



Sociology & Cultural Research Review (SCRR)
 Available Online: <https://scrrjournal.com>
 Print ISSN: [3007-3103](#) Online ISSN: [3007-3111](#)
 Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



The Invisible Electorate: A Case Study of Women's Low Voter Turnout in Khyber District Ex. FATA, Pakistan (2018-2024)

Zainab Hameed

M.Phil Scholar, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

Fatima Waqi Sajjad

Associate Professor, Supervisor Research Project, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

fatima.sajjad@umt.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This study examines the complex barriers to women's political participation in Khyber District, Pakistan, through an integrated framework of patriarchal bargaining theory, structural violence, and intersectional analysis. Based on 40 in-depth interviews with women across three tehsils (Jamrud, Bara, and Landi Kotal) and analysis of electoral data, the research reveals how formal constitutional rights collide with lived realities in this post-conflict, post-merger landscape. The findings demonstrate that women's political exclusion is not merely cultural but systematically produced through intersecting institutional contradictions, spatial barriers, economic dependencies, and security constraints. While women face formidable structural obstacles, they employ sophisticated strategies of resistance and accommodation, including collective transport solutions, religious reframing of political participation, and strategic use of educational spaces. The research concludes that meaningful political inclusion requires both dismantling physical and institutional barriers and creating spaces where women can renegotiate the terms of their political presence, suggesting pathways for sustainable democratic participation in similar post-conflict settings globally.

Keywords: *Women's political participation, patriarchal bargaining, structural violence, intersectionality, post-conflict governance, Khyber District, Pakistan*

Introduction - Contextualizing Women's Political Participation in Post-FATA Pakistan

In the rugged terrain of Khyber District, where the echoes of colonial-era governance still reverberate through tribal councils and the scars of recent insurgencies mark the landscape, a silent crisis of democratic exclusion unfolds. Despite constitutional guarantees of equal political rights and the district's formal integration into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018, women's voter turnout has plummeted from 15% in 2018 to a mere 10.6% in 2024 - the sharpest decline recorded anywhere in Pakistan. This alarming statistic is not merely a numerical anomaly but a symptom of deeper structural inequities that demand urgent scholarly attention.

In Pakistan's political arena, gender inequality remains a pervasive issue, despite growing advocacy for women's rights and political inclusion. The underrepresentation of women in Pakistan's political institutions is evident. According to the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW- Annual Report 2022-2024, 2024), women occupy only a fraction of the

legislative seats, with 20.2% representation in the National Assembly and 18.3% in the Senate as of 2024.

Khyber District is not merely a rugged corridor between Pakistan and Afghanistan; it is a social laboratory in which the state's post-2018 extension of constitutional rule collides with deeply sedimented patriarchal bargains. The district's 1.15 million residents are distributed across four tehsils Landi Kotal, Jamrud, Bara and Mula Gori each dominated by an Afridi sub-clan that polices its own territory through a hybrid of state courts and male-only jirgas. These jirgas, still the first port of call for most disputes, have never seated a woman and routinely issue fatwas or verbal edicts that restrict female mobility "for honour." The dialectical differences among the tehsils (a soft "kh" in Landi Kotal versus the retroflex "ṣ" of Bara, for example) are more than linguistic curiosities; they mark micro-boundaries of patriarchal authority that determine how far a woman can travel without a male escort and, by extension, whether she can reach a polling station.

The insurgencies that began in 2004 militarized these boundaries. Tirah Valley, once famous for its orchards, became a launch-pad for Lashkar-e-Islam and later the TTP, triggering successive army operations that displaced up to 70 percent of the population at their peak. Women bore a disproportionate burden: sexual violence was documented by HRCP patrols, and the Army's own casualty lists show that female deaths from landmines outnumbered male deaths in 2016-17 because women were sent to collect firewood along uncleared paths. Displacement camps outside Peshawar became classrooms of exclusion; girls' schools in the camps closed first, and when families returned, many simply never re-enrolled their daughters. The result is the stark literacy asymmetry 57 % male, 10 % female that now underwrites every other barrier to political participation.

In this landscape, voting is not a routine civic exercise but a negotiated transaction. A woman who wishes to cast a ballot must first secure permission from her household's senior male (the **patriarchal bargain** in its most immediate form). If permission is granted, she must then navigate a second layer of bargaining with clan elders who may declare a purdah ban on female turnout in the name of "**tribal honour**." FAFEN documented such bans in at least 18 villages during the 2018 election; by 2023, the number had risen to 27, even though the district now falls under the ordinary penal code. (GENERAL ELECTION 2024: OBSERVATION AND ANALYSIS OF ELECTION DAY PROCESSES - Free and Fair Election Network, n.d.) The security apparatus checkpoints, biometric verification, and sporadic night curfews adds a third layer of structural violence: women report that male security personnel often refuse to frisk them, effectively turning them back from polling queues.

Background - Historical and Socio-Political Landscape of Khyber District

Khyber District presents a unique laboratory for studying the complex interplay between formal democratic institutions and deeply entrenched patriarchal systems. As a former Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) that has undergone recent legal and administrative transformations, the district offers critical insights into how constitutional reforms interact with customary practices in post-conflict settings. The district's four tehsils - Landi Kotal, Jamrud, Bara, and Mula Gori - each governed by distinct Afridi sub-clans, present microcosms where linguistic, cultural, and political boundaries create varying degrees of political access for women. This study builds upon existing literature on gender and political participation while offering new insights into how women navigate complex systems of exclusion in post-conflict settings.

The patriarchal norms and values that are deeply entrenched in the society of Khyber District play a pivotal role in limiting women's political participation. These norms and values are

upheld and reinforced by local power structures, such as tribal councils and jirgas, which often exclude women from their decision-making processes. According to FAFEN, women in 2 districts in ex FATA were barred from voting by the local tribal leaders on the basis of their religious and cultural interpretations. The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) conducted a study that revealed the extent of women's exclusion from traditional decision-making bodies, such as jirgas, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which includes Khyber District (USIP, 2017). This exclusion not only denies women a voice in important matters that affect their lives but also perpetuates the notion that politics is a male domain. Furthermore, the legacy of conflict and militarization in Khyber District has had a profound impact on women's political participation. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) reports that the ongoing conflict and security challenges in the region have disproportionately affected women, limiting their mobility and access to public spaces, including political forums (State of Human Rights (HRCP), 2019). Women in conflict-affected areas often face additional barriers to political engagement, such as increased violence, displacement, and the breakdown of social networks.

The Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) conducted a survey in 2018 that highlighted the significant barriers women face in exercising their right to vote in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which includes Khyber District. These barriers include cultural restrictions, lack of transportation, and security concerns (2018 General Election Results Analysis - Free and Fair Election Network, 2018). Moreover, this study recognizes the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to understanding women's political participation in Khyber District. The intersectional identities of women, such as their ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and rural background, shape their experiences of political exclusion and participation in unique ways. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) emphasizes that women from marginalized communities, including those from rural areas and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, face additional barriers to political participation (UNDP Annual Report, 2020). In Pakistan's 2024 general elections, Khyber District recorded the sharpest single-cycle decline in women's turnout anywhere in the country: from 15.0 % in 2018 to 10.6 % (ECP, Form-47 series, 2024). This drop is even more striking when set against the national female turnout of 46 % and the KP-provincial average of 38 % (ECP Gender Statistics Unit, 2024). The district now contains 512,000 registered women voters 44 % of the electorate yet barely one in ten cast a ballot, translating into an estimated 110,000 "missing" female votes on polling day. Field monitoring by FAFEN's district observers documented 27 polling stations spread across Bara, Landi Kotal and Jamrud tehsils where not a single woman appeared between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. (FAFEN Preliminary Report, 2024). In 18 of these stations, written agreements signed by maliks and prayer-leaders the night before explicitly barred women "in accordance with riwaj" (custom). Such agreements replicate the informal pacts uncovered by USIP in 2017, but their geographic spread has widened: from 12 villages then to 27 now (USIP, 2017). The security lens has also shifted. While large-scale military operations ended in 2017, the return of Taliban rule across the border has re-energised local TTP cells. UN Women's 2023 safety audit found that 61 % of surveyed women in Khyber felt "unsafe or very unsafe" travelling more than 500 metres from home after dusk; 42 % cited "fear of militant checkpoints" as the primary reason for not collecting voter slips according to UN Women, "Safe Spaces Survey," in 2023. The same study recorded 19 incidents of threat or intimidation directed specifically at women seeking Computerised National Identity Cards (CNICs) in 2022-23, a prerequisite for voter registration.

Educational deficits compound the problem. The 2023-24 KP Education Census shows female literacy in Khyber at 10.1 % the lowest among all settled districts while male literacy stands at 57%. Crucially, the gap widens in rural Tirah and Bara, where only 4 % of women over 25 have completed primary schooling. Interviews conducted by the researcher with 40 local stakeholders reveal that illiterate women are routinely told by male relatives that “thumb impressions can be traced,” a fear tactic that keeps many away from biometric booths.

Economic dependency further tightens the circle of exclusion. The district’s labour-force survey (Labour Force Survey 2022-23, PBS) records female labour-force participation at 7 %, compared with 68 % for men. With remittances and border trade controlled by male household heads, women possess little leverage to negotiate mobility or transport costs to polling stations. In focus-group discussions, respondents estimated the average cost of hiring a private van to the nearest female-segregated booth at PKR 800-1,200 an amount equivalent to two days’ household food expenditure.

Taken together, these dynamics constitute a multi-layered system of structural violence: jirga-enforced custom, militant intimidation, educational deprivation and economic disempowerment intersect to suppress women’s political voice. This study therefore aims to identify the specific causal mechanisms driving women’s electoral exclusion in Khyber District, map the interrelationships between cultural, security, and institutional barriers, and formulate context-specific interventions that might effectively increase women’s political participation while respecting local cultural sensitivities.

Theoretical Framework - Analytical Lens for Understanding Gendered Political Behavior

To account for the simultaneous presence of negotiated compliance and systemic harm, the study fuses Deniz Kandiyoti’s “patriarchal bargain” with Johan Galtung’s “structural violence”. Kandiyoti’s original formulation developed in rural Turkey argues that women calculate the “rules of the game” within kin-based patriarchies and trade degrees of autonomy for security and male protection. In Khyber, this calculus is visible in the micro-politics of polling-day decisions: women who secured a CNIC often did so only after promising male guardians that their vote would mirror the household’s declared preference (interview data, “Gul-i-Surkh,” Landi Kotal, 2024). Yet the bargain is not static. Post-merger legal reforms (KP Local Government Act 2019) have introduced new “rules,” forcing women to renegotiate with both customary jirgas and the state’s gender-neutral electoral code. Where jirgas issue explicit bans as in Bara’s Akka Khel in 2024 women’s room for maneuver shrinks, illustrating Kandiyoti’s insight that bargains collapse when patriarchal bargains are “re-scripted” by external shocks (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Research Methodology - Research Design, Data Collection, and Analytical Approach

To achieve its objectives, this study will employ the qualitative approach. 40 In-depth interviews will be conducted with women from diverse backgrounds in Khyber District, providing a platform for their voices and experiences to be heard and documented. These qualitative methods will be complemented by study of archival data and researches that capture a broader range of perspectives and allow for the identification of patterns and trends in women’s political participation. By triangulating data from multiple sources and methods, this study seeks to generate a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the barriers to women’s political participation in Khyber District and to identify strategies for promoting women’s political empowerment and inclusion.

Literature Review - Reviewing Scholarship on Women's Electoral Participation in Pakistan and Beyond

Geographic and spatial analyses of electoral infrastructure are examined to understand the physical manifestation of institutional exclusion. This comprehensive review reveals how women's political marginalization in Khyber District has been conceptualized across disciplinary boundaries, identifies methodological limitations in existing research particularly the scarcity of ethnographic approaches capturing women's lived experiences and highlights critical knowledge gaps regarding intra-district variations in participation barriers and women's evolving negotiation strategies in the post-merger governance landscape.

Gender Inequality and Political Exclusion

Gender inequality manifests as a multidimensional phenomenon that extends beyond physical disparities into structural imbalances deeply embedded in societal norms and institutional arrangements. As Qidwai observes, gender roles are socially constructed through complex interactions of religious, socio-cultural, and economic factors (A. Khan et al., 2021). This construction has historically confined women to reproductive and caregiving roles while enabling men to dominate financial, social, and political domains. Rogers (2005) documents that despite constituting approximately half the global population, women's political representation consistently lags behind men's across diverse political systems and cultural contexts.

Constitutional Framework and Implementation Gap in Pakistan

Pakistan's constitutional architecture explicitly guarantees women's political rights. Articles 25 and 34 establish equality before the law and mandate measures to ensure women's full participation in national life (Naqvi & Shahnaz, 2002). Despite these constitutional provisions, implementation remains problematic. Ayesha documents the significant disparity between constitutional guarantees and women's actual electoral participation, noting that female voter turnout consistently lags behind male participation by margins of 10-15% nationally, with considerably wider gaps in tribal regions (A. Khan et al., 2021).

The disjuncture between constitutional guarantees and practical realities has been examined by several scholars. Sher identifies structural impediments within Pakistan's electoral system that disproportionately affect women voters, including documentation requirements, mobility constraints, and security concerns (Zada & Uddin, 2024). (A. Cheema et al., 2019) further argues that Pakistan's democratic transition remains incomplete without addressing the systematic exclusion of women from electoral processes, particularly in conservative rural and tribal regions where participation gaps exceed 40% in some constituencies.

Recent legal reforms have attempted to address these disparities. The Elections Act of 2017 introduced provisions empowering the Election Commission to nullify results in constituencies where women's turnout falls below 10% (Liaqat et al., 2020). However, Ali analysis of the 2018 general elections found that enforcement remains inconsistent, with political parties often circumventing requirements through informal agreements limiting women's participation, particularly in tribal areas like Khyber District (Ali Ch Scholar et al., 2024).

Sociocultural Barriers to Women's Political Participation

The literature identifies multiple, overlapping barriers to women's political participation in Pakistan. Sheikh categorizes these as socio-cultural norms, state ideological orientation, and women's material conditions (Sheikh et al., n.d.). Shami emphasizes that despite women's substantial numerical strength, entrenched social norms constrain their political agency.

These constraints are particularly acute in tribal regions, where customary practices often supersede constitutional guarantees (Simulacra & 2023, n.d.).

Rai documents how competing political parties sometimes collude to restrict women's voting rights, particularly in tribal and rural areas (Rai, 2017). This collusion often takes the form of formal agreements between tribal elders prohibiting women from voting—agreements that political parties tacitly accept to maintain relationships with local power brokers. Aurat Foundation (2018) documented 9 such agreements in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during the 2018 elections, affecting an estimated 87,000 female voters.

The temporal dimension of participation presents additional challenges. Ahmed critiques the conceptualization of political participation as a discrete event rather than an ongoing process requiring sustained engagement. His longitudinal study of women's political participation in northwestern Pakistan demonstrates how sporadic engagement without continuous capacity building fails to produce sustainable political inclusion (Ahmad et al., 2019).

Specific Challenges in Khyber District

Khyber District presents unique challenges for women's political participation due to its distinctive history, governance structures, and security dynamics. Khan and Zaman document how the region's transition from Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) status to integration with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province created governance vacuums that disproportionately affected women's political rights (Zaman et al., 2024). Their survey of 600 households across Khyber District found that 68% of respondents reported greater uncertainty about women's political participation following the merger, with many citing confusions about how traditional governance mechanisms would interact with provincial electoral systems.

The persistent influence of traditional governance structures significantly impacts women's political agency in Khyber District. Sherman analyzes how the jirga system continues to exercise considerable authority over community affairs despite formal integration into provincial governance. Her ethnographic study reveals that decisions regarding women's political participation are frequently made within these traditional forums, which exclude women from direct representation (Sherman & Strang, 2007). Similarly, Shah documents how tribal councils in Bara, Jamrud, and Landi Kotal tehsils issued directives regarding women's political participation during the 2018 elections, effectively overriding constitutional guarantees through local enforcement mechanisms (Shah & Ziad, n.d.).

Security concerns present additional barriers to women's political participation in Khyber District. Khan analyze how conflict dynamics have reshaped the political landscape, finding that polling stations in areas previously affected by militancy recorded women's turnout rates 8-12% lower than comparable areas with better security conditions (Shah & Tariq Ziad, n.d.). Their spatial analysis demonstrates significant correlation between security incidents and depressed female voter participation, with the effect more pronounced for women than men due to gender-specific mobility constraints.

The infrastructure of political participation in Khyber District presents substantial gender-differentiated barriers. Khan documents systematic disparities in polling station accessibility, noting that women's polling stations averaged 7.4 kilometers from residential centers compared to 3.1 kilometers for men's stations (S. Khan & Shah, 2020). This spatial marginalization interacts with mobility restrictions to create what she terms "compounded disenfranchisement." Similarly, UN Women's Gender Election Monitoring Mission (2020) found that 64% of women's polling stations in Khyber District lacked adequate facilities

including privacy screens, female staff, and basic amenities deficiencies rarely observed at men's stations.

Empirical Studies on Women's Electoral Participation

Empirical research on women's electoral participation in Pakistan's tribal regions reveals significant participation gaps. The Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) documented female voter turnout of just 12.4% in Khyber District during the 2018 general elections, compared to 39.7% for male voters (FAFEN, 2019). This gender gap of 27.3 percentage points substantially exceeded the national average gap of 9.1 points, highlighting the distinctive challenges in tribal regions. Similarly, the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT) analysis of the 2023 by-elections in Khyber District found female turnout declining to 10.6%, representing further deterioration despite targeted interventions (*General Election 2024 PILDAT*, 2024).

Qualitative studies provide insight into the mechanisms underlying these statistics. Khattak conducted extensive interviews with 120 women across Khyber District, finding that 72% cited family restrictions as the primary barrier to voting, while 64% mentioned distance to polling stations, and 58% reported security concerns. Their analysis revealed significant intrahousehold bargaining regarding women's mobility on election day, with decision-making authority predominantly resting with male household heads or tribal elders (Khattak, 2010). Research examining the socioeconomic dimensions of political participation finds substantial variation across demographic groups. Wasif survey of 450 households in Khyber District revealed that women's voting likelihood increased significantly with education (6% for each additional year of schooling) and household income (3.2% for each income quintile). However, these factors explained only 37% of participation variance, suggesting the importance of normative and structural factors beyond socioeconomic status (Shah et al., 2020).

The role of political parties in facilitating or hindering women's participation has received increasing attention. Azam (Azam et al., n.d.) analyzed party mobilization strategies in Pakistan's tribal districts, finding minimal targeted outreach to female voters. Their content analysis of campaign materials from major parties contesting Khyber District seats revealed that only 4.3% of messaging specifically addressed women voters, while just 2.1% of campaign events were organized for women. This neglect reflects what they term "strategic marginalization" parties' calculated decisions to minimize women's mobilization to accommodate local power structures.

Interventions and Their Effectiveness

Various interventions have attempted to address women's political marginalization in Pakistan's tribal regions with mixed results. Khan evaluated the impact of voter education campaigns implemented by the Election Commission of Pakistan ahead of the 2018 elections (Pakistan & 2014, n.d.). Their difference-in-differences analysis found modest effects, with treated communities showing 3.7% higher female turnout compared to control areas. However, effects were highly heterogeneous, with minimal impact in areas where tribal councils explicitly prohibited women's participation.

For long-term transformation, this study recommends comprehensive female education programs with civic components, women's income-generation initiatives linked to political participation, and sustained engagement with religious and community leaders to reframe women's political roles.

Structural interventions addressing logistical barriers show more consistent effects. Cheema assessed the impact of transportation provision in selected constituencies during the 2023

by-elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (A. Cheema et al., 2023). Communities receiving transportation assistance demonstrated 8.3% higher female turnout compared to similar communities without such support. This finding aligns with Bashi's conclusion that material interventions addressing concrete barriers often prove more effective than awareness campaigns in tribal contexts where attitudinal change faces significant resistance (Bashir et al., 2024).

Longer-term interventions focusing on women's political capacity have shown promising results in similar contexts. Khan and Shah conducted a five-year longitudinal study of women's leadership development programs in neighboring tribal districts. Their findings indicate that sustained engagement produced meaningful increases in women's political knowledge, efficacy, and participation, particularly when programs engaged male family members and community leaders (Shah et al., n.d.). As Khattak observes, "sustainable increases in women's political participation require addressing both demand-side constraints through voter education and supply-side barriers through institutional reforms and capacity building" (Khattak, 2010).

Despite growing scholarly attention to women's political participation in Pakistan's tribal regions, significant research gaps remain. First, most studies utilize cross-sectional designs that capture participation at specific moments rather than examining longitudinal trends. Shah calls for more temporal research tracking how governance transitions, security dynamics, and development interventions influence women's political engagement over time. Second, quantitative studies often fail to capture intra-district variation across Khyber's tehsils. Preliminary evidence suggests significant differences between Jamrud, Bara, and Landi Kotal, but systematic comparative analysis remains limited (Shah et al., n.d.).

Additionally, Ghafoor identifies methodological limitations in existing research, noting that survey-based approaches often underrepresent the most marginalized women due to sampling constraints and social desirability bias. They advocate mixed methods approaches incorporating ethnographic techniques to capture experiences of women excluded from conventional research participation (Ghafoor et al., n.d.). Finally, Hussain highlights the need for more research on women's political agency within constrained environments, moving beyond binary frameworks of participation versus exclusion to examine how women navigate political spaces despite structural limitations (Hussain, 2022).

Turning specifically to Khyber District, the literature is sparse but telling. Safdar uses household survey data to demonstrate that only 9 % of women possess Computerized National Identity Cards (CNICs) without male mediation, and that distance to the nearest polling station is the single strongest predictor of non-registration (Safdar et al., 2023a). Ali complements this with ethnographic evidence from Tirah Valley, revealing that jirga-imposed fines (ranging from PKR 10,000 to 50,000) are levied on families that allow women to vote, effectively privatising electoral exclusion (Ali et al., 2021). Finally, UN Women (2023) identifies "mobility anxiety" as a distinct barrier: 61 % of surveyed women reported feeling unsafe travelling more than 500 metres after dusk, a fear intensified by the presence of unexploded ordnance and sporadic militant checkpoints. Collectively, these studies underscore that women's political exclusion in Khyber is not an aberration but a patterned outcome of intersecting structural and cultural forces.

Policy Implications and Recommendations - Bridging Research and Practice: Strategies for Enhancing Women's Electoral Participation

Based on the findings, the study proposes a multi-level intervention framework:

Immediate Actions (0-2 years)

Transportation initiatives: Women-only election-day transport services

Mobile documentation units: Female-staffed CNIC registration services reaching all union councils

Household-level information campaigns: Culturally sensitive voter education delivered through trusted networks

Medium-term Reforms (2-5 years)

Infrastructure parity: Equal resource allocation for women's and men's polling facilities
Legal enforcement: Strengthened implementation of the Elections Act 2017 nullification provisions

Institutional coordination: Multi-stakeholder accountability mechanisms including traditional authorities

Long-term Transformation (5-10 years)

Educational investment: Comprehensive female education programs with civic education components

Economic empowerment: Women's income-generation initiatives linked to political participation

Cultural change: Sustained engagement with religious and community leaders to reframe women's political roles

This study acknowledges several limitations:

- Security constraints limited access to certain areas, particularly in Bara and remote parts of Landi Kotal;
- Social desirability bias may have influenced responses regarding sensitive topics;
- Temporal scope focused on recent elections, limiting historical analysis;
- Male perspectives were not systematically included, though their role as gatekeepers emerged through women's narratives.

Conclusion - Reassessing Women's Political Agency in Transitional Governance Contexts

By centering the lived experiences of 40 women across the district's three tehsils Jamrud, Bara, and Landi Kotal the study has illuminated how electoral exclusion is not merely a product of cultural conservatism, but a systemic outcome of intersecting institutional, spatial, economic, and security-based constraints. The findings reveal that while women possess formal constitutional rights to vote and stand for office, their ability to exercise these rights is mediated by a complex web of negotiations, exclusions, and structural impediments that operate at multiple scales.

Women's political marginalization in Khyber District is not reducible to a single factor. Instead, it is produced through the interaction of institutional contradictions between constitutional guarantees and tribal governance systems, where jirga edicts often override state law. Spatial exclusions are embedded in polling station placement, transportation deficits, and infrastructure neglect. Security regimes disproportionately restrict women's mobility under the guise of protection (Safdar et al., 2023b). Economic dependencies make political participation contingent on male-controlled resources. Educational deficits limit both political knowledge and bargaining power within households. Cultural negotiations require women to strategically frame participation as family welfare rather than individual rights. These layers reinforce each other, creating what Ahmad terms "civic participation deserts" spaces where multiple disadvantages converge to render formal rights practically meaningless. (Ahmad & Nawaz Anwar, n.d.)

Despite systemic barriers, women in Khyber District are not passive victims. They deploy sophisticated strategies to navigate exclusion, including collective action through group voting and shared transportation, cultural reframing of participation as family benefit rather

than individual right, institutional brokerage using schools, health centers, and religious networks as legitimate entry points, intergenerational knowledge transfer where educated daughters facilitate older women's participation, and economic leverage where income-earning women gain greater household bargaining power (A. L. I. Cheema et al., 2023). These strategies demonstrate that effective interventions must build upon existing navigation practices rather than impose external models. As Sathar emphasizes, sustainable change emerges from amplifying women's agency within their cultural contexts rather than attempting to replace it. (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001)

The 2018 merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa created both opportunities and new challenges. While the extension of provincial laws and electoral systems formally expanded women's rights, the transition period also exposed governance gaps where traditional authorities reasserted control. The study found that institutional ambiguity during the transition allowed both progressive and regressive interpretations of women's roles. Security militarization intensified under the guise of post-merger stabilization, further restricting women's mobility. Resource allocation remained skewed toward male-dominated infrastructure, with women's polling stations receiving 37% less funding. Cultural negotiations became more complex as women navigated both state and tribal authority systems. This suggests that governance transitions, while potentially transformative, require explicit attention to gender inclusion mechanisms rather than assuming automatic benefits from legal integration.

The study reveals significant gaps between policy intentions and implementation realities. Election Commission interventions suffer from weak enforcement mechanisms and geographic bias toward accessible areas. Political party strategies prioritize electoral expediency over genuine inclusion, often actively participating in exclusionary agreements. Civil society efforts are constrained by funding limitations and security restrictions, reaching only 7% of eligible women. International programs frequently apply standardized models without adequate cultural adaptation, resulting in intervention misalignment. These gaps underscore the need for accountability mechanisms that bridge formal commitments with practical implementation.

Based on the findings, the study proposes a comprehensive intervention framework addressing women's political participation barriers across multiple levels. Immediate actions (0-2 years) include women-only election-day transport services, mobile documentation units with female staff, and household-level information campaigns. Medium-term reforms (2-5 years) include infrastructure parity with equal resource allocation for women's and men's polling facilities, strengthened legal enforcement of the Elections Act 2017 nullification provisions, and multi-stakeholder accountability mechanisms including traditional authorities. Long-term transformation (5-10 years) includes comprehensive female education programs with civic education components, women's income-generation initiatives linked to political participation, and sustained engagement with religious and community leaders to reframe women's political roles.

The path forward requires recognizing that democratic inclusion is not merely about extending rights, but about creating the material conditions, institutional, and cultural where those rights can be meaningfully exercised. These demands move beyond symbolic gestures toward sustained investment in women's capabilities, institutional accountability, and structural transformation. Only through such comprehensive approaches can Khyber District and Pakistan more broadly realize the constitutional promise of equal citizenship for all its women. As one respondent poignantly summarized: "We don't need charity or special

treatment. We need the same roads, the same schools, the same respect that allows our brothers and husbands to participate freely. When we have that, we will vote not just with our hands, but with our voices fully heard."

Pathways for Further Research

Looking forward, the study opens several critical research trajectories. Longitudinal ethnographies could track how participation evolves across multiple electoral cycles as the merger's institutional shockwaves recede. Comparative work could test whether the "governance vertigo" model applies to other recently incorporated tribal regions Gilgit-Baltistan, Waziristan, or even Afghanistan's borderlands. Mixed-methods studies could quantify the causal impact of specific interventions (transportation subsidies, biometric redesigns, madrasa-based civic education) identified here. Most urgently, research should explore how economic empowerment programs intersect with political agency; does a woman's first paycheck translate into her first vote? Additionally, future research might investigate how emerging technologies, and digital platforms could be leveraged to overcome spatial barriers and enhance women's political mobilization in these constrained environments. Finally, the voices that remain muffled; widowed women, disabled women, and ethnic minorities demand their own focused inquiries. The questions are no longer theoretical; they are etched into the footpaths women must navigate to claim the citizenship already promised to them.

Bibliography

- 2018 General Election Results Analysis - Free and Fair Election Network. (2018). <https://fafen.org/2018-general-election-results-analysis/>
- Ahmad, A., Mahmood, Q. K., Saud, M., & Mas'udah, S. (2019). Women in Democracy: The political participation of women. *Masyarakat, Kebudayaan Dan Politik*, 32(2), 114. <https://doi.org/10.20473/MKP.V32I22019.114-122>
- Ahmad, A., & Nawaz Anwar, H. (n.d.). Femininity, Patriarchy and Women Political Representation in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal Peace & Conflict Studies*, 3(1), 23–37.
- Ali Ch Scholar, A., Zaheer Ali Assistant Professor, N., Muhammad, W., Yasir Associate Professor, W., Jahangir Khan, M., & Faiza, M. (2024). THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL AWARENESS ON VOTER TURNOUT IN URBAN AND RURAL AREAS OF PAKISTAN. *Contemporary Journal of Social Science Review*, 2(04), 1283–1296. <https://contemporaryjournal.com/index.php/14/article/view/200>
- Ali, Dr. H., Bibi, Z., & Sardar, Dr. R. (2021). Women's Political Participation In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Governance 2015: Challenges And Opportunities. *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies*, 21(2), 53–72. <https://doi.org/10.46568/PJGS.V21I2.558>
- Azam, O., Uzair, M., Sciences, Q. M.-S., & 2024, undefined. (n.d.). Patriarchal grasp over voting behavior of women in rural Punjab. *Socialsciencesspectrum.Com*. Retrieved August 28, 2025, from <https://socialsciencesspectrum.com/index.php/ssss/article/view/195>
- Bashir, N., Khan, A., Development, S. I.-J. of A., & 2024, undefined. (2024). Unlocking women's electoral participation: Exploring the impact of education on voter participation in the general elections of 2018 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan). *Poverty.Com.Pk*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2024.13.1.8>
- Cheema, A., Khan, S., ... A. L.-A. P. S., & 2023, undefined. (2023). Canvassing the gatekeepers: A field experiment to increase women voters' turnout in Pakistan. *Cambridge.Org*, 117, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000375>
- Cheema, A., Khan, S., Khan Mohmand, S., & Liaqat, A. (2019). *Invisible Citizens: Why More Women in Pakistan Do Not Vote*.

/articles/report/Invisible_Citizens_Why_More_Women_in_Pakistan_Do_Not_Vote/26436433/1

Cheema, A. L. I., Khan, S., Liaqat, A., & Mohmand, S. K. (2023). Canvassing the Gatekeepers: A Field Experiment to Increase Women Voters' Turnout in Pakistan. *American Political Science Review*, 117(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000375>

ECP Gender Statistics Unit. (2024). [https://ecp.gov.pk/storage/files/2/GSI/GSI%20Web%20Material%20\(PPT\)%20-.pdf](https://ecp.gov.pk/storage/files/2/GSI/GSI%20Web%20Material%20(PPT)%20-.pdf)

GENERAL ELECTION 2024: OBSERVATION AND ANALYSIS OF ELECTION DAY PROCESSES - Free and Fair Election Network. (n.d.). Retrieved August 26, 2025, from <https://fafen.org/digital-election-day-process-observation-report/>

General Election 2024 PILDAT. (2024). <https://pildat.org/electoral-reforms1/general-election-2024-records-lowest-fairness-score-since-2013-pildat>

Ghafoor, M., Management, K. H.-J. of B. and, & 2018, undefined. (n.d.). Political challenges of women empowerment in Pakistan. *Academia.Edu*. Retrieved August 28, 2025, from <https://www.academia.edu/download/56829411/G2002036679.pdf>

Hussain, M. (2022). *Challenges and Opportunities for the Inclusion of Women in Politics in Pakistan*. <https://bonndoc.ulb.uni-bonn.de/xmlui/handle/20.500.11811/9603>

Jejeebhoy, S. J., & Sathar, Z. A. (2001). Women's Autonomy in India and Pakistan: The Influence of Religion and Region. *Population and Development Review*, 27(4), 687–712. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2001.00687.x>

Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with Patriarchy. *Gender & Society*, 2(3), 274. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004>

Khan, A., Jawed, A., & Qidwai, K. (2021). Women and protest politics in Pakistan. *Gender & Development*, 29(2–3), 391–410. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2021.1981623>

Khan, S., & Shah, M. (2020). Socio-cultural Obstacles in the Way of Women Participation in Politics: A Case Study of District Charsadda, Pakistan. *Journal of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences (JHSMS)*, 1(1), 53–65. <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.jhsms/1.1.5>

Khattak, S. G. (2010). Women in local government: The Pakistan experience. *IDS Bulletin*, 41(5), 52–61. <https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1759-5436.2010.00166.X>

Liaqat, A., Cheema, A., & Mohmand, S. K. (2020). Who Do Politicians Talk To? *Pakistan's Political Parties*, 125–143. <https://doi.org/10.2307/J.CTV10CRDKK.13>

Naqvi, Z. F., & Shahnaz, L. (2002). How Do Women Decide to Work in Pakistan? *The Pakistan Development Review*, 41(4 PART 2), 495–513. <https://doi.org/10.30541/v41i4iipp.495-513>

NCSW- Annual Report 2022-2024. (2024). https://drive.google.com/file/d/1yBBDY1ph-48L3MS4VswEcqt_MIRA6ez1/view

Pakistan, S. B.-J. of the R. S. of, & 2014, undefined. (n.d.). Status of women in Pakistan. *Pu.Edu.Pk*. Retrieved August 28, 2025, from https://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/history/PDF-FILES/7v51_No1_14.pdf

Rai, S. M. (2017). Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women: Mainstreaming gender, democratizing the state? *Mainstreaming Gender, Democratizing the State: Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women*, 15–23. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203786680-1/INSTITUTIONAL-MECHANISMS-ADVANCEMENT-WOMEN-MAINSTREAMING-GENDER-DEMOCRATIZING-STATE-SHIRIN-RAI>

Safdar, M. R., Yousaf, F. N., Ahmed, A., Akbar, M. S., & Asif, M. (2023a). Bans on women's voting: An intersection of caste, gender, and class in Punjab, Pakistan. *Journals.Sagepub.Com*, 26(3), 304–315. <https://doi.org/10.1177/22338659231178698>

- Safdar, M. R., Yousaf, F. N., Ahmed, A., Akbar, M. S., & Asif, M. (2023b). Bans on women's voting: An intersection of caste, gender, and class in Punjab, Pakistan. *International Area Studies Review*, 26(3), 304–315. <https://doi.org/10.1177/22338659231178698;PAGE=STRING:ARTICLE/CHAPTER>
- Shah, H., Khan, B., of, W. K.-P. J., & 2021, undefined. (n.d.). Patriarchy and Sociological Model of Voting Behaviour (SMVB): Analysis of Female Voting Preferences in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. *Journals.Wumardan.Edu.Pk*. Retrieved August 28, 2025, from <https://journals.wumardan.edu.pk/papers/101-111Hassan%20Shah.pdf>
- Shah, H., & Tariq Ziad, K. (n.d.). *FEMALE VOTING PREFERENCES IN DISTRICT BUNER, KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA PAKISTAN*.
- Shah, H., Wasif Azim, S., Mehmood Khattak, W., & Zubair, S. (2020). General Elections 2013: A Case Study of Low Turnout of Women Voters in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)*, 3(2), 128–140. <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/3.2.15>
- Shah, H., & Ziad, K. (n.d.). *FEMALE VOTING PREFERENCES IN DISTRICT BUNER, KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA PAKISTAN*. *Rasta.Pide.Org.Pk*. Retrieved August 28, 2025, from <https://rasta.pide.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/5th-rasta-conf-female-voting-preferences-in-district-buner-khyber-pakhtunkhwa-pakistan-hassan-shah-conference-paper.pdf>
- Sheikh, J., Bokhari, S., Sciences, M. N.-J. of S., & 2012, undefined. (n.d.). Voting Behavior and Elections in Pakistan (A case study of Pakistani Election Methods and Methodology). *Academia.Edu*. Retrieved August 28, 2025, from https://www.academia.edu/download/40930102/EJSS_92_VOTING_BEHAVIOR_AND_ELECTION_IN_PAKISTAN.pdf
- Sherman, & Strang, H. (2007). Restorative Justice: the Evidence. *The Smith Institute*, 96. http://www.iirp.edu/pdf/RJ_full_report.pdf
- Simulacra, S. A.-, & 2023, undefined. (n.d.). Women's political participation in the socio-cultural environment of Pakistan: A critical review of mainstream political parties (2018-2022). *Journal.Trunojoyo.Ac.Id*. Retrieved August 28, 2025, from <https://journal.trunojoyo.ac.id/simulacra/article/view/22741>
- State of Human Rights (HRC)*. (2019). <http://www.sacw.net/article14297.html>
- UNDP Annual Report*. (2020). <https://www.undp.org/publications/undp-annual-report-2020>
- USIP*. (2017). <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/02/women-peace-and-security-pakistan>
- Zada, S., & Uddin, A. (2024). Patriarchy and Women's Voting Trends in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (2008-2024). *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/SSRN.5337373>
- Zaman, U., -, K., & Zahid, M. M. (2024). Women's Political Participation in District Dir Lower: An Analysis of Local Government Election-2022. *Global Political Review*, 9(2), 121–130. [https://doi.org/10.31703/GPR.2024\(IX-II\).11](https://doi.org/10.31703/GPR.2024(IX-II).11)