

Received : 20 May 2024, Accepted: 15 June 2024

Socio-Cultural Hurdles to Participation of Pashtun Women in Politics: A Case Study of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Tasneem Sarwat¹, Dr. Shehla Gul²

1.Ph.D Scholar, Pakistan Studies, Department of Pakistan Studies, Islamia College Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, Tasneemsarwat806@gmail.com

2.Lecturer, Department of Pakistan Studies, Islamia College Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, shehlagul01@gmail.com

Abstract

Pashtun Women are expected to adhere to the norms and values in a very stringent manner. Deep-rooted in traditional norms, gender roles, and tribal customs are; the hurdles that they encounter are widespread and multifaceted. This Study examines the socio-cultural dynamics that restrict Pashtun women from fully participating in politics, portrayal on case studies, reports and interviews to reveal how these barriers operate at the family, community and institutional levels. Pashtun women face significant challenges rooted in patriarchal values, traditional gender roles, and cultural norms that discourage their involvement in political activities. Societal expectations, familial control, and resistance to female leadership in both public and private spheres further restrict women's opportunities to engage in political discourse, decision-making, and leadership roles. Those Pashtun women who attempt to join politics face retaliation from the community and families through verbal harassment, pressure to withdraw and damage to their honour. These obstacles are shaped by a combination of a conservative cultural beliefs; limited educational opportunities, restricted mobility, and societal expectations which collectively suppress their political engagement in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. By understanding these socio-cultural hurdles, this study aims to provide insights into potential reforms and support systems that could enhance political inclusion and participation for Pashtun women, thereby contributing to gender equality and inclusive governance in the country. These cultural codes act as a powerful barriers to women's political participations. The central problem this research seeks to address is: What are the socio-cultural barriers that hinder women's participation in politics within Pashtun society in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, This research adopts a qualitative approach, emphasizing non-numeric information. This research provides data-driven insights to inform policies and programs that can promote Pashtun women's participation in politics. This study can disseminate findings to raise awareness among community, policymakers, stakeholders and general public about women's political participation.

Key words: Politics, socio-cultural hurdles, Pashtun women, Feminism, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Introduction

Women's political empowerment signifies their capability and freedom to make choices, vote, and stand as a candidate in elections, engage in political demonstrations, and have a voice in decision-making. In spite of the fact that they make up half of the world's population, women continue to contend with prejudice, which causes them to fall behind males in a variety of facets of life. Ensuring that women are actively involved in political processes is an essential basis for achieving gender equality and cultivating ideas that are both real and democratic.

Women are given the opportunity to fully engage in public decision-making, and they are held to a higher standard of accountability as a result. Women who hold political office are confronted with obstacles on both the national and their provincial levels. Because of the prohibitions and traditions that exist in Pashtun society, women have challenges when it comes to participating in political activities on an equal footing (Bose and Rossi, 1983). Women of Pashtun descent are particularly confronted with obstacles when it comes to political participation. Throughout history, Pashtun women have had a restricted level of engagement in political processes (Rahim, 2021). In a community of Pashtuns, only men are allowed to participate in political activities. It is considered a work that should be performed by men rather than women because men are considered to be authoritative and decision makers. In addition to this, they are supported by clerics in the society by virtue of the fact that they legitimize their political position from the standpoint of religion. For example, clerics regularly spread the belief that a woman is not qualified to govern a society under Islam and that only men are capable of doing so. This kind of narrative is well engrained in the minds of the general population, and it is only males who are chosen to participate in political engagement (Waheed, 2024).

The present study analysis the social and cultural hurdles to Pashtun women's involvement in the politics of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, it highlights the challenges they face and identifying potential opportunities for their active participation in the political system of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Literature Review

The ladies of the Pashtun tribe are obligated to adhere to their customs. Pashtunwali ideals provide a very definite definition of the position that women hold in society. The role of a woman, her likes and dislikes, her activities, the places she may travel, how and with whom she may go out, and the Pashtun language she may speak are all controlled by certain codes that she is not permitted to break. These codes also determine the activities that she may engage in any act of disobedience is regarded as a source of dishonor and humiliation for the family, which ultimately leads to her being reprimanded, which in certain instances may even result in her passing away (Naz and Chaudhry, 2011). In Pashtun society, women are socially associated with men. In the society of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which is controlled by men, women do not have the ability to express their individuality. In certain circumstances, they are seen as individuals who belong to the male gender. The women politicians of Pashtun society had viewed that we women are not more than pets, and we keep them restricted to the walls of our houseswomen should not be allowed to participate in activities that take place in public (Ahmad and Bano, 2019). In the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that are considered to be particularly conservative women have traditionally been prohibited from exercising their right to vote (Khan, Yousaf and Naqvi, 2020). In the Pashtun society, the combination of culture and religion made it more difficult for women to assert their right to public spaces and to take part in political activities in order to achieve equality in society and legal rights. As a result of the fact that cultural norms are one of the primary reasons behind every barrier, including illiteracy, unemployment among women, and a lack of public spaces, the connection between culture and political engagement of women in Pashtun society is extremely complicated (Nawaz, 2013).

The Pashtunwali advocates for a limited input of women in the political process in Pashtun society. Pashtun women were being excluded from politics and governance, and ultimately, the home became the place for women. According to the Pashtunwali code of conduct, the

most significant factors that contribute to aggression in tribal conflicts are Zar (gold), Zamaka (land), and Zan (woman) (Shah, 1998).

There is a widespread perception that women around the world do not have access to opportunities, information, and skills, and even some fundamental human rights. Women are subjected to persecution and suppression in virtually every nation; as a result, they are highly marginalized in society. Attempts were made by humans to establish gender equality in ancient societies, by minimizing discrimination (Qais, 2023). These efforts began throughout the ancient times. A philosophy known as feminism insists that men and women should have equal rights in all aspects of life, including politics, decision-making, careers, and the raising of children. It is made up of a variety of different social, cultural, and political forces that are working toward the goal of achieving equal rights for men and women (Mohajan, 2022).

In feminism an attempt to made to define the oppression of women, to explain the reasons and consequences of this oppression, and to propose various tactics for the liberation of women. A gender-based view of the state, which is founded on the establishment of a society that is gender-neutral, is something that feminists advocate for (Bryson, 1992).

The radical feminism emphasis on the patriarchal foundations of inequality between men and women, as well as the societal dominance of women by males. From the perspective of radical feminism, patriarchy is characterized by the division of society rights, privileges, and authority predominantly along the lines of sex, which ultimately results in the subjugation of women and the elevation of men (Mohajan, 2022). Radical feminism in the context of Pashtun culture is important because Pashtun's code of conduct such as: *Purdah*, *ghairat* and obedience to male authority the important cultural ingredients in Pashtun's society. These cultural codes act as a Powerful Barriers to women's political participations. The advocates of radical feminism believes that women cannot be empowered through alterations in policies rather they can be empowered through structural changes in the societal attitudes and deconstruction of patriarchal systems. Using this perspective of feminism, the study explores the socio-cultural barriers that impedes Pashtun's women political participation. Radical feminism challenge the traditional gender roles and expectations that have limited Pashtun women's participation in politics. It can create space for women to engage in public life.

Social Factors

Social factors are those which influences within the society and affect people's behavior, live, attitude and interact with others. Traditional views on gender roles, often reinforced by tribal customs and conservative interpretations of religion, have relegated Pashtun women to the private sphere, restricting their participation in public life. Moreover, societal expectations and familial pressures create an environment where women are discouraged from stepping into the political arena. The concept of "Pashtunwali" (the code of honor) further complicates this issue, as it emphasizes male dominance and discourages the public involvement of women.

The Family

The vast majority of women who are involved in politics came from families that are financially or politically connected. The family sphere of Pakistan is predicated on kinship, necessitating that women, like males, cater to the clan vote. Nonetheless, familial backing offers advantages for female candidates, as families may contribute financially to political campaigns. Without exception, every single female lawmaker recognises the

importance of the moral, emotional, and financial support that the family provides (Mahmud, 2002). In the domain of house, women just cook for their families. The men are the earner and this is exploited by them, they control women of their household (Ali, 2023). The primary responsibilities of women in Pakhtun society include performing tasks around the house, managing the household, taking part in ceremonial occasions, and working in jobs that are geared toward women. Pakhtun women also have an essential role in the decision-making linked to the health care, financial management at home, family planning, income keeping and spending and give suggestions in every topic relating to the family (Alam, 2012). One of Ex MPA discusses the role of family in Political participation, she said that One of the important thing is strong family background. A strong family and a strong political family would play a very important role. It is very important for a Pashtun woman to have a strong political or a strong family behind her when she enters politics because that family then supports her (Sultan, 2024).

Illiteracy

Pakhtun women politicians are facing many problems. The solution to all problems is education. Women should be educated more. At this time, once again, education has been banned in Afghanistan. Majority women in the Pakhtun society are not educated, they are facing problems in politics (Humayun, 2024). Reasons behind low participation in politics are women's illiteracy (Kazmi, 2018). Parents prefer to invest in quality education for their sons. In a conservative and regressive society, parents view their children as their support in their old age. Conversely, women in traditional societies encounter numerous challenges, resulting in limited access to health care, education, and, more significantly, political participation, thereby rendering them socially incapacitated (Matland, 2002).

The women's literacy rate in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is 37.4% (Khattak, 2024). Majority of Pashtun women facing difficulties to obtain an education, and as a result, they continue to lack the skills and resources necessary to deal with any circumstance. There are some instances in which Pashtun men deny their ladies the fundamental rights as well. Moreover, the fact that only men earn, regulate, and restrict women has had an impact on the economy of Pakistan as well. The fact that the women in developed countries are able to work and earn for themselves, which in turn gives them more power and contributes to the economy of the country, is a significant distinction between developed societies and developing societies (Arbab, 2023). It is necessary that Pashtun women should be educated, if they have education, then they can grow. Pakhtun society is suffering from male dominance like other societies. The educated women can participate in politics and they can remove male dominance (Sultan, 2024).

Awareness

Awareness is crucial for Pakhtun women to participate in politics because it helps them to overcome cultural, social, and structural barriers that limit their engagement. Without awareness, women remain uninformed about their rights, lack confidence to enter politics, and are unable to challenge the restrictive norms.

Majority of Pakhtun women are unaware of their constitutional rights to vote, contest elections, and hold public office (Sultan, 2024).

Early Marriages

Early marriages in Pashtun society are a significant hurdle to Pashtun women's political participation. These marriages limit their education, restrict their mobility, and reinforce traditional gender roles that keep them away from political and public life. Many girls who marry early are forced to drop out of school, preventing them from gaining the knowledge and skills needed for political engagement. Without education, they lack awareness of their political rights and are unable to participate effectively in decision-making.

After marriage, Pashtun women are expected to prioritize household responsibilities, motherhood, and family honour over public life. Married women, especially in conservative Pashtun areas, have limited freedom to move outside their homes without male permission (Jan, 2024).

Restricted Mobility

Restricted mobility is one of the biggest barriers to Pashtun women's involvement in politics. Women who cannot move freely miss out on political discussions, meetings, and educational opportunities. They are often unable to attend schools, universities, or training programs that could equip them with the knowledge needed for political engagement. Traditional norms and customs in Pashtun society often restrict women's mobility, autonomy, and decision-making authority (Ali et al., 2010). Political participation requires networking, public speaking, and attending gatherings, which is nearly impossible if a woman is not allowed to leave her home without the permission. Many Pashtun women cannot do door-to-door campaigns or hold rallies, reducing their chances of winning elections. In many rural areas, women are barred from voting due to mobility restrictions imposed by family members or tribal elders (Younas, 2024).

Gender disparity

Gender disparity in Pashtun society is deeply rooted in cultural traditions, patriarchal structures, and rigid gender roles, leading to significant challenges for women, especially in political participation. Women are significantly underrepresented in political and decision-making bodies within Pashtun society (Shvedova, 2005).

In many areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, male elders forbid women from voting, preventing them from exercising their democratic rights. Women who enter into politics face different problems like; harassment, character assassination, and a lack of party support (Parveen, 2024).

Cultural Factors

By cultural barriers, the researcher means those impediments that are deep-rooted traditions, values and customs that pass from generation to generation. In this section, the researcher discussed those cultural barriers that impede the political participation of women.

Patriarchy

The concept of patriarchy, as it is understood in the context of feminist thought, refers to the supremacy of men over women in all aspects and mechanisms. The patriarchal system is viewed by feminist theorists as a biased structure that is oppressive to women. The patriarchal system is created by society and that it is possible to eliminate it by demonstrating and critically evaluating the signs that it is attempting to communicate (Pateman, 1988). Males are extremely important for women who decide to enter into the politics. Since women in Pashtun society are not independent and she is dependent on male. Therefore, without the active support of their respective

males in a family women cannot decide to participate in the politics (Younas,2024).Many Pashtun women with political aspirations may feel hesitant to voice their dreams or step into the political arena due to fear of societal backlash or family disapproval. These limitations can lead to a sense of isolation or frustration (Kishwar,2024).

Pashtun society is characterized by a patriarchal system where men holds primary power and authority. Women are often relegated to subordinate roles, both in the household and in broader societal structures. This entrenched male dominance creates barriers for women seeking to engage in political activities. Within Pashtun culture, there exists a significant disparity between males and females across nearly all aspects of life. Women are significantly deprived of their fundamental rights, particularly in terms of political representation, where they are entirely overlooked (Ali and Govino, 2008).

Traditions

Traditional norms and customs in Pashtun society often limits women's mobility, autonomy, and decision-making authority. Misinterpretation of religious teachings may reinforce these restrictive gender roles, leading to the marginalization of women in political spheres. Overall, the combination of patriarchal structures, socio-economic challenges, and cultural constraints contributes to the low level of women' political participation in Pashtun society. It is necessary to make comprehensive efforts to promote gender equality, enhance access to education and economic opportunities for women, and address these hurdles in order to ensure that they are overcome challenge traditional norms, and ensure that religious teachings are interpreted in ways that support women's empowerment and participation in public life. (Ali et al., 2010).

Strict Purdah System

The strict purdah is adhered to by women in society, which eventually serves as a barrier to their engagement in political activities. For instance, before venturing outside the home, she must fully cover herself from head to toe (South Asian for Human Right, 2009). In South Asian countries, cultural constraints such as the practice of the veil ("parda") further limit women's mobility, discouraging their participation in political activities and hindering their empowerment. This cultural barrier diminishes women's exposure and their ability to meet societal standards of equality compared to the men (Shvedova, 2005).councilor Ayesha Asad said,

During my campaign, I was initially reluctant to put my picture on posters, as this was uncommon for women in my area. Even when I did, people would sometimes tear them down or cover them with posters of male candidates. There were concerns about my public visibility, especially with my pictures on campaign posters. There were instances where my posters were removed or replaced by those of male candidates, which was disheartening at first.

In the similar fashion, Shahida waheed (ex MPA) also highlights such concerns related to the pardah system and stated that strict veiling system of Pashtun society is one of the major hurdles of female political participation and she asserts that one must be cautious in such situations. According to her, “*Being a Pashtun affects traditional rules such as veiling, talking and sitting with men, and traveling alone, so one has to act very thoughtfully and cautiously*” On the other hand, Meraj Humayun (Ex-MPA) stated that veil is one of the

hurdles of Pashtun's women political participation because a woman who veil and observe pardah cannot participate effectively in politics. She has considered veil as an obstacle for political participation probably due to veiling, a woman cannot effectively move from one place to another which is mandatory for election campaigns. According to her, *"In Pashtun society it is the veil that is pulling women back, because of veil women can't participate properly."* Such views are also highlighted by Palwasha Abbas ex-MPA, according to her, *"As the veil is another big factor, it is very difficult for many women to raise their voices in the political field and to go to the procession."* On the other hand, Shaheen Sultan Ex MPA asserts that a woman has to perform various tasks in Pashtun's society and it is a strict Pashtun's women code of conduct.

Rigidity

Rigidity means the structural and institutional barriers that limits the women's engagement in the politics of the country. Pashtun's society is a rigid society, due to cultural and social barriers, most of the women local government representatives do not attend meetings but their husbands, and fathers attend meetings on behalf of them. Besides this, gender roles in Pashtun society are heavily influenced by cultural dynamics, and women often face discrimination across various spheres of life, including politics. Rural areas, in particular, witness lower levels of women's political engagement (Shah, 2020). Pashtun Women who enter politics often face criticism, ostracization, or threats from their own communities. Families may discourage women from joining politics due to concerns over societal backlash and the preservation of family honor (Hanif, 2024).

Conclusion

To conclude the study found that social factors which are the hurdles to Pashtun women's participation in politics are; the family, household, illiteracy, lack of awareness, early marriages, restricted mobility and gender disparity are the main hurdles to women political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These factors collectively contribute to a socio-cultural environment that restricts women participation in the politics of Pakistan and lead to marginalization of women in the political sphere. As a consequence of this, women's voices are not heard in the political discourse and decision-making processes in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region. There is a lack of awareness regarding political rights, Because of the socio-cultural factors and the fear of being labeled as socially stigmatized, women in Pashtun culture are restricted to the limits of their homes, and they are not allowed to freely go outside of their places of residence. This is because of the fear of being classified as socially stigmatized. According to the traditions, customs, and values that are based on Pashtunwali, it is strictly illegal for women to take part in political activities inside Pashtun society. For this reason, women are not allowed to participate in political activities. As a result of gender inequality and discrimination, which are widespread in both society and politics, women's participation in political processes is negatively damaged. This is because of the fact that these issues are extensive. This is because women are more likely to be marginalised than men are. This is the reason for this. There are a number of obstacles that women face when they participate in the electoral process in a variety of roles, such as voters, candidates, journalists, members of civil society, and electoral administrators. These obstacles include a sociological barrier, a physical barrier, a psychological barrier, an economic barrier, and a cultural barrier.

References

Alam, A. (2012). Women's role and status in Pukhtoon society (A case study of village Sufaid Dheri, Peshawar). *International Journal of Learning and Development*, 2(3), 313–324.

Ali, P. A., & Gavino, M. I. B. (2008). Violence against women in Pakistan: A framework for analysis. *Journal–Pakistan Medical Association*, 58(4), 198-203

Ali, W., *et al.* (2010). Cultural barriers in women empowerment: A sociological analysis of Multan, Pakistan. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 18(1), 147-155.

Ahmad, N., & Bano, A. (2019). Women's political empowerment through local government in the patriarchal society of Pakistan. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal*, 3(1), 1–8.

Arbab, S., & Taieb, M. (2023). Role of women in decision making: A case study of Pashtuns of Tehkal, Peshawar, Pakistan. *Journal of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences*, 4(1), 1–14.

Asad, A. (councilor Mardan of ANP). Personal communication. 10 September 2024.

Bose, C., & Rossi, P. (1983). Gender and jobs: Prestige standings of occupations as affected by gender. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 316–330.

Bryson, V. (1992). *Feminist political theory: An introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Faheem, L. (Activist of PTI Mardan). Personal communication. 18 September 2024.

Hanif, S. (councilor Mardan PTI). Personal communication. 28 September 2024.

Humayun, M. (Ex-MPA of QWP Swabi). Personal communication 20 September 2024.

Jan, N. (Ex- MPA of ANP swabi). Personal communication 25 September 2024.

Kazmi, S. S. (2018). 2018 elections very significant from women's point of view: NCSW. *Dawn*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1451269>

Kishwar, N. (Ex MNA of JUI-F Mardan). Provincial Vice President of Khawateen Wing. Member of the Electoral Reforms Committee. Personal communication 22 September 2024.

Khan, A., Yousaf, Z., & Naqvi, S. (2020). Women politicians navigating the 'hostile environment' in Pakistan. *Institute of Development Studies*, 51(2), 43-61 <https://doi.org/10.19088/1968-2020.129-134>

Khattak, A. (2024, January 5). Breakdown of literacy rates of all provinces. *ProPakistani*. <https://propakistani.pk/2024/01/05/breakdown-of-literacy-rates-of-all-provinces/>

Mahmood, N. (2002). Women's role in domestic decision-making in Pakistan: Implications for reproductive behaviour. *The Pakistan Development Review*, 41(2), 121–148.

Matland, R.E. (2002). *Enhancing Women's Political Participation: Legislative Recruitment and Electoral Systems*. Loyola University Chicago

- Mohajan, K. H., (2022). An overview on the Feminism and Its Categories. Munich Personal Archives. <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/114625/>
- Naz, A., & Chaudhry, H. U. R. (2011). Gender and development: Socio-cultural, economic, religious and political impediments in women's empowerment: A case study of Malakand Division, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *Bio-Info Sociology*, 1(1), 15–24.
- Naz, A., et al. (2013). Pashtun social structure and its impacts on women's education. *Global Journal of Human Social Science*, 12(13), 15–22.
- Nawaz, H. (2013). Status of women in Islam and its impact on Pashtun society. *Al-Baseera*, 2(1), 1–14.
- Parveen, K. (councilor swabi of Jamaat I Islami). Personal communication 16 September 2024.
- Pateman. C. (1988). *The sexual contract*. Polity Press. United Kingdom.
- Qais, U., et al. (2023). Contemporary global feminism trends and cultural barriers to women's empowerment in Pakistan: An Islamic perspective. *Pakistan Journal of Islamic Philosophy*, 5(2).
- Rahim, S. (2021). Women's political activism and public spaces in Pashtun society in Pakistan. *Global Political Review*, VI(II), 25–32.
- Shah, W. A. (1998). Women and politics in the North-West Frontier Province (1930–1947). *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture*, XIX (1), 67–80.
- Shvedova, N. (2005). Obstacles to women's participation in parliament. *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, 33(1), 22–45.
- Sultan, S. (Ex MPA of PPP Charsadda). Personal communication. 10 October 2024.
- Waheed, S. (MPA of ANP Mardan). Personal communication. 6 October 2024.
- Younas, T. (Ex MPA of ANP Swabi). Personal communication. 12 October 2024.