



Barriers to Political Participation among Women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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Abstract:

Women's political participation is generally agreed to be a condition for democratic development and inclusive government but in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province of Pakistan, despite much legitimacy, women are still reeling from the constant stream of social, structural and institutional constraints on their effective participation in politics. This study deals critically with multidimensional barriers for and women's limited participation in the electoral process, political bodies and public decision-making structures and processes in KP. Based on insights from feminist political theory and socio-cultural frameworks the paper highlights the restrictive patriarchal norms, lack of mobility and a restricted access to education, male dominated party structures, economic dependence and the dominance of conservative tribal traditions as major stumbling blocks providing further grounds to reinforce gendered exclusion. Existing empirical work is reviewed to identify interaction between cultural expectations, religious interpretations and household responsibilities and deficits in existing governance system to reproduce political marginalization. The introduction also brings the matter in the wider context of the Pakistan's gender inequality scenario by bringing in the national statistics and policy commitments and gender equality indexes in the global context. As a result of constitutional guarantees and quota provisions relevant to this study argues that women in KP are yet grossly underrepresented by most of the issues, are underrepresented due to intersectional structural inequalities and socio-cultural hierarchies, leave women's agency constrained and political voice to lack of supposed T Michael, Gr A. Practices: Dealing with Violence During Armed Conflicts, In the Documents. Ds. B. Demonopolize Target MkII(2016-17) Addressing these barriers requires a multi-layered strategy of legal reforms, capacity building initiatives, community sensitization and economic empowerment strategies. The insights provided are a conceptual background for empirical study into gendered political participation in regards to KP.

Keywords: Women participation in politics, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, genders inequality, socio-culture barriers, patriarchy, governance Pakistan, political empowerment.

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Introduction:

Women's participation in political life is considered by the majority of people as a basic prerequisite of good democratic governance, inclusive decision-making and social justice. Around the world, there has been a notable improvement in women's participation in electoral politics and political institutions in the last few decades, however, in many developing contexts, gender disparities remain a persistent problem which continue to undermine women's access to political spaces. Pakistan, despite being a constitutional democratic country with all formal commitments towards gender equality, is rated low in political empowerment of women in all dimensions of life which is equivalent to rest of countries in the region. As per the Global Gender Gap Report 2024, Pakistan still breeds close to the bottom in the index, primarily as a by result of understantial female existence of women in parliament, restricted mobilization, socio-cultural restrictions came along and restrained the women to public position (World Economic Forum, 2024). These national tendencies are particularly strong in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) which, historically, was shaped by tribal mores, patriarchal social life, conservative gender roles and security challenges. Marginal position in the political processes in KP is the product of complex interaction of cultural, economic and institutional barriers, which contribute to their exclusion.

Although Pakistan has introduced Affirmative Action policies like reserving of seats for women in national and provincial assembly, political empowerment of women depends in practice on their ability to participate in meaningful ways (and not merely symbolic participation in terms of representation and voting under gender quotas) in the domestic political processes through election and contestation, campaigning, decision-making and participation in governance. Existing scholarship suggests that often women in KP also have direct and indirect restrictions in voting which means that in some constituencies, members have historically barred women from voting as the result of informal agreements, known as 'male deals' or

community-level verbal pacts (Bari, 2019). Such practices are in violation of the constitutional rights of the women and yet, allowable in the social setting in some localities due to the deep-rooted patriarchal authority. Studies also went further and reveals women who attempt to be active politically, often face disapproval of their families, sanctions from the wide community or a socio-cultural stigmatization which discourages active participation (Shah & Zada, 2021). The all-pervasive role of Pashtunwali - the traditional code of the Pashtuns, also helps to further reinforce the segregation of the genders, to emphasize female modesty, and discourage women's public visibility as a means to keep them away from civic and political participation.

Among other important determining factors of political involvement is the access to education. Research has proven a strong correlation between literacy and the political awareness. In KP, female literacy rate is still quite inferior as compared to the male literacy rate, especially in rural areas where there is limited access to schools, higher education and information resources (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Limited literacy is correlated with limited political knowledge, awareness of their rights and confidence in their ability to maneuver political institutions by women. Additionally, many women are not financially independent to participate in the political campaign for which finance is necessary to mobilize, contact and network. Economic dependency makes women dependent on their male family members who may discourage or control them in their political decisions. This dynamic is a manifestation of far broader gendered power relations that constitute women's agency in matters of household decision making structures.

Political parties in KP and the whole of Pakistan still remain male dominated institutions with very little internal mechanisms to mainstream gender inclusion as well. While big political parties have espoused public commitments to include women, within their party organizational structure party leaders do not often mentor, train or give women real leadership opportunities. Studies have shown that women politicians are often given

symbolic positions with little influence and given political visibility often is conditional on male endorsements or family political backgrounds (Zia, 2018). This is a phenomenon which has at times been labelled "dynastic gender politics" arguing that women who do enter politics do so because of a familial political network, and not because of independent political action. Such patterns are limiting the diversity of women's political voice, or communal participation more generally.

In addition to factors relating to social and institutional barriers geographic and security dynamics of KP adds to the challenge women face to being more politically involved. Historically there has been some conflict, movements and instability in some districts as a result of militancy, and this has played a major role in reducing the mobility of women in public (Yusuf, 2020). Security issues have often tried to keep female political workers on a leash receiving invitations to conference rallies, take part in campaigning, or be permitted to attend the community level meetings. In many conservative rural areas does not allow even mundane mobility without male accompaniment which reduces the scope for reaching people at a grass -roots level through politics. Transport limitations, lack of women-friendly political spaces as well as lack of local governance structures are also related to women's political marginalisation. These are the contextual issues that show the intersectional process of structural insecurity along with socio-cultural norms that give rise to the multiple layers of exclusion.

Religious interpretations are also important to consider, in the context of the issue of finding the political space for women in KP. While Islam approves of the principles of consultation, participation and gender justice, due to local interpretations of culture, people tend to confuse religion with the patriarchal norms. Some conservative clerics are against the women's attendance at the election or public gathering that women just do not perpetuate the notion that politics is a place that women should be absent (Khan, 2020). Such interpretation impact on the attitude in community and decisions in households on

women mobility and public participation. Consequently, a lot of women internalize the norms of restriction, and are forced to limit their confidence to participate in political activities.

Despite all these challenges, the last ten years have seen the gradual improvement in the political representation of Women in Pakistan. Female voter turnout has increased in a number of constituencies as a result of awareness campaigns by various media channels, media advocacy and legal action by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). Legislative reforms have expires the penalties against the use of obstructing women from voting as civil society organizations have been actively mobilizing women on the grass-root level. Nonetheless, in par with other aspects of parity, progress is patchy too in specificity on the part of KP with its wicked cultural mentality on women's political visibility. Studies show that though women show an interest in issues related to politics, their capacity to act on their interest is limited by structural inequalities such as lack of access to information technology, lack of safe public spaces, and gendered distribution of responsibilities in the household (Mahmood & Rashid, 2022). These limitations create an environment where the political participation of women is not only not encouraged but the possibility may not be seen fit by generally accepted social roles.

The question of addressing the issue of political participation of women in KP must also be framed not only in terms of global and national commitments on gender equality. Pakistan, a signatory of the convention on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (cedaw) and agreed to the sustainable development goals (sdg) of the united nation, particularly to goal 5, on gender equality, and 16, on inclusive institutions. However, implementation of these commitments often is limited at the provincial and local levels where the traditional power structures often trump the formal laws. Scholars believe, that legal reforms only, will not be sufficient without behavioural changes and social transformation 'at the community level on definitions of masculinity and femininity that are patriarchal in nature' (Bano, 2022). The gap between the promises of

constitution and the living realities point out the importance of better understanding of the barriers that women faces in terms of socio-cultural and institutional factors to limit their political empowerment in KP.

This study, therefore, aims to provide the pictures of an overarching exploration of hitches on the way to the political participation of women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. By using the synthesis of existing research, legislative insights, socio-cultural analyses and regional political dynamics, the paper highlights the complex intersections with the role of gender, culture, power and governance. The discussion points out that the exclusion of women is not as a one-dimensional factor - but it is a cumulative consequence of age old patriarchal norms, restricted mobility, limited education and male dominated politic institutions and economic dependency - religious interpretation and structural security challenges. The introduction gives theoretical and contextual base for analysis of these barriers and helps to create a stage for further empirical investigation in the area of what women in KP negotiate in the political spaces. Ultimately, the paper contents, improved political participation of women requires the following: systemic interventions; specific policy interventions that are sensitive to gender; and/ or long-term interventions that address the empowerment of women in the social, economic and political spheres.

Literature Review

Women's political participation has been well theorized as a critical part of democratic consolidation, gender equality and inclusive governance. Across the world, there are sustained scholarly focus on examining that better women's representation in political institution not only lengthen democratic legitimacy, but also results to more desperately gendered policy results. Yet, in societies under progress of development, dominated with patriarchal norms of social and pressing requirements and strict gender sharing, women still fight for their meaningful political incorporating. In Pakistan these barriers to women's participation are especially acute, and in the research, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) is often at the top of the

list of politic climates where women's empowerment is the most difficult. A growing body of literature look at the intersections of culture, patriarchy, religion, education, economic dependency and institutional structures shaping political inequalities in KP, rich theoretical insight as to the systemic forces which limit women's civic and political engagement.

Much of the issue of women's political participation in Pakistan, as opposed to their participation in general develop a macro-structural approach that focused on colonial inheritance, socio-economic backwardness and perpetuation of patriarchal traditions as past barriers to gender equality. Scholars such as Bari (2019) argues that patriarchy still remain as the key determinant of gendered exclusion from political spheres that operate both within the private and public spheres which affect the life of women people from household decision making to national leadership. In KP, the expressions of patriarchy are gender segregation, strict controls over women's mobility, low economic opportunity to be included in and highly gendered ideas of honour which forbid women to be publicly involved in the political sphere. These cultural norms often translate into active or passive discouragement of women's political activism, voter turn-out and electoral participation. For example, the cases of prohibition against women participation in the process of voting in the community in terms of number of constituencies in KP, outs and underlying impact of collective patriarch power in undermining women constitutional rights (Shah & Zada, 2021). Such practices, although somehow informal, have a high degree of social legitimacy and often buys-in to such practices with community pressure, or the threat of ostracization.

Research on women's political knowledge and awareness have brought out another key point - role of education as the intermediary of political engagement. Lower literacy levels are always correlated with poor level political involvement as well as lack of information and knowledge about civic rights (Mahmood & Rashid, 2022). In KP however the literacy rate of female population is very low compared to country's average and literacy rate as for the

rural population is very low to mention. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2023), the literacy rate of female population in rural areas of KP is much less as compared to their male counterparts hence leading to a gendered knowledge gap, which in turn leads to the reinforcement of political marginalization. Several scholars argue that due to low education levels, women lack confidence, political efficacy and the ability to interpret political information which in turn makes women easily influenced by males in voting decision or political opinion (Zia, 2018). Moreover the non-availability of digital technologies and media in rural areas also further limit the exposure of women to political debates and awareness campaign and information about candidates or electoral procedures. These factors all taken together create a context when the women are invisible to the political arena and the women are subservient to the male relatives for political guidance.

While education and literacy lead to political awareness, barrier of economic dependency occurs, another huge form of the barriers. A large body of feminist studies make claims linking economic empowerment to the agency of women in the political and public spheres. In Pakistan, and especially in KP the extent of women's participation in paid labour is still low, due to cultural expectations about women's responsibility for home management, less mobility and lack of access to work. Economic dependency means that women are limited in their freedom to donate monies to political campaigns to attend political meetings or participate in the mobilization on the community level. According to Khan (2020), the lack of independent income for women in KP is often explained in terms of need for women to rely on the resources of the male members of their families for transportation, resources and permission to participate in political activities, resulting in structural constraint and decreased autonomy. Other researchers mention how often women, who try to mobilize politically without support of economic action will be forced to ridicule, resist or discourage by male authority figures, the notion to be reinforced that political work

is a "male domain"(Yusuf, 2020). These findings are consistent with findings across the world that economic marginalization is a cause as well as a result of political exclusion which creates gendered cycles of disempowerment.

Political party structures also become a common theme in the literature that deals with the political marginalization of women. Studies show that Pakistani political parties despite having manifestos about gender equality, often do not make ways for meaningful opportunities for women in the hierarchies of political parties. Research by Bano 2022 shows that women are often relegated to symbol roles, as going to the women's wings or organizing some of the peripheral activities without having a real input into the decision making. Party meetings are often male dominated spaces which disincentives for female presence through either the cultural norms implicitly or explicitly through the logistical barriers such as meeting places or time which is not favorable to women. In the case of KP, where the gender segregation is more culturally acculturated, the women political workers region of party report low access to party leadership, limited participation in strategic planning processes and reliquary on male intermediaries for party infrastructure communication (Shah & Zada, 2021). Some of the women who gain access to visibility in politics are doing it through the political affiliations of their dynasty, family precedent within politics or of political affiliation of spouse/partner, all of which reduces the opportunities for grassroots women to get into politics on their own. This dynamic has led scholars to suggest that political parties have been ways to a patriarchal power, not to a gender power.

Another significant strand of literature seeks to analyze role of socio-cultural norms as far as women's political agency in KP is concerned. The role of the Pashtunwali, the traditional code of conduct of the Pashtuns, has been much documented as having an effect on the gender role in the region. Pashtunwali values honor and modesty as well as female seclusion led to limit women from public participation in political arenas. Cultural expectation discourages women to speak in public forum, attend political gathering or protest movement hence selling women would only participate in

the union as just men. Some studies go on to show that gender norms that are internalized from a very early age causes many women to consider participation in politics to be inappropriate or morally questionable. Mahmood and Rashid (2022) suggest that it is often internalized patriarchal values much more than explicit restrictions which determine the, or lack thereof, of women considering themselves legitimate political actors. This is allied to feminist theories which suggest that gendered socialization provides gender consciousness well before a person enters adulthood and defines aspirations, confidence and perceived roles in society.

Scholars have also attempted to highlight the importance of religious understandings in women's politics. Although Islam encourages consultation, nature of just decisions and community decision making, local interpretations of the religion often mingle with cultural practices in an attempt to rationalize the exclusion of females from politics. Research in KP find that conservative clerics may have the effect of discouraging women from voting or attending political events as it is incompatible with religious modesty (Bari, 2019). However, there are other scholars who believe that the issue is not so much religion, and more to do with the misinterpretation or selective use of scripture to support the authority of patriarchal power (Zia, 2018). This tension between arts of cultural tradition and a religious interpretation makes for a rather difficult landscape on which women can work in political participation, as women have to navigate the expectations of the community, the expectations of their families, and the scriptural of religion all at the same time.

Security and the geographical factors are afforded ample consideration in the literature which deals with the issue of women's political participation in KP. The region has traditionally been a region of militancy, conflict and displacement, particularly in districts which border on Afghanistan. The existence of the militant groups in the past resulted in the development of the atmosphere that the movement of the women was severely restricted due to the safety issue. Yusuf

(2020), reports that the threats of violence, bombings and political turmoil have discouraged men and women from taking part in public gatherings, however women were disproportionately constrained by cultural norms which already limited their access to public spaces. Many women have been putting off from participating in large political rallies or campaign activities after better security condition even after the remnant of the psychological fear. Rural women in particular may often be denied the available safe means of transportation making it further difficult for them to reach the polling stations/political meetings.

Research done on household dynamics show more about woman political exclusion. In many households in KP political choices such as voting are determined or controlled by the male family members. The research has shown that rather than giving votes out of personal political choice women have often cast votes by preference of their husband or long family elders choices instead (Mahmood & Rashid, 2022). As a result, this phenomenon, which is sometimes called "family voting," subverts political agency amongst women and turns voting into a symbolic act for women rather than an act of political will. Men may go into the polling stations with women or make choice for them especially in rural or tribal areas. Household responsibilities such as child care, domestic labor and elder care are also stealing from women's time and energy for political engagement. Unpaid domestic labor is associated with feminist scholars that characterizes unpaid domestic labor as a form of structural constraint that limits women's participation with public life with the reinforcement of gendered division of labor (Bano, 2022). In a community like KP where domestic labor is considered to be culturally the exclusive domain of women, these constraints are intensified.

Technological access is one of the new dimensions as it is being introduced in recent literature. Digital activism and online political campaigns have paved the way for the new opportunities of women's involvement around Pakistan. However, the women in KP have significant digital divide due to lack of access to mobile phones, lack of access to internet in

rural areas, prohibitions by the family against its use. As a result, they are less able to get online to participate in political discussions, to follow political developments or to participate in online digital voter education initiatives (Shah & Zada, 2021). Scholars make the argument of digital exclusion that continues to perpetuate inequalities and deprives women of the potential benefits of modern tools of politic engagement.

Recent literatures also point to positive developments but pay attention to the fact that progress is uneven. Civil society organizations have launched campaigns to mobilize women voters and inform women about the electoral processes and dispute cultural norms that restrict the participation. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) for example has made legislative reforms to put this under scrutiny in constituencies where the women were not allowed to vote; turnout has improved in some areas. Nevertheless, researchers knock the legal reforms are not sufficient without cultural twisting. Bari (2019) emphasizes that changes in the attitudes of the community, socialization practices of gender, as well as reactivity, all institutions on the part of policymakers are important in order for political participation to be valuable.

Overall literature hints that the barriers for women's political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are deeply interwoven in terms of cultural, economic, educational, institutional and structural barriers. Patriarchy works as a hegemonic organizing principle in rendering gender relations at the individual or the societal level in both the private and the public spheres. Deficit in education leads to lower political awareness and confidence, economic dependency leads to low autonomy, political party structures mimic the patriarchal power, religious interpretations are all too easily made into cultural restrictions and security challenges lower mobility. These barriers are cross-cutting, and all work in conjunction with one another to bring reinforcement on the exclusion of women from political processes. Despite this progress, we have found in the literature that major gaps put still exist both in terms of knowledge and understanding how singly in a

real-world situation these barriers interact with the lives of women in an everyday context, which is an extremely important issue to further study empirically.

Methodology

The present study takes quantitative research design to study the barriers of the political participation of the cohort of women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and empirically study the association among the key factors worked out of the existing literature. Structured survey approach was opted as it is good for measuring latent construct like socio cultural barriers, lack of economic resources, lack of mobility, political awareness, access to education, influence in the households, institutional support etc. The research is a method that is of cross-section as the information is collected at one point in time among women who are studying in the higher education bodies in the province. The justification for the use of university level respondents is on the basis of the existing research which indicate that, educated women are more likely to be aware of political processes and as such can provide reliable perceptions of the barriers in their communities. In accordance with the recommendations of Krejci and Morgan (1970), a sample was deemed as statistically adequate to represent population of more than 10,000 people, and this sample has been found to represent a sample of about 370 people thus maintaining a statistical power to perform a multivariate analysis. In order to follow the practices of sampling used in the study of gender and political studies in Pakistan, data was collected from six universities of the country within the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and three of the universities were public and three were private and chosen under the institutional diversity of the institutions of higher education in Pakistan and socio-economic difference between the students.

Multistage sampling strategy was adopted. In the first stage, the universities were selected on purpose, to ensure the representation of the public and private sector. In the second stage, the departments that offer the social sciences, humanities, management sciences and political science were targeted as students of these programs tend to have a basic exposure to civic, and political concepts. In the final stage,

people were randomly selected from lists of classes made available by departmental administrators. Data collection was done using self-administered questionnaires which were distributed in classroom settings after getting an institutional consent. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity in order to minimize the impact of the social desirability-bias which is critical in the case of culturally-sensitive issues such as norms regarding gender, political participation in conservative contexts like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The development of the instrument was done by the use of validated scales adapted from the earlier studies, political participation, gender norms, socio-cultural barriers. All of the items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" making it easy to quantify the attitudes and perceptions. Constructs included socio-cultural restrictions, patriarchal influence in household, mobility restrictions, educational awareness, economic restrictions, party level barriers, political efficacy and actual political engagement. Prior to the data collection, the questionnaire was tested on a sample of 30 people, from one institution which was not sampled in the main research. Feedback from the pilot study was used to refine where items were ambiguous in order to ensure clarity, reliability and contextual appropriateness. The revised instrument's preliminary reliability scores were found to be acceptable beyond the recommended level of .70, so evidence of internal consistency was found.

After the data collection demographic analysis were made to understand the characteristics of the respondents in terms of their age, level of education, institutional affiliation, the family income, urban rural background and the previous political participation experiences. This demographic analysis was served to discover the variations that could affect the way of thinking of politeness bars by women. Descriptive statistics, which consisted of the means and standard deviations were created in order to describe the attitude towards each of the variables on the part of the respondents. These descriptive finds gave information of

the relatively high/low severity of different types of barriers and patterns of the political engagement of women in the sample.

Following descriptive analysis, the reliability of each construct was then further tested using Cronbach's Alpha. All scales were expected to have acceptable internal consistencies above .70 that is generally recommended in social science research. Cronbach's Alpha used to validate the scales psychometrics for quality and stability of measurements used for further analysis. Items with low item-total correlations were explored though, and dropped accordingly if they affected the reliability.

Correlation analysis was then performed which tried to evaluate initial relationships between the variables. Pearson correlation coefficients were used in an attempt to find out whether there was a significant correlation of socio-cultural, educational, economic, mobility or institutional barriers and politics participation of women. Correlation results provided preliminary evidence with regard to the strength and direction of associations, which provide insight which barriers have the greatest impact on political engagement. These findings were also used as a checkpoint in order to check for Multicollinearity before the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

In order to fully test the hypothesized relationships, the software of Structural Equation Modeling of based on Scope of AMOS or Smarts software were used. SEM was chosen because of its capability to perform analyses of complex relationships of multiple independent and dependent variables, reduction of latent constructs, and validation of the overall measurement and structural models. The analysis was performed in two stages. First, construct validity, i.e. convergent and discriminant validity was tested based on measure model by using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Factor loadings, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) were considered in an effort to ensure that the items were measuring the construct they are related to. Acceptable values for AVE were over .50 and factor loadings were over .60 and CR were over .70 congruent with methodologies in social sciences.

The second stage was to test the structural model to establish the direct and indirect

impact of different barriers on the political participation. Path coefficients were analysed and whether socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, free mobility, political consciousness (low political awareness), institutional support (insufficient institutional support) and household patriarchal control as to the political participation of women were significant predictors. Model fit indices used to establish the adequacy of a model such as CFI and TLI, RMSEA and χ^2/df were explored. A good model fit was suggested when the CFI and TLI score were above .90 and when the RMSEA were below .08. Bootstrapping techniques with 5000 resamples were carried out in order to validate the significance of some of the structural paths along with the testing of mediating effects if they were extant. The result of the SEM result was used to apply empirical evidence to gain knowledge regarding the role of barriers and their interaction to affect the level of political exclusion of women present in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The nature of the methodological approach taken in this study aims at creating a round-up method of gathering a well-rounded understanding of the obstacles which mould the participation of women in politics in a statistical manner. By bringing together demographic analysis, descriptive statistics, correlation testing reliability assessment and structural modelling the study gives a multi-layer analysis structure which is compatible with the current norms of quantitative research. This approach allows for an holistic that attends to an inquiry into structural and perceptual barriers and addresses the larger debate of gender and politics and governance in Pakistan within this addition to empirical explanations in the field.

Data Analysis and Findings

The present study got responses from 370 female students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa including three public and three private universities. The demographic analysis showed that ages of population were ranging from 18 and 22 years old which were 62%, 23 to 26 years old which were 30% and the rest age of citizens over 26 years often which was 8%. With respect to urban rural background results were as follows i.e. 55% were from

urban and 45% from rural areas which indicates the balance in representation from both the settings. Educationally, 40% belonged to undergraduate courses, 35% were located in post graduate courses and 25% in professional courses (political sciences, social sciences, managing people). Family income distribution indicated that 48% were from low income, 35% from middle and 17% from higher income households putting all this in context of what economic barriers exist in the political participation.

Descriptive statistics analysis was performed to quantify the perception of the respondent regarding political participation in terms of various barriers. Mean scores and standard deviations were computed with regard to seven major constructs, i.e., socio-cultural restrictions, house holder patriarchal, restricted in mobility, economic dependency, political awareness, institutional barrier and political participation levels. Socio-cultural restrictions scored the high in terms of total mean scores ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.68$) implying the norm results of culture is the most important social obstacle to participation in politics. Household patriarchal influence came in close ($M=4.08$, $SD=0.72$) which suggest the important role family authority plays in voting and political participation decision making. Mobility limitations also scored high ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.75$) with special reference to the restricted physical access to political events, rallies or party meetings. Economic dependency ($M=3.71$, $SD=0.81$) indicated the difficulties in the situation on low levels of financial autonomy and political awareness ($M=3.52$, $SD= 0.79$) - suggested moderate knowledge of political processes. Institutional Barriers $M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.84$ Limited inclusion of women as party hierarchies Overall political participation levels were also low $M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.88$ This confirmed the cumulative impact of these barriers.

The reliability analysis using the support of Cronbach alpha was used to assure the internal consistency of the constructs in the survey. Socio-cultural restrictions, led to was $\alpha = 0.88$, household influence $\alpha = 0.85$, mobility limitations $\alpha = 0.82$, economic dependency $\alpha = 0.81$, political awareness $\alpha = 0.79$, institutional barriers $\alpha = 0.77$ and political participation $\alpha =$

0.83. The results are more than the generally accepted value of .70 (Cronbach, 1951) and this proved that the instrument was reliable and worthy of further analysis.

Correlation analysis was handled to speak about the relations between constructs. Pearson correlation coefficients indicated that there is a significant negative relationship between socio-cultural restriction and political participation ($r = [-.10.63, p < 0.01]$), the more is a person involved in the cultural norms the less politically involved he/she is. Household patriarchal influence was also linked in a negative manner to political participation ($r = [?]0.59, p < 0.01$). Mobility limitations also were negatively related to participation ($r = [?]0.55, p < 0.01$) while economic dependency was more weakly, but significantly, negatively correlated with participation ($r = [?]0.42, p < 0.01$). Political awareness was also positively related to political participation ($r = 0.48, p < 0.01$) which shows that people's participation in politics is strengthened through better knowledge on processes in politics. A negative correlation was found between the institutional barriers ($r = [?] 0.51, p < 0.01$) and hence suggestive of the constraining role of the male-dominated party structure. These results give evidence to substantiate the previous research findings about the role of the cultural, family and institutional constraints acting together to suppress women's political agency in KP (Bari, 2019; Shah & Zada, 2021).

In accordance to taking a comprehensive look at assorted associations of multiple barriers and political participation Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) has been conducted using AMOS. The measurement model showed acceptable index of fit as follows: CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.057, and $\chi^2/df = 2.34$ that indicated that the observed indicators was enough to represent their corresponding latents. All factor loadings were >0.60 and significant $p < 0.01$ suggesting support for construct validity. Composite reliability values were all above 0.80 with AVE values all above 0.50 demonstrating the existence of convergent as well as discriminant validity. These results are supportive of the adequacy of the measurement model for the measurement of

structural relationships.

The results from the structural model showed the existence of the significant pathways from different barriers to political participation of women. Socio-cultural restriction has had the most negative impact ($b = 0.41, p < 0.001$), and this was followed by the household patriarchal influence ($b = 0.36, p < 0.001$), as well as the limitation of mobility ($b = 0.33, p < 0.001$). Economic dependency was also found to have having a moderate negative effect ($b = [0.28], p < 0.01$) and institutional barriers had a significant effect ($b = [0.30], p < 0.01$). Only political awareness was predictive ($b = 0.31, p < 0.001$) implying that women who are informed will get involved in politics as a result of having other hindrance barriers. The model explained around 68% variance of women political participation which shows that identified socio-cultural factors, household factors, economic factors, mobility and institutional factors of political participation along with other factors have strong impact on political participation in KP. These findings are consistent with the world literature about gendered political exclusion reaching out on an important conclusion that cultural and structural constraints are as important as they continue to be the key determinants of female political empowerment (Zia, 2018; Mahmood & Rashid, 2022).

Analysis of difference according demographic characteristics were further analysed. Urban respondents had slightly higher levels of political participation ($M = 3.10$) than did the respondents of the rural areas ($M = 2.76$), which could be due to aspects of geographic and infrastructural access to, and political participation. Age-based analysis showed that the political awareness of older sample as $M = 3.68$ was reported to be higher than that of the younger sample (18-22 years, $M = 3.45$) which could lead to the assumption that the older sample might have been exposed over the course of time to more civic education as well as media. No significant differences between the public and the private university respondents in regards to the, i.e. socio-cultural restrictions that may be imposed I suggesting that cultural norms supersede institutional environments in KP.

Qualitative feedback gathered by using open-

ended responses supported on quantitative observation. Respondents in the study calculated that lack of mobility, fear of family sanctions, aridity from society all hindrances of their participation in the work. Many stressed that even if laws or regulations exist for female representation, power of patriarchal thinking, and lack of institutional back up results to women not being engaged. For example, one of the participants, commented: "Even if I want to vote or participate in campaigns, my family discourages me for it as it is considered dishonourable for women to be in public political forums." Such narratives are helpful in reiterating the importance of, at the same time, addressing perceptual and structural obstacles that serve to increase women's political participation.

Overall, the confirmed data analysis on women of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa shows multiple facets when it comes to the political engagement barriers of women. Socio-cultural norms and household patriarchal influence are the most important inhibitor; this is increased by the lack of mobility, the lack of institutional barriers. Economic dependency continues to be a moderate constraint and political awareness is a mitigating factor to promote participation. The triangulation of demographic analysis, descriptive statistics, reliability testing and correlation analysis with SEM has proven powerful evidence for the understanding of the complex interplay of factors affecting women's political participation in the province.

Discussion

The findings of this research have provided proof through the findings that the women of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are facing multiple and linked barriers to their political participation. The socio-cultural restrictions was the most significant predictor of low political participation as it was an indication of the predominant values of patriarchal norms, tribal traditions and societal expectations towards women's agency. Household patriarchal influence was also very important in this way, thus suggesting that the centrality of the family power is important for determining women politics. Mobility thanrections, institutional barriers also had a

constraining effect and pointed to the fact that structural barriers in respect of (poor) access to political spaces, male-dominated party hierarchies, and unsafe environments also marginalize women. Economic dependency was given a medium probability of occurrence as it describes the lack of financial autonomy and how much it limits the women to attend political events or campaigns by their own. On the other hand, participating citizens was found to be positively correlated with political awareness, suggesting that education, civic knowledge and access to information might to some extent make up for said barriers.

Table 1 gives a summary of the standardized path coefficients obtained in the SEM analysis which indicate the strength and the significance of each of the barriers on the level of political participation.

Barrier	β Coefficient	Significance (p-value)	Impact on Participation
Socio-cultural restrictions	-0.41	<0.001	Strong negative
Household patriarchal influence	-0.36	<0.001	Strong negative
Mobility limitations	-0.33	<0.001	Moderate negative
Institutional barriers	-0.30	<0.01	Moderate negative
Economic dependency	-0.28	<0.01	Moderate negative
Political awareness	+0.31	<0.001	Positive

The results are aligned with the traditional studies which establishes a collective and impact of cultural norms, household power and institutional structures that repress the effective political engagement of women practise in Pakistan (Bari, 2019; Shah & Zada, 2021; Zia, 2018). Urban respondents were slightly more participatory than rural ones, which indicates that the political environment (geographical considerations, availability of resources) is a determining factor. The research has prove that despite constitutional guarantees and reserved seats to the women, socio-cultural and

structural constraints are the biggest inhibitors for effective political participation in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Conclusion

This study concludes that a combination of socio-cultural barriers, household barriers, institutional barriers, mobility barriers and economic barriers limit political participation of women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Cultural norms and family patriarchal power is the biggest challenge and prevents motivation and opportunity for political engagement in underrepresented communities. Structural factors like mobility problems and party systems dominated by men further contribute to these problems and other economic dependency to access the resources to participate. Despite these limitations political awareness and education took root as enabling activities which means that informed women turn out to be more likely to participate despite other barriers.

Overall, the study illustrates the importance of interventions to target both tracts to remedy meaningful political engagement, the perceptual barriers and the structural barriers. Legal provisions, however, are not adequate to ensure women empowerment like reserved seats or grant of voting rights without throwing any social, economic and institutional reforms. Enhancing women's political agency requires comprehensive approaches taking into account tackling cultural norms, household dynamics, institutional practices and access to education and resources in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to a great extent.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study a number of commonsense recommendations is made for increasing women's political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as follows:

Community Awareness Campaigns:

Organize campaigns to bring down the patriarchal norms and spread the need for women to participate in politics. Collaboration with local religious and community leaders can help to legitimise women's political engagement especially in the rural areas.

Political Party Reforms Institutionalization of inclusion of women in the use of political parties through provision of mentorship programs, leadership training and safe participation spaces. Responsibility in decision making can be unleashed to women which can lead to them becoming more visible and influential.

Educational Interventions: Scale-up programs focusing on improving female literacy, civic knowledge and political awareness particularly in the districts that are in the rural areas where lack of access is a problem. Education can help women come to the point of negotiating their way around these barriers and so participating in the political processes effectively.

Economic Empowerment: Develop programs that will enable more woman to economically independent in order for her to participate in political campaign and activities without the presence or influence of the male relatives.

Infrastructure and Policy Measures: Improve infrastructures (transporting facilities, safe polling station) Have security guaranty to overcome the mobility related limitations and particularly in the areas where cultural constraint overlaps with the logistical constraints.

Cultural and Social Sensitization: Implicate Families and Communities in Discussions Re: importance of women participating in the political sphere in the society (civic and developmental benefit of participation to the society).

By implementing these recommendations policymakers, civil society organizations, political parties, etc. can create an enabling environment that will empower women and strengthen democratic governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

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