Women Low Political Participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: A Case Study of District Dir Upper

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Abstract: This study looks at Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's (KPK) low rate of female political participation, with a particular emphasis on District Dir. The goal of the research is to identify the institutional, sociocultural, and economic impediments that limit women's participation in politics in this area. Women in District Dir still have major obstacles that prevent them from being fully empowered and involved in politics, even in the face of numerous laws and programs intended to advance gender equality and increase female political engagement. This study used a mixed-methods approach to collect data on political involvement rates and perceptions, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews with local women, community leaders, and political activists. The study examines the main barriers to women's active participation in politics, including cultural norms, a lack of education, economic dependence, and inadequate representation in local governing systems. According to preliminary research, socioeconomic limitations and strongly ingrained patriarchal traditions are the main obstacles preventing women from participating in politics in District Dir. In addition, there are obvious gaps in the community and family's support, as well as restricted access to resources and chances for political training. These results imply that in order to improve women's political engagement, systemic problems and cultural beliefs that limit women's roles in politics must be addressed. This study gives policy recommendations targeted at increasing women's political participation and advances knowledge of gender-based differences in political participation in Pakistan. This study gives policy recommendations targeted at improving women's participation in political processes and advances knowledge of gender-based differences in political participation in Pakistan. In District Dir and other similar contexts across KPK, the study promotes focused educational programs, community awareness campaigns, and changes in local governance to foster a more welcoming political atmosphere for women. The research intends to promote efforts toward attaining gender parity in political representation and establishing a more fair political landscape in Pakistan by exposing these important concerns and offering workable solutions.

Key words: Women's representation, Voting participation, Political awareness, Rigid culture, Religious interference

1. Introduction

Quaid-e-Azam The father of the country, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, established guidelines for women's roles in all areas of society. "We are victims of bad customs; no country can rise to the pinnacle of glory without women by its side," he declared. The fact that our women are imprisoned like captives within the four walls of their houses is a crime against humanity. No one is held accountable for the appalling living circumstances that women must endure. Muhammad Ali Jinnah said in 1944, "You should take your women with you as comrades in all walks of life."

An increasing body of research indicates that women's involvement in decision-making enhances their

circumstances and advances society (UN-Women, 2017). Working across party lines and addressing issues of health, education, equality, and governance, women are exhibiting remarkable political leadership on a global scale (Parliamentary Union - IPU 2017). Nonetheless, there is still a sizable gender gap in spite of recent advancements in women's growth (Epstein 2007).

The religious parties of the NWFP called a meeting during the local elections, and at that meeting, officials from the various parties signed an electoral agreement that barred women from competing for office. Not only were women not allowed to submit candidacy papers in Swabi, Mardan, and Dir districts, but they were also not allowed to vote. Religious authorities in the Malakand region united to declare boycotts of Nikah, Namaaz-I-Janaza, and all other religious rights of female candidates and voters (Mooraj, 2004). Certain Dir city councilors are unable to carry out their duties. The fact that these women's male relatives show up to council meetings on their behalf is even more alarming (Dawn, 2006).

According to social activists and women's rights organizations like the Aurat Foundation, women were denied the right to vote in some parts of Dir Upper and Dir Lower. For instance, in the three municipal councils of Darora, Chukiatan, and Barawal in the Dir Upper district, more than 6,000 women voters were registered, according to an independent group monitoring the general election of 2013. However, no women were registered. Only one woman cast a ballot in the Darora district during the Assembly elections in the Upper Dir constituency, according to Shah (2013). Likewise, there was not a single female voter in 17 of the 27 union councils. Days before elections, political groups in these areas frequently come to a verbal agreement prohibiting women from casting ballots (Shah 2013).

2. Literature Review

The Election Commission of Pakistan states that it has been noted that women make up a relatively small percentage of voters in both general and local elections, particularly in Potohar districts where certain union council women were denied the right to vote in the 2013 general elections. There are instances in Pakistan where women are denied the right to vote, despite the constitution's assurance of equal opportunity for them to engage in politics. Women were denied the right to vote in the 2018 general elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Malakand Division, Upper Dir, and Lower Dir. Previously, Dir district was included in the list of women who were prohibited from voting in the general elections of 2013 and the municipal elections of 2015.

The new regulation states that the election results will be deemed illegitimate if the percentage of female voters in a constituency stays below 10%. In advance of the 2018 general elections, this regulation was included in the electoral changes. Because there were no female voters among the whole electorate, the Election Commission of Pakistan ruled that the Shangla polls were invalid. For the first time in Pakistani history, the Election Commission has declared an election invalid and held a fresh poll on the grounds that women are not allowed to vote.

Conversely, the women's participation rate in Dir Upper and Dir Lower stayed below 10%; nonetheless, since the laws were implemented at the constituency level, the elections were deemed legitimate, and the districts did not hold congresses. In remote rural and tribal communities like Dir Upper, women rely on their male family members to meet their basic needs, including access to resources, mobility, and other essentials like passports and ID cards. Local (religious) community leaders in these places threatened women with physical violence and social exclusion through enforced boycotts, and women were forbidden by their immediate families from engaging in politics or voting (Ansari 2012).

In a research, Asif (2017) described the situation in Lower Dir, where women were denied the right to vote. The significance of religion in deterring women from entering politics is one of her research's results. Women's suffrage can be explained in part by religion. Women's participation in politics is typically seen as un-Islamic. The conservative perspective interprets religion in a way that keeps women confined to the house and prevents them from voting. There have been warnings in certain places not to go to the funerals of women and their relatives who are running for local office (Shah 2013).

Women's rights organizations and social activists like the Aurat Foundation revealed that women were prohibited from voting in several parts of Dir Upper and Dir Lower. For instance, 6,000 or more women were registered to vote in three union councils, including Darora, Chukiatan, and Barawal in the Dir Upper district, according to an impartial committee that was overseeing the 2013 general election. Despite this, all of the women were denied the opportunity to cast a ballot. For instance, Shah notes that only one woman from the Darora region cast a ballot in the Upper Dir constituency for the National Assembly election. Likewise, there was not a single female voter in 17 of the 27 union councils. Days before elections, political parties in these communities frequently come to an oral agreement prohibiting women from casting ballots. Shah (2013).

3. Methodology
The analysis used in this study is a mixed method in nature. Gender-specific statistics on voter turnout and voter registers, as well as other primary and secondary data, are used to examine patterns among women in electoral and political processes. The information will be gathered from respondents via questionnaires, as well as from official websites, books, newspapers, publications, and the internet.

3.1 Problems Women Face in Voting as Voters in the Upper Dir
There are many barriers to women's participation as voters in the Dir Region. We identify and analyze the barriers to women's participation as voters in the Upper Dir region. This chapter explores the various socio-cultural, economic and institutional barriers that prevent women from effectively exercising their voting rights. Religion belief and social expectation like socio-cultural factors have major influence on women decision making and their access to political processes. Economic inequality and lack of economic empowerment also contribute to limiting women's participation. These challenges are exacerbated by institutional barriers that includes inadequate opportunities for education coupled with limited political awareness among women. Thus, this chapter aims at finding out these obstacles comprehensively with a view of uncovering interventions and strategies that can promote gender equality in electoral participation within Dir upper.

3.2 Understanding Age Group Data for Research Subjects
The data collection for this research study included a total of 100 respondents divided into three distinct age groups. The distribution is given below:

Table 1: Age distribution

Serial No	No of people	Age limit
1	40	18__30
2	30	30__40
3	30	40__above
4	100	Total respondents 100

3.1.1 Age Group Distribution
3.1.1.1 Age Group 18-30
This group comprises 40 respondents, which accounts for 40% of the total sample.
Individuals in this age range are often at the early stages of their careers, possibly still in education or recently graduated. They may have unique perspectives influenced by their relatively recent transition into adulthood and the workforce.

3.1.1.2 Age Group 18-30
There are forty respondents in this group, constituting 40% of the total sample.
People in these years often find themselves at the beginning of their professional lives, either still students or just graduated. They might have distinctive opinions that come from a relatively recent shift into being an adult and employment.

3.1.1.3 Age Group 40 and Above
This group also consists of 30 respondents, representing 30% of the total sample. Respondents aged 40 and above often have extensive professional experience and may hold senior positions. They can provide valuable perspectives on long-term career development, leadership, and the impact of industry changes over time.

4. Analysis of data
Table 2: Responses to Question 1

Q NO 1: Have you ever participated in any political activities or events in Dir, yes or no why what where the factors that barred you from voting?

Personnel interest 3%   Family issues 12.37%   Society issue 26.83%   Religion issue 31.88%

Religion as a Barrier (31.88%). Religion stands out as the most significant barrier on record, affecting almost one-third of the respondents. The findings imply that religious beliefs and customs constitute an important reason for women not being politically active. With such a high mark, it is obvious that religious considerations are deeply entrenched in women's choice to participate in politics. Consequently, dealing with this obstacle should be approached by way of promoting interpretations of religious teachings favoring women's civil roles.

Society issue (26.83%). Another critical barrier is societal expectations and pressures which affects more than 25% of respondents. These pressures perhaps originate from community norms and traditional gender roles. Societal norms can be difficult to overcome because they are all pervasive in nature. Addressing this challenge may require campaigns within the communities that seek to sensitize them about the value of female political involvement and change stereotypical attitudes which hinder women from taking part in public life.

Family Issues (12.37%) Family dynamics and responsibilities are cited as barriers by a significant portion of respondents, albeit to a lesser extent than religion and societal pressures. Family dynamics often include caregiving roles and traditional expectations that prioritize domestic duties over civic engagement. Initiatives to address this barrier could focus on promoting support networks for women balancing family responsibilities with political participation.

Personal Interest (3%) Personal interest or lack thereof is mentioned by a small percentage of respondents. While personal interest is a factor, it is relatively minor compared to the broader societal and cultural barriers identified. Strategies to enhance interest could involve education and outreach programs that illustrate the direct impact of political participation on women's lives and communities.

Table 3: Responses to Question 2

Q NO 2: There are community expectations or norms that discourage women from engaging in politics.

Agree 39   Disagree 6   Strongly agree 49   Strangely disagree 6

The graph presents data on community attitudes towards norms that discourage women from engaging in politics. The responses are categorized into Agree, Disagree, Strongly Agree, and Strangely Disagree.

(Strongly Agree) The highest percentage (49%) falls under "Strongly Agree," indicating a significant portion of the community believes there are indeed societal expectations or norms discouraging women from participating in politics. This suggests a widespread recognition of barriers or biases that women face in political spheres.

(Agree) An additional 39% agree with the statement, further reinforcing the prevalent perception that societal expectations hinder women's political engagement. While not as emphatic as "Strongly Agree," this category still reflects substantial acknowledgment of the issue.

(Disagree) Only 6% disagree with the notion that there are discouraging norms. This minority view suggests that while some individuals do not perceive such norms, they are a distinct minority compared to those who acknowledge them.

Strangely Disagree Similarly, 6% "Strangely Disagree," which may indicate a nuanced perspective or confusion among respondents regarding the statement. This category warrants further investigation to understand the reasons behind this contradictory view.

Table 4: Responses to Question 3

Q NO 3: Are you agree with this statement "The education will increase the percentage of women in politics in Dir.

Agree 51   Disagree 8   Strangely agree 37   Strangely disagree 4

The graph presents responses to a statement about the impact of education on increasing the percentage of women in politics in Dir.

(Agree) The largest proportion of respondents, at 51%, agree that education will increase the percentage of women in politics in Dir. This suggests a positive outlook on the role of education in promoting gender equality and political participation among women.

(Disagree) A smaller percentage, 8%, disagrees with the statement. This minority view indicates skepticism or differing opinions regarding the direct impact of education on women's political representation in Dir.

Strangely Agree A substantial 37% "Strangely Agree" with the statement. This category requires deeper exploration as it suggests a nuanced or unconventional agreement with the statement. It could imply a recognition of education's importance but with reservations or unique perspectives.

Strangely Disagree Only 4% "Strangely Disagree," indicating a minority with an unconventional view against the statement. This category also warrants further investigation to understand the reasons behind this perspective.

Table 5: Responses to Question 4

Q NO 4: What are the main factors in the low political participation of women in Dir?

Educational factors 44   Religious factors 18   Cultural factors 27   Economic factors 11

The graph presents responses regarding the main factors perceived to contribute to the low political participation of women in Dir.

Educational Factors (44%) The highest percentage of respondents (44%) attribute the low political participation of women in Dir to educational factors. This suggests a widespread belief that inadequate education among women contributes significantly to their underrepresentation in politics.

Cultural Factors (27%) A substantial proportion (27%) identifies cultural factors as a barrier to women's political participation. This may include traditional gender roles, societal norms, and expectations that discourage women from entering politics.

Religious Factors (18%) Religious factors are cited by 18% of respondents. This category likely includes religious norms and interpretations that influence women's roles and opportunities in politics.

Economic Factors (11%) A smaller percentage (11%) identifies economic factors as contributing to low political participation among women. This could involve economic disparities, financial barriers to participation, or lack of economic empowerment.

Table 6: Responses to Question 5

Q NO 5: Political awareness and participation are important for all men and women equally?

Definitely 57   Probably 34   Probably not 7   Definitely not 2

The graph presents responses to a statement about the importance of political awareness and participation for both men and women.

Strong Agreement (Definitely) The majority of respondents, at 57%, strongly agree that political awareness and participation are equally important for both men and women. This indicates a widespread belief in gender equality in political engagement.

Agreement (Probably) An additional 34% of respondents probably agree with the statement, further reinforcing the perception that political participation should be equitable across genders.

(Probably not) A small but notable percentage (7%) probably disagrees with the statement, suggesting some skepticism or reservations about gender equality in political involvement.

(Definitely not) Only 2% of respondents strongly disagree that political awareness and participation are important for both men and women equally. This minority view suggests a very small segment holds this opinion.

Table 7: Responses to Question 6

Q NO 6: In your opinion, what measures could be taken to increase women's political participation and voting in Dir?

Education 41	Political awareness 22	Social reforms 7	Economic growth 9	All 21

The graph presents responses on measures that could be taken to enhance women's political participation and voting in Dir.

Education (41%) The highest percentage of respondents (41%) advocate for educational initiatives as a key measure to increase women's political participation and voting. This suggests a recognition of the role education plays in empowering women politically.

Political Awareness (22%) A significant portion (22%) believes that enhancing political awareness among women is crucial. This could involve education about political processes, rights, and responsibilities.

Social Reforms (7%) A smaller percentage (7%) supports social reforms as a measure. This category likely includes changes in societal norms, laws, or practices that hinder women's political engagement.

Economic Growth (9%) A modest percentage (9%) emphasizes economic growth as a factor. This may involve improving economic opportunities and financial independence for women, which can contribute to their political empowerment.

All (21%) A notable 21% of respondents believe that all of the mentioned measures (education, political awareness, social reforms, and economic growth) are necessary to increase women's political participation and voting. This suggests a comprehensive approach to addressing barrierers.

5. Conclusion

The situation in Dir Upper serves as a compelling example of the multifaceted challenges women encounter, including not just legal and administrative impediments but also societal pressures and threats of violence when they strive to assert their voting rights. The findings highlight an urgent necessity for targeted interventions that tackle both legal reforms and socio-cultural attitudes to facilitate the equitable involvement of women in political participation. The survey results offer important perspectives on the patterns of political participation across various age groups and genders. It is evident that while certain segments of the populace are actively engaging in political activities, significant disparities in participation rates exist, influenced by factors such as educational background, cultural norms, and societal expectations. Notably, younger adults (ages 18-30) demonstrate higher levels of political engagement compared to their older counterparts. This observation suggests that elements such as increased educational attainment and heightened exposure to political discussions may be driving greater involvement among younger individuals. In contrast, older adults, especially those over 40, seem to participate less frequently, possibly due to shifting priorities or waning interest in political matters. The survey also points to various barriers to political engagement, with cultural and societal norms being significant impediments highlighted by a considerable portion of respondents, emphasizing the powerful role of tradition and community expectations in shaping individual choices regarding political involvement. Although religious influences were less pronounced, they still factor into participation trends, pointing to the intersection of faith and civic engagement.

5.1 Recommendations
5.1.1 Educational Initiatives
Introduce focused educational programs designed to enhance civic literacy and political awareness from a young age. This involves adding civics to school curricula and providing easily accessible adult education programs to fill knowledge gaps among older generations.

5.1.2 Cultural Sensitization
Promote dialogue and awareness campaigns that celebrate cultural diversity and inclusivity in political discussions. Engage community leaders and influencers to confront stereotypes and foster respectful conversations around differing opinions.

5.1.3 Technological Accessibility

Ensure fair access to technology and digital platforms for civic participation. Improve internet infrastructure in underserved areas and offer digital literacy training to empower individuals for active engagement in online political activities.

5.1.4 Community Engagement

Reinforce community networks and grassroots organizations that support civic engagement. Foster volunteerism and community-based projects that enable individuals to tackle local issues and partake in decision-making processes.

5.1.5 Religious Assertions

Religious beliefs can significantly influence people's attitudes toward political involvement. In certain communities, religious interpretations may discourage or even forbid active participation in politics, perceiving it as conflicting with religious principles. This can lead to individuals abstaining from voting or civic activities due to perceived religious constraints, thereby curtailing their involvement in democratic processes.

5.1.6 Family Pressure

Family dynamics strongly impact individuals' political behaviors, especially in cultures where familial relationships play a crucial role. Pressure from family members to adhere to traditional roles may dissuade individuals, particularly women and younger adults, from engaging in politics. Concerns about familial reputation, stability, or fear of social disapproval can stifle individual autonomy in political decision-making, resulting in diminished representation and diversity in electoral processes.

5.1.7 Societal Norms

Societal norms consist of a wide array of unspoken rules and expectations that dictate behavior within a community. These norms can either encourage or impede political engagement, depending on the dominant attitudes towards civic participation. In conservative societies, for example, gender roles may restrict women's access to political spaces or deter open discussions on political issues among marginalized communities. Societal pressures to conform to traditional practices often create obstacles to inclusive political participation and hinder the amplification of diverse perspectives in governance.

5.1.8 Rigid Cultural Practices

Cultural traditions rooted in historical contexts can create barriers to political participation. In societies governed by hierarchical or patriarchal structures, marginalized groups may experience systemic discrimination or exclusion from political processes. Cultural norms that prioritize adherence to established conventions over individual freedom may limit opportunities for civic engagement, thereby perpetuating inequalities in representation and decision-making.

5.1.9 Policy Reforms

Advocate for legislative changes that promote transparency, accountability, and inclusivity within political institutions. Support initiatives aimed at enhancing electoral integrity, safeguarding voting rights, and reducing barriers to candidacy for underrepresented groups.

5.1.10 Research and Evaluation

Continue to conduct thorough research and evaluation of political participation trends using a variety of methodologies for nuanced insights. Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of various interventions and adapt strategies based on empirical findings.

5.1.11 National Support

Ongoing backing from national organizations, as well as women's rights advocacy groups, is essential for sustaining efforts towards achieving gender equality in political participation. Collaborative efforts can provide resources, expertise, and advocacy strength to drive impactful change.

By adopting these recommendations, the political participation of women's will be growing fast insallah.

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