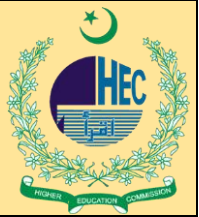




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Pathways to Empowerment: Overcoming Structural and Cultural Hurdles in Women's Political Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the socio-cultural vestigial impediments that hinder the realization of political empowerment of women in Pashtun community of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan. Although constitutional, women are grossly underrepresented in politics and a sophisticated set of patriarchal relations. Using a qualitative research design, collecting data was done through in depth and unstructured interviews with 30 educated and politically interested Pashtun women living in Peshawar, which was chosen through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis found five interrelated thematic hurdles, including near complete lack of autonomy in decision-making, requiring male authorization to engage in politics; a severe lack of access to education, which can be seen as the root cause of empowerment; an omnipresent male domination within political parties preventing women access to useful leadership roles; cultural and religious beliefs that strength and honor can be used to subjugate women; and the appearance of fear of violence, which suppresses any ambition towards politics. Conceptualized by a theoretical approach based on Radical Feminism, the results demonstrate that these obstacles are not disconnected from each other but they create a system that is aimed at controlling resources, space and bodies of women in order to leave them out of power. The research leads to the conclusion that legislative quotas are not enough to be applied to the top-down level without bottom-up strategies at the same time. It, therefore, suggests three radical ways into empowerment; economic and educational independence, reforming institutions in order to produce safe political spaces, and initiating education campaigns to make the difference between culture and religion. The study highlights the fact that the actual political empowerment will be achieved by removing the patriarchal nexus in order to allow the women to become independent agents.

Keywords: Women's Political Empowerment, Political Participation, Patriarchy, Socio-Cultural Barriers, Pashtun Society, Pakistan, Qualitative Research, Radical Feminism.

Introduction

The radical philosophy that no country can really be great without the active involvement of its women was radically summarized by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, a founding father of Pakistan (as cited in Begum, 1987). This ideal is, however, in sharp contrast with the present reality that is experienced in the country, where women are yet to be empowered in the political world. The paramount significance of the political involvement of women is not only a question of illumination but a basic requirement of democratic credibility and long-term development. According to Sawyer (2000), women inclusion means that the policy results are indicative of the experiences and interests of the whole people and not a half of the people. It is substantial, given

the idea of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2021), according to which gender equality in the political life enhances governance and speeds up the progress of all Sustainable Development Goals. However, the performance of Pakistan in this front is frightening. A report released by the World Economic Forum (2022) on Global Gender Gap reviews the global status of 146 countries; Pakistan has been ranked 145 out of 146, which is a sad example of a historically unequal system. This difference is most severely experienced in the political arena which is demonstrated as a shocking imbalance in the number of voters between the genders as it was recorded at 12.54 million in the 2018 general elections (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2019) and an abysmal number of 1 percent in directly elected seats in the past (Lari, 2011). This gap between the constitutional advocacy of equality and the Pakistani woman is a critical sign that democracy lacks dramatically as a large segment of the citizenry has been effectively disenfranchised.

This national process of exclusion is even highly enhanced in this concrete socio-cultural environment of Pakhtun community in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region where patriarchal structures are firmly rooted and intensively defended. In this case, the political sphere is not only male-dominated, but it has been made conceptually structured to be a place of masculinity (Rasul, 2014). It is a strict code of honour (Pardah or Purdah) that controls the social order of things and the concept of male family honour depends directly on the seclusion and limited movement of the women (Alam, 2012). This forms a nexus of the interactions of culture and politics to exclude women in a systematic way. As indicated in the problem statement of the research, the perceptions about the role of women are extremely engrained in social stratification, cultural norms and religious interpretation which when combined put women at the position of second class citizens, restricted to the domestic posts (UNICEF, 1988). The entering into the life of openness, challenges of confrontational politics is therefore seen as a defiance of gender roles, as well as a direct assault on the structure of the familial and communal honour. This serves well to make politics a no-go zone to women and their voices are not considered legitimate and their opinions are perceived as irrelevant. A more strict normative framework, according to the study, exists in Pakhtun society compared to what is found in other Pakistani societies and thus the barrier to entry is not only an institutional, but is more to the point a cultural and ideological one.

As a result, a path of political empowerment of Pakhtun women is a difficult road that transcends the ballot box. It is a fight against a highly internalized patriarchal atmosphere that is manifested in day-to-day practices and powers. The results of the research indicate that the agency of women is horribly restricted; they need permission of the male to participate in political life, they use the votes suggested by their husbands and relatives, and their involvement depends on the consent of family members (Interview data, pp. 30-31). This powerless situation is added by the widespread fear of violence- physical, psychological and social- which acts as a strong discouragement to any kind of political ambition (Interview #24, p. 41). Hence, studying what obstructs the political participation of women in this region is not a case to look at the mere failure to adopt a less problematic policy intervention but the radical understanding of what is meant by the structures of power, culture and social control. It is crucial to understand these dynamics in order to move beyond top-down approaches such as quotas which although essential, have not been effective enough in breaking down those socio-cultural norms that still

underlie the ability to suppress the political agency of the female gender as well as the fact that politics is still an exclusively masculine domain.

Literature Review

A combination of strongly ingrained barriers that systematically deny women the opportunity to participate in political activities in Pakistan has been consistently noted in the literature, and such barriers are especially high in the Pashtun society. According to scholarly literature, a patriarchal social system is the root of the problem, a system where men dispose of all the features of society, such as the lessening and duties of women (Khan, 2012; Alam, 2012). The culture and religious interpretations that support this structure are frequently played on to legitimize female seclusion (Purdah) and to make political activism an act of religious and cultural defiance (Shaheed et al., 2009). Both the fear and experience of violence are powerful mechanisms to enforce these standards; as per the reports by organizations, such as the Thomson Reuters Foundation, it is continuously ranked among the most unsafe countries to be a woman, which establishes an atmosphere of fear and discourages engagement (Ali, 2018; Rauf, 2020). Moreover, it is not only a societal phenomenon because this exclusion is established even in the field of politics. The problem of male domination in political parties is one of the barriers, often the women become relocated to soft-profile positions, are not included into the major decision making process, and are provided with the tickets as representatives of family political dynasties, not on merit (National Commission on the Status of Women [NCSW], 2010; Rasul, 2014). This summary shows that women have a fortress of oppression that is multi-layered, with social norms, cultural decrees, violence threat, and institutionalized sexism working in unison to hold on to the status quo in politics as a masculine domain.

To effectively analyze the struggle against these barriers, it is essential to adopt a robust definition of empowerment. Moving beyond simplistic metrics of participation, Kabeer (1999) conceptualizes empowerment as a multifaceted process involving the expansion of choice, agency, and resources leading to meaningful achievements. This process-oriented view is crucial, as it recognizes that mere presence in a political space does not equate to power. Applying this specifically to the political domain, Ibrahim (2011) defines women's political empowerment as the freedom to vote, run for office, engage in political expression, hold positions of authority, and influence decision-making. This aligns with the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute's empirical framework, which measures political empowerment through three core dimensions: *freedom of choice* (e.g., suffrage, freedom of expression), *agency* (the capacity to act independently and make free choices), and *participation* (active involvement in politics and civil society) (Sundström et al., 2022). Therefore, for Pashtun women, true political empowerment is not achieved simply by casting a vote—often under directive—but through the cultivation of the genuine agency to make independent political choices and the ability to participate authentically and safely in the political process, from grassroots activism to holding elected office.

To deconstruct the root causes of this disempowerment, this study employs Radical Feminism as its primary theoretical lens. Pioneered by thinkers like Kate Millett (1970), Radical Feminism posits that patriarchy is not a natural condition but a pervasive political institution structured around power relationships that subordinate women in all spheres of life—the personal, social, economic, and political. Millett (1970) argued that this system is upheld through ideology, social customs, and institutional practices that normalize male dominance. This framework is uniquely

suited for the present analysis because it moves beyond liberal feminist appeals for equality within the existing system and instead directly challenges the very foundational structures—the patriarchal family, cultural codes like Pashtunwali, and religious misinterpretations—that are identified in the literature as the primary sources of oppression. It provides the theoretical depth to understand that the barriers faced by Pashtun women are not discrete or accidental but are interconnected manifestations of a single, overarching system of patriarchal power designed to exclude them from public power.

Consequently, Radical Feminism allows for a "gross root level analysis" (p. 29) that interprets the documented phenomena—the lack of decision-making power, the enforcement of Purdah, the fear of violence, and male dominance in parties—not as isolated cultural anomalies, but as logical, interconnected tactics of a patriarchal political institution defending itself. The perceived need for male permission, for instance, is a direct manifestation of what Millett termed the power-powerless dynamic within the family, the primary cell of patriarchal political control. By framing politics as a "dirty game" unsuitable for women, patriarchal forces ideologically justify their exclusion from a key domain of power. Therefore, this theoretical lens convincingly argues that the struggle for women's political empowerment in this context is inherently a radical project: it requires nothing less than the dismantling of these deep-rooted patriarchal structures to create space for women's agency and full political personhood.

Problem Statement

Although the constitution guarantees women in Pakistan and the international community commitment towards gender equality, females in Pakistan, especially the conservative Pashtun, are grossly underrepresented in politics. This issue is anchored in a mass of socio-cultural and structural entrapments that are so deep rooted. Another controlling factor is their patriarchal system that dictates all facets of women, who have little autonomy and the power to make their own decisions. Female seclusion (purdah) is supported by restrictive cultural norms and religious interpretations, thus placing politics as a male preserve. In addition, women have no political aspiration or participation as a result of actively deterring the political aspirations of women by the pervasive threat of violence and social stigma. Therefore, women are elevated out of the real-life political participation in a systematic manner, which not only deprives women of the basic rights accorded as provided in the United Nation charter, but also stalls developmental aspects of democracy and fairness by leaving half the population with their mouths open. This paper examines these obstacles in a bid to establish ways of achieving true political empowerment.

Objective of the Study

To investigate the socio-cultural and patriarchal barriers to women's political participation and empowerment in the Pashtun societal context and to propose actionable pathways for change.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research design in this study was a qualitative research to fulfill its objective of examining the compound socio-cultural stigmatising issues which blocked the political empowerment of women in District Peshawar. The character of the investigation with attempts to comprehend subtle perceptions, lived experiences, and deeply rooted social norms required the approach that would have been able to obtain rich and detailed information. A quantitative method was considered inadequate to investigate subjective and context-specific fact of the participants. The

study was modeled to be structured more in depth than breadth with the banner of the patriarchal social structure, normative systems and religious orientations with which shape the electoral participation of women. This was chosen because it helped to shed more light on the underlying causes and social processes of the phenomenon, which is in line with the aim of the study that aimed at offering a thick description of the cultural and societal barriers encountered by Pashtun women. The philosophical rationale behind this method is also based on interpretivism logic because it attempts to explain the social world on the voices of the participants in the research because reality is socially constructed and multidimensional.

Sampling Strategy and Data Collection Techniques

The universe of the study was confined to District Peshawar, with data collection conducted at the University of Peshawar and Shaheed Benazir Women University. These sites were strategically selected; the former for its diverse and heterogeneous population, and the latter for its unique position as a women-only institution, ensuring easy accessibility to a concentrated sample of educated women. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants, a non-probability strategy essential for this study as it targeted specific individuals who could provide the most relevant and information-rich data. The sample consisted exclusively of 30 female students and faculty members who possessed pre-existing political knowledge, interest, and orientation. This criterion was crucial for learning about women who have a tendency towards political participation. Data collection ceased upon reaching theoretical saturation, the point at which no new information or themes were observed in the data. Primary data was gathered through in-depth, unstructured interviews, each lasting between 20 to 35 minutes. This method allowed for flexibility and the emergence of unanticipated themes, enabling participants to express their views freely. Interviews were conducted in a natural and quiet setting, recorded using a smartphone application, and supplemented with comprehensive field notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details.

Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

The data collected was put through a thematic analysis technique which is a common, systematic method of identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) in qualitative data. Transcribing of the interviews was done in verbatim with the interviews being read through several times to familiarize oneself with the same. The data were initially subjected to the generation of codes and subsequently amongst the codes were collated into potential themes. These themes were then revised, narrowed down and defined so as to reflect the data properly. All the concluding themes were discussed and evidenced based on the verbatim statements of the participants that were mentioned in pseudonyms to maintain anonymity and placed in the context of the available empirical literature. Strict ethical considerations were followed in the whole process of the research. This was done by ensuring that the informed consent was obtained before data was collected, the confidentiality of all personal information and the anonymity of the identities of the participants. The researcher assured no harm to any personal beliefs and views of the study participants and ensured that the information gathered would be used only in academic circles hence the integrity and ethical rigor of such studies.

Results and Findings

The Absence of Autonomy: Lack of Decision-Making Power

The analysis revealed that the most fundamental barrier to political empowerment is the near-total absence of autonomous decision-making power among Pashtun women. In a society where

males dominate choices, women's political agency is not merely discouraged but is systematically negated. Participants consistently reported that any form of political engagement—whether voting, campaigning, or contesting elections—requires explicit permission from a male guardian, typically a father, husband, or brother. This dependency crushes independent political ambition before it can even form. As Nazia explained, "In all decision-making circumstances, women are expected to defer to men... Before women enter politics in Pakhtun culture, men must grant their permission." This control extends to the voting booth, where the affiliation of their male relatives with a political party effectively dictates women's electoral choices, transforming the act of voting from a right into an obligation to the male-headed household. Brikhna, a student, underscored this profound dependency, stating, "Women are fully dependent on men for their everyday life routine and other important aspects of their life. Since women are dependent, men must provide a party, candidate or organization details to support in politics." This lack of self-determination is the backbone of disempowerment, ensuring that women remain political surrogates rather than independent actors, their political identities subsumed within the patriarchal family structure.

The Foundational Key: The Central Role of Women's Education

Participants unanimously identified education as the critical, non-negotiable foundation for challenging the status quo and fostering political empowerment. The findings highlight a stark disparity in investment, where female education is often perceived as a financial burden or a wasted resource, as girls are seen as temporary members of their natal homes. Mehwish, hailing from a tribal area, noted, "investing on women education is considered as a wastage of money. Women are seen as a burden in their own house." However, the participants argued that education is the primary catalyst for awareness, critical thinking, and the confidence necessary to claim political space. It is the tool that allows women to understand their constitutional rights, decipher the political landscape, and formulate their own opinions. Shahida Aman, a teacher, powerfully connected educated women to an educated society, arguing, "educating every mother is the most effective way to ensure that society is educated." Furthermore, participants linked economic independence, often a product of education, to autonomous decision-making. One sociology student observed that "working women, unlike their unemployed counterparts, are not required to confer with male family members before making decisions about their political career." Thus, education was framed not just as academic learning, but as the essential pathway to economic agency, self-worth, and the intellectual capacity to engage in political life.

The Old Boys' Club: Male Dominancy in Political Structures

The research uncovered that the patriarchal hegemony extends beyond the household and is rigorously enforced within the formal structures of political parties, which operate as exclusive "old boys' clubs." Participants reported that women's participation within parties is rarely promoted and that they are systematically excluded from core decision-making procedures, candidate selection, and strategic planning. Shazia Aslam described this as a "traditional approach to suppress women and keep them behind the doors," noting that authoritative positions are almost exclusively reserved for men. This male dominance creates a vicious cycle: the exclusion of women from decision-making roles perpetuates policies and a party culture that are insensitive to women's issues and hostile to their leadership. The findings also revealed a critical issue of access; political party membership and candidacy are not merit-based but are largely available only to women from political dynasties, wealthy backgrounds, or those with

personal connections to the male leadership. Nazia Anjum confirmed this, stating, "it is truly the system of Pakistani Political system where women have rare chances of getting into a higher and strong position to take decisions." This internal party structure acts as a formidable gatekeeper, ensuring that even if a woman overcomes familial hurdles, she faces a second layer of institutionalized gender discrimination within the very organizations that should facilitate her political career.

The Weight of Tradition: Cultural and Religious Barriers

A complex and deeply ingrained interplay of cultural codes and religious interpretations forms a formidable barrier that morally and socially justifies the exclusion of women from politics. The study found that Pashtunwali (the Pashtun tribal code) and certain interpretations of Islam are often conflated to enforce a rigid gender ideology. Cultural norms promoting female segregation and isolation, such as *Purdah* (veiling and seclusion), are frequently justified through religious discourse. Zara, a sociology student, explained that these norms "impede the mobility of women," creating "access and visibility barriers [that] limit women's political participation, from voting to running for office." Participants highlighted how religion is often misinterpreted or weaponized to restrict women. Rukhsana from the Islamiyat department noted, "The political participation of women in Islam is not clear due to which most of women in Pashtun society don't go for it," leaving them marginalized. This creates a powerful social sanction where a woman adhering to conventional norms is praised, while one who seeks a public political role risks being labeled immoral or irreligious. The socialization process, as Haseena pointed out, internalizes these gendered norms, making women themselves recognize and fear violating these boundaries, thus becoming complicit in their own exclusion from the political sphere.

The Silent Inhibitor: Fear of Violence

Pervading all other barriers is a pervasive and potent fear of violence that serves as the ultimate silent inhibitor to political participation. This fear is not abstract; it is a tangible and ever-present threat that regulates women's behavior. The findings indicate that women who venture into politics—a domain perceived as a "dirty game" and a masculine space—face a high risk of physical, psychological, and sexual violence, both from within their households and from the broader community. Saima Ameen asserted that the "perceived fear of violence, from men inside and outside of house, restricts women to participate in political activities and especially in political candidacy and campaign." This fear is inextricably linked to notions of family honor (*izzat*); a woman's political activity is often construed as bringing shame and dishonor upon her family, making her a target for violence intended to restore that honor. The research participants expressed concern about sexual exploitation and harassment in the political environment, which is viewed as unsafe and hostile. Areej summarized that in this male-dominated culture, "one of the most prevailing is violence against women." This climate of fear ensures that even the most educated and ambitious women practice self-censorship and withdrawal, as the potential cost of participation—ranging from social stigma to physical harm—is deemed unacceptably high, thereby effectively maintaining the patriarchal political order through intimidation.

Discussion

The identified five thematic hurdles (lack of autonomy, educational deprivation, male party dominance, cultural-religious barriers, and fear of violence) are not stipulated as discrete issues but are related, and symptoms of the same, of the umbrella phenomenon of patriarchal system. This discussion validates the primary assumption of the Radical Feminist model (Millet, 1970)

that was used to conduct this research which is that patriarchy is a pervasive political institution aiming to safeguard male power. As the findings show, this system has a total control: it denies enterprises to women as female education and financial autonomy is not a priority; it controls their space by cultural codes such as the Purdahs and Pashtunwali that justify the need to segregate and to grant women a limited level of movement; and it also suppresses their bodies by using violence as a constant reminder of the need to function in harmony. Such three places of control space, resources, and bodies channel women out of the sphere of power, which is carefully designed as a space that belongs to men only (Rasul, 2014). Thus the fact that Pashtun women have not been able to engage in the political sphere is not one of individual ambition but rather, the natural result of a well-orchestrated social edifice designed to put out the ambition pre-emptively, confirming the radical feminist perception that individual and the political are inseparable.

To convert these insights of the analysis into a change practice, it is necessary to shift away as the barriers are defined and instead create solid ways of empowerment, which is a direct response to the third objective of the study. These channels have to strike the patriarchal nexus at various levels. To begin with, there is Economic & Educational Empowerment, the background pathway. This is by means of offering vocational training, and publicizing work at home opportunities that may be culturally feasible as advocates persisted. Economic autonomy is a very crucial trigger to autonomy and declines dependence on the male guardians and brings the self-esteem to make independent political choices. Second, it needs safe spaces and Institutional Reform to break the old boys club system of political parties. This route requires bringing about strong women-pioneered wings in parties that have real decision-making powers that are not controlled by the males and autonomous financially. At the same time, the strict application of the anti-harassment regulations and the introduction of the gender-sensitive policies cannot be talked out of to allow building a safe climate that will help reduce the fear of violence, which is common. Third, we should have a route of Awareness, Advocacy, and Re-interpretation that should be used to fight ideological objections. This is through strategic social media campaigns to enlighten the rural and urban women of their political rights and initiating an initiative where there is a clear definition between repressive culture and effective religious values, where most of the respondents indicated that rights of self-determination were already provided.

Finally, such bottom-up, multi-pronged paths emphasize the severe constriction of plans on the top-down legislative indicates such as reserved quotas. Although quotas have played a significant role in granting a minimum degree of the descriptive representation by having women to govern the state, this study has shown that it is not enough to bring substantive empowerment. The patriarchal system may adopt quotas, but such quotas are usually appointed by elite women who have family ties and who, instead of breaking the status quo, may reinforce it. The real empowerment defined by Kabeer (1999) and the plight of the participants shows that agency, resources, and self-determined achievements are all the attributes needed to gain real empowerment. Thus, the sustainable change requires a two-pronged solution: preserving and enhancing the top-down legal structures and at the same time implementing the bottom-up channels that will focus on changing the socio-cultural landscape. It is only through political mainstreaming of women on the grassroot through education and provision of economic and ideological support and ensuring that political institutions become truly inclusive and safe, that

the deep-rooted patriarchal nexus can be broken in order to give way to authentic and transformative politics.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

According to the overall analysis that can be made in this paper, it can be concluded that political empowerment of Pashtun women is a very elusive goal that is essentially hampered by a highly interconnected network of patriarchy. This system is not an isolated system that keeps women trapped in barriers but is an orchestrated system which regulates the access to resources, limits physical and social movement by the use of cultural and religious proclamations and controls physical bodies and choices by the overwhelming fear of violence. The analysis of the results confirmingly indicates that the solution to this disempowerment remains consistent in that the failure to make independent decisions is the key to the disempowerment issues in which male consent determines all aspects of political existence, including the choice of a particular candidate and even the candidacy. This fact is compounded by a political party system that serves as a closed men-only club, in which women are marginalized in all aspects, thus showing no interest in senior positions and leadership. As such, the process of political engagement is not only seen not as the right but as the violation of the honor of the family and the societal norms, so the political sphere was seen as an unwelcoming and inaccessible area to women.

Thus, to genuinely become politically empowered, a multi-level approach, which can step beyond superficial answers, is necessary. It requires a collective action of cutting the paths that assault the sources of disenfranchisement and not just its effects. This involves the bottom up revolution, which has directed its attention towards economic and educational empowerment to enable financial independency and critical thinking which qualifies as a pre-condition of agency in politics. At the same time, the top-down institutional changes are crucial to remove the gender framework of political parties and establish truly safe and inclusive environments of women. These have to be enhanced by a long-term awareness and advocacy initiative that decodes and recodes oppressive cultural behavior in the terms of religious beliefs and thus, extends a new social agreement that enshrines politically the importance of women. After all, this radical socio-cultural transformation is needed even in the face of the legislative effort such as quotas that would help open the doors. Real empowerment will also be achieved by seeing pashtun women being involved in politics not as proxies and tokens, but rather as independent, confident and secure agents of their own destiny which will fundamentally change the political arena within the region.

Recommendations

1. Implement targeted vocational education and skill-development programs for women to foster economic independence and self-reliance.
2. Launch nationwide awareness campaigns using social media and local media to highlight the importance of women's political participation and rights.
3. Establish and enforce gender-sensitive policies within political parties, including mandatory women-led wings and quotas for leadership roles.
4. Create safe, harassment-free environments in political spaces through strict implementation of anti-harassment laws and responsive accountability mechanisms.
5. Introduce flexible work-from-home and economic opportunities tailored to women to balance social norms with financial empowerment.

6. Promote religious and cultural literacy programs to clarify women's rights in Islam and distinguish them from restrictive cultural practices.
7. Provide scholarships, stipends, and financial incentives specifically for girls' higher education to reduce dropout rates and encourage academic achievement.
8. Strengthen collaboration between government, NGOs, and community leaders to ensure grassroots support and localized solutions for women's inclusion in politics.

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