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Familial Enmities in Pashtun Society: Causes, Consequences, and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms-A Case Study of District Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract

Familial enmities have remained a significant social issue in many Pashtun communities, where disputes between families often continue for generations and influence social relations, community stability, and local development. This research examines the causes, consequences, and conflict resolution mechanisms of familial enmities in District Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The study explores how factors such as land and property disputes, honor-related conflicts, political rivalries, personal disagreements, and weak dispute resolution practices contribute to the persistence of family-based conflicts. It further analyzes the social, economic, and psychological consequences of these enmities, including loss of lives, insecurity, displacement, damaged social relationships, and disruption of educational and economic activities. The study also investigates the role of traditional institutions, particularly the jirga system, along with formal legal structures and emerging community-based approaches in resolving such disputes. Using a qualitative research approach, the study relies on interviews with community elders, local leaders, affected families, and legal practitioners to understand the dynamics of familial conflicts in the region. The findings aim to provide a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural factors behind family feuds and suggest practical strategies for strengthening conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms. The research contributes to the broader discussion on peacebuilding, social cohesion, and indigenous conflict management practices in Pashtun society.

Keywords: Familial Enmities, Pashtun Society, Family Feuds, Conflict Resolution, Jirga System, Social Conflict, District Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Background of Study

The family, known in Pashto as kor or koranai, is the center of economic, social, and emotional life for Pashtuns. Land, houses, honor, and even political influence are usually owned and defended by the family as a group, not only by one person. Because of this, an insult, a property dispute, or a crime against one family member is treated as an attack on the whole family. Marriage choices, business decisions, and even where a person can walk safely in the village are often decided with the family's collective reputation in mind. This deep attachment to family is one reason why conflicts, once started, are difficult to end quickly.

Kinship in Pashtun society is organized in a segmentary way. A person belongs first to a small household, then to a wider group of close relatives, then to a khel or clan, and finally to a qabila or tribe, with everyone tracing descent from a common male ancestor along the paternal line (Glatzer, 2002;

Wikipedia contributors, 2026b). This layered kinship system means that a dispute between two individuals can quickly widen into a dispute between two large groups of relatives, because kin are expected to support each other in times of conflict. At the same time, rivalry among close male relatives, especially first cousins, is a well-known feature of Pashtun social life, since cousins often compete over the same inherited land and status (Facts and Details, 2021).

Pakhtunwali, the unwritten code of the Pashtuns, organizes almost every part of social behavior, including how conflicts should be handled. Central values of Pakhtunwali include nang (honor), melmastia (hospitality), nanawatai (seeking forgiveness or asylum), and badal, which means taking revenge or seeking justice for a wrong that was done (Ali et al., 2024; Cultural Property News, 2021). Badal has no time limit, so an old insult or killing can be avenged even after many years, and if a family fails to take revenge, it may be seen as losing its honor within the community (Shah, 1998). Pakhtunwali also provides tools for making peace, such as jirga councils and rituals of forgiveness, but the same code that offers a path to peace also creates strong pressure toward revenge, which makes Pakhtunwali a double-edged influence on family conflict.

Family feuds have existed in Pashtun society for a very long time and are not a new social problem. Historical accounts describe disputes over land, water, and women as common triggers of long blood feuds between families and even whole clans, feuds that could continue for generations unless elders successfully intervened (Facts and Details, 2021; Encyclopedia.com, 2019). Common Pashto sayings about revenge, and the cultural memory of feuds lasting decades, show that this is a deeply rooted pattern rather than a recent development caused only by modern problems such as weak governance. It is useful to separate a personal dispute from an inter-family enmity. A personal dispute is a disagreement between two individuals that usually stays limited to those people and can often be solved through an apology, compensation, or short mediation. An inter-family enmity, however, involves the honour and support of an entire extended family or clan, spreads beyond the original individuals, and can continue even after the original people involved have died, being carried forward by their sons and grandsons (Shah, 1998). This paper focuses mainly on the second kind of conflict, which causes wider social damage and is harder to resolve.

District Swabi is an important place to study this problem for several reasons. It is a densely populated, mostly rural and agricultural district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with a population of about 1.89 million people according to the 2023 census, where land, water, and family honor remain central concerns of daily life (Pakistan Almanac, 2022; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Government, 2026). Swabi sits close to major urban centers such as Peshawar and Mardan, so it shows both the persistence of traditional customs and the pressure of modern change, including migration, education, and closer contact with the formal legal system. Despite this importance, very little focused academic research exists specifically on family enmities in Swabi, which makes it a valuable and underexplored case for study.

Statement of the Problem

Family feuds remain a persistent and growing problem in District Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Increasing population pressure on limited agricultural land, disputes over property and inheritance, and the influence of modern communication technologies have contributed to the escalation of minor disagreements into long-term conflicts. At the same time, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are losing their effectiveness, while the formal judicial system remains slow and inaccessible for many families. As a result, many disputes remain unresolved, leading to cycles of retaliation and prolonged

hostility. These feuds have far-reaching social and economic consequences, including loss of life, displacement, disruption of education and livelihoods, and weakened community cohesion. Despite the significance of this issue, there is limited empirical research focusing specifically on District Swabi, creating a gap in understanding the local causes, impacts, and conflict resolution practices needed to inform effective policy and community-based interventions.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the causes, consequences, and conflict resolution mechanisms of familial enmities in District Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

1. To identify the major causes of familial enmities in District Swabi.
2. To analyze the role of Pakhtunwali in sustaining or reducing family conflicts.
3. To examine the social, political, and economic impacts of familial enmities on the local population.
4. To assess the effectiveness of traditional conflict resolution institutions, particularly the jirga, in Swabi.

Research Questions

1. What are the major causes of familial enmities in District Swabi?
2. How do cultural norms, especially Pakhtunwali, influence the continuation of family disputes?
3. How effective are the jirga and other customary institutions in resolving these disputes?
4. What role does the formal justice system play in preventing or resolving familial enmities in Swabi?

Significance of Study

This study is significant because it brings together sociology, anthropology, political science, and conflict studies to explain a problem that touches the daily lives of ordinary families in District Swabi yet remains poorly documented in academic research. By producing local, evidence-based knowledge, the study can help tribal elders, religious scholars, lawyers, police officers, and local government representatives understand which factors most strongly drive family enmities and which interventions are most likely to reduce them. The findings can also support the design of practical policies, such as strengthened mediation committees and legal awareness programs, that respect local culture while reducing the human and economic cost of unresolved disputes. Finally, the study adds to the small but growing body of academic literature on Pakhtunwali and dispute resolution in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, giving future researchers a starting point for comparative work in other districts.

Scope of the Study

This study is geographically limited to District Swabi in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, an agricultural district of about 1,543 square kilometers divided into four tehsils, namely Swabi, Lahor, Topi, and Razar (Pakistan Almanac, 2022). The study population includes a wide range of people connected to the subject matter, namely tribal elders, religious scholars, lawyers, police officers, local government representatives, victims of family disputes, jirga members, and academics working on conflict and society in the region. Drawing on such a varied population allows the study to compare perspectives from those who experience family enmities directly with those who are responsible for resolving or governing them, giving a more complete picture of the causes, consequences, and possible solutions connected to familial enmities in the district.

Delimitations

This study is limited in several important ways. First, it is restricted to District Swabi and does not attempt to represent every district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or the wider Pashtun region, since local histories, economic conditions, and tribal structures can differ from one district to another. Second, the study focuses only on family-based conflicts, meaning disputes rooted in land, inheritance, marriage, and honor between related households, and it deliberately excludes political conflicts, sectarian violence, and militant or terrorism-related conflict, even though these sometimes overlap with family disputes in practice. Third, the study is cross-sectional, meaning that data is collected at one point in time rather than tracking the same families or disputes over many years, so it can describe the current situation and patterns but cannot fully capture how individual feuds change over long periods.

Literature Review

Concept of Familial Enmity

Familial enmity, in the Pashtun context, refers to a lasting state of hostility between two related or neighboring families, often described locally through terms such as *dushmani*, meaning enmity or hostility between groups, and *baadi*, which describes the specific condition of being in an active blood feud where a person risks killing or being killed (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2025). Unlike an ordinary quarrel, familial enmity is collective: the whole family or clan carries the responsibility of defending its honor, and the obligation to respond can be inherited by sons and grandsons long after the original dispute began (Shah, 1998). Scholars generally agree that familial enmity is not simply personal anger but a socially recognized status that shapes how a family is seen and treated by its neighbors.

Pakhtunwali and Family Relations

Pakhtunwali functions as an unwritten constitution for Pashtun family life, covering hospitality, protection of guests, honor, and revenge (Britannica, 2026; Wikipedia contributors, 2026a). Two of its principles are especially relevant to family enmities. First, *badal* requires that any serious wrong done to a family member, whether murder, theft, or an insult to female relatives, must eventually be answered, and failing to respond is considered shameful (Nesar, 2025). Second, *nanawatai* allows an offending party to seek forgiveness by approaching the offended family with elders, sometimes offering compensation, which can end a feud without further bloodshed (Shah, 1998). Because both revenge and forgiveness are built into the same code, Pakhtunwali can either extend a family conflict for generations or provide a dignified route out of it, depending on how community elders apply it in a specific case.

Kinship Structure in Pashtun Society

Pashtun kinship follows a segmentary lineage system, where individuals belong to nested groups: a household, an extended family, a *khel* or sub-clan, and a *qabila* or tribe, all tracing descent through the male line to a shared ancestor (Glatzer, 2002; Wikipedia contributors, 2026b). This structure explains why conflicts spread so easily beyond the two individuals originally involved. Because land, inheritance rights, and even a person's voice in the village *jirga* depend on kinship position, disputes over property most often occur between close male relatives, particularly first cousins, who are simultaneously each other's nearest allies and closest rivals for the same resources (Facts and Details, 2021). This tension between cousins, sometimes called *tarburwali* in the literature, is repeatedly identified as an underlying source of long-running family enmities.

Causes of Familial Enmities

Across the literature, three causes are mentioned most often as triggers for Pashtun family feuds, sometimes summarized locally as *zan, zamin, and zer*, meaning women, land, and gold or wealth (Pukhtunkhwa Journal, 2021). Disputes over land boundaries and inheritance shares are extremely common because agricultural land is limited and highly valued, and because inheritance customs can be interpreted differently by different family branches. Disputes connected to women, including elopement, refusal of an arranged marriage, or perceived insults to a woman's honor, are treated with special seriousness because a woman's conduct is linked directly to her family's collective honor. Disputes over money, business partnerships, and old debts also frequently escalate, especially when combined with a prior history of tension between the same families. In addition, small everyday disagreements, insults, or acts of taunting known as *peghor* can escalate quickly because Pakhtunwali expects a strong, immediate response to protect honor (Pukhtunkhwa Journal, 2021).

Social Consequences

Long-running family enmities damage the social fabric of villages in several ways. Families involved in active feuds often restrict their own movement and that of their women and children to avoid attacks, effectively isolating themselves from normal community life. Marriages between rival families become impossible, narrowing the pool of social and economic alliances available to the next generation. Trust in neighbors and even in customary institutions such as the *jirga* can decline when disputes are seen to have been settled unfairly or only temporarily, and cycles of revenge can eventually draw in wider kin networks, spreading insecurity beyond the original two households (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2025).

Economic Consequences

Family enmities carry a heavy economic cost for rural districts like Swabi. Disputed land often cannot be cultivated safely or sold, reducing agricultural productivity and household income. Families engaged in feuds frequently spend large amounts of money on legal fees, weapons, security, or compensation payments, diverting scarce resources away from education, health, and business investment. In some cases, families are forced to migrate away from their ancestral village entirely to escape violence, losing access to their land and social networks, which pushes them into poverty in unfamiliar areas. The broader district economy also suffers when agricultural land lies unused or when able-bodied men are killed, imprisoned, or forced into hiding because of an ongoing feud.

Political Consequences

Family enmities in Pashtun areas are rarely purely private matters; they often intersect with local politics. Rival families frequently support opposing candidates in local elections, turning electoral competition into another arena for pre-existing family rivalries. Politicians and influential local figures sometimes protect their supporters involved in disputes from police action or manipulate *jirga* proceedings in their favor, which reduces public trust in both the formal and informal justice systems (Raja & Tariq, 2025). In some documented cases, disputes that began as family matters have contributed to wider community tension, showing how personal and political conflict can reinforce each other in Pashtun districts (Yamin & Malik, 2014).

Traditional Conflict Resolution

The *jirga*, a council of respected elders selected for wisdom, integrity, and knowledge of Pakhtunwali and Islamic law, has for centuries been the main institution for resolving disputes among Pashtuns,

including land conflicts, blood feuds, and inter-family matters (Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 2024). The jirga sits in judgment somewhat like a jury, offering an informal, low-cost, and locally trusted process that many communities still prefer over formal courts (Mahmood et al., 2018). In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a state-supported version called the Dispute Resolution Council has also been introduced, working under police supervision, in an attempt to combine local trust with government oversight (Raja & Tariq, 2025). However, the traditional jirga faces serious criticism, including limited inclusion of women, uneven power between wealthy and poor parties, occasional pressure from powerful local figures, and, in some documented cases, decisions that conflict with basic human rights protections (Dennys & Marjana, 2012).

Formal Justice System

Pakistan's formal justice system suffers from severe delays that push many disputing families toward informal alternatives. As of 2025, the district judiciary alone faced close to 1.86 million pending cases, with civil litigation making up the majority of this backlog, while cumulative pending cases across all court levels exceeded two million (ISSRA, 2025; The Friday Times, 2025). Causes of these delays include judicial vacancies, frequent transfers of judges, weak investigative and forensic capacity, and complex, old-fashioned legal procedures (Zafeer et al., 2020). Because pursuing a case in the formal courts can take years and requires money that many rural families do not have, communities in areas like Swabi often rely on the jirga simply because it is faster, even when its fairness is questioned (Science Publishing Group, 2025).

Research Gap

Existing literature offers strong general accounts of Pakhtunwali, kinship, and the jirga system across the wider Pashtun region, and useful national-level analysis of court delays in Pakistan, but very few empirical studies examine familial enmities specifically in District Swabi through a combined sociological, anthropological, political, and conflict-resolution lens. Most available research either focuses on Afghanistan, on the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas, or on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in general terms, without collecting district-level, field-based evidence from Swabi itself. This gap limits the ability of local government, police, and civil society organizations in Swabi to design conflict resolution policies based on solid local evidence rather than general assumptions borrowed from other regions.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Conflict Theory, associated with the German philosopher and sociologist Karl Marx, as its primary theoretical lens. Conflict Theory views society not as a system built on shared agreement, but as an arena of ongoing competition between individuals and groups over limited resources, power, and status (Lumen Learning, 2021; Simply Psychology, 2026). Although Marx originally developed this theory to explain economic class struggle between capital owners and workers, later sociologists have extended it to explain competition and conflict between other kinds of groups, including families, clans, and communities competing over land, wealth, and social standing (Simply Psychology, 2026).

Applied to District Swabi, Conflict Theory helps explain why family enmities so often center on land, inheritance, and marriage: these are the scarce resources through which status, security, and future opportunity are distributed within Pashtun society. Families that feel their share of land or influence has been unfairly reduced by relatives or neighbors experience this as a direct threat to their long-term position, which can justify continued resistance or revenge in their own eyes. The theory also helps

explain why powerful or wealthier families are sometimes able to use the jirga or local political connections to their advantage, since Conflict Theory expects that groups with more resources will tend to shape institutions, including customary ones, in ways that protect their own interests. Where useful, this study also refers to Pakhtunwali itself as an indigenous explanatory framework alongside Conflict Theory, since local concepts such as honor, badal, and nanawatai provide a culturally specific vocabulary for understanding why families fight and how they eventually make peace.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. The qualitative component allows the researcher to explore the lived experiences, motivations, and cultural meanings behind family enmities in depth, while the quantitative component allows broader patterns, such as the most common causes of disputes or the perceived effectiveness of different resolution mechanisms, to be measured and compared across a larger sample of respondents. This combination is well suited to a sensitive and locally rooted topic such as family enmity, since numbers alone cannot capture the cultural weight of honor and revenge, while qualitative accounts alone cannot show how widespread patterns are across the district.

Research Philosophy

The study follows an interpretivist research philosophy, which holds that social reality, including concepts such as honor, revenge, and forgiveness, is best understood through the meanings that people themselves attach to their experiences, rather than through purely external or numerical measurement alone. This philosophy fits a study of familial enmity well, because the same event, for example a land boundary dispute, can be interpreted very differently depending on family history, local reputation, and cultural expectations, and an interpretivist approach allows these differences in meaning to be captured through interviews and discussions rather than flattened into a single external explanation.

Population

The population of this study includes a broad cross-section of people connected to familial enmities in District Swabi. This includes ordinary community members and victims of family disputes, whose lived experience forms the core of the qualitative data; police officers, who are often the first point of contact when a dispute becomes violent; lawyers and judges, who represent the formal justice system; jirga elders and religious scholars, who represent traditional and religious approaches to conflict resolution; political representatives at the local government level; and academics and NGO staff who study or work on conflict, peacebuilding, and community development in the region. Including such a wide population allows the study to compare how different groups understand the same set of conflicts.

Sampling Technique

The study uses purposive sampling, a non-random technique in which participants are deliberately selected because they hold relevant knowledge or direct experience of familial enmities in Swabi. This technique is appropriate here because the topic requires participants with specific roles or experiences, such as being an active jirga member, a lawyer handling relevant cases, or a person who has personally experienced a family feud, rather than a random sample drawn from the general population.

Sample Size

For the qualitative component, the study aims to conduct between 40 and 60 semi-structured interviews with the population groups described above, a range that is generally sufficient to reach

thematic saturation in a focused, single-district qualitative study. For the quantitative component, the study aims to survey approximately 300 respondents drawn from community members across the four tehsils of Swabi, namely Swabi, Lahor, Topi, and Razar, to allow for meaningful statistical analysis while remaining practically manageable within the study's resources and timeframe.

Data Collection

Primary data will be collected using semi-structured interviews, allowing flexibility to explore each participant's specific experience while still covering the same core themes across interviews; focus group discussions, particularly useful for exploring shared community perceptions of jirga effectiveness; structured questionnaires, used for the quantitative survey component; direct observation of jirga proceedings where access and consent are possible; and documented case histories of specific, anonymized family disputes, which help illustrate how disputes develop and are resolved over time.

Secondary data will be drawn from books and journal articles on Pakhtunwali, kinship, and conflict resolution; government reports and district development statistics for Swabi; court records, where accessible and with appropriate permissions; police records on reported family-related disputes and violence; reports published by NGOs working on peacebuilding and access to justice in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; and relevant newspaper coverage of specific disputes or reconciliation efforts in the district.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and case histories will be analyzed using thematic analysis, in which transcripts are read closely and coded to identify recurring themes, such as common causes of disputes, perceptions of jirga fairness, or barriers to reconciliation. Quantitative survey data will be analyzed using SPSS, beginning with descriptive statistics to summarize the sample and the frequency of different causes and outcomes, followed by chi-square tests to examine relationships between categorical variables, such as the connection between education level and preference for formal versus customary dispute resolution, and regression and correlation analysis to examine how strongly factors such as land ownership, family size, or income relate to the likelihood and duration of enmities.

Ethical Considerations

Because familial enmity is a sensitive and sometimes dangerous topic, this study follows strict ethical guidelines. Informed consent will be obtained from every participant before data collection begins, with a clear explanation of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity will be protected throughout, particularly for victims of ongoing disputes, by removing names and identifying details from case histories and interview transcripts. Participation will be entirely voluntary, with no pressure placed on any individual, especially those who may feel vulnerable due to an active dispute. Extra care and, where necessary, referral to appropriate support services will be provided for vulnerable participants, such as women affected by honor-related disputes. Finally, the research design and instruments will be submitted for approval to a relevant institutional ethics committee before fieldwork begins.

Findings

Because this proposal-stage paper is based on secondary literature rather than completed fieldwork, the findings below are presented as expected themes that future data collection in District Swabi is likely to confirm or refine, based on patterns already documented in the wider Pashtun

literature reviewed above. These themes are organized to correspond with the study's main research questions and objectives.

Causes of Familial Enmities

Consistent with the wider literature, land and inheritance disputes are expected to emerge as the single most frequently reported cause of family enmities in Swabi, given the district's dense population and heavy reliance on agricultural land. Disputes connected to marriage choices and perceived insults to family honor, particularly involving women, are expected to be reported as the second most common cause, often described by participants as the most serious and least negotiable type of dispute. Financial disagreements, including unpaid debts and disputed business partnerships, are expected to form a smaller but still significant category, frequently mentioned as an underlying tension that later combines with a land or honor dispute to produce a lasting enmity.

Table 1. Major Causes of Familial Enmities Identified in the Literature

Cause	Typical Trigger	Relative Prominence in Literature
Land and inheritance	Disputed boundaries, unequal division of inherited land among brothers/cousins	Most frequently cited
Honor and marriage	Elopement, refusal of an arranged match, perceived insult to a woman's conduct	Very frequently cited; treated as most serious
Money and business	Unpaid debts, disputed partnerships, unfulfilled financial obligations	Frequently cited, often combines with land or honor disputes
Insult or taunt (peghor)	Public shaming or mockery referencing an earlier unavenged wrong	Commonly cited as an escalating factor

Note. Compiled by the author from the wider Pashtun conflict literature reviewed in Section 3 (Pukhtunkhwa Journal, 2021; Shah, 1998; Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2025). Categories are not mutually exclusive; a single enmity often involves more than one cause.

Cultural Influences

Interviews with elders and community members are expected to show strong support for the idea that Pakhtunwali, and particularly the principle of badal, creates real social pressure to respond to any perceived wrong, even where individuals privately wish to avoid further conflict. At the same time, many participants, especially younger and more educated respondents, are expected to express a wish to see nanawatai and community mediation used more often as an honorable, culturally acceptable way to end a dispute without violence, suggesting an internal cultural debate about how strictly badal should be followed today.

Economic Impacts

Survey data is expected to show that a meaningful proportion of households affected by ongoing enmities report unused or under-cultivated disputed land, reduced household income, and unusual spending on legal costs, private security, or compensation payments. Some respondents, particularly

from families that have experienced serious violence, are expected to report having migrated away from their ancestral village, at real cost to their livelihood and social ties.

Gender Dimensions

Women are expected to appear in the findings mainly as indirect participants in these enmities: their conduct or marriage choices are frequently the stated cause of a dispute, yet they are rarely included as decision-makers in jirga proceedings that resolve the resulting conflict. Female participants, where interviewed, are expected to describe restricted mobility and heightened anxiety during periods of active family conflict, along with a preference for resolution mechanisms that do not place further burden or blame on women.

Political Effects

Local government representatives and community members are expected to report that family rivalries frequently overlap with local political competition, with rival families supporting different candidates and some local politicians accused of protecting their own supporters from formal accountability. This overlap is expected to reduce public confidence in the neutrality of both the police and, in some cases, the jirga itself.

Traditional Justice

Jirga elders themselves are expected to defend the institution as fast, low-cost, and culturally legitimate, while other respondents, particularly women, younger people, and those with lower social status, are expected to describe jirga outcomes as sometimes unfair or biased toward wealthier or more powerful families, echoing concerns already documented in the wider literature on jirga systems in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Raja & Tariq, 2025; Dennys & Marjana, 2012).

Formal Justice

Lawyers and litigants are expected to confirm that pursuing a family dispute through the formal courts in Swabi is widely seen as slow and expensive, discouraging many families from using it except as a last resort or when the dispute is too serious or too politically connected for the jirga to resolve. Police officers are expected to describe a difficult position of being called upon to prevent violence connected to disputes that the formal system has not yet, and may not for years, formally resolve.

Table 2. Jirga and Formal Courts Compared as Mechanisms for Resolving Familial Enmities

Feature	Jirga (Customary)	Formal Courts
Speed	Typically fast; decisions often reached within days or weeks	Slow; civil disputes can take years, sometimes over a decade
Cost	Low; mainly time and hospitality costs for elders	High; filing fees, lawyer costs, and repeated court visits
Cultural legitimacy	High; rooted in Pakhtunwali and local trust	Variable; often seen as distant or foreign to local custom
Inclusion of women	Very limited; women rarely participate directly	Formally guaranteed, but access is often practically limited
Consistency and appeal	Uneven; depends on the elders involved, limited appeal	More standardized, with formal appeal mechanisms

Risk of elite bias	Present; wealthier or more powerful families can carry more weight	Present; documented corruption and unequal access to legal resources
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Note. Compiled by the author from Raja and Tariq (2025), Denny and Marjana (2012), ISSRA (2025), and The Friday Times (2025).

Successful Reconciliation Cases

Despite the challenges described above, the wider literature includes documented examples of long-running disputes being successfully resolved through sustained jirga mediation, sometimes involving compensation, symbolic acts of submission, or marriage alliances between the families, with support from local administration (Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 2024). Similar successful reconciliation cases, where trusted elders intervened early and both families accepted a face-saving settlement, are expected to be identifiable within Swabi as well, offering practical lessons for future mediation efforts.

Barriers to Peace

The most commonly expected barriers to lasting peace include the absence of trusted, neutral mediators for disputes involving powerful families; fear that accepting mediation could be seen as a sign of weakness or dishonor; the slow pace of the formal courts, which removes pressure on disputing parties to settle quickly through the jirga; and, in some cases, political interference that benefits from keeping a dispute unresolved rather than settled.

Table 3. Applying Conflict Theory and Pakhtunwali to the Expected Findings

Expected Finding	Conflict Theory Explanation	Pakhtunwali Explanation
Land and inheritance are the top cause of enmity	Land is a scarce resource; families compete for it, producing group conflict	Land loss also damages a family's standing and voice in the community jirga
Honor and marriage disputes are treated as most serious	Less directly explained; honor is not a material resource	Badal requires a response to any perceived insult to family honor, regardless of material value
Jirga outcomes sometimes favor powerful families	Groups with more resources shape institutions to protect their own interests	Elders are expected to be impartial, but social pressure and status can still influence outcomes
Nanawatai and mediation valued by younger respondents	Less directly explained; theory emphasizes ongoing competition	Pakhtunwali itself provides a dignified, honor-preserving path to ending conflict

Note. Compiled by the author to illustrate how the two frameworks introduced in Section 4 complement one another when applied to the study's expected findings.

Discussion and Findings

The expected findings described above align closely with both Conflict Theory and the indigenous framework of Pakhtunwali, while also showing important local particularities specific to District Swabi. Conflict Theory's central claim, that society is organized around competition for limited resources, fits

well with the finding that land and inheritance disputes are the most common source of family enmity. Because agricultural land in a densely populated district like Swabi is a genuinely scarce resource tied directly to family survival and status, competition over it naturally produces the kind of sustained group conflict that Conflict Theory predicts, extending well beyond the two individuals originally involved (Simply Psychology, 2026).

At the same time, the findings suggest that Conflict Theory alone cannot fully explain why disputes over honor and marriage are treated as seriously as, or even more seriously than, material disputes over land. This is where Pakhtunwali, as an indigenous explanatory framework, adds essential explanatory power: badal turns a personal insult into a matter of collective family honor that must be answered, regardless of its material value, which helps explain why some of the most intense and long-lasting enmities in the literature begin with a perceived insult rather than a straightforward economic dispute (Nesar, 2025; Shah, 1998).

The discussion also highlights an important tension between structural functionalism, which would view the jirga and Pakhtunwali as institutions that maintain social order and cohesion, and the more critical view offered by Conflict Theory, which expects that such institutions can also be used by powerful families to protect their own advantage. The expected findings on political effects and uneven jirga outcomes support this more critical view: rather than acting only as a neutral peacemaking body, the jirga in some documented cases appears influenced by existing inequalities of wealth and power, echoing concerns raised in the wider literature on jirga reform in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Raja & Tariq, 2025; Dennys & Marjana, 2012). This suggests that in District Swabi, as elsewhere in the Pashtun belt, elements of both theoretical perspectives are useful: Pakhtunwali and the jirga do provide real social cohesion and a shared moral language for resolving disputes, but they operate within, and are sometimes shaped by, the same competition for land, status, and power that Conflict Theory describes.

Compared with similar studies from other Pashtun-majority areas, such as Khost province in Afghanistan and various districts of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas, the expected patterns in Swabi appear broadly consistent: land, honor, and women remain the central triggers of feuds, and the jirga remains the preferred but imperfect resolution mechanism (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2025; Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 2024). What appears specific to Swabi, based on its demographic and geographic profile, is the particularly intense pressure on agricultural land due to high population density and proximity to expanding urban centers, which may make land-related enmities more frequent, relative to purely honor-based disputes, than in more remote tribal districts.

Policy Recommendations

5. Strengthen community-based mediation in coordination with the formal justice system, so that jirga decisions on civil matters can be formally recognized where they meet basic fairness standards, reducing pressure on overloaded courts.
6. Provide legal awareness programs on inheritance and property rights, particularly targeted at rural households in Swabi, to reduce disputes that arise from misunderstanding of legal entitlements.
7. Train jirga members in mediation skills, basic human rights standards, and conflict-sensitive practices, so that customary resolution processes better protect vulnerable participants, including women.

8. Encourage youth and women's participation in local peacebuilding initiatives, creating space for perspectives that are currently underrepresented in traditional jirga proceedings.
9. Improve access to timely and affordable justice by expanding court capacity, reducing judicial vacancies, and simplifying procedures for straightforward civil disputes common in rural districts.
10. Introduce school and community peace education programs that teach conflict resolution skills and present nanawatai and mediation as honorable alternatives to prolonged revenge.
11. Create district-level mediation and reconciliation committees, bringing together government officials, respected elders, and civil society representatives to handle disputes that are too large or too sensitive for a single village jirga.
12. Enhance collaboration among local government, civil society organizations, police, and religious leaders, so that early warning signs of an escalating family dispute can be addressed before violence occurs.

Conclusion

Familial enmities remain a deeply rooted and consequential feature of social life in District Swabi and the wider Pashtun region, shaped by a segmentary kinship structure, the enduring influence of Pakhtunwali, and continuing pressure on scarce agricultural land. This paper has argued that these disputes typically begin over land, marriage and honor, or money, and that once started, they can spread through extended kin networks and persist across generations because of the cultural weight placed on badal and family honor. The consequences are wide-ranging, touching social trust, household economics, and even local politics, while both traditional and formal conflict resolution mechanisms face real limitations: the jirga offers speed and cultural legitimacy but can be uneven in fairness, while the formal courts offer legal protection but are slowed by severe case backlogs. Viewed through both Conflict Theory and the indigenous framework of Pakhtunwali, familial enmity in Swabi appears as a product of genuine competition for limited resources and status, expressed through a distinctly Pashtun cultural language of honor and revenge. Reducing the burden of these long-standing feuds will likely require culturally informed approaches that work with, rather than against, respected local institutions such as the jirga, combined with practical improvements to legal awareness, access to formal justice, and inclusive local peacebuilding. Such an approach offers the most realistic path toward strengthening social cohesion and reducing the human cost of family enmities in District Swabi.

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