

DOES PUKHTUNWALI IMPEDE WOMEN POLITICS? A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF DISTRICT, KOHAT-PAKISTAN

Mr Tariq Aziz^{1*}, Dr Shahid Khan² Ruqayya Bibi³, 4-Mr. Israr Ahmed⁴

^{1*}Lecturer Department of Sociology Kohat University of Science and Technology-Kohat.

²Assistant Professor (IPFP), Department of Sociology Kohat University of Science and Technology-Kohat

³M.Phil Social Work, University of Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan

⁴Lecturer Department of Sociology Kohat University of Science and Technology-Kohat

^{1*}tariq.aziz@kust.edu.pk, ²drshahidkhan@kust.edu.pk, ³Ruqayyabibin107@gmail.com,

⁴sociologist930@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: *

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ABSTRACT

Women's political participation remains a significant challenge in many underdeveloped societies. In Pakistan, despite ranking 93rd out of 153 countries, women have not achieved a prominent position in politics, despite the reserved quota seats system introduced during the Gen. Musharraf regime. This study aims to identify the barriers that restrict women's involvement in the political arena. A qualitative approach was employed for an in-depth analysis, using open-ended interviews with twenty-five participants, including ten female party workers, ten candidates, and five female political activists, all selected through purposive sampling. The study found that Pakhtun customary practices such as the Purdah system, male dominance, perceptions of politics, participation in political campaigns, and women's subordinate status are key obstacles to women's political engagement.

Keywords: Political participation, Purdah System, Perception about Politics, Political Campaigns, Pakhtun women.

INTRODUCTION

Women make up half of the global population, yet they continue to face discrimination and deprivation across various aspects of life, including education, employment, and political participation (Daraz, 2012; Bari, 2005; Mehmood, 2004). Gender-based political discrimination is a major social issue in Pakistan, as highlighted by Paxton et al. (2020). Scholars like Naz (2011) have pointed out that, in addition to educational and economic challenges, women suffer from low political participation, both in voting and candidacy (Aderinwale, 1997). Women are often denied access to higher education, autonomy in marriage decisions, voting rights, employment opportunities, and inheritance rights, including property and economic participation (Naz, 2011).

A recent study by Strengthening Participatory Organization (SPO, 2020) identified several issues faced by female parliamentarians in Pakistan, including unethical and prejudiced

attitudes from men towards female voters and political representatives. The study revealed that Pakistan's ranking for women's representation dropped from 45th out of 145 countries in 2008 to 65th, with women holding only 20% of seats in both provincial and national assemblies. Elected women have criticized political parties for denying them tickets and creating obstacles to their political involvement (SPO, 2020).

Similarly, Bano (2010) reported that the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial assembly has 22 reserved seats for women, but these seats are often controlled by political parties, which allocate them to their own female members, such as relatives and family members (Khan et al., 2018b). As a result, only a few women reach the assemblies through regular election processes. Bano also noted that the post-9/11 era saw the Gen. Pervez Musharraf regime increase reserved seats for women in national and provincial assemblies in an effort to boost female political

participation. Despite these efforts, there remains a critical need for greater political empowerment of women.

Political empowerment for women involves enabling them to actively participate in elections, vote according to their own choices, and express their political views and needs. It also includes decision-making power and authority over their actions and priorities (Ibrahim, 2012). The extent of women's political empowerment varies by country and region, influenced by socio-cultural and economic factors, as well as entrenched male-dominated societal systems (Naz et al., 2011).

Asif (2008) reported that some political parties use social pressure and harassment to prevent women from contesting or voting in elections, resulting in the loss of approximately 650 seats. Consequently, several districts, including Lower Dir, Kohistan, Battagram, Upper Dir, Swabi, and Mardan, had no female representatives or political empowerment initiatives. Women's electoral rights were again denied under the guise of local traditions, and in some cases, local authorities led organized anti-women movements (Mirza, 2002).

In light of these issues, the current study aims to examine the socio-cultural obstacles limiting women's political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It also considers honor-related issues, such as dignity and respect, which are tied to women's involvement in activities outside the home (Khan et al., 2018). These cultural stereotypes not only restrict Pakhtun women from participating in politics but also neglect their basic rights.

Research Questions:

- 1- What socio-cultural factors contribute to the lower political participation of women in the political arena?
- 2- How do cultural codes impede women's participation in the political arena of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

Research objectives:

- 1-To identify the socio-cultural factors that contribute to the reduced political participation of women.

2-To examine how cultural codes obstruct women's participation in the political arena of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative approach to conduct an in-depth analysis of the socio-cultural barriers affecting women's political participation in District Kohat. Participants included female political workers and candidates from various political parties, selected through cluster sampling. In total, 25 representatives were involved, following the sampling guideline suggested by Oppong (2013). This included five representatives each from the Awami National Party (ANP), Jamaat-e-Ulema Islam (JUI), Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). Additionally, two focus group discussions were held with female students from Kohat University of Science and Technology, representing different political affiliations.

Further, data collection involved conducting interviews with participants according to an established protocol based on Charmaz's (2014) guidelines. These in-depth interviews aimed to uncover participants' perspectives on socio-cultural barriers. All interview questions were designed to be clear and impartial. The interviews were carried out in Urdu and Pashto, with voice recordings used to capture the discussions, ensuring participants had ample opportunity to share their views. The recorded data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Stirling (2001). During the analysis, participants were given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. The findings identified key factors hindering women's political participation in the region, including Pakhtun customary practices such as the Purdah system, male dominance, perceptions of politics, involvement in political campaigns, and the subordinate status of women.

Discussion

Social System and political participation

The study found that women's political participation is significantly impeded by various socio-cultural factors. Key barriers include the need for family approval to run for office, which is often seen as a breach of Purdah, challenges in registering women voters, negative stereotypes

about political campaigns, a male-dominated society, and restrictions on women's involvement in political processions and meetings. Additionally, women's roles are frequently limited to domestic duties such as child-rearing and managing household responsibilities.

Participant Mrs. Ahmad shared:

"I encountered significant challenges; my family, especially my mother and sisters, were extremely concerned about my interest in politics due to the uncertainties in the region and the harassment women face in this male-dominated society. It is very difficult for a woman to participate in politics without family support, particularly from a father, and having a strong financial background can also facilitate a woman's involvement in political activities."

Miss Sabeela added:

"At first, I had little knowledge of politics, but my husband's political affiliation inspired me to enter the field. He secured a reserved seat for me as an MNA in the National Assembly and handled all the decisions and negotiations himself. Although he supported me, I struggled to engage with voters and attend party events, particularly in Hujras, because people would mock women in politics and highlight their activities on social media."

Another participant Miss Zubaida expressed that:

"I am a housewife and adhere to Purdah, as it aligns with both Islamic teachings and Pakhtun customs for women. The main challenge I encountered was within my constituency. However, within the political sphere, such as in Parliament, I faced no issues; my male colleagues were supportive, cooperative, and courteous. I never felt uncomfortable working with them."

The discussion indicates that women's involvement in political activities is significantly constrained by the prevailing social structure and attitudes towards women in politics. Similarly, Shaheed (2009) identified three distinct dimensions of political disadvantage for women in Pakistani society: socio-economic factors, societal structure, and religious justification (Shaheed et al., 2009:26). These factors collectively hinder women from acquiring political skills and experience. On a practical level, the demands of childbearing and rearing impede women's entry into politics. Additionally,

cultural norms in Pakistani society, often justified by religious arguments, promote the segregation and seclusion of women, as noted by Khan et al. (2018).

Culture System and Political Participation

Another participant, Najma Paracha, a reserved political member of JUI, shared her experiences regarding political participation in Pakhtun society.

"She highlighted that economic dependency and family support are crucial for women's involvement in politics. Without such support, it is extremely challenging for women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to engage in political activities. Family backing provides psychological support and counters negative perceptions held by men, while economic resources grant women greater independence and empower them to challenge Pakhtun cultural stereotypes. However, the prevailing social conditions, such as militancy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, negative male perceptions of female participation, and misinterpretations of religious views on women in politics, contribute to social unrest and erode public trust. Consequently, families often discourage their female members from participating in the political arena."

Similarly, a female student leader from PTI at various government degree colleges in District Kohat shared her experiences.

"She noted that male perceptions, both within and outside political parties, are predominantly negative. Women face significant harassment and harsh criticism while engaging in political activities. Male members often express disturbing views, and religious political parties sometimes manipulate religious arguments to undermine women's roles in politics, suggesting that a "good" woman should remain at home. This approach not only demoralizes women and their families but also severely impacts their mental and psychological well-being. As a result, many families in Pakhtun society discourage their female members from participating in political activities, which impedes efforts to advocate for gender equity and women's rights."

The discussion with female political activists confirms that the male-dominated structure in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa significantly affects women's political participation. A study

conducted in April 2010 found that social pressure and harassment, often instigated by religious groups and political parties, prevented women from contesting or voting in elections, leading to the loss of approximately 650 seats (Naz, 2012). This situation resulted in several districts, including Lower Dir, Kohistan, Battagram, Upper Dir, Swabi, and Mardan, lacking female representation and political empowerment (Asif, 2008). In Sawabi and Mardan, religious groups obstructed women's political empowerment, denying them electoral rights under the guise of local traditions, and in some cases, local authorities led organized anti-women movements (Mirza, 2002).

Saima Khattak, a senior member of the PTI women's wing in District Kohat, referred to her experiences with the political culture and Pakhtun society.

“She argued that Pakhtunwali, the traditional code of Pakhtun culture, plays a significant role in restricting women's political participation, particularly in rural areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Pakhtunwali shapes cultural norms and enforces gender roles, with men expected to be the breadwinners and women relegated to domestic responsibilities. This cultural framework perpetuates male dominance and limits women's roles, including their political participation, reinforcing their subordinate status and denying them the right to vote and make decisions about their futures.”

Miss Musarat Shafi further elaborated

“that Pakhtun cultural stereotypes also impede women's political participation. Women are often viewed as physically weak and lacking decision-making competence, and Pakhtun society tends to view women as fearful and primarily suited for domestic roles. Consequently, the male members of Pakhtun society feel insecure due to the lack of social protection and cultural norms that reinforce male dominance. This division of gender roles within society, community, and group contexts maintains women's subordinate status and restricts their participation in the political sphere”.

Conclusion

Gender-based political discrimination remains a significant social issue in Pakistan, particularly as it creates substantial barriers to women's political

participation. This challenge is compounded by socio-economic and cultural factors, which further hinder women's involvement in voting and candidacy. In Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, for example, women face obstacles such as limited access to higher education, restricted autonomy in marriage decisions, denied voting rights, limited employment opportunities, and constrained inheritance rights. The current study aimed to address two main objectives: to identify the socio-cultural and cultural barriers impacting women's political participation in the region. A qualitative approach was employed to achieve these objectives. Twenty-five female political workers were interviewed using cluster sampling techniques. To ensure unbiased results, respondent anonymity and researcher impartiality were maintained during data collection. The collected data were then analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that family support is crucial for political participation, yet it is lacking in the study area. The socio-cultural environment often discourages women from engaging in elections, voting, attending political meetings, or participating in political gatherings outside their homes. Additionally, the purdah system prevalent in Pashtun society is a significant barrier to women's political involvement. Many respondents also pointed out that negative perceptions of female political workers, combined with ongoing militancy and conflict, further inhibit women's participation in electoral processes. Overall, these findings suggest that various socio-cultural factors contribute to the limited political involvement of women in the region.

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