

Challenges to Women's Participation in Electoral Politics in District Mardan

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Abstract

This study examines the various obstacles that women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's District Mardan face when trying to participate in electoral politics. Women's political participation in the area is still low, despite constitutional protections and legislative efforts to advance gender equality. Traditional norms misinterpreted religious beliefs, low literacy rates, a lack of political consciousness, economic dependence, and the prevalence of patriarchal structures within political parties are some of the main obstacles identified by the study. The roles of women in the electoral process are further marginalized by systemic problems like limited mobility, intimidation, and token representation. Using secondary data analysis, the study shows that although there are legal frameworks to support women's political inclusion, it is still difficult to effectively implement them. This study examines the difficulties women encounter in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, District Mardan electoral politics. Notwithstanding notable progress in the direction of gender equality, KP women still face many obstacles that prevent them from actively engaging in electoral politics, especially in rural and conservative areas like Mardan. Women's political empowerment is severely hampered by these social, cultural, political, and economic obstacles. This study will examine these challenges and offer solutions. Many institutional, societal, and financial obstacles have long restricted women's political engagement in District Mardan. Women encounter obstacles that prevent them from participating in electoral politics in rural areas such as Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Patriarchal norms, cultural expectations, economic dependence, and limited access to political networks are just a few of the many barriers that women face when trying to get involved in politics. This paper explores the local political structures and customs that limit women's ability to vote and take part in electoral politics. This study intends to explore the difficulties that women in Mardan encounter when attempting to negotiate the political arena, with an emphasis on institutional frameworks, social norms, and financial limitations.

Keywords: Women, Face, Challenges, Hurdles, Electoral Politics, Mardan.

Introduction

A fundamental component of gender equality and democratic governance is women's involvement in electoral politics. But in conservative areas of Pakistan, such as District

Mardan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, political, structural, and cultural barriers still significantly limit women's participation in politics. Even with legal provisions like women's reserved seats in national and provincial assemblies, women's active participation, particularly as candidates, voters, and decision-makers, remains low. The dominance of male-centric political networks, religious interpretations, tribal customs, and traditional gender roles all play a part in women's marginalization during election processes. Local jirgas, or tribal councils, have even unofficially prohibited women from voting in rural Mardan, and female candidates frequently experience intimidation, lack of funding, and low media exposure. Furthermore, political parties frequently view women as symbolic representatives rather than giving them actual power or the support of their constituents. Social conservatism and institutional indifference work together to maintain women's underrepresentation in politics, which eventually impedes the advancement of democracy. In addition to improving gender inclusion in Mardan, examining these issues is crucial for informing more comprehensive national plans for fair political engagement. In District Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, women still encounter major obstacles when trying to enter and participate in electoral politics, despite constitutional guarantees and legal frameworks that support gender equality in political participation. In the region, women's political agencies are restricted by ingrained patriarchal norms, limited educational opportunities, sociocultural barriers, religious conservatism, and a lack of institutional support. Additional factors undermining true democratic representation include societal opposition to women in leadership roles, political party tokenism, and frequent instances of vote-barring in rural areas. In addition to excluding women from the decision-making process, these barriers impede the district's transition to inclusive governance. Fostering gender equity and bolstering democratic institutions at the local and national levels require an understanding of and commitment to addressing these issues.

Women's political participation is a critical indicator of democratic inclusion and gender equality. However, in many parts of Pakistan—including District Mardan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)—women remain largely underrepresented in electoral politics due to entrenched socio-political and cultural barriers (Arif & Jamil, 2015). The complexities behind this gender gap, identifying structural, cultural, and institutional factors that limit women's participation in formal political processes.

Although Pakistan has legal frameworks aimed at guaranteeing gender equality, women still encounter major obstacles when trying to participate in electoral politics in many regions of the nation. Conservative districts like Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where traditional gender roles and sociocultural dynamics significantly impact women's roles in public life, make the difficulties even more apparent. Even though Pakistan has enacted national and local gender quotas to increase the representation of women in politics, women's participation is still low, especially in rural areas of District Mardan.

For any society to advance, women's political participation is essential. It guarantees that the demands of the general populace are reflected in political decisions. Women are still underrepresented in Pakistani politics, though, especially in rural areas like Mardan.

Examining the difficulties faced by women in electoral politics is made particularly interesting by District Mardan's conservative socio-political context.

To achieve a representative and balanced democracy, women must be involved in electoral politics. However, there are several barriers that prevent women in Pakistan from participating in political processes, particularly in rural areas like Mardan. Women still face discrimination in access to political power, even after the country's constitution established gender quotas in local and national assemblies. The deeply ingrained cultural and religious norms in Mardan frequently limit women's freedom of movement and involvement in public life, and their economic dependence and institutional barriers within political parties further hinder their ability to actively participate in politics. Even with the notable changes in the political landscape around the world, women in Pakistan continue to face underrepresentation and exclusion from decision-making processes, particularly in rural areas of District Mardan. Economic constraints, political systems, and societal attitudes are some of the many factors that prevent women from participating in electoral politics. Despite national initiatives like gender quotas and reserved seats aimed at boosting female political participation, women's political participation is still low in Mardan, a conservative district where patriarchal traditions predominate.

Literature Review

A growing body of research highlights the various barriers that women face in politics. According to studies on gender and politics in KP District Mardan, common challenges include societal norms, limited access to education, economic dependence, political violence, and legal constraints. These barriers such as cultural practices like patriarchy, and the lack of support from male-dominated political structures, further marginalize women's political involvement.

In Pakistan, long-standing socio-cultural, religious, and political barriers have historically limited women's ability to participate in electoral politics. These difficulties are especially noticeable in District Mardan because of the patriarchal and conservative tribal norms that prevail their

cultural taboos that limit women's public visibility and political discourse participation reinforce gender-based political marginalization in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In rural regions like Mardan, where traditional family structures and male-dominated decision-making are prevalent, these limitations are very severe. (Arif and Jamil,2015)

According to Butt (2017), women in Pakistan are restricted in their ability to participate in electoral processes by several structural and psychological obstacles. These consist of a lack of knowledge about political rights, economic dependence, and restricted access to education. These national patterns are reflected in Mardan, where women's candidacy and voter turnout rates are much lower than those of men.

The Government of Pakistan (2020) also notes that true political empowerment is still elusive even after reserved seats for women were added to legislatures. Frequently chosen by male leaders, women serve as proxies rather than autonomous political actors. This problem is apparent in Mardan local politics, where women frequently play a symbolic rather than a substantive role.

In their case study of women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Khan and Iqbal (2018) argued that obstacles like lack of family support, harassment, and mobility limitations prevent women from actively participating in electoral politics. Their conclusions are especially pertinent to Mardan, where comparable trends of intimidation and exclusion are common during election seasons.

A more recent study by the Pakistani Women's Political Forum (2023) examines the socio-political obstacles in District Mardan, emphasizing how political gatekeeping, religious conservatism, and informal power structures hinder women's participation in elections.

The literature suggests that women in District Mardan encounter several interrelated obstacles when trying to enter and take part in electoral politics. Even with the existence of institutional mechanisms for inclusion, real progress is still hampered by patriarchal party structures, cultural resistance, and a lack of grassroots advocacy.

Research Methodology

Research methodology is based on primary and secondary sources i.e., books, magazines, libraries, articles, newspaper, journals, and relevant websites to complete the research paper.

Challenges Faced by Women in Electoral Politics

Patriarchal Social Norms

One of the biggest obstacles preventing women from voting in District Mardan is patriarchal social norms. Because men predominate in public and political life and women are expected to concentrate on household duties, gender roles are strictly defined in this largely conservative area. Girls are taught to be submissive, unassuming, and invisible in public from an early age, which deters them from pursuing leadership roles or political engagement. Especially in rural areas where community elders have a significant influence, families frequently prevent female members from voting, attending political rallies, or even taking part in elections campaigns. Disobeying these expectations can lead to social rejection, criticism, or even threats to a woman's safety. Consequently, the notion of a female candidate for office is viewed as improper.

Religious and Tribal Influence

In District Mardan, tribal and religious influence significantly restricts women's political participation. Jirga systems and conservative religious interpretations have a significant impact on the area; they frequently encourage male dominance in public affairs and deter women from assuming leadership positions. Traditional tribal councils, or jirgas, have been known to make unofficial agreements prohibiting women from voting or running for office in many rural areas. Religious leaders frequently support these decisions by defending the exclusion of women from the electoral process with specific religious rhetoric. Islam does not forbid women from holding political office, but cultural customs frequently take precedence over religious doctrine, fostering a culture of fear and repression. Half of the population is essentially excluded from the democratic process because of this influence, which also limits women's political rights and upholds a system in which a small number of male elites still hold political power.

Absence of political awareness and education

The lack of political awareness and education among women in District Mardan is a significant barrier to their electoral participation. The district's female literacy rate is still much below the national average, especially in rural areas with limited access to high-quality education. Many women are not taught the fundamentals of their constitutional rights, the value of voting, or the operation of electoral processes from an early age. As a result, they are less likely to consider running for public office, engage in political discourse, or register to vote. This disparity is exacerbated by the lack of civic education programs. To break the cycle of exclusion and disempowerment, political parties and civil society organizations have mostly failed to involve women in voter education programs. In the absence of focused initiatives to enhance education and increase political consciousness, women in Mardan will remain excluded from meaningful engagement in democratic processes. Many women rely on male family members in case of political and electoral participation in politics and they act upon on the advice of their male, this limits their democratic process.

Financial Limitations

In District Mardan, financial limitations are a major obstacle to women's political engagement. Campaigning, transportation, publicity, and community outreach are all significant costs associated with running for office, and most women in the district cannot afford these costs. Many women rely on their male family members for financial support because they have limited access to education and work opportunities, and they frequently don't want to support their political aspirations. Since political parties typically only provide financial support to male candidates with larger networks, even politically active people have trouble raising money or winning party support. Cultural limitations have also make it difficult for women to handle their own money or participate in public fundraising. Women are essentially shut out of the competitive market if they lack institutional financial support or economic independence.

Male gatekeeping and family power

Family authority severely limits women's political participation in District Mardan because male family members frequently serve as gatekeepers, limiting women's participation in elections. According to cultural norms, women must get consent from their husbands, fathers, brother, son or older male family members before they can openly express their political views, register to vote, or attend political gatherings. Because men predominate in the home, women's autonomy is restricted, and their political voices and participation in decision-making are essentially silenced. Male gatekeeping discourages women from actively participating in politics by upholding traditional power dynamics that view political participation as a male prerogative (Tanzil et al., 2024).

Party-Level and Institutional Exclusion

Effective political participation is hampered for women in District Mardan by their severe institutional and political party exclusion. Political parties often marginalize women by denying them access to party resources and decision-making processes, so even women who are granted reserved seats in local government frequently face discrimination. These women's roles are often reduced to symbolic representation rather than actual

political influence because they are often seen as lacking the requisite political skills or qualifications. Women's participation is further discouraged by the fact that political events and party gatherings are typically planned at times or locations that are inappropriate or inaccessible to them. These structural obstacles within political organizations and parties uphold male domination and thwart initiatives to empower women in politics.

Extremist threats and security concerns

Women's political participation in District Mardan is severely hampered by security issues and the existence of extremist threats. Political violence and intimidation have occurred in the area on occasion, creating a hostile environment, especially for women who try to participate in electoral activities. Many women are deterred from voting or campaigning by fear of harassment, assaults, or social backlash at polling places and political events. Women are less inclined to engage in politics openly because of this atmosphere of insecurity, which also creates psychological barriers that limit their physical access to political venues. Therefore, extremist threats reinforce male dominance and restrict democratic inclusivity in the region while also contributing to the marginalization of women in the political arena.

Taboo Status of Women's Rights in Conservative Communities

A major obstacle to women's political participation is the taboo nature of the subject of women's rights in conservative communities such as District Mardan. It is common for family members and community elders to oppose and socially disapprove of discussions about gender equality or women's empowerment. Women are deterred from publicly voicing their political views or pursuing leadership positions by this cultural stigma because they are afraid of rejection or retaliation. It is challenging to start significant changes when attempting to increase awareness of women's political rights because of these deeply held beliefs. The taboo nature of women's rights in these contexts strengthens gender hierarchies already in place and keeps women out of politics.

Socio-Cultural Barriers

Patriarchal Norms are the obstacles in the way of woman electoral politics in district Mardan. Mardan has strong patriarchal values, much like the rest of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Women are frequently discouraged from engaging in public life, and men are usually assigned to political positions. Women's participation in electoral politics is further deterred by cultural norms surrounding their domestic roles. Besides, conservative community attitudes deterred women from electoral politics. Women are not given much public visibility and are treated with suspicion when they vote in elections in many of Mardan's rural areas. Local clergy, community leaders, and male family members strongly oppose women running for office or entering other political positions.

Political and Institutional Barriers

Male-Dominated society in District Mardan prevent women from electoral politics. Men serve as the leaders of most Pakistani political parties, including Mardan. Politicians frequently exclude women from decision-making processes and restrict their access to

party structures. In their local context, women do not have plenty of role models or political mentors. Younger women are discouraged from pursuing a career in politics by the lack of senior female leaders. Women's limitations in forming political coalitions and influencing local politics stem from their inability to join networks that make decisions, which are primarily controlled by men.

Economic Challenges

Economic Dependency in District Marsan is a big hurdle to women electoral politics. It is challenging for many women to independently fund an election campaign because they rely on male family members for financial support. A major obstacle is the expense of political campaigning, which includes travel, advertising, and mobilization. Women have limited access to resources due to this they frequently encounter obstacles when trying to obtain resources like media coverage, political training, and campaign materials, all of which are essential for a successful campaign.

In Mardan, the area is notorious for its political instability, and female candidates are particularly vulnerable to physical violence, harassment, and intimidation. This violence frequently deters women from entering the political sphere. It is challenging for the female candidates to freely campaign due to social stigma and threats to their family's honor or reputation. Despite Pakistan's gender quota system guaranteeing 33% female representation in local councils, it is not well implemented, and women's opinions are frequently marginalized in political decision-making process. Women who are underqualified or have little political clout frequently fill the quota.

The structural problems that keep women from fully taking part in elections are not sufficiently addressed by Pakistan's legal system. Legal changes to guarantee women's equal political rights are frequently sluggish and ineffectual.

Cultural and Social Norms

Mardan, like many other rural KP communities, has a strong patriarchal social structure in which women's roles are typically limited to the home. They find it challenging to freely participate in elections because of this limitation on their freedom and mobility. In many households, male family members have the power to influence or control women's choices, including whether to vote. Voter participation is limited because women are frequently expected to follow their fathers', brothers', or husbands' lead, particularly in conservative households. Women who cast independent ballots may experience negative social reactions. In traditional and rural areas, where women's public participation in politics is not widely accepted, this is especially noticeable. Women are stigmatized for taking on roles outside the home, which discourages them from voting.

Lack of Political Awareness and Education

Many women in Mardan still lack formal education or have limited access to it. Insufficient literacy rates lead to a lack of political consciousness and an inability to comprehend the importance of voting. Women might not fully understand the political issues or candidates to play if they lack proper education. Women in rural regions frequently do not participate in political forums. Female voters are not the primary focus of political parties' campaigns, and their voices are frequently ignored in the political discourse, which results in low levels of political participation. Many women have lack

sufficient knowledge about the electoral process, including the locations of polling places, voting procedures, and their legal rights to hold elections.

Physical and Geographical Barriers

Women in the rural areas of Mardan is challenging to vote because polling places are frequently situated far from their homes, particularly if there are no alternatives for transportation. The security situation makes this problem worse by discouraging women from going to polling places.

Polling places frequently don't have enough amenities for women, like separate voting booths or female-staffed poll workers. When women-friendly facilities are lacking, the experience may become uneasy or even frightening.

Militancy and internecine conflicts are among the security problems that Mardan, like other parts of KP, has faced. Women may feel unsafe while casting their ballots because of this hostile environment.

Political and Institutional Barriers

Mardan's political parties might not give women's issues top priority or make sure that women are fairly represented on their lists of candidates. Women who feel excluded from the political process due to the underrepresentation of women in local politics are deterred from casting ballots.

Mardan women frequently do not participate in political decision-making. Women are less likely to vote in elections when political campaigns do not address their needs and concerns because they believe that their votes will not affect changes to the law. In District Mardan women voting rights have insufficient protection. Although law guarantees women's political participation is in place, they are frequently not adequately enforced, especially in rural regions. In the polling places, women may encounter intimidation or opposition, and there they face insecurity while casting their votes.

Religious and Traditional Restrictions

Conservative religious interpretations discourage women from exercising their political participation and still right to vote, certain local religious leaders may employ conservative interpretations of Islamic teachings or cultural practices. Religious opposition is a major barrier to women's engagement in these communities. Social Pressure is also a serious issue in front of their voting rights. Local civic and religious leaders who feel that women shouldn't vote may oppose women who attempt to cast their own ballots. This social pressure, particularly in close-knit organizations, can be demoralizing.

The influence of patriarchal culture and traditional gender norms, which discourage women's visibility in the public sphere, is one of the most mentioned obstacles. Butt (2017) claims that when women in KP try to vote, they encounter strong opposition from their families and communities, who frequently call them dishonorable or immoral for entering areas that are dominated by men. The idea of "purdah" (gender segregation) prevents women from participating in political rallies, interacting with male voters, or running for office in extremely conservative districts like Mardan.

Furthermore, the exclusion of women from politics is frequently justified by

misinterpretations of religion. Local clerics and religious organizations occasionally portray women's political participation as un-Islamic, deterring both voters and this misuse of religion not only reinforces gender stereotypes but also institutionalizes women's marginalization within political parties.

Institutional and Structural Obstacles

In addition to cultural barriers, the political system is inherently intolerant. Pakistani political parties frequently operate in patriarchal environments with males predominating in decision-making. According to the Government of Pakistan (2020), women are often chosen for reserved seats or assigned to non-electable constituencies despite being nominated. As a result, rather than having a significant impact on policy, many female politicians only hold symbolic office.

This dynamic can be seen in District Mardan, where women are listed on party lists or meet quota requirements, but they are rarely given the financial or logistical support necessary to run competitive campaigns. Local political networks are closed and frequently antagonistic to female entrants, with some women even feeling pressured by their families or communities to withdraw nominations.

Safety, Aggression, and Harassment

The state of security and the possibility of violence, especially in District Mardan, present another significant obstacle. During election seasons, female voters and candidates are subjected to physical violence and intimidation. According to several reports, women in Mardan have received direct threats to not cast their ballots or run for office (Arif & Jamil, 2015). Women are greatly deterred from participating in politics by electoral violence and harassment, which fosters a fear-based environment that erodes their democratic engagement.

Absence of Political Knowledge and Understanding

Women's lack of political education and awareness is a basic but frequently disregarded issue. Women's comprehension of their rights and the electoral process is impeded in Mardan by low literacy rates and restricted access to civic education. Many women don't know about the registration process, about the importance of vote and involvement of politics. They are more vulnerable to political manipulation and outright exclusion because of this knowledge gap.

Change-Related Activities

Notwithstanding these obstacles, new programs are being developed to increase women's political participation. In KP, NGOs and civil society groups have started running advocacy campaigns, leadership development courses, and voter education initiatives aimed at rural women. Digital platforms and media campaigns are also becoming increasingly important in raising awareness of women's rights and the value of gender parity in governance (Pakistani Women's Political Forum, 2023). However, its need to be combined with legislative changes, more stringent gender quota enforcement, and safeguards for female voters and candidates. The institutional and cultural constraints that currently limit women's political agency in places like Mardan will persist in the absence of these structural adjustments.

Lack of Supportive Infrastructure

There is a lack of women-centric campaigns in electoral politics because their male did not allow their females to run campaign for election, this depressed women from voting rights. In Mardan, political campaigns frequently go without efforts to encourage female voters. The degree of women's election participation is restricted by the lack of gender-sensitive campaigning by political parties or focused outreach initiatives. There aren't many community-level initiatives to involve and empower women in politics. While some women's organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are advocating for greater political participation, the reach and scope of these programs are frequently constrained.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the socio-cultural, traditional, and religious and economic fabric of the area is fundamental to the difficulties women in District Mardan face in electoral politics. Women are still excluded from active political participation due to a combination of traditional patriarchal norms, the dominance of male political networks, and a lack of financial resources. The number of women in local assemblies has increased thanks to policies like gender quotas, but they still play a very small part in actual decision-making. This study highlights the necessity of all-encompassing approaches to remove these obstacles, such as political education, the development of women's political networks, and the fortification of institutional and legal frameworks to shield women from discrimination and violence. Women's involvement in Mardan electoral politics can only be significantly increased by tackling these complex issues.

Women in Mardan face a myriad of challenges in electoral politics, ranging from socio-cultural to economic and legal barriers. These challenges are deeply embedded in the region's patriarchal traditions, political structures, and limited access to resources. While significant barriers exist, targeted efforts to promote gender equality, political education, and legal reforms can pave the way for greater female participation in politics in District Mardan. Addressing these challenges is crucial not only for empowering women but also for strengthening the democratic process in Pakistan as a whole.

In District Mardan, several obstacles keep women voters from fully participating in the electoral process. These obstacles include deeply rooted cultural norms, a lack of institutional support, economic limitations, a lack of political awareness, and geographical and physical barriers. Political reforms improved educational opportunities, the advancement of women's political rights, and political parties actively addressing women's issues are all necessary components of a multifaceted strategy to overcome these obstacles. Resolving these issues will be essential to boosting women's voting turnout and creating a more welcoming political atmosphere in Mardan and elsewhere.

Despite the official legal provisions designed to increase women's political participation, the study shows that women in Mardan continue to face major barriers that restrict their ability to participate in electoral politics. Women's political empowerment in the region is still hampered most by sociocultural factors, such as rigid gender roles and the absence of backing from male-dominated political institutions. Political violence and economic reliance also deter women from entering the political field. Reforms in society and institutions are urgently needed to address these issues. This entails increasing political

education access for women, enforcing gender quotas more strictly, promoting gender equality, and making sure that female candidates are better protected from harassment and violence. By taking care of these problems, Mardan's political system could by addressing these issues, the political system in Mardan could become more inclusive and reflective of the diverse perspectives that women bring to the table. In nutshell, a variety of intricate obstacles prevent women in District Mardan from fully engaging in electoral politics. Cultural and structural barriers still prevent women from participating in politics, even after gender quotas and legal measures were implemented to guarantee their representation. Marsan can get closer to attaining gender equality in its political processes by creating an atmosphere that encourages women's political agency, through legal protections, economic empowerment, and education. In the end, empowering women in Mardan will help Pakistan's political and social development in addition to the women themselves.

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