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Socio-Cultural Barriers to Women Political Participation in District Buner

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Abstract

This study explores the socio-cultural barriers to women's political participation in District Buner, Pakistan, where traditional gender roles, conservative religious interpretations, and economic constraints significantly limit women's involvement in political processes. Grounded in feminist theoretical frameworks, the research seeks to understand the complex interactions between cultural norms, societal expectations, and institutional obstacles that constrain women's political agency. Using a qualitative research approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with women from diverse backgrounds in District Buner. Thematic analysis revealed key barriers, such as the practice of purdah (female seclusion), limited educational opportunities, economic dependence, and widespread fear of harassment. These challenges, compounded by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, restrict women's mobility and participation in public life, often relegating them to domestic roles. Despite these challenges, the study also identifies emerging trends in urban areas and among younger women, where access to education and political awareness are gradually improving. Furthermore, women's advocacy groups and NGOs are playing a vital role in raising awareness and providing support to overcome these barriers. However, the research emphasizes that meaningful political engagement for women in District Buner requires both structural reforms and cultural shifts. Expanding educational opportunities, enforcing gender-sensitive policies, and fostering stronger family and community support systems are critical steps in advancing women's political empowerment. The findings highlight the importance of comprehensive approaches that go beyond legal reforms to address the entrenched socio-cultural factors hindering women's political participation in conservative regions like District Buner.

Key Words

Women's Political Participation, Socio-Cultural Barriers, Feminist Theory, Gender Norms, District Buner

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Introduction

Socio-cultural norms play a pivotal role in shaping, and often limiting, women's participation in the political process, particularly in historically conservative regions such as District Buner. These deeply ingrained norms impose rigid gender roles and expectations, restricting women's access to crucial resources like education, economic opportunities, and public spaces. Consequently, women often struggle to engage actively and meaningfully in political activities, as societal conditioning typically socializes them to accept subservient roles with limited chances to exercise their political agency (Anjum et al., 2022).

Patriarchal structures, deeply embedded within these communities, further amplify these limitations by assigning domestic and caregiving responsibilities primarily to women. This division restricts their potential for political engagement, leadership development, and public representation (Hossain, 2012). However, these socio-cultural constraints are not uniform and vary across regions, cultures, and socio-economic contexts. As such, the extent to which women can exercise their political rights and participate in governance processes is shaped by these factors (Naz & Chaudhry, 2012).

In addition to socio-cultural barriers, economic hardships present significant challenges for women attempting to

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engage in political activities. The financial costs associated with eligibility to contest elections, running campaigns, and maintaining a political career are particularly burdensome for economically marginalized women (Shaheen, 2021). Furthermore, in conservative settings, women often face systematic opposition from political adversaries and societal members who undermine or oppose their right to assume political roles. The ongoing lack of institutional and societal support for promoting women's candidacy and leadership in national legislatures remains a critical issue (Chuki & Turner, 2017).

Cultural practices and traditions in District Buner exacerbate these challenges by reinforcing gender stereotypes that portray women as less capable or less suited for political roles. These stereotypes are normalized through influential social institutions such as family structures, community leadership, and religious teachings, which shape collective and individual attitudes toward women's political participation. Moreover, restrictive religious interpretations that confine women to domestic spaces and limit their visibility in public life serve as further barriers to their meaningful political involvement (Nwabunkeonye, 2014). Together, these socio-cultural and religious factors create an environment that hinders women's ability to fully exercise their political rights, contribute to decision-making processes, and seize leadership opportunities.

In light of these barriers, this study seeks to explore the multi-faceted factors affecting women's political participation in District Buner. The research will specifically address the following key questions:

Research Questions

1. What are the key socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers that hinder women's political participation in District Buner, Pakistan?
2. How have constitutional reforms, particularly the quota system, influenced women's representation and political engagement in Pakistan?
3. What roles do family and community support networks play in empowering women to engage in political activities in rural regions like District Buner?

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1. To analyze the socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers that limit women's political participation in District Buner, Pakistan.
2. To evaluate the impact of constitutional reforms and the quota system on enhancing women's political representation and participation in Pakistan.
3. To examine the influence of family dynamics and community support systems on women's ability to engage in politics in rural areas.

By addressing these questions and objectives, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding women's political participation in Pakistan, shedding light on both the barriers they face and the pathways to empowerment.

Literature Review

The political activity of women in Pakistan is shaped by multiple facets and dynamics. Despite making up more than half of the population, women have historically played a marginal role in the country's political arena. There have been significant institutional, social, and cultural barriers that have kept women out of legislative bodies in Pakistan's political history (Allauddin et al., 2020). Over the last two decades, important reforms have been introduced regarding women's political participation, most of which stem from constitutional changes and the quota system aimed at increasing female representation (Naima Tabassum Syed & Huma Tabassum, 2020).

A significant shift can be observed between two key periods: from independence in 1947 until 2000, and after 2000. During the former, women's participation in national and provincial legislatures, the Senate, and municipal councils was low. It was only after 2000 that constitutional and legislative measures strongly enhanced women's participation in political arenas, signaling a radical transformation in Pakistan's political scene (Naima Tabassum Syed &

Huma Tabassum, 2020). However, despite these initiatives, women's voter participation has consistently lagged behind that of men in all general elections, indicating that legislative interventions alone are not sufficient. They must be accompanied by the elimination of deeply rooted social barriers (Allauddin et al., 2020). Additionally, the dynamics of gender within family structures, the labor market, and dominant political institutions have historically been exclusionary towards women, creating structural hurdles that persist over time. In response to these structural inequalities, reforms such as electoral quotas have been central to developing women's political participation at both the national and local levels (Moghadam, 2009). Quotas aim to ensure that women not only represent but also have a significant opportunity to influence decision-making processes.

Beyond structural and societal determinants, family and community support networks are also crucial for women's engagement in politics (Majokweni & Molnar, 2021). Among these support systems, there is a variation of services, including emotional support, logistics such as child care, financial assistance, and advocacy networks, which help sustain women's political involvement (Christopher & Godknows, 2019). The availability of such support systems is a vital enabler, preparing women to navigate the competitive and male-dominated political arena. A lack of facilitating tools can significantly hinder political aspirations (Majokweni & Molnar, 2021).

The ideological divisions among women reflect the broader political landscape in Pakistan. Liberal women support active engagement in public spaces and reject religious fanaticism, while conservative women endorse traditional gender norms and often revive religiously inspired nationalism (G. Anjum, 2020). These contrasting viewpoints highlight the tension between modernization and tradition within Pakistan's socio-political context. Additionally, the post-military democratic period marked a new phase for women's participation. Different administrations with varying ideological leanings have shaped the women's rights movement, illustrating the intersection of historical, political, and policy factors (Sher Muhammad et al., 2022). Despite some progress, women's political representation remains far behind their actual numbers. A study by the UNDP in 2005 found that women held only 15% of all parliamentary positions globally, a trend also seen in Pakistan, despite quotas being implemented as a temporary solution to this disparity (Rubab, Mustafa, & Nawaz, 2020).

Socio-cultural factors have repeatedly been identified as major obstacles to women's political empowerment. Gul & Farooq (2019) noted that traditional gender norms and male dominance, coupled with a lack of autonomy, strongly prevent women's political participation in places like Multan. Similarly, Allauddin, Alizai, and Rind (2020) emphasized that socio-religious, economic, and cultural barriers continue to hinder women's involvement in political affairs. These barriers are often embodied in patriarchal structures that confine women to domestic duties, limiting their opportunities for political participation (Hossain, 2012). The support women receive from their families and communities significantly influences their access to political roles and their ability to influence policy outcomes (Keiser, 1997). Conversely, the quality of family relationships—based on affection, communication, and support—serves as a catalyst for women's empowerment. Such environments foster self-esteem, confidence, and autonomy, all of which are essential for political engagement (Allendorf, 2012). Families that prioritize education, support independent decision-making, and recognize women's leadership potential play a critical role in developing the skills and self-efficacy necessary for political leadership (Allendorf, 2012). Families and communities, as potential agents of change, can challenge traditional gender roles by creating platforms where women are not only tolerated but actively encouraged to participate (Keiser, 1997).

Ethnic and regional considerations further complicate the issue. Ullah (2018) found that factors like limited education, significant family obligations, patriarchal practices, and the strict adherence to purdah severely restrict women's political participation within the Pakhtun culture. Umer and Othman (2016) observed that among Baloch communities, patriarchy, religious misunderstandings, and nomadic lifestyles inhibited women's access to identification papers and voting facilities. Additionally, Khajjak and Safdar (2018) found that limited mobility, male supremacy, and domestic obligations remain crucial barriers to political participation. Naz and Ibrahim (2012) specifically examined Pakhtun societies and how traditions like Pakhtunwali intersect with socio-economic and religious contexts to sustain prejudice and hinder women's political power. These socio-cultural constraints vary by region and influence the extent to which women can assert their political rights (Naz & Chaudhry, 2012). Religious interpretations that confine women to domestic spaces further compound these challenges (Nwabunkeonye, 2014). Women also face significant economic

hardships (Shaheen, 2021) and are often confronted with opposition that undermines their legitimacy (Chuki & Turner, 2017).

Regional differences exacerbate the situation. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), particularly in areas like Swabi, Swat, and Dir, feudal and patriarchal cultures limit women's political engagement. This exclusion is often legitimized through religious narratives, with women in regions such as Malakand confined to domestic roles (Bano, 2009). However, KPK also provides insights into how entrenched norms can change. Despite a history of conservative standards limiting women's participation, significant improvements have been observed in recent years due to changes in family sentiments, community mobilizations, and legislative reforms (Ali, Ismail, & Khan, 2023). Many families, particularly in urban settings and among the educated middle class, now support the involvement of their daughters and sisters in politics (Ali, Ismail, & Khan, 2023). In addition to familial support, community networks—such as women's organizations, civil society groups, local people, and influential community leaders—play a crucial role in providing material support, political education, and campaign backing, creating spaces for women to collaborate and build solidarity (Ali, Ismail, & Khan, 2023). These networks offer mentorship, leadership training, and exposure. While challenges such as societal resistance and resource limitations persist, women in KPK, with strong familial and community support, have contested elections and influenced policy, demonstrating that shifting attitudes are as crucial as formal changes (Ali, Ismail, & Khan, 2023).

Regarding political advocacy, women's NGOs have made significant contributions, although their scope has often been shaped by historical factors, such as the focus on religious identity during the Partition period (Ahmed, 2014). Recent efforts like the Aurat March highlight ongoing debates about promoting women's rights in context-sensitive ways (Khushbakht & Sultana, 2020). Women's political participation shows considerable disparities globally, with industrialized countries differing markedly from developing nations like Pakistan, where women continue to fight against socio-economic inequality, patriarchal structures, and religious conservatism to maintain their subordinate social status (Bari, 2005).

In conclusion, although Pakistan has made strides in increasing women's political engagement, obstacles rooted in cultural traditions, religious interpretations, educational gaps, socio-economic dependence, and the crucial role of family and community support systems remain significant. Addressing these multifaceted challenges is essential to create a more inclusive and equitable political environment for women.

Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative research methodology to investigate the socio-cultural impediments influencing women's political engagement in District Buner. Qualitative approaches are especially effective for comprehending intricate social phenomena, enabling a thorough investigation of participants' experiences, perspectives, and the cultural milieu that shapes their political involvement.

Data Collection

Primary qualitative data were obtained via semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with women from various backgrounds in District Buner. These instruments offered flexibility, allowing participants to articulate their perspectives candidly while enabling researchers to investigate particular concerns as they arose. The interviews and conversations were done in local languages when needed, ensuring that language obstacles did not impede the richness of the data acquired.

Alongside primary data, secondary sources including academic publications, government reports, policy papers, and historical records were used to provide background context and guide the formulation of interview questions. The fundamental analysis of this research relies on original qualitative data collected directly from participants.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, which is methodically locating, classifying, and coding patterns or themes within the data, was used to assess the qualitative data that was gathered. This method enabled the identification of significant patterns and insights

about the socio-cultural barriers encountered by women in political engagement. The analysis was informed by the feminist theoretical framework of the research, ensuring that gender, power, and cultural norms were fundamental to data interpretation.

Thematic analysis facilitated an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of women in District Buner, emphasizing both personal and communal narratives that elucidate the structural and cultural impediments to their political empowerment (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on Feminist Theory, which provides a critical framework for examining the socio-cultural obstacles that restrict women's political engagement in District Buner. Feminist theory critiques conventional power dynamics that sustain gender disparities in political, economic, and social domains (Tong, 2009). It asserts that the marginalization of women is not inherent but rather socially produced via patriarchy, cultural norms, and institutional prejudices (Jaggar, 1983). This study uses feminist views to examine how ingrained cultural practices, religious interpretations, and economic constraints impede women's comprehensive participation in political life.

Two significant branches of feminist philosophy are Liberal Feminism and Radical Feminism. Liberal Feminism emphasizes the promotion of women's equal rights, including suffrage, educational access, and involvement in political decision-making (Freedman, 2001). It underscores the need of changes within the current political and legal frameworks to guarantee equality and eradicate prejudice. Within District Buner, liberal feminism emphasizes the need of dismantling legal, educational, and sociological obstacles that inhibit women's political rights.

However, Radical Feminism examines the fundamental, structural origins of women's subjugation inherent in patriarchal cultural and religious conventions (Firestone, 1970). Radical feminists contend that genuine gender equality requires not just legislative changes but also a reconfiguration of the conventional social frameworks that perpetuate male supremacy. The application of radical feminism elucidates how stringent gender norms, enforced purdah practices, and cultural expectations in Buner foster an atmosphere where women's political participation is seen as inappropriate or dishonourable.

This research integrates concepts from liberal and radical feminism to critically analyze both the superficial barriers to women's political engagement and the entrenched cultural and structural causes that perpetuate gender inequities in District Buner. This theoretical framework offers a thorough foundation for examining the obstacles women encounter and developing methods for substantial political empowerment.

Discussion

Multifaceted interplay of cultural, religious, economic, and even institutional aspects continues blocking women's political participation, despite some development in the legislative representation and awareness, according to the data collected through the interviews, focus group discussions and surveys in District Buner. The research confirms that entrenched patriarchal beliefs, complemented by socio-religious stories and ancient such as purdah maintains close gender order that hinders women from public life.

One of the key findings of this study is internalization of the limiting gender norms among both males and females. Domesticity is the only vocation women in Buner can ever accept due to continued indoctrination, misinterpretations of religion and fear of retaliation by the communal order. In a number of cases well educated women actually avoid political participation owing to fears of social isolation or violence. Males including fathers and husbands tend to become the gatekeepers of what can or cannot be done by the woman. This agency deficit reduces autonomy and limits the ability of women to impact on political outcomes notwithstanding documented formal arrangements such as reserved seats.

The results also point out the strong influence of economic constraint. Political participation sometimes calls for financial independence or at least access to resources, which is not the case with some women in Buner. Campaigning, transportation, political education, and public announcement require finances. economic empowerment of women is

necessary since it means they will no longer depend on male members in their families for financial decisions. This dependency limits their mobility, political aspirations, and their ability to compete at par with the male candidates.

Another great barrier in the form of fear of harassment and reputational damage has been stated as well. Verbal harassment, public examination, and even threat of physical harm are faced by the female political candidates. The experiences revealed by several participants are important deterrents for women who have political careers in their mind. Public and political spheres were considered as dangerous places for women, and therefore the political involvement made a woman lose her dignity and respectability.

The report highlights favorable trends, particularly in urban areas of Buner and youthful age group. Improved access to education, increase in media exposure and efforts of NGOs and civil society are taken to change perceptions. The role of women's groups has become increasingly crucial in that they provide the leadership training as well as a legal assistance while they organize the awareness campaign advocating for the women's constitution rights and their political potentials.

The importance of the family and community support also emerged as a crucial part of the situation. Women with the support of parents, husbands or community elders had overwhelming high levels for political desire and participation in public life. In contrast, those with the lack of these systems reported feelings of isolation, unpreparedness and discouragement to political involvement. These findings substantiate the existing research that indicates that the supporting environment is the essential factor that will contribute to the promotion of women's political empowerment.

This research reflects feminist theoretical assumptions, especially radical feminism, that cosmetic measures such as quota will have no impact unless there is a structural change and the advancement in which patriarchal order is eliminated. The focus on legal and educational equality by liberal feminism finds its reflection in the demands of the participants for improved access to political education and proper use of already existing laws. However, the need for transformational changes at a structure level, as underlined in radical feminism, is still a vital issue in traditional environments such as Buner. This study coincides with the feminist theoretical frameworks (radical feminism) in maintaining that facile means of such as quotas are ineffective unless the culture is extensively remodeled to disintegrate the patriarchal order. The emphasis of liberal feminism on legal and academic equality can be observed in the demands of the participants for better opportunities for a political education and equal application of existing laws. However, the thrust for deep structural change expressed by radical feminism continues to be an important problem in such conservative settings as Buner.

Conclusion

This research concludes that a network of sociocultural barriers engendered by patriarchy, religious conservatism, and institutional bias continues to exert a severe bearing on political participation of women in District Buner. Notwithstanding attempts by institutions geared toward improving female representation through reserved seats and legislative framework, the perpetuating dominance of patriarchal norms that confine women to home spheres and taint their engagement in the public domain neutralize these efforts.

Reversely, major challenges are limited access to education, lack of financial independence, the prevalence of gender-based abuse and harassment, and dominant social perception upon women that they put home and domestic activities ahead of public affairs. Traditional customs such as purdah, male guardianship, and honor-based social architectures collectively entrench these barriers and prevent extensive political participation.

Notwithstanding these barriers, the research points to an awakening consciousness within women and some factions from the community on the need for the inclusion of gender in the governance. Restricted cases of familial and communal assistances suggest the prospect of transformation. Additionally, the works of NGOs, women-led community organisations and growing political literacy among the younger demographics allude to the fact that if the interventions are put in place, significant progress is achievable.

This research finally proves that reaching gender parity in politics is not only a legal matter but a highly cultural issue. Having a sustainable transition will encourage deconstruction of established belief systems, re-engineering of power

relations, and forging a political culture that respects women's thoughts. District Buner, as is the case with the others conservative areas, requires bottom-up mobilization and top-down innovation for communal advancement.

Recommendations

A comprehensive and integrated strategy is necessary to successfully address the socio-cultural hurdles restricting women's political engagement in District Buner. Education is one of the most essential foundational elements. Initiate community-based awareness campaigns to confront patriarchal narratives and advocate for women's rights to political participation. Educational institutions must include gender-sensitive civic and political education into their curriculum to foster an early comprehension of political rights and duties. Involving religious leaders and academics in advocating for progressive interpretations of Islamic teachings is essential to combat the abuse of religion in justifying gender discrimination.

Legal and structural changes must be enhanced to provide a protected and supportive environment for women in politics. This entails enforcing current gender quota regulations and establishing measures to guarantee their effective implementation. Robust anti-harassment laws must be implemented to safeguard female candidates from intimidation and abuse, especially during electoral campaigns. Moreover, accessible legal assistance and institutional support must be provided to women encountering prejudice or threats in political environments.

Another tenet of encouraging women's political engagement is economic empowerment. Many women in Buner are not financially independent enough to participate in politics or run campaigns. As a result, women-specific business training, political campaign subsidies, and microfinance initiatives are crucial. Women will be able to engage in public life on an equal basis with males thanks to these measures, which will also lessen economic reliance.

Family and community support structures have a significant role in molding women's political ambitions and prospects. Initiatives should concentrate on establishing mentoring programs in which seasoned female leaders assist prospective candidates. Simultaneously, awareness programs must include families—particularly parents and spouses—to cultivate a culture that appreciates and supports women's leadership. Emphasizing local female role models and success narratives might further alter attitudes and legitimize women's participation in politics.

It is imperative that political parties implement internal gender quotas, provide leadership wings for women, and ensure that women's voices are meaningfully represented in party decision-making processes in order to promote gender inclusivity. Parties should also be encouraged to nominate women candidates for general constituencies as well as reserved seats, which will strengthen women's substantive participation in politics.

Enhancing the safety and accessibility of public and political areas is essential. Investments in gender-sensitive infrastructure, such as safe transportation and designated polling places for women, may promote increased female participation in political processes. Local governments need to provide inclusive public forums that enable women to express their concerns securely and participate in community-level decision-making (Khan, 2024; Khan, 2023).

Lastly, it's important to keep an eye on things and do research to help make policy and programs better. Regularly collecting and analyzing gender-disaggregated data on political participation is a good way to see how things are going and spot new problems. Academic and field research should also be encouraged to learn more about how sociocultural, economic, and religious factors affect women's political experiences in conservative areas like Buner.

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