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## **Socio-Cultural and Patriarchal Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Pashtun Society**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*This study is a critical analysis of the socio-cultural and patriarchal restraints that exist that contort women's political empowerment in Pashtun society with special focus on District Peshawar, Pakistan. Constitutional provisions and stick to the moored political reservations have not significantly shaken patriarchy that still subjugates women systemically to lack of voice because of stifling cultural and religious reasons in perpetuating gender inequality. Based on a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews conducted with thirty educated women, the research has identified five inter-related obstacles: Denial of free choice, Educational exclusion, Male control over political institutions, Cultural and religious disadvantage (e.g. purdah) and an ever-present threat of violence. The result identifies that even women with high educational attainment and interest in politics are facing serious repression issues, indicating the failure of top-down policy measures. The study concludes that sustainable empowerment necessitates a multi-sectoral intervention which incorporates economic agency, educational expansion, political reform and cultural reinterpretation to unravel patriarchal structures that allow for women's full participation in public life.*

**Keywords:** *Women's political participation, Patriarchy, Pashtun society, Socio-cultural barriers, Political empowerment, Gender inequality, Pakistan, Qualitative research, Violence against women, Educational deprivation.*

#### **Introduction**

The political empowerment of women is not merely a metric of development but a fundamental prerequisite for a just and equitable society, a notion famously echoed by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, who asserted that no nation could achieve greatness without the active participation of its women (Begum, 1987). This vision, however, stands in stark contrast to the contemporary reality for millions of women in Pakistan, particularly within the Pashtun sociocultural context. Despite constituting approximately 48.54% of the population (World Bank, 2020) and being legally endowed with the same rights to political participation as men a right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) Pakistani women face a pervasive and systemic exclusion from the political sphere. The country's shameful ranking of 151st among 153 countries on the World Economic Forum's (2020) Global Gender Gap Index is a sobering testimony to this depressing disparity. The gap between constitutional potential and the reality is further exemplified in the mournful quantitative statistics: in the Senate 20% and in the National Assembly 33% of seats are occupied by women; even fewer - less than 1% of directly elected parliamentarians - were women in the period 2008-2013 (Lari, 2011; Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2019, 2020a, 2020b). This systemic marginalization, however, is not an isolated

phenomenon but is deeply entrenched into a complex web of patriarchal structures that govern every aspect of life, thereby making the public sphere a masculine world where women have "neither a place nor an obligation" (Alam, 2012).

This systemic political disenfranchisement is supported by a broader regime of socio-cultural oppression that seriously limits women's autonomy. Within the highly insular and traditional social structure of the Pakhtun society, control over women's lives from their mobility and education to their marital choices and bodily integrity is established by a combination of patriarchal authority, strict interpretations of religion and ancient cultural codes such as Pakhtunwali (Saeed, 2012; Rasul, 2014). The consequences are dire and multifaceted, including poor access to healthcare, poverty and endemic violence, including domestic abuse, forced marriage and so-called 'honor killings' (Ali, 2001). This environment of repression is so severe that a Thomson Reuters Foundation survey identified Pakistan as the most dangerous country for women in the world (Ali, 2018; Rauf, 2020). Central to this disempowerment is the deliberate constriction of women's agency, defined as their ability to make strategic life choices and influence societal change. While men's interpretations of law and custom often prevent women from exercising their *de jure* rights to education, property, and political choice (University of Minnesota Human Rights Library, n.d.), the political domain remains particularly fortified. Politics is viewed as an inherently "masculine" arena (Rasul, 2014), and women who dare to enter it confront a "masculinist, confrontational, alienating culture" that actively discourages their participation (West & Blumberg, 1990). This is compounded by the dual burden of domestic responsibilities and a pervasive fear of violence and social stigmatization, which effectively brands women who engage in public life.

Consequently, this article seeks to critically investigate the specific socio-cultural and patriarchal barriers that preclude the political empowerment of women within Pashtun society. Moving beyond purely quantitative assessments of representation, this analysis delves into the qualitative lived experiences and structural impediments that sustain this exclusion. The research is guided by three core objectives: first, to investigate the socio-cultural challenges women face when attempting to engage in political activities; second, to analyze the profound influence of the patriarchal social structure on women's political participation and their subsequent empowerment; and third, to offer substantive measures and suggestions to assist women in gaining power through political engagement. By examining the interplay of factors such as male dominance in political institutions (Zakar & Hamid, 2018), the cultural enforcement of *purdah* (seclusion) (Kabir, 2003), illiteracy, and the ever-present threat of violence, this study argues that women's political marginalization is not a passive outcome but an actively maintained feature of the patriarchal order. The analysis contends that without a concerted effort to dismantle these deep-rooted barriers through education, economic independence, legal protection, and a transformation of political culture the constitutional guarantees of equality will remain a distant illusion, and the nation will continue to fail half its population.

### **Literature Review**

The historical trajectory of women's political participation in Pakistan is a narrative of stark contrasts, marked by periods of progress and severe regression. As Shami (2009) outlines, women played a significant role in the independence movement, yet their formal political engagement has fluctuated dramatically with changing regimes, thriving under leaders like

Bhutto and Musharraf but being severely curtailed during periods like Zia-ul-Haq's martial law. Despite constitutional guarantees and a critical mass of reserved seats that create the illusion of representation Pakistan has the highest proportion of women in parliament since independence (Latif et al., 2015) this numerical presence is deeply misleading. As Philips (2000) and Sumbadze (2008) argue, descriptive representation does not automatically translate into substantive representation or the advancement of women's interests. The National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW, 2010) confirms this, reporting that women in politics remain largely disengaged, with little progress made in transforming the inherently patriarchal culture of political institutions themselves. This suggests that top-down measures, while creating a visible platform, are insufficient to dismantle the deep-seated structural and institutional biases that perpetuate gender inequality within the political arena (Duflo, 2012; Smulders, 1998).

Beneath this institutional facade lies the formidable bedrock of socio-cultural and patriarchal structures that actively suppress women's political agency. In the specific context of Pashtun society, this control is exerted through a powerful combination of patriarchal authority, rigid cultural codes like Pakhtunwali, and specific interpretations of religion (Sohail, 2014; Rasul, 2014). This system enforces female seclusion (Purdah), prioritizes domestic roles, and severely restricts mobility, effectively rendering the public sphere a masculine domain where women have "neither a place nor an obligation" (Alam, 2012). As Naz (2011) and Khan (2011) contend, this control is maintained by denying women fundamental political rights: the autonomy to vote freely, run for office, campaign, or express political opinions. This disenfranchisement is compounded by economic dependence and a deliberate lack of awareness about their legal rights, making women vulnerable to discrimination and state-sanctioned injustices (Aamir, 2015; Baloch, 2012). Furthermore, a pervasive culture of violence including domestic abuse, threats, and honor-based crimes serves as a powerful deterrent, punishing transgressions and enforcing conformity to these oppressive norms (Ali, 2001; McCarthy & Sultana, 2004).

The theoretical concept of empowerment, particularly as defined by Kabeer (1999) as the process of enhancing one's ability to make strategic life choices, is crucial for understanding this impediment. Women's political empowerment, therefore, means possessing the agency to vote, contest elections, express political will, and influence decision-making (Ibrahim, 2011). However, in Pashtun society, this agency is systematically negated. Liberal feminist thought, as discussed by Daraz (2012) and Naz (2011), argues that the problem is not women's inherent inferiority but a social structure that denies them equal legal rights and opportunities, particularly in education. This lack of education is a primary obstacle; it is the most powerful tool for enhancing social position yet remains inaccessible to many, with low female literacy rates perpetuating cycles of disempowerment (Sidra, 2021). Without education and economic independence, women cannot develop the self-worth and autonomy required to challenge their subordinate status. Consequently, they are confined to secondary positions without a say in economic or political affairs, their lives dictated by male power and control (Naz, 2011; Bose & Rossi, 1983).

Ultimately, the literature reveals a significant gap between policy and practice, between international frameworks like gender mainstreaming (Beijing Declaration, 1995) and on-the-ground realities. While initiatives promoted by bodies like the Inter-Parliamentary Union

(2020) aim to make parliaments more gender-sensitive, their implementation in a context as rigid as Pashtun society is fraught with challenges. The process is often reduced to "window dressing" (Rao & Kelleher, 2005), failing to alter the underlying patriarchal power structures. Previous studies have effectively diagnosed the broad factors patriarchy, culture, religion, violence but have often overlooked the nuanced, ground-level perspectives of the women themselves, particularly educated women who possess political interest but are still constrained by these forces. This study seeks to fill that void by moving beyond macro-level analysis to investigate the specific, lived experiences of these barriers, exploring how socio-cultural norms are internalized and how they manifest to actively restrict political participation and, by extension, the full realization of empowerment for Pashtun women.

### **Problem Statement**

In Pakistani and Pashtun societies, women face profound and systemic barriers that prevent their active participation in politics, despite constituting half the population. Deeply entrenched patriarchal structures, conservative mindsets, and specific religious interpretations converge to relegate women to the private sphere, viewing them as second-class citizens unsuited for the male-dominated public arena of political life. This exclusion is compounded by widespread female illiteracy and economic dependence, which severely curtail autonomy and reinforce their reliance on male relatives for decision-making. Consequently, women are systematically discouraged from political engagement, whether as voters, campaigners, or candidates. This marginalization is particularly acute in Pashtun society, where rigid cultural norms and a strict normative framework further intensify these restrictions. The core problem, therefore, is not a lack of capability but a deeply rooted socio-cultural system that actively suppresses women's political agency. This study aims to critically investigate these specific cultural and societal barriers, arguing that any meaningful initiative for national development remains ineffective without first dismantling the structures that hinder women's political empowerment.

### **Research Methodology**

This study used a qualitative research methodology for conducting an in-depth study on the socio-cultural complex barriers in hindering the political empowerment of the Pashtun women at District Peshawar. The qualitative methodology has been contemplated as the most appropriate as it assists to comprehend nuances of human experiences, perceptions and social realities that can't be well collected with the quantitative methodology solely. The research was especially related to the study of the combined role of patriarchal social structures, normative systems and religious perspectives covering and limiting women's participation in politics. This methodological choice allowed for some flexibility in data collection and analysis as the researcher may now deeply probe into sensitive topics of the culture and capture the full richness of the participant experience and contextualise it within it. The choice of qualitative framework was particularly suitable for studying the underlying power relations, cultural norms and social mechanisms, perpetuating gender inequality in the political sphere, with and in line with study objective to find out the deeply rooted socio-cultural factors that hinder women's political agency.

The research was conducted in District Peshawar, with data collection specifically taking place at the University of Peshawar and Shaheed Benazir Women University. These sites were strategically selected to access participants who could provide insightful perspectives on

women's political empowerment the former for its diverse and heterogeneous population, and the latter as the first women's university in the region, ensuring both accessibility and a concentration of potential participants with relevant experiences. The study utilized purposive sampling to identify thirty female students and faculty members who demonstrated both political interest and familiarity with political information, continuing recruitment until data saturation was achieved. This sampling strategy was essential for targeting information-rich cases that could speak directly to the research questions, while the exclusive focus on female participants ensured that women's perspectives remained central to the inquiry and helped avoid the potential biases that might have been introduced by male respondents in this culturally sensitive context.

Data collection mainly used unstructured interviews, each of which took 20-35 minutes and took place in a natural setting to foster open dialogue. These interviews were audio-recorded with consent of the participant and accompanied by detailed field notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information. The unstructured form permitted the participant to freely voice out their views and experiences on the topic of political participation and allowed the researcher to explore emergent themes in real-time. The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis which entailed systematically identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within collected data through a process of coding and development of themes. Throughout the research process, careful ethical protocols were in place such as obtaining informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity through pseudonym, and strict data use policies such that all data would be used for academic purposes only, followed by strict protections of participants from potential harm in this sensitive area of research.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The importance of women's political participation is debated, with its foundation in the fairness and equality arguments offered in the literature. First and foremost, women lack equal access to political decision-making because they constitute half of the world's population and because women's experiences, values, and interests are distinct from those of men and therefore need to be represented at the political level; scholars also highlight the effects of women's political presence on policy outcomes and the significance of women's representation for the legitimacy of political institutions (Sawer 2000, Lovenduski 2000). To this end, numerous studies have found that increased female engagement in all spheres of society including politics, business, and the economy is associated with higher levels of prosperity, better leadership, and less poverty (Klasen and Lamanna 2009, Coleman 2004, Swamy, et al. 2001, Wangnerud, 2009).

One of the best fit theoretical approach is Radical Feminism which calls for end to Patriarchy and cultural practices which limit women mobility and access to different resources and opportunities. Radical feminism is a branch of feminism which strongly against oppose the patriarchal system and cultural forces which cause women subordination in all aspects of power domain (Johannasdottir, 200) Kate Millet, a radical feminist argues that patriarchy is a political institution which is structured in relationship of power and powerless (Millet, 1970). This approach underscores gross root level analysis of patriarchal and socio-cultural practices which influence women political decision making and participation. With political empowerment, one of the most important facets of the empowerment paradigm, women can challenge male dominance in the political arena by having a voice in policymaking. Though

empirical trends suggest that more and more women are entering politics, and though the topic is widely acknowledged to be of normatively crucial importance, the literature on women's political empowerment remains sparse. Indicative of the challenges and slow progress on the empirical front is also the absence of well-defined definitions and measurable indicators. (Hanmer and Klugman 2016). Hence, this study found the link between patriarchal socio-cultural system and lack of women political participation which limits women empowerment.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

The basic obstacle to women's political empowerment in Pashtun society, as indicated by the analysis of in-depth interviews, is the almost complete lack of independent decision-making space for women. Repeatedly, participants talked about a patriarchal system where even something as simple as political activity requires male permission and approval. Nazia's story (Interview #2) points to this power imbalance clearly: "In all decision-making situations, women are expected to keep quiet in front of men... For a woman to enter politics in Pakhtun society, she must get permission from men. This reliance has also an economic dimension, since women's economic dependency on men in effect extinguishes their political freedom. Brikhna (Interviewer 5) also emphasized this dependency on a structural basis: "Women cannot live without the dependency of men on the daily course of their lives and other significant moments of their lives." Voting becomes an extension of male preferences in politics, rather than an expression of female political agency. This systematic disenfranchisement is consistent with Latif et al. (2015) who found that stereotypical thinking limits women's political participation and produces a society where women cannot freely decide if and how to participate politically.

Educational deprivation emerged as both a consequence and reinforcement of patriarchal control, creating a cyclical barrier to political participation. Participants identified education as the critical catalyst for empowerment, yet described systematic barriers to female education in Pashtun society. Mehwish (Interview #10), who hails from a tribal area, noted that "investing on women education is considered as a wastage of money. Women are seen as a burden in their own house." This perception reflects deep-seated cultural norms that prioritize domestic roles over intellectual development for women. Huma (Interview #15) connected education directly to political empowerment, stating that education enables women to "violate some cultural norms because our cultural norms are strict for women." Shahida Aman (Interview #10) provided an intergenerational perspective, arguing that "educating every mother is the most effective way to ensure that society is educated." The participants overwhelmingly viewed education as the foundation for developing political consciousness, understanding rights, and gaining the confidence necessary for political participation. However, as one sociology student (Interview #22) noted, educated working women gain marginally more autonomy: "working women, unlike their unemployed counterparts, are not required to confer with male family members before making decisions about their political career."

The political arena itself operates as a masculine domain that actively excludes women from meaningful participation. Participants described political parties as institutions that perpetuate gender inequality through male-dominated leadership and decision-making processes. Menhas (Interview #12) observed that "women's participation in political parties

is rarely promoted. They are excluded from any decision-making procedures that may impact them." This exclusion is maintained through structural barriers and cultural norms within political organizations. Shazia Aslam (Interview #18) highlighted how political opportunities are restricted to women with specific privileged backgrounds: "every common women cannot be a part of a political party because this opportunity is largely available to either a politician's family, wealthy women or someone who have links and relationship with political party leadership." Nazia Anjum (Interview #14) described the gender stereotyping that prevents women from attaining leadership positions: "women are not trusted and considered as emotional, weak and unfaithful." These findings corroborate previous research by Sanauddin et al. (2016) and Latif et al. (2015) indicating that political institutions in Pakistan reflect and reinforce the patriarchal patterns prevalent in the broader society.

Cultural and religious norms provide the ideological justification for women's political exclusion, particularly through the enforcement of purdah (seclusion) and strict gender roles. Participants described how cultural practices intertwined with religious interpretations to create powerful barriers to political participation. Zara (Interview #3) explained how "Purdah promotes male supremacy and female servitude, restricting women's economic and political participation and advancement." Haseena (Interview #6) detailed the socialization process through which women internalize these constraints: "The gendered norms are internalized during the socialization process which develop later into their personality. women cannot think of participation in political activities openly due to gendered norms and religious instructions." Religious misinterpretation emerged as a significant theme, with Rukhsana (Interview #16) noting that "Religion is misinterpreted in our society which leads to many social problems especially for women." However, some participants, like Shazia (Interview #23), distinguished between authentic religious principles and cultural practices: "due to lack of knowledge among women regarding the difference between Pashtun cultural norms and religious principals, they are being discriminated." These findings support previous research by Shaheed et al. (2009) and Kalam (2014) on how cultural and religious norms restrict women's mobility and political participation.

The ever-present threat of violence serves as the ultimate enforcement mechanism maintaining women's political exclusion. Participants described a pervasive culture of violence that punishes women who transgress traditional gender roles by engaging in political activities. Saima Ameen (Interview #24) articulated this fear: "Perceived fear of violence, from men inside and outside of house, restricts women to participate in political activities." This fear encompasses physical violence, sexual exploitation, and social stigmatization. Areej (Interview #21) contextualized this violence within broader power structures: "Men is controlling the social, economic and political life of women in Pashtun society and considered them as a personal property." The participants described how the threat of violence affects even basic activities like going to polling stations or attending political meetings. This environment of fear effectively eliminates political participation as a viable option for most women, confirming previous findings by Bock and James (2005) and Waring (2010) on how fear of violence and stigmatization discourages women from political engagement. Together, these five thematic barriers lack of decision-making power, educational deprivation, male political domination, cultural-religious constraints, and fear of violence create a

comprehensive system of political disempowerment that maintains women's exclusion from the public sphere.

### **Findings of the Study**

This study reveals the reason that Pashtun women are politically disempowered which has fundamentally embedded in patriarchal system in which women are not given the autonomy to decide their decision-making on systematic basis. Despite all the participants being educated women and with demonstrated political interest with most participants holding postgraduate degrees their narratives had a constant undercurrent of an absence of basic agency in political choices. Women not able to participate in politics as they said that they needed male's permission for even basic political activities such as voting and their political affiliations were decided (often) by the political loyalties of their male family members. This dependency is supported by economics given that economic dependence on men essentially leads to the wholesale destruction of political autonomy. The results of this research show that decision making power doesn't just form part of empowerment but is in fact the very basis upon which political participation is erected, and without which, is a crucial building block that impossible to surmount in order to achieve meaningful political participation.

The study alludes to the relationship between structural and a socio-cultural inhibitions that hinders women's participation in politics as a whole lumped category. Respondents overwhelmingly perceived male supremacy in the political institutions and the long-standing cultural norms as the biggest barriers. They said that political parties are the male spaces in the society, women do not have opportunities to take part in party leadership and decision-making by virtue of systemic discrimination and gender stereotyping. Also, traditional cultural practices (e.g., purdah), as well as religious beliefs about the place of women in families is part of the normative controls that limits women's mobility and visibility in public life. These barriers are compounded by education gaps however, in that despite the advanced education of the participants, resort to female education was reported to be widespread in Pashtun culture more broadly, with female education seen as unnecessary or even detrimental to the female's primary role of being the domestic caregiver.

A continuum of knowledge that is cementing in the course is the ubiquity of fear and violence as hegemonic bodies that relegate women to a political "other." Participants used terms such as ever-present threat, to describe both physical and psychological violence unleashed on women for assuming activities outside of traditional gender roles - something that includes participating in political activities. This fear is a powerful deterrent which also even prohibits the most rudimentary political activity of visiting polls or political meetings. Political participation is seen as a dangerous act to be engaged in by women due to the ever present threat of violence and the social stigma and possible consequences of honour. This climate of fear enforced by the social mores and institutional conformity is in itself sufficient to preclude political participation as a legitimate choice of action for most women, no matter what their educational level, political interest, or other condition.

### **Conclusion**

This study strongly demonstrates political empowerment of Pashtun women is highly restricted yet to be achieved by a hypocritical institution that is thriving on adjoining socio-cultural, religious, and structural challenges. The analysis indicates that the exclusion of women in participating in politics is not an accidental issue, but a system built up by many

modes through which such action has been sustained; denial of the right to make decisions, limited access to education, male dominance of political organizations, as well as through the creation of barriers to mobility and fear of violence imposed by the culture. Most notable of the findings is the means in which the barriers are linked to each other to create a system of over determined disempowerment, which in turn leads to the exclusion even in women of high education and political interest. The remaining presence of these restrictions highlights the weakness of top-down approaches of gender equality, such as political quotas, which fail to focus the inherent patriarchal norms and power structure approaching women and marginalizing them in political life.

The way forward includes a fundamental change of both structural prerequisites and cultural arrangements. Women's economic dependency needs to be addressed starting from the expansion of education and development of vocational skills that lead to economic independence. Second, political parties need to undertake internal reforms in order to ensure effective inclusion of women in leadership positions and decision making. In order to accomplish this, the cultural and religious narratives that currently exclude women from participation must be critically scrutinized and reinterpreted with the help of the engagement and awareness campaigns among men and women alike. Finally, a multi-sectoral (educational, economic, political, and cultural) effort is required to advance women's political participation in Pashtun society without the fear of violence or social condemnation, and without silence, where their voices equally influence the political life of their countries.

### **Recommendations**

1. Promote women's economic independence through market-relevant vocational education and flexible work-from-home opportunities to foster financial autonomy and political empowerment.
2. Launch comprehensive awareness campaigns that educate women about their legal rights and political entitlements to combat systemic disempowerment.
3. Develop targeted vocational training programs specifically designed for Pashtun women to build professional skills and enable self-reliance.
4. Establish women-led wings within political parties free from male interference to create safe spaces for political participation.
5. Utilize social media platforms to disseminate information about women's political importance through strategically placed advertisements during popular entertainment content.
6. Implement government policies that actively increase women's access to economic opportunities and leadership positions in all sectors.
7. Facilitate networking initiatives connecting rural and urban women to strengthen decision-making capabilities through shared experiences and mentorship.
8. Create protective mechanisms and safe environments in political spaces to prevent harassment and encourage female participation.
9. Integrate technology-friendly educational programs that empower women through digital literacy and access to cutting-edge tools.
10. Ensure that development programs prioritize underprivileged women's needs and involve them directly in project conception and execution.

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