



The Critical Assessment of Electoral Reforms in Pakistan and Their Impact on Women's Political Participation in District Upper Chitral

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Abstract

This study mainly focuses on the influence of electoral changes on women's political involvement in District Upper Chitral with an emphasis on factors facilitating and impeding their successful implementation. Women's meaningful engagement in the district is still restricted, despite the existence of legal and institutional frameworks intended to encourage their inclusion in political processes. The study employs a qualitative, quantitative, and context-based methodology. This paper is composed of three parts. Part-I deals with brief introduction and literature review. Part-II deals with Methodology. Part-III deals with major challenges, recommendations and conclusion.

Keywords: Upper Chitral, Electoral, Socioeconomic, Empowerment, Women.

Introduction

The complicated interplay between electoral reforms, sociocultural norms, and changing gender roles is reflected in the political empowerment of women in Upper Chitral. The area has shown relatively higher levels of women's political engagement than many other districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, despite its distant and traditionally organized society (Abid, 2023). Although electoral reforms have created new opportunities for women to participate, their transformative power still depends on more profound changes in political awareness, decision-making authority, and representation that go beyond symbolic inclusion (Saira et al., 2025). Women in Upper Chitral have progressively made their presence known in a historically male-dominated political environment, transitioning from unofficial and marginalized roles to acknowledged political participation. This change represents women's political voice, agency, and continuity in public life in addition to higher voter participation or representation through reserved seats (Sufia & Ayesha, 2024). However, the success of these changes differs depending on local socioeconomic and cultural settings emphasizing that real empowerment involves significant influence in government systems and goes beyond mere access. According to recent developments, Upper Chitral women actively participate in local and national political processes, striking a balance between traditional values and contemporary goals (Suwaibah et al., 2018). Despite ongoing difficulties, their tenacity and increasing participation highlight a slow but substantial change, making the area a crucial example for comprehending the dynamic relationship between electoral reforms and women's political empowerment in Pakistan (Bilal et al., 2018).

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to examine existing scholarship on the relationship between electoral reforms and women's political participation, while identifying key gaps in the literature. Previous studies highlight both historical trajectories and contemporary challenges shaping women's political empowerment across global and local contexts. Historically, women's political engagement has evolved through sustained struggle (Uddin, 2026). Ford (2018) notes that women have been politically active for nearly two centuries employing strategies such as suffrage movements, constitutional reforms, and electoral participation. Despite these efforts, full equality across political, legal, and socio-economic domains remains unachieved. Similarly, Nelson and Chowdhury (1994) highlight how women's participation in nationalist movements and democratic struggles significantly contributed to political awareness and mobilization, particularly in contexts like anti-colonial and authoritarian resistance movements. Recent global research emphasizes both progress and persistent threats. Krook (2017) observes that women's representation in national parliaments has doubled in recent decades, strengthening their role as a political constituency. However, rising incidents of harassment and violence against women in politics pose serious challenges to democratic inclusion. Supporting this trend, Thames (2017) argues that electoral reforms have played a crucial role in increasing women's participation, although progress remains gradual and uneven. In the Pakistani context, scholars underline both institutional progress and structural barriers. Shafiq, Arshad, and Riaz (2024) stress that women's inclusion is essential for democratic legitimacy, highlighting milestones such as the Pakistan Muslim Family Laws Ordinance and increased participation during the era of Benazir Bhutto. Moreover, quota systems and reserved seats have significantly enhanced women's political presence in both national and local institutions. Empirical studies further reveal that electoral reforms such as reserved seats and gender quotas have positively influenced women's representation. Jabeen (2019) and Riaz & Akbar (2022) demonstrate that reforms introduced during the early 2000s increased women's representation to approximately 17% in assemblies and 33% in local governments. Similarly, Nadia Bashir et al. (2024) highlight legal measures such as the 10% female voter turnout requirement and 5% party ticket quota, which aim to enhance women's electoral participation, although implementation gaps persist. Despite these advancements, socio-cultural barriers continue to limit women's effective participation. S. Irshad et al. (2023) and Burhan Rafay et al. (2016) emphasize challenges such as patriarchal norms, institutional constraints, and gender biases that hinder women's influence in policymaking. Region-specific studies reinforce this perspective. Rahila and Jawad (2025) identify family pressure and patriarchal control as key obstacles in Upper Chitral, while Jahan (2024) links limited participation to low education levels and conservative social values. Furthermore, research focusing on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa highlights structural inequalities. Farooq Khan et al. (2024) argue that women's political engagement is constrained by economic dependency, traditional gender roles, and limited access to political platforms. However, local governance reforms, such as the 2013 Local Government Act, have created opportunities for inclusion, as noted by Waqar Ul Muluk (2023). Electoral data also reflects gradual but insufficient progress. Gul and Sherazi (2022) show that although women's representation reached around 20% in the early 2000s, gender gaps in voter registration and electoral success persist. K. Naheed et al. (2021) conclude that while women's participation has increased over the past two decades, it remains largely dependent on reserved seats rather than direct electoral success.

Methodology

For this study, the below research methodology has been followed (Uddin, 2026).

a. Mixed Method

The research is based upon mixed-method approach composed of both qualitative and quantitative methods so as to explore the impacts of electoral reforms on women's political participation in Upper Chitral and also found out the factors which limited the full implementation of electoral reforms in Upper Chitral, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

b. Sources of data

The research is focused on primary data, surveys, interviews, observations, experiments and case studies. It also focused on secondary data, books, research papers, articles and other written materials in order to understand the concept of impact of electoral reforms on female's political participation and also highlighted the factors that facilitated and limited the full implementation of electoral reforms in District Upper Chitral, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

c. Sampling Method

For this study, stratified-convenient sampling has been followed (Uddin, 2026).

S. No	Respondent	No of respondents
1	Politicians	16
2	Local Representatives	10
3	Local Government Officials	08
4	Local People	31

d. Analysis of data

In the light of aforementioned research methodology, the primary data was collected through interviews and questionnaires. Moreover, analysis of the secondary data was based on content analysis method (Uddin, 2026).

Major Challenges

The findings of the study show the following major challenges in the way of women empowerment in District Upper Chitral (Uddin, 2026).

A. Cultural Barriers

During this study, the following cultural hindrances have been observed. First, the patriarchal politics restricted the participation of women in political spheres. Second, women are confined to domestic responsibilities and their political engagements are considered as inappropriate. Third, cultural notions of purdah (Veil) and honor restrict their movement and visibility. Fourth, female leadership faces resistance, social pressure, and lack of acceptance in the society (Uddin, 2026).

B. Social Constraints

In addition, some social challenges have also been noticed. First, women's political choices are often dictated by male family members. Second, low literacy and un-awareness has limited their understanding of political rights and electoral processes. Third, social isolation has also restricted mobility and lack of support. Fourth, minimal representation reduces motivation and recognition. Fifth, weak support mechanism like limited institutional, party, and community backing also hinder their role to play in politics (Uddin, 2026).

C. Religious Factors

In addition, religious factors also hinder women in upper Chitral to actively participate in politics. First, misinterpretation of religion discourages women to play political role. Second, lack of explicit support from religious leaders creates uncertainty and hesitation among women (Uddin, 2026).

D. Political Challenges

The political factors hindering women empowerment in Upper Chitral cannot be sidelined. First, male-dominated political structures excluded women from leadership and decision-making. Second, biased ticket allocation and preference for male candidates due to stronger networks

and resources also alienated women from political sphere of Upper Chitral. Third, women are often confined to symbolic or reserved roles with little influence. Fourth, women have limited institutional inclusion like weak participation in party and governance structures (Uddin, 2026).

E. Economic Barriers

The economic hindrances were also noticed. First, financial constraints like high campaign costs limit women's candidacy. Second, economic dependency like reliance on male family members also restricts women's independent political action (Uddin, 2026).

F. Geographic & Infrastructure Issues

The geographical and infrastructure factors have also observed as obstacles in the way of women political participation in Upper Chitral. First, remote terrain and poor transport have made it difficult for women to have access to polling stations. Second, weak communication systems also limited access to information and awareness campaigns. Third, harsh climate or seasonal isolation restricts participation and implementation of reforms (Uddin, 2026).

G. Security Concerns

The security issues like harassment and intimidation in the shape of social and psychological pressure discourages their participation in politics. In addition, unsafe polling environments or lack of gender-sensitive arrangements reduces turnout (Uddin, 2026).

H. Administrative & Governance Weaknesses

In addition, weak local governments or limited grassroots political engagement opportunities also obstructed their role in politics. Moreover, indifferent bureaucratic approach to introduce and enforce women-related electoral reforms is also one of the issues (Uddin, 2026).

I. Legal & Institutional Gaps

Besides this, weak enforcement mechanism to execute existing electoral reforms and poor coordination among institutions are some legal institutional hindrances to empower politically a woman in Upper Chitral (Uddin, 2026).

Major Recommendations

In the light of collected data (Uddin, 2026) the following recommendations have been suggested. Effective implementation of electoral reforms to enhance women's political participation in Upper Chitral requires a context-sensitive, multi-dimensional strategy rooted in local realities. Standardized, urban-centric reform models are unlikely to succeed; instead, localized reform design must account for intra-district variations in culture, mobility, and education across valleys such as Mulkhow, Torkhow, and Biyar. Leveraging community influencers, religious leaders, elders, and educated women is critical to securing social legitimacy (Uddin, 2026).

A women friendly polling environment is essential to ensure dignity, safety, and accessibility. This includes gender segregated and culturally appropriate polling arrangements, deployment of trained female staff and provision of basic infrastructure suited to the region's harsh geography. Complementary measures such as mobile polling, women only voting hours and pre-election awareness campaigns can significantly reduce participation barriers (Uddin, 2026).

Education and political consciousness form the structural foundation of sustained engagement. Beyond literacy, targeted civic education delivered through community-based programs and local languages must emphasize constitutional rights, electoral processes and the value of political participation. Simultaneously, engaging men, religious authorities and community leaders is necessary to reposition women's participation as a collective social good rather than a cultural disruption (Uddin, 2026).

Economic empowerment is a prerequisite for meaningful political inclusion. Women's financial independence through access to microfinance, local enterprise development and skill-building

programs reduces dependency on male intermediaries and enables autonomous political engagement. Institutional support, including campaign financing, stipends and logistical assistance is vital to facilitate women's entry and retention in politics (Uddin, 2026).

The use of indigenous language communication is indispensable in a linguistically diverse region. Electoral information, awareness campaigns and political messaging must be delivered in local languages such as Khowar to enhance comprehension, trust, and outreach, particularly among women with limited formal education (Uddin, 2026).

Aligning reforms with religious narratives enhances acceptability in a context where religion strongly shapes public opinion. Framing women's political participation within Islamic principles such as consultation (shura), justice and collective welfare can mitigate resistance and reinforce legitimacy through culturally resonant arguments (Uddin, 2026).

Similarly, cultural legitimization strategies must present women's political engagement as consistent with local values of honor, dignity and family representation. Positioning women's participation as an extension of existing informal influence structures strengthens community acceptance (Uddin, 2026).

Institutional effectiveness depends on robust bureaucratic accountability mechanisms. Clearly defined roles, performance indicators (e.g., female voter turnout, staff deployment) and enforceable evaluation systems are necessary to ensure that reforms translate into measurable outcomes rather than symbolic commitments (Uddin, 2026).

Finally, strict anti-harassment enforcement is fundamental to building trust in the electoral process. Zero-tolerance policies, gender-sensitive training, accessible complaint mechanisms and rapid response systems are essential to create a secure and inclusive environment for women voters and candidates (Uddin, 2026).

Conclusion

In the nut shell, it can be said that despite electoral reforms in Pakistan, the political participation of women in Upper Chitral is still a far cry and not up to the mark.

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