights, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, the ECP, and civil society organizations should collaborate to conduct campaigns promoting transgender acceptance and rights. These campaigns should utilize print, electronic, and social media platforms, as well as engage on-ground community mobilizers and opinion leaders from various sectors including politics, social activism, culture, law, religion, and entertainment.

Access to Political Processes

Steps for the ECP to take:

- Incorporate transgender individuals as presiding officers and polling staff to promote the political participation of the transgender community. This initiative aims to establish a comfortable environment conducive to their engagement in the electoral process.
- Enforce a requirement for political parties to allocate a specific percentage of their tickets to transgender individuals.
- Develop digital tools and applications for advancing the community's understanding of political processes. These tools should provide information about the resources and opportunities available for them to participate as voters and as candidates.
- Policies should be enacted to waive or reduce nomination paper fees and taxes on campaign materials for the transgender community.
- The Gender Mainstreaming and Social Inclusion Framework should be revised and implemented to address transgender concerns related to voter registration and the provision of postal ballot services to their community.
- Collaborate with NADRA to streamline and prioritize the registration of transgender persons in voting lists. Additionally, engage with the community to inform and educate them about the registration processes and timelines.
- Continue and expand the Gender and Social Inclusion Wing's initiatives for transgender persons:
 1. Conduct awareness sessions and workshops within the community regarding their political rights, emphasizing the importance of their understanding of electoral processes and their participation within them.
 2. Provide information about candidates, political party platforms, and manifestos.
 3. Offer guidance on the complaint mechanisms available for reporting instances of harassment, hate speech, and electoral violations.
 4. Highlight the available channels of aid and assistance during elections, including resources like its Gender Desk, which registers complaints about discrimination, harassment, and intimidation.

- Collaborate with civil society organizations to:
 1. Establish mentorship forums, promoting dialogue and support networks that link transgender candidates with prior political experience to community members interested in voting and contesting elections.
 2. Provide training on digital literacy and empowerment, promoting the use of digital tools and social media for voting and campaigning among transgender electoral candidates and voters through workshops and educational sessions.

Steps for Political Parties to take:

- Launch a mentorship program to enhance the capacity of transgender political activists.
- Establish transgender wings as an inclusive entry point for the transgender community, guaranteeing their representation and engagement.

National Identity Card Registrations

Steps for NADRA to take:

- Expand existing accommodations, such as the Mobile-Registration Van project, to make registration more accessible for transgender individuals and to accelerate the processing of their applications.
- Collaborate with other relevant government organizations such as the ECP, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, the National Commission for Human Rights, as well as non-governmental advocacy and rights groups, to undertake regular community engagements and consultative dialogues with transgender persons. These engagements would enable it to:
 1. Identify and effectively mitigate the barriers and challenges transgender individuals face in acquiring 'X' identity cards.
 2. Extend outreach efforts to transgender networks, including their families, their *gurus*, and their neighborhoods, to educate them about transgender rights and protections.
 3. Increase community awareness regarding the importance of obtaining an 'X' identity card for accessing their rights, as well as the procedures of registering for it.
 4. Reduce the trust deficit within the community following NADRA's suspension of 'X' identity card registrations last year.
 5. Incorporate the insights gathered from community engagement to launch a nationwide registration drive for transgender identity cards.

