

WOMEN IN THE SHADOWS: IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGES TO FEMALE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN PAKISTAN: A CASE STUDY OF KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the multifaceted challenges to female political participation in Pakistan, focusing specifically on the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province. Despite constitutional guarantees and international commitments, women's political representation in KPK remains significantly low due to entrenched socio-cultural norms, systemic gender biases, and institutional barriers. The study employs qualitative method approach, and surveys with qualitative insights from interviews with female politicians, activists, and experts. Key findings reveal that patriarchal structures, lack of education, economic dependency, and limited access to political networks significantly hinder women's political engagement. Additionally, the analysis highlights the impact of security concerns and political violence on women's participation. The paper argues for comprehensive policy reforms, including gender-sensitive electoral policies, capacity-building programs for women, and initiatives to foster a more inclusive political culture. By providing a detail understanding of the impediments to female political participation in KPK, this study contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality in political representation in Pakistan and offers actionable recommendations to enhance women's role in the political arena. The findings underscore the need for concerted efforts by the government, civil society, and international organizations to address these challenges and promote a more equitable and participatory political environment.

Keywords: Female political participation, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, gender equality, institutional barriers, socio-cultural norms.

INTRODUCTION

In the political landscape of Pakistan, women's participation has been a subject of considerable debate and analysis. Despite the constitutional guarantees and Pakistan's commitments to international frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), female political representation remains markedly low. This disparity is particularly pronounced in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), a region with a unique socio-political context that further complicates women's political engagement. This research paper seeks to delve into the intricate challenges faced by women in KPK as they navigate the political arena, offering a case study that sheds light on the broader issues affecting female political participation in Pakistan (Azim, 2021).

The significance of women's participation in politics cannot be overstated. It is a cornerstone of democratic governance and essential for the development of inclusive policies that address the needs of all citizens. However, in KPK, women's political representation is hindered by a confluence of socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers. Patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles are deeply embedded in the societal fabric, often relegating women to the private sphere and limiting their public engagement. These cultural impediments are compounded by systemic gender biases within political institutions and a lack of supportive policies that could facilitate women's entry and sustainability in politics (Dawn, 2022).

The objective of this research is to identify and analyze the specific challenges that women in KPK face in their pursuit of political participation. This

involves examining both overt barriers, such as discriminatory practices and violence, and more subtle obstacles, like limited access to political networks and resources. By employing a mixed-methods approach, this study integrates quantitative data from electoral records and surveys with qualitative insights from interviews with female politicians, activists, and experts. This comprehensive approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of the barriers to women's political participation in KPK (Baehr, 2020).

A critical aspect of this study is the exploration of educational and economic factors that influence women's political engagement. Education plays a pivotal role in shaping political awareness and empowerment, yet many women in KPK face significant barriers to accessing quality education. Similarly, economic dependency further constrains their ability to participate in politics, as financial independence is often a prerequisite for political candidacy and activism. This research will highlight the intersectionality of these issues, demonstrating how education and economic status intersect with gender to create a complex web of challenges for aspiring female politicians. Another dimension of this research focuses on the impact of security concerns and political violence on women's political participation. KPK has experienced significant instability and conflict, which disproportionately affects women and deters them from engaging in political activities. Threats and acts of violence against female politicians are not uncommon, creating an environment of fear and intimidation that further discourages women's involvement in politics. Through case studies and personal accounts, this paper will illustrate the real and perceived risks that women face in the political sphere (Dilanzo, 2019). This research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on gender equality in political representation by providing a detailed case study of KPK. It will offer policy recommendations to address the identified challenges and promote a more inclusive political environment. By understanding the specific barriers to female political participation in KPK, stakeholders can develop targeted strategies to empower women and enhance their role in the political arena, thereby strengthening democratic governance in Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

To analyze the challenges to female political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan, this research employs the theoretical framework of Feminist Institutionalism. Feminist Institutionalism examines how gender dynamics are embedded within political institutions and how these institutions can both enable and constrain women's political participation. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding the complex interplay of formal and informal rules, norms, and practices that shape women's roles in politics in KPK (Iqbal, 2005). Feminist Institutionalism integrates insights from both feminist theory and new institutionalism. Feminist theory highlights the significance of gender as a fundamental organizing principle in society, influencing power relations and access to resources. New institutionalism, on the other hand, focuses on how institutions—defined broadly to include formal rules, norms, and practices—shape political behavior and outcomes. By combining these perspectives, Feminist Institutionalism provides a robust analytical tool for examining how institutions perpetuate gender inequalities and how they can be transformed to promote gender equality (Jatoi, 2022).

One of the core concepts of Feminist Institutionalism is the distinction between formal and informal institutions. Formal institutions refer to codified laws, regulations, and policies that govern political processes. In the context of KPK, formal institutions include the legal frameworks and electoral systems that regulate political participation. Despite constitutional guarantees of gender equality and reserved seats for women in legislative bodies, the implementation of these provisions often falls short. Analyzing the gaps between formal legal provisions and their actual enforcement can reveal the institutional weaknesses that hinder women's political participation. Informal institutions, encompassing unwritten rules, social norms, and cultural practices, play a significant role in shaping political behavior. In KPK, patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles are deeply entrenched, often relegating women to subordinate positions and discouraging their involvement in public life. These informal institutions can undermine formal policies designed to promote gender equality, creating a hostile environment for female political aspirants. Understanding the influence of informal institutions is crucial for identifying the social and cultural barriers that women face in KPK (Ahmad, 2020).

Feminist Institutionalism also emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, recognizing that women's experiences of political participation are shaped by multiple, intersecting identities, including ethnicity, class, religion, and geographic location. In KPK, factors such as rural-urban divides, tribal affiliations, and economic disparities intersect with gender to create a complex landscape of challenges for women. An intersectional analysis can uncover how these intersecting identities exacerbate barriers to political participation and highlight the need for targeted interventions that address the specific needs of diverse groups of women. Moreover, Feminist Institutionalism encourages a critical examination of power dynamics within institutions. It posits that institutions are not neutral; they reflect and reproduce existing power relations. In KPK, political institutions have historically been dominated by men, which can create an exclusionary culture and limit women's access to political networks and resources. Examining power dynamics within political parties, electoral bodies, and legislative assemblies can reveal how institutional practices marginalize women and propose strategies for creating more inclusive and equitable political environments (Khan, 2021).

Applying Feminist Institutionalism to the study of female political participation in KPK allows for a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted barriers women face. It highlights the interplay between formal and informal institutions, the significance of intersectional identities, and the embedded power dynamics that shape women's political engagement. By using this theoretical framework, the research can offer nuanced insights and practical recommendations for transforming institutions to better support women's political participation in KPK and beyond.

CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

Women's participation outside the household in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) remains limited due to entrenched societal taboos affecting their involvement in politics, careers, and education. Cultural expectations confine women to domestic roles, while historical patriarchal norms and misinterpretations of religious teachings further restrict their public engagement. Additionally, limited access to education hinders the development

of necessary skills and knowledge for political involvement (Allauddin, 2020). However, recent years have seen positive changes in KPK. To enhance women's political participation, it is crucial to address these cultural, historical, religious, and educational barriers through comprehensive policies and legislation aligned with egalitarian-liberal feminist principles, thereby fostering a more inclusive political landscape.

Socio-Cultural Barriers to Female Political Participation

A. Patriarchal Structures and Norms

Patriarchal structures and norms are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural landscape of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), significantly impacting women's political participation. These patriarchal structures are characterized by male dominance in various spheres of life, including politics, where decision-making power and authority are predominantly held by men. In KPK, a region where traditional values and customs are strongly upheld, these structures create a formidable barrier to women's involvement in political activities ((Iwanaga, 2008).

In patriarchal societies, the public sphere is often regarded as a male domain, while women's roles are confined to the private sphere, primarily focusing on family and household responsibilities. This division reinforces the perception that politics and governance are inherently masculine domains, which undermines the legitimacy of female political candidates and leaders. Women who seek to challenge these norms and enter politics face significant resistance from their families and communities, who may view their ambitions as a threat to traditional gender roles (Ali, 2023).

Furthermore, patriarchal norms perpetuate the idea that men are better suited for leadership and decision-making roles due to their supposed rationality and strength, while women are deemed more emotional and nurturing. This perception not only limits women's opportunities to participate in politics but also undermines their potential contributions to political discourse and decision-making. In KPK, where such traditional beliefs are prevalent, women often face a double burden: the societal expectation to conform to traditional gender roles and the challenge of overcoming entrenched biases within political institutions (Ahmad, 2019).

The impact of these patriarchal structures is also evident in the lack of support for women's political activities. Women who attempt to engage in politics may encounter significant obstacles, such as limited access to political networks, financial resources, and opportunities for training and development. This lack of support reinforces the gender gap in political participation and perpetuates the cycle of exclusion.

B. Gender Roles and Expectations

Gender roles and expectations play a crucial role in shaping women's political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. From an early age, individuals in KPK are socialized into specific gender roles that dictate their behavior and aspirations. For women, these roles often emphasize domestic responsibilities, caregiving, and adherence to traditional values, while men are encouraged to pursue public and professional roles (Ghulam, 2020).

The societal expectations placed on women in KPK create significant barriers to their political participation. Women are often expected to prioritize their family duties over personal ambitions, including political aspirations. This expectation is reinforced by cultural norms that value women's roles as wives and mothers above their potential contributions to public life. As a result, women who seek to enter politics may face disapproval from their families and communities, who view their ambitions as incompatible with traditional gender roles.

Additionally, gender roles in KPK influence the perception of women's capabilities and qualifications for political office. Women who challenge these roles and seek political positions often face skepticism about their abilities and suitability for leadership. This skepticism is fueled by stereotypes that portray women as less capable or less committed to political responsibilities compared to men. Such stereotypes not only undermine women's confidence but also hinder their chances of success in political campaigns and leadership roles (Aurat, 2015).

C. Impact of Religious Beliefs and Practices

Religious beliefs and practices have a profound impact on gender dynamics and women's political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Islam, the predominant religion in the region, is interpreted and practiced in ways that can either reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms. The influence of religious beliefs on women's political participation is complex and multifaceted, shaped by various

interpretations and socio-political contexts (Aurat Foundation, 2019).

In conservative interpretations of Islam, women's roles are often restricted to the domestic sphere, with limited participation in public and political life. These interpretations emphasize modesty and seclusion for women, which can be perceived as conflicting with active political engagement. As a result, women who seek to enter politics may face resistance from religious leaders and community members who view their participation as contrary to religious principles.

However, it is important to recognize that Islam also contains principles of gender equality and justice. Progressive interpretations of Islamic teachings support women's rights to participate in political and public life, and there are examples of Muslim women who have successfully engaged in politics and advocacy. The challenge lies in reconciling these progressive interpretations with traditional practices and overcoming the resistance from conservative elements within society (Gul, 2021).

The impact of religious beliefs on women's political participation in KPK is also influenced by the broader socio-political environment. In regions where religious extremism and fundamentalism are prevalent, women's political activities may be particularly restricted due to security concerns and threats of violence. This environment can create a hostile atmosphere for women seeking to challenge traditional gender roles and engage in political activism.

Institutional Barriers to Female Political Participation

A. Gender Biases in Political Institutions

Gender biases within political institutions present a significant barrier to female political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). These biases are entrenched in both formal structures and informal practices, creating an environment that often disadvantages women seeking to enter or advance in the political arena (Ali, 2008).

i. Formal Structures and Gender Biases

Formal political institutions in KPK, such as legislative assemblies and electoral commissions, are typically designed and operated within a framework that has historically marginalized women. Gender biases in these institutions can manifest in several

ways. For instance, political institutions may have rules and procedures that inadvertently favor male candidates, such as scheduling meetings or voting times that conflict with traditional gender roles and domestic responsibilities. Furthermore, the lack of gender-sensitive policies and practices within these institutions can perpetuate discriminatory attitudes and behaviors (Jamil, 2009).

In legislative bodies, women's voices and concerns may be underrepresented due to the limited number of women in these positions. This underrepresentation can result in policies and decisions that do not adequately address the needs and issues faced by women. The presence of gender biases in legislative processes and decision-making can further marginalize women's perspectives and contributions.

ii. **Informal Practices and Gender Biases**

Informal practices within political institutions also play a crucial role in reinforcing gender biases. Networking and mentorship opportunities, which are essential for political advancement, are often dominated by male members of the political community. Women may find it challenging to access these networks or secure mentorship from influential figures who can provide guidance and support (Farooq, 2009).

B. Lack of Supportive Policies and Frameworks

The lack of supportive policies and frameworks is a significant institutional barrier to female political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Effective policies and frameworks are essential for creating an environment that supports and facilitates women's involvement in politics. Without such measures, women may face numerous obstacles that hinder their political engagement and advancement.

Absence of Gender-Specific Policies

In KPK, the absence of gender-specific policies can be a major impediment to women's political participation. While there may be general policies aimed at promoting gender equality, these are often insufficiently targeted or inadequately implemented. For example, electoral laws and regulations may lack provisions to support female candidates, such as funding, training, and capacity-building programs. Without these supportive measures, women may

struggle to compete on an equal footing with their male counterparts (Ghulam, 2020).

C. Access to Political Networks and Resources

Access to political networks and resources is a critical factor influencing female political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Political networks and resources play a crucial role in facilitating political engagement, providing support, and enabling candidates to effectively campaign and secure office.

Limited Access to Political Networks

Political networks are vital for gaining political support, building alliances, and accessing information and resources. In KPK, women often have limited access to these networks due to entrenched gender norms and barriers within political institutions. Networking opportunities are frequently dominated by male politicians, making it challenging for women to establish connections and build the necessary support for their political careers. The lack of access to political networks can also impact women's ability to secure endorsements, campaign contributions, and voter support. Without these crucial resources, women may struggle to mount effective political campaigns and compete with better-resourced male candidates (Arat, 2020).

D. Role of Political Parties in Hindering/Facilitating Participation

Political parties play a significant role in shaping the political landscape and influencing women's participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The policies and practices of political parties can either facilitate or hinder women's political engagement and advancement.

Hindering Factors

Political parties in KPK may contribute to barriers to female political participation in several ways. For instance, parties may have internal practices that discriminate against women, such as biased candidate selection processes or lack of support for female candidates. Women may face challenges in gaining party nominations, especially if they are not well-connected or do not meet the party's informal criteria for candidacy.

In some cases, political parties may also fail to provide the necessary support and resources to female candidates. This can include inadequate

campaign funding, limited access to party infrastructure, and lack of mentorship or training opportunities. Without this support, women may struggle to compete effectively and gain electoral success.

Facilitating Factors

On the other hand, some political parties actively work to facilitate women's participation in politics. This can include implementing gender quotas or reserved seats for women, providing financial and logistical support for female candidates, and fostering a culture of inclusivity within the party. Political parties that prioritize gender equality and women's empowerment can play a crucial role in enhancing female political participation.

Educational and Economic Factors Affecting Female Political Participation

A. Impact of Education on Political Awareness and Engagement

Education plays a critical role in shaping political awareness and engagement among women, and its impact on female political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) is substantial. Education not only equips individuals with knowledge and skills but also fosters a sense of civic responsibility and political consciousness (Awan, 2016).

Influence of Educational Attainment

Higher levels of education are associated with increased political awareness and engagement. Educated women are more likely to understand political processes, advocate for their rights, and participate in political activities. In KPK, however, educational disparities between men and women can hinder female political participation. Traditional gender norms and socio-cultural barriers often limit educational opportunities for women, particularly in rural areas. Girls may face obstacles such as early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and societal expectations that prioritize male education over female education.

Educational Opportunities and Political Participation

Access to quality education directly impacts women's ability to engage in politics. Education provides women with the skills necessary for critical thinking, public speaking, and policy analysis, all of which are essential for political involvement.

Additionally, educational institutions often serve as platforms for political engagement, offering opportunities for debate, advocacy, and leadership development. In KPK, initiatives to promote female education can therefore have a positive effect on women's political participation by increasing their knowledge of political issues and their confidence in participating in public life (Ahmad, 2023).

Educational Initiatives and Their Impact

Efforts to improve educational opportunities for women in KPK have shown promising results. Programs aimed at increasing female enrollment in schools, providing scholarships, and creating female-friendly educational environments can help bridge the gender gap in education. For example, government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have implemented initiatives to promote girls' education through community-based programs and awareness campaigns. These efforts contribute to enhancing women's political awareness and engagement by equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to participate actively in political processes (Azam, 2023).

B. Economic Dependency and Financial Barriers

Economic dependency and financial barriers are significant factors that impact women's political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Economic constraints can limit women's ability to engage in politics, run for office, or support political campaigns.

Economic Dependency and Political Participation

Economic dependency often restricts women's political participation. In many cases, women in KPK may be financially dependent on their families or spouses, which can limit their autonomy and ability to pursue political ambitions. This dependency can create significant barriers to running for office or engaging in political activities, as women may lack the financial resources required for campaigning, networking, and other political endeavors.

Financial Barriers to Political Engagement

The financial demands of political campaigns can be prohibitive, particularly for women who may have limited access to financial resources. Campaigns often require substantial investments in advertising, outreach, and organizational support. Women facing

economic challenges may struggle to secure funding, making it difficult to compete with better-resourced male candidates. Additionally, women may encounter barriers in accessing financial support from political parties, donors, or business interests, further exacerbating the economic constraints they face.

C. Programs and Initiatives Aimed at Empowering Women

Various programs and initiatives aimed at empowering women play a crucial role in enhancing their political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These initiatives focus on improving education, providing financial support, and creating opportunities for women to engage in politics.

Educational and Leadership Programs

Educational and leadership programs are designed to build women's capacity for political participation. These programs often include training in public speaking, leadership skills, and political advocacy. By equipping women with the skills and knowledge necessary for effective political engagement, these initiatives help increase their confidence and ability to participate in political processes. For example, organizations such as the Aurat Foundation and the Women's Political Participation Project offer training and support to female politicians and activists in KPK. These programs aim to strengthen women's leadership capabilities and provide them with the tools needed to navigate the political landscape (Aurat foundation, 2023).

Economic Empowerment Programs

Economic empowerment programs focus on reducing financial barriers and enhancing women's economic independence. Initiatives such as microfinance programs, vocational training, and entrepreneurship support can help women overcome economic constraints and gain the financial resources needed for political engagement. In KPK, organizations like the Rural Support Programs Network (RSPN) have implemented programs to support women's economic development, contributing to their ability to participate in politics.

Security Concerns and Political Violence Affecting Female Political Participation

A. Threats and Violence against Female Politicians

Threats and violence against female politicians are significant barriers to their participation in the political landscape of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). The pervasive security challenges in the region create a hostile environment for women who aspire to enter or remain in politics.

Female politicians in KPK face various forms of threats and violence, ranging from verbal abuse to physical attacks. Threats can include intimidation and harassment from political opponents, extremist groups, or even within their own communities. Such threats often aim to dissuade women from participating in politics by instilling fear and insecurity.

Physical violence against female politicians can manifest in several ways, including assault, kidnapping, and even murder. The risk of violence is heightened in regions affected by conflict or instability, where armed groups and extremist factions may target women involved in political activities. These acts of violence not only threaten the safety of individual women but also serve as a broader deterrent to other women considering political participation.

B. Impact of Security Situation in KPK on Women's Participation

The security situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa significantly influences women's political participation. The region's complex security landscape, characterized by ongoing conflict, insurgency, and extremism, creates an environment that can be particularly challenging for female politicians.

Security Risks and Constraints

The security challenges in KPK, including militant activity and sectarian violence, impose severe constraints on women's ability to engage in politics. Frequent security incidents can disrupt political campaigns, limit access to constituencies, and create barriers to public gatherings and rallies. Women may face heightened security risks when traveling or attending political events, which can further restrict their participation (Niaz, 2010).

C. Case Studies and Personal Accounts

Examining case studies and personal accounts of female politicians in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provides valuable insights into the real-life impact of security concerns and political violence on women's participation.

Case Study 1: The Attack on Malala Yousafzai

One of the most notable cases is that of Malala Yousafzai, a young education activist from KPK who was targeted by the Taliban for her advocacy of girls' education. In 2012, Malala survived an assassination attempt by Taliban militants, an attack that drew international attention to the challenges faced by women in conflict-affected regions. Malala's case highlights the extreme risks that female activists and politicians can face in KPK and underscores the need for robust security measures and support for women in politics.

Case Study 2: The Experience of Bushra Gohar

Bushra Gohar, a prominent female politician from KPK, has spoken publicly about the challenges she has faced in her political career, including threats and violence. Gohar's experiences illustrate the difficulties of navigating a male-dominated and insecure political environment. Despite these challenges, Gohar has continued to advocate for women's rights and political participation, demonstrating resilience and commitment to her cause.

Personal Accounts of Female Politicians

Personal accounts from female politicians in KPK reveal the everyday realities of working in a high-risk environment. Many women describe instances of intimidation, harassment, and violence, as well as the impact these experiences have had on their political careers. These accounts provide a poignant reminder of the courage and determination required for women to engage in politics under such challenging circumstances.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS:

Comparative Position of Women in Pakistan and Other Societies

The position of women in Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, reflects broader regional and global trends of gender disparity, especially in political participation. Comparatively, Pakistan's situation mirrors many aspects found in other Islamic

societies where traditional cultural norms and religious interpretations significantly impact women's roles in public life. In countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Afghanistan, women's political participation is similarly constrained by a combination of legal restrictions, cultural practices, and religious mandates (Ahmad, 2023).

However, Pakistan also shows differences. Unlike some of these countries, Pakistan has had female political leaders, including Benazir Bhutto, the first woman to head a Muslim-majority country. This dichotomy highlights the complex interplay of progress and persistent barriers. In contrast, in secular societies like those in the West, women generally experience fewer formal barriers to political participation, although cultural and structural challenges still exist (Ali, 2020).

The Intersection of Religion and Patriarchy

Religions like Islam, Catholicism, and Judaism exhibit patriarchal structures that often marginalize women from significant roles. The patriarchal nature of these religions is deeply rooted in historical contexts where religious doctrines were formulated within male-dominated societies. Over centuries, these religious traditions have institutionalized gender roles that prioritize male leadership and authority (Nisar, 2024).

In Islam, the interpretation of religious texts has traditionally been male-dominated, leading to patriarchal norms being deeply embedded in Islamic societies (Ghulam, 2019). Similarly, Catholicism, with its male-only priesthood, and Orthodox Judaism, with its gender-segregated practices, reflect historical patriarchal values. These religions often emphasize distinct roles for men and women, with women's roles being more confined to the private sphere.

Gendered Dress Codes and Religious Practices

The requirement for women to cover themselves extensively, such as wearing hijabs, abayas, or burqas, and to worship separately from men, stems from interpretations of religious texts that emphasize modesty and segregation of the sexes to avoid moral corruption. In Islam, these practices are justified by the notion of protecting women's modesty and moral integrity, reflecting deeper cultural values about gender and sexuality (Amjad, 2018).

Men, on the other hand, are not subjected to the same level of scrutiny or restrictions regarding their dress,

reflecting a gendered double standard. These practices are often defended as religious obligations, yet they perpetuate gender inequality by enforcing a visible marker of difference and control over women's bodies and behavior.

Islam's Influence on Women's Political Participation

The nature of Islam, as interpreted and practiced in many Muslim-majority societies, significantly influences women's political participation. In Pakistan, as in other Islamic contexts, religious doctrines often intersect with cultural practices to create a restrictive environment for women. Conservative interpretations of Sharia law can limit women's public roles, reinforcing the notion that women should prioritize family and domestic responsibilities over political engagement (Asfand, 2022).

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, these religious and cultural norms are particularly pronounced. The region's conservative social fabric, influenced by tribal traditions and Pashtunwali (the traditional Pashtun code of conduct), further restricts women's mobility and public presence. This conservatism manifests in low female voter turnout, limited candidacy, and societal resistance to women in leadership roles (Rahman, 2017).

Socio-Cultural Barriers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

The socio-cultural barriers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are multifaceted. Patriarchal family structures often discourage or outright forbid women from participating in politics. Women who do engage politically face significant social stigma, threats, and even violence. Educational disparities also play a critical role; with lower literacy rates among women, fewer women possess the qualifications or confidence to participate in political processes (Fatima, 2016).

Additionally, political parties and institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are dominated by men who often marginalize or ignore women's issues. The political landscape is shaped by male networks and patronage systems, making it difficult for women to break through these entrenched structures.

Opportunities and Pathways for Change

Despite these challenges, there are emerging opportunities for enhancing women's political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Legislative

measures, such as reserved seats for women in local governments, have provided a foothold for female political engagement. Civil society organizations and women's rights groups are increasingly advocating for women's political empowerment, challenging patriarchal norms and pushing for policy changes.

Education and awareness campaigns are crucial in shifting societal attitudes towards women's political participation. By promoting gender equality and highlighting successful female political leaders, these initiatives can inspire and empower more women to enter politics. Moreover, engaging men as allies in this process is vital, as changing patriarchal mindsets requires the support and involvement of the entire community (Shazia, 2023).

The position of women in Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, reflects a broader global struggle against patriarchal norms entrenched in religious and cultural traditions. While Pakistan shares similarities with other Islamic societies in the challenges women face, it also exhibits unique dynamics that offer pathways for progress. Addressing the deep-rooted socio-cultural and religious barriers requires a multifaceted approach, combining legislative reforms, education, and grassroots advocacy. By challenging patriarchal structures and promoting gender equality, Pakistan can move towards a more inclusive political landscape where women can fully participate and contribute.

Policy Recommendations for Enhancing Female Political Participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

To address the barriers faced by women in politics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and promote greater female political participation, several policy recommendations can be made. These recommendations focus on implementing gender-sensitive electoral policies, building women's capacities, enhancing security, and creating inclusive political environments.

A. Gender-Sensitive Electoral Policies Implementing Gender Quotas

Gender quotas are a proven mechanism for increasing female representation in politics. Implementing quotas for women in legislative assemblies and other political positions can ensure that women have a greater presence and influence in political decision-making. In KPK, this could involve setting specific targets for female candidates

in elections, as well as reserving a certain percentage of seats for women. Such measures can help address historical underrepresentation and provide women with a platform to contribute to policy discussions and legislative processes.

Encouraging Female Candidacy through Financial Support

Financial constraints often hinder women from running for office. To address this, policies should be developed to provide financial support for female candidates. This could include grants, subsidies, or low-interest loans for campaign expenses. Political parties can also be incentivized to support female candidates by providing additional resources or funding. Ensuring that women have access to financial resources is crucial for enabling them to compete effectively in elections.

Establishing Gender-Sensitive Electoral Processes

Electoral processes should be designed to be inclusive and accommodating of female candidates. This includes setting up mechanisms to ensure that electoral procedures are fair and do not disadvantage women. For example, measures can be introduced to facilitate women's participation in debates and public forums, and to ensure that election campaigns are conducted in a way that does not perpetuate gender biases.

Promoting Awareness and Advocacy

Raising awareness about the importance of female representation in politics is essential. Public campaigns and advocacy efforts can help shift societal attitudes towards greater acceptance of women in political roles. By promoting the value of gender diversity in politics, these initiatives can create a more supportive environment for female candidates.

B. Capacity-Building and Leadership Programs for Women

Developing Comprehensive Training Programs

Capacity-building programs are vital for equipping women with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in politics. Training programs should cover areas such as public speaking, policy analysis, campaign management, and leadership. These programs can be offered by government agencies, NGOs, and educational institutions, and should be

designed to address the specific needs and challenges faced by women in KPK.

Creating Leadership Development Opportunities

Leadership development opportunities are crucial for preparing women for political roles. Initiatives such as mentorship programs, leadership workshops, and networking events can help women build the necessary skills and connections for political participation. Mentorship from experienced female politicians and leaders can provide valuable guidance and support, helping women navigate the complexities of the political landscape.

Supporting Women's Political Organizations

Women's political organizations play a key role in supporting female candidates and promoting gender equality in politics. Government and non-governmental support for these organizations can help strengthen their capacity to advocate for women's rights and provide resources and support for female politicians. Funding and logistical support for women's organizations can enhance their effectiveness and reach.

Encouraging Educational Initiatives

Educational initiatives aimed at increasing political awareness and engagement among women can contribute to their political participation. Programs that focus on civic education, political literacy, and leadership training can help women understand the political system and prepare for active engagement. Collaboration with educational institutions to integrate these topics into curricula can further support women's political development (Luqman, 2011).

C. Enhancing Security and Protection for Female Politicians

Implementing Enhanced Security Measures

Security concerns are a significant barrier to female political participation in KPK. To address this, enhanced security measures should be implemented to protect female politicians from threats and violence. This could include providing security details, safe transportation, and secure venues for political events. Ensuring that female politicians have access to protection and support can help create a safer environment for their political activities.

Developing Support Mechanisms for Victims of Violence

Support mechanisms should be established for female politicians who experience violence or threats. This includes providing psychological support, legal assistance, and medical care. Support services should be accessible and responsive to the needs of women affected by political violence. Creating a dedicated support system can help mitigate the impact of violence and assist women in continuing their political careers.

Enhancing Collaboration with Law Enforcement

Collaboration between political institutions and law enforcement agencies is essential for addressing security concerns. Law enforcement agencies should be trained to handle issues related to political violence and gender-based threats. Developing protocols for responding to threats and incidents of violence against female politicians can help ensure timely and effective interventions.

Promoting a Culture of Safety and Respect

Fostering a culture of safety and respect within political environments is crucial for protecting female politicians. This involves promoting respect for women's roles in politics, challenging gender-based violence and harassment, and creating a supportive atmosphere. Training programs for political actors, media, and the public can help raise awareness about the importance of safety and respect in political engagement (Abdullah, 2012).

D. Creating Inclusive and Supportive Political Environments

Promoting Gender Equality in Political Parties

Political parties play a crucial role in shaping the political landscape. To create more inclusive environments, parties should adopt gender equality policies and practices. This includes ensuring that women are represented in leadership positions, providing equal opportunities for advancement, and implementing mechanisms to address gender bias within the party. Creating a more inclusive and supportive party environment can help increase female participation and leadership.

Encouraging Inclusive Policy-Making

Policy-making processes should be designed to be inclusive and representative of diverse perspectives. This involves actively seeking input from female

politicians and ensuring that women's voices are heard in policy discussions. Creating platforms for women to contribute to policy development can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of policies.

Supporting Women's Participation at All Levels

Efforts to support women's political participation should extend beyond high-profile positions to include all levels of political involvement. This includes supporting women's participation in local governments, community organizations, and grassroots movements. By creating opportunities for women to engage at various levels, a more comprehensive and inclusive political environment can be achieved.

Building Alliances and Partnerships

Building alliances and partnerships between government agencies, civil society organizations, and the private sector can enhance efforts to support female political participation. Collaborative initiatives can leverage resources, expertise, and networks to create a more supportive environment for women in politics. Engaging with a wide range of stakeholders can help address the multifaceted challenges faced by female politicians.

Summary of Key Findings:-

Socio-Cultural Barriers: The study reveals that patriarchal structures, rigid gender roles, and the influence of religious beliefs significantly hinder female political participation in KPK. Women face substantial societal pressure to conform to traditional roles, which limits their opportunities for political engagement. Additionally, the prevalent norms and practices often perpetuate gender inequality, creating an environment where women's political ambitions are frequently constrained.

Institutional Barriers: Gender biases within political institutions, lack of supportive policies, and restricted access to political networks are critical obstacles. Women often encounter systemic discrimination that impedes their entry and advancement in politics. The lack of institutional support and the dominance of male networks further exacerbate these challenges, making it difficult for women to achieve parity in political representation.

Educational and Economic Factors: Education plays a pivotal role in enhancing political awareness and engagement among women. However, disparities in educational access and economic

dependency limit women's capacity to participate fully in politics. Financial constraints, coupled with a lack of resources for political campaigns, disproportionately affect female candidates, restricting their ability to compete on an equal footing with male counterparts.

Security Concerns and Political Violence: The security situation in KPK presents significant risks for female politicians. Threats and violence against women in politics undermine their ability to participate effectively and can deter others from entering the political arena. The persistent threat of violence and instability creates a hostile environment that inhibits female political engagement.

Implications of the Study for Policy and Practice

Policy Implications: The findings underscore the need for gender-sensitive policies and reforms to address the barriers to female political participation. Implementing gender quotas, providing financial support for female candidates, and designing inclusive electoral processes are crucial for enhancing women's representation. Additionally, policies that promote education and economic empowerment for women can help mitigate the disparities that currently exist.

Practice Implications: Practitioners and policymakers must prioritize the development of comprehensive capacity-building programs for women, focusing on leadership skills and political engagement. Ensuring the safety and protection of female politicians through enhanced security measures and support mechanisms is essential. Creating a more inclusive political environment requires a concerted effort to challenge and change existing biases and barriers, both within political institutions and in broader societal contexts.

Institutional Reforms: Political parties and institutions need to adopt gender equality policies and practices that support the advancement of women. This includes fostering a culture of respect and inclusion, addressing gender biases, and ensuring equal opportunities for women at all levels of political participation.

Suggestions for Future Research

Exploring Regional Variations: Future research could explore how female political participation varies across different regions of KPK, particularly in rural versus urban areas. Understanding regional differences can provide more targeted insights and

strategies for addressing local challenges and opportunities.

Impact of Educational Initiatives: Further investigation into the effectiveness of educational and leadership programs in increasing female political engagement would be valuable. Research could assess which types of programs are most successful and identify best practices for scaling these initiatives.

Longitudinal Studies: Longitudinal studies could examine the long-term effects of policy interventions and capacity-building programs on female political participation. This approach would provide insights into the sustainability and impact of various initiatives over time.

Comparative Studies: Comparative research analyzing female political participation in KPK alongside other regions with similar socio-political contexts could offer valuable insights into effective strategies and practices. Comparing different contexts can help identify successful models and approaches that could be adapted and implemented in KPK.

Evaluating Security Measures: Further research could evaluate the effectiveness of current security measures and support systems for female politicians. Assessing how well these measures address the specific security challenges faced by women in politics can inform improvements and enhance their effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study on female political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) reveals a complex interplay of socio-cultural, institutional, educational, economic, and security-related factors that significantly impact women's engagement in politics. The findings illustrate that while there are notable barriers, there are also critical opportunities for enhancing female participation through targeted policies and practices. Socio-cultural barriers, including entrenched patriarchal norms, restrictive gender roles, and the influence of religious beliefs, create substantial obstacles for women aspiring to enter politics. These factors not only limit women's opportunities but also perpetuate gender inequality, making it challenging for women to fully engage in political processes. Institutional barriers further compound these challenges, with gender biases in political institutions, a lack of supportive policies,

and restricted access to political networks undermining women's political participation.

Educational and economic factors also play a significant role. While education is crucial for increasing political awareness and engagement, disparities in educational access and economic dependency restrict women's ability to participate. Financial constraints hinder female candidates' ability to compete effectively in elections, exacerbating gender imbalances in political representation. Security concerns are another critical issue. The volatile security situation in KPK poses significant risks for female politicians, with threats and violence creating a hostile environment that deters women from participating in political activities. Ensuring the safety of female politicians is essential for fostering an environment where women can engage in politics without fear.

To address these challenges, several policy recommendations emerge. Implementing gender-sensitive electoral policies, such as gender quotas and financial support for female candidates, can enhance women's representation. Capacity-building programs and leadership development initiatives are vital for equipping women with the skills needed for political success. Enhancing security measures and creating a supportive political environment are also crucial for encouraging female participation. Addressing the barriers to female political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa requires a comprehensive approach involving policy reforms, targeted support programs, and efforts to create an inclusive and safe political environment. By implementing these recommendations and continuing to explore further research, stakeholders can work towards achieving greater gender equity in political representation and engagement.

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