

An Appraisal of Factors Affecting Women Participation in Electoral Politics in District Swabi of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract

The participation of women in electoral politics is important for strengthening democracy in a country. In a democratic and developing country like Pakistan, some factors hinder women's participation in electoral politics. The paper deals with those factors that affect women's participation in electoral politics in Pakistan. In spatial and temporal context regarding Pakistan, this research focuses on women's participation in the general elections in district Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan in the 21st Century. This study aims to identify factors determining women's involvement and impact in electoral politics in the Pakhtun community. It employs a mixed-method approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The research highlights that socio-cultural factors, economic dependency, religious ignorance, lack of political awareness, inaccessibility to polling stations and lack of computerized National Identity Cards are some factors that impede women's participation in electoral politics in district Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

Keywords: Pakistan, democracy, electoral politics, Swabi, women empowerment

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INTRODUCTION

Women political participation is very important for a strong democratic system. Their commitment in governmental issues stays unattended which is the most critical organization of the general public that is identified with help in basic leadership process. The overall portrayal of ladies is just 15% and there are just 12 nations of the world that has 33% seats for ladies in parliaments (UNDP, 2005). The dynamics of women's political engagement and autonomy exhibit a variance across nations and regions, predominantly influenced by the multifaceted interplay of economic, social, and religious constructs, collectively denoted as gender roles. This divergence manifests in the varying degrees of women's interest and participation in national and local politics, often presenting a palpable disinterest in political affairs and a reluctance to contribute therein. Notably, the Constitution of Pakistan enshrines the principle of gender equality, affirming equal rights for all citizens irrespective of gender, as delineated in Article 25 of the 1973 Constitution. In this context the study is focused to identify factors that determine women's participation in the political processes in Pakhtun Society especially in district Swabi.

Women, upon attaining the age of eighteen and possessing a computerized national identity card, possess the constitutional right to participate in the political process by exercising their franchise and registering as voters on electoral rolls. Nevertheless, women encounter multifarious challenges in Pakistan, particularly pronounced within the Pashtun society, where they contend with pervasive disparities across various facets of life. Within the Pashtun societal framework, prevalent social constructs emerge as pivotal determinant significantly impeding women's political engagement, characterized by factors such as pervasive ignorance, burdensome domestic responsibilities, and a notable dearth of involvement in decision-making processes (Ullah, personal communication, March 23, 2018) Numerous factors impede the development of political acumen and participation among women. In tandem with socio-cultural and economic impediments, women encounter hurdles like gender segregation, educational deficits, and a lack of awareness regarding their political entitlements, thus constraining their political engagement

MAP OF PAKISTAN

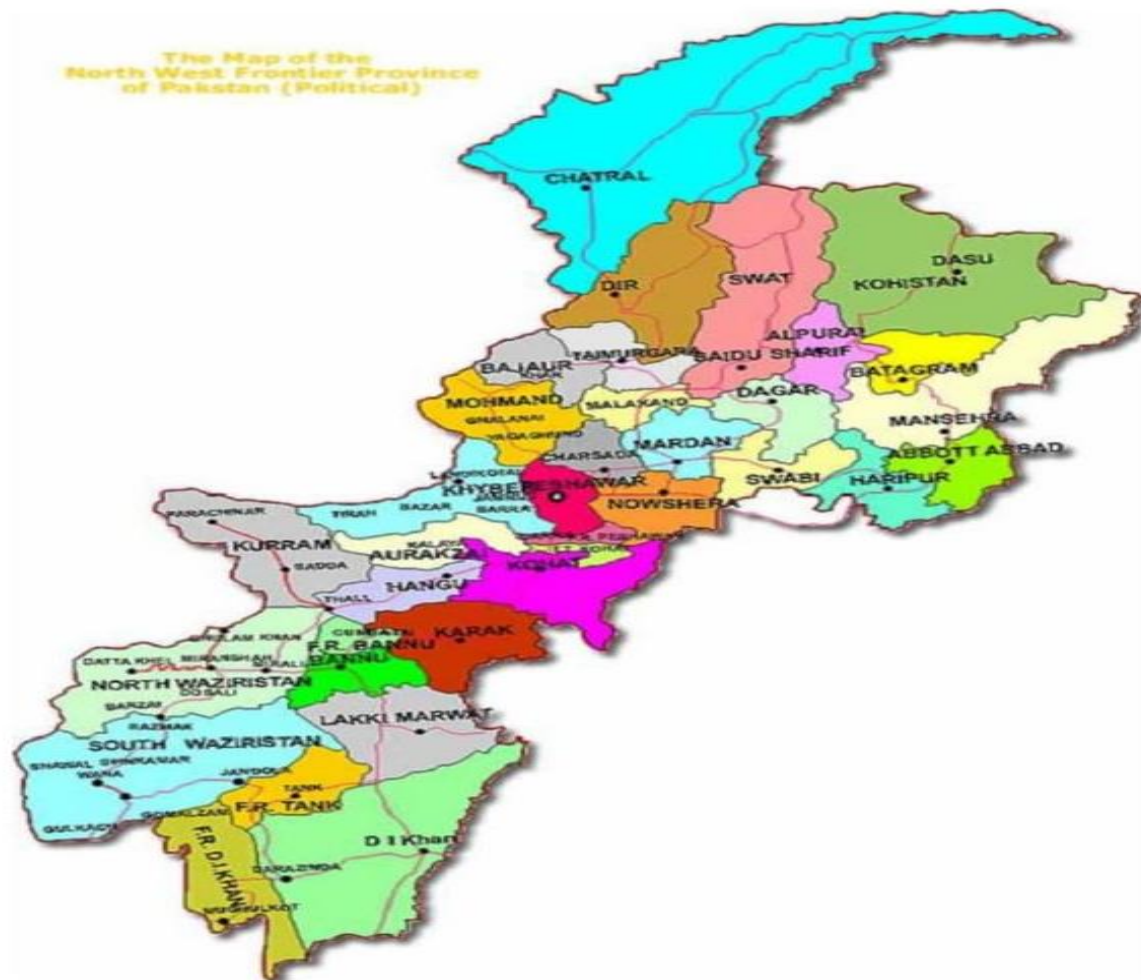


Figure; Administrative vector map of Islamic Republic of Pakistan (lesniewski, n.d.)

This challenge is particularly acute in rural settings, where entrenched norms often confer disproportionate authority to men. The notable issue of gender-based segregation in political realms, exacerbated by Pakhtunwali (Pakhtun Code of Life) and entrenched gender divisions, compounds this predicament. Rooted in multifarious factors such as low educational attainment and sustained disregard for women's rights, especially pertaining to expression and participation in decision-making processes both familial and societal, this quandary pervades the region (Minault, *The khilafat Movement: A Religious and Political Mobilization in India*, 1982). This study delves into the numerous challenges hindering women's political empowerment in Swabi. Traditional norms and the dominant male-centric ethos among the Pashtun population in the surveyed areas confine women to limited roles. Despite some women fulfilling their rights within Islamic boundaries, their involvement in politics remains

scarce. The research aims to explore the socio-cultural and religious dynamics of Pashtun society in rural Swabi, focusing on women's participation in

MAP OF KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

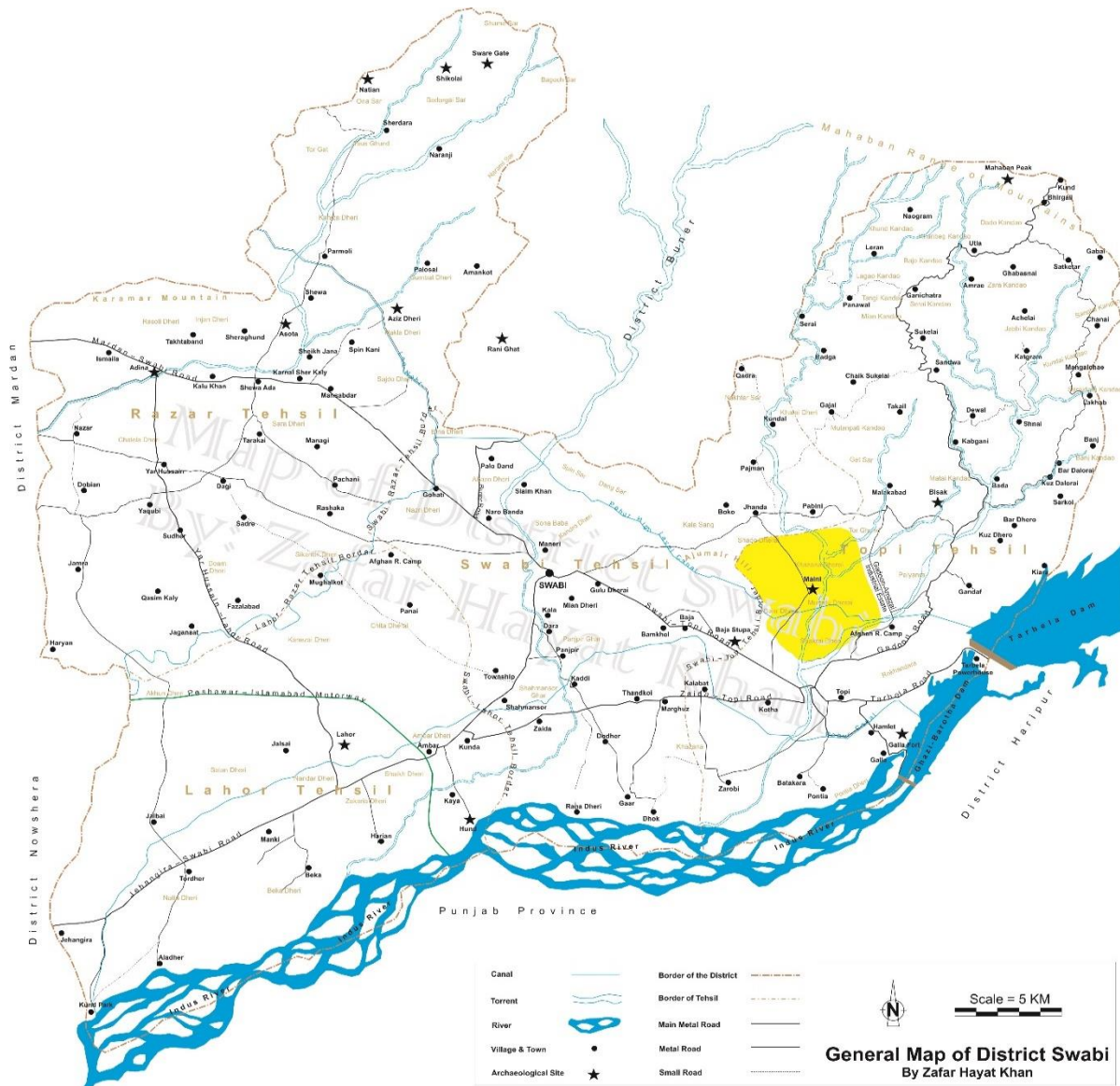


Figure; Map of KP, District wise (Meherali, n.d.)

elections. Data was collected from primary and secondary sources across four tehsils. Primary sources included historical documents, interviews, while secondary sources comprised magazines, articles, books, and newspapers. Purposive sampling was used for structured

interviews in rural areas, with respondents selected through simple random sampling. In-depth interviews were conducted to understand the socio-cultural barriers inhibiting women's political participation.

MAP OF DISTRICT SWABI



Figure; Map of District Swabi. (hayat, 2012)

Demography of Swabi:

Currently, Swabi district is divided into four tehsil.

1: Swabi Tehsil

2: Topi Tehsil

3: Lahore Tehsil

4: Razzar Tehsil

Total area of district is 1543 sq.kms.

According to the census report 2017, the population growth of Swabi,

Tehsil of swabi district	Population census 1998	Population census 2017
Lahore	187,558	306,168
Razzar	376,106	583,936
Swabi Tehsil	258,006	406,212
Topi	205,134	328,300
Swabi	1,026,804	1,624,616

Source: (swabi, 2017)

In Swabi, women face numerous social, economic, and political hurdles, along with discriminatory practices, hindering their political participation as voters, candidates, and election administrators. In the aftermath of the 1998 Pakistan census, an extra national assembly seat and two provincial assembly constituencies were designated based on population growth. Despite the total number of registered female voters in Pakistan reaching 32.2 million since the 2002 elections, certain areas still witness a notable absence of women in the electoral process. Swabi, specifically, saw lower turnout of female voters compared to males in 2002, particularly in rural regions where women were denied their voting rights. Below is a table depicting the distribution of registered female voters in these areas:

Gender gap in registered voters, Election 2002

No of provincial constituencies	Male	Female	Total
PF-31 (Swabi-1)	57,908	38,339	96,247
PF-32 (Swabi-2)	55,612	36,007	91,619
PF-33 (Swabi-3)	58,268	38,093	96,361
PF-35 (Swabi-5)	61,919	41,747	103, 366
PF-36 (Swabi-6)	54,289	38,643	92,932
Total	344,158	228,530	572,388

(EDITOR, sawbi: 155 poling stations 'sensitive in swabi, 2008)

National assembly constituencies in 2002

No of national assembly constituencies	Male	Female	Total
NA-12 (Swabi-1)	171, 788	112,439	284,227
NA-13 (Swabi-2)	172, 070	116, 091	288, 161
Total	343,858	228,530	572,388

(EDITOR, sawbi: 155 poling stations 'sensitive in swabi, 2008)

In every constituency, there exist distinct polling stations designated exclusively for women, along with segregated polling booths for women situated within combined polling stations. Although women comprise a lesser proportion of registered voters compared to men, a significant concern arises from instances where women, constrained by societal pressures and apprehension, exhibit lower turnout, particularly evident in certain areas where household boundaries impede their participation during the national elections of 2002.

The general election convened on the 18th of February, 2008, witnessed the populace of Pakistan exercising their fundamental right of universal adult suffrage, thereby electing representatives to the national and provincial assemblies of Pakistan. However, during the 2008 electoral process, certain rural sectors of the Swabi district witnessed the disenfranchisement of women, depriving them of their voting rights. Notably, the district

boasts a total of 57,128,58 registered voters, of whom 34,27,03 are men and 22,85,55 are women.

In Swabi Provincial Assembly Constituencies, 2008 Election

No of provincial constituencies	Male	Female	Total
PF-31 (Swabi-1)	57,908	38,287	96, 195
PF-32 (Swabi-2)	55,612	35,998	91,610
PF-33 (Swabi-3)	57,813	38,091	95,904
PF-34 (Swabi-4)	56,162	35,701	91,863
PF-35(Swabi-5)	60,920	41,835	10,27,55
PF-36 (Swabi-6)	54,288	38,643	92,931
Total	34, 27, 03	22, 85,55	57,12, 58

(votes, 2007-08)

National Assembly Constituencies, 2008 Election

No of constituencies	Male	Female	Total
NA-12 (Swabi-1)	171,333	112, 376	28,37,09
NA-13 (Swabi-2)	171,370	116,179	287,549
Total	34,27,03	22,85,55	57,12,58

(votes, 2007-08)

During the 2008 election in Pakistan, approximately 14,000 polling stations were designated for female voters, with 478 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and 23 in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). However, an examination of polling station activity revealed that certain districts, such as Swat, Charsadda, Swabi, Peshawar, Buner, and the Malakand protected area, had a notable number of female polling stations with no activity. This was particularly evident in Swabi, Charsadda, and Buner, where 29% of inactive polling stations were concentrated, indicating broader societal dynamics, especially in Pashtun society, where women often rely on male relatives for access to information and civil rights, such as obtaining a National Identity Card.

In the 2013 elections, Pakistan had 97.01 million registered voters, with males outnumbering females (54.59 million versus 42.42 million). In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, there were 12,266,157 registered voters, comprising 7,008,533 males and 5,257,624 females, with Swabi district alone accounting for 71,544 registered voters.

National assembly constituencies in district Swabi 2013

No of constituencies	Male	Female	Total
NA-12 (Swabi-1)	200,516	151,159	35,16,75
NA-13 (Swabi-2)	209,360	15,34,19	362,779
Total	40,98,76	30,45,78	71,44,54

(ECP, Election Commission of Pakistan Report, volume 2nd 2013, 2013)

Between 2002 and 2013, Swabi experienced consecutive increases in registered voters, with a 21% rise from 2002 to 2008 and a 26% increase from 2008 to 2013. During this period, female voter registration also rose, reaching 42.3% in 2013, while male voter proportion slightly decreased. In the 2018 general elections on July 25th, Pakistan saw another surge in registered voters in Swabi compared to 2013.

The National Assembly Constituencies in District Swabi 2018

No of constituencies	Male	Female	Total
NA-18 (Swabi-1)	25,25,15	196,521	449,036
NA-19 (Swabi-2)	262,136	201,497	463,634
Total	514,651	398,018	912,670

Source: (commissioner, 2018)

Provincial Assembly Constituencies in District Swabi 2018

No of provincial constituencies	Male	Female	Total
PK-43 (Swabi-1)	97,342	75,195	172,537
PK-44 (Swabi-2)	112,886	88,483	201,369
PK-45 (Swabi-3)	103,899	81,074	184,973

PK-46 (Swabi-4)	101,409	77, 171	178,580
PK-47 (Swabi-5)	99,116	76,095	175,211
Total	514,652	398,018	912,670

Source: (commissioner, 2018)

Socio-Cultural Factors

In 2018, female voter turnout in rural Swabi experienced a noticeable decline, revealing a complex interplay between socio-cultural factors and societal perceptions, especially in rural areas where familial reputation heavily influences women's decision to vote. During the 2018 election, many rural Swabi women faced obstacles preventing them from voting, as local Jirga members and religious representatives agreed to limit women's involvement in the electoral process.

In rural areas some perceptions prevail which can help to understand local dynamics. For instance, a village resident of Sheikh Derai Anbar testified that their community strictly follows customs rooted in Pukhtunwali. Voting is never considered, and women are prohibited from seeking medical help or leaving home in line with tradition. The community relies on its own system governed by the Jirga.

In Jalbai, another resident echoed similar sentiments, highlighting how cultural norms limit women to childcare and domestic tasks, restricting their participation beyond the household. The weight of these responsibilities acts as a barrier to their engagement in our nation's electoral process. (Ruqia, personal communication, April 7, 2019)

In Pakhtun society, women face significant limitations on their mobility, hindering their participation in public and political life. Social customs restrict their interaction with both genders, creating barriers to their engagement in civic affairs. Additionally, the perception of power politics as a realm dominated by men intensifies these obstacles, marginalizing women further. This cultural stance is especially pronounced in Swabi, where few women challenge the restrictions imposed by men on their freedom and participation.

One respondent from Adina village recounted how women were denied the right to vote, dictated by the decisions of the Jirga in their community (kheela, 2019). In-depth interviews across multiple villages highlight women's traditional roles centered around the home. An

overwhelming 85% of women handle household tasks like cleaning, cooking, and childcare, while a mere 15% are involved in public matters. This dominance of men perpetuates gender gaps across society. Over time, cultural constraints on women in Swabi have diminished, leading to fewer complaints. Most grievances come from migrants from tribal areas, who bring with them tribal customs.

Financially Dependency

In Pakistan, men occupy central roles in a culture that often sidelines women. Traditional Pashtun norms historically limited women's access to employment, leaving them economically dependent on men. This dependence poses a significant obstacle for women in politics, as their participation typically requires male support. With many women financially dependent on men, their involvement in electoral processes hinges on the consent and backing of their male counterparts.

One female respondent articulated that a majority of women believe that financial backing from family members—whether fathers, brothers, or husbands—is indispensable for engaging in election campaigns. (Salma, personal communication, April 17, 2019)

In the rural expanse of Swabi, women find themselves devoid of the agency to autonomously govern household finances, as patriarchal structures dictate that the household's helm is invariably occupied by the grandfather or father figure, who wields unassailable authority over all familial assets and capital.

Sara a respondent lamented that while she is granted permission to engage in employment, her freedom remains curtailed, for she is bound by the stipulation that her movements beyond the confines of her employment require the explicit consent of a male authority figure. Despite her participation in familial decision-making processes, the final say invariably rests in the hands of her male counterparts (Ayesha, personal communication, March 11, 2018).

Furthermore, even when women manage to secure jobs and earn money, their financial independence is still difficult to achieve since most of their earnings are typically controlled by men. As a result, women often find themselves trapped in a cycle of financial dependence, which hinders their participation in political activities. Given that politics requires significant financial backing and is heavily influenced by profit motives, women in Pashtun society

remain excluded due to their reliance on male supporters. Another woman hailing from Kabgani, expressed a lack of comprehension regarding the concept of women's empowerment. Her understanding solely revolves around her husband being regarded as her authority figure, and she perceives it as her obligation to adhere to his directives. She associates her personal ease and contentment within the familial sphere with her husband's satisfaction (Mehnaz, personal communication, May 14, 2019).

A considerable portion of individuals lacking identity cards find themselves disenfranchised, unable to partake in the electoral process due to their financial incapacity to obtain such documentation.

Religious Ignorance

In Pakistan, with around 98% of its population practicing Islam, religion holds significant sway in societal dynamics. Yet, differing interpretations of religious principles due to a lack of comprehensive understanding create discrepancies. This gap greatly affects societal norms, especially in electoral politics, posing significant barriers, especially for women, based on religious affiliations.

Religious practices are often used to enforce gender stereotypes, especially hindering women in politics. Within the purview of our study, the prevailing low levels of literacy and inadequate comprehension of Islamic tenets among the populace serve as primary catalysts for the infringement of women's rights.

The Quran underscores the equality of men and women in the eyes of God, affirming their shared accountability for actions and granting both genders the right to engage in issues impacting their community and society (Fatima, personal communication, May 21, 2019). Additionally, the Quran advocates for consultation (shura) among believers in all matters, underscoring the necessity of inclusive decision-making that involves both men and women for societal advancement. Consequently, Islamic principles endorse and encourage women's participation in elections as a means to foster justice, advance equality, and ensure the representation of diverse viewpoints in the political arena (Thabaan, personal communication, March 5, 2018).

Lack of Political Awareness

A significant portion of the female populace lacks comprehension regarding political, civic, and electoral protocols, thereby remaining oblivious to the avenues for women's electoral engagement and their associated rights (Sabzal, personal communication, April 15, 2018). As a result, many women refrain from voting, feeling they lack significance due to their limited awareness. While literacy rates in Swabi have improved, a significant number of educated individuals, especially those seeking higher education, have moved to Peshawar and Islamabad. In Swabi, literacy is at 36%, with males at 56% and females at 18% (Pari, personal communication, April 19, 2018). Notably, these statistics solely pertain to literacy, with the prevalence of political illiteracy being even more pronounced. On Election Day, many educated individuals view it as a leisurely respite, neglecting their political responsibility of casting their votes. Furthermore, a considerable number of women remain uninformed about the rationale behind elections and the identities of the candidates. While some informational booklets were distributed featuring the names of contenders and their respective party symbols, no substantial government-led or political leader-endorsed campaign was initiated to foster political consciousness among the populace (Naima, personal communication, April 10, 2018). This deficiency underscores a prioritization of garnering votes over fostering political enlightenment among the citizenry. I did cast my vote but it would likely be rejected because I used thumb impression rather of stamp” (Rawasia, 2018). I did cast my vote but it would be rejected because I used stamp of all the symbol emblems, due to lack of awareness (Ruqia, personal communication, April 7, 2019).

Not Accessibility to Polling Station

Due to a dearth of fundamental equipment and the inaccessibility of polling stations, individuals with physical disabilities and members of diverse communities are obstructed from exercising their right to vote in the elections. Further exacerbated by stringent cultural norms, women face considerable challenges in accessing polling stations with ease. When these stations are situated at a distance, women often rely on their male counterparts for transportation, which may not always be feasible. Within Pashtun society, women are often reliant on the support of men.

During an interview, a female respondent from Swabi recounted, "I was in Peshawar due to my cousin's demise and could not return to Swabi." She advocated for the implementation of a biometric system or E-voting (Ayesha, personal communication, March 11, 2018).

Female respondents from Jalbai village voiced their dismay over the distant polling station and the dilapidated road, which lacked transportation from the candidates. As a result, they had to endure a grueling 90-minute walk under the blazing sun. Feeling excluded, they opted not to vote, while their male counterparts managed to reach the remote stations. Their decision was influenced by their household duties, including preparing lunch and managing domestic chores. They asserted that with improved road conditions, they would be more inclined to participate in the electoral process. We live in Islamabad now, but our polling station is in Haryan. It's not feasible for us women to travel to Swabi just for voting. We rely on our male relatives to enable our participation. I believe a biometric system could solve these issues. (Shazia, personal communication, April 27, 2019)

Non-Availability of National Identity Card:

In Pakistan, the act of voting necessitates that voters fulfill the requirement of registering their national identity card. However, a significant portion of women find themselves unable to fulfill this requirement due to various reasons. Firstly, many women lack a computerized national identity card, either due to a lack of awareness regarding its necessity or the difficulty in obtaining one. Consequently, this renders their participation in the voting process technically unattainable. Moreover, women in Pakistan encounter severe constraints on their mobility, further exacerbating the situation.

Some men hold the belief that their daughters and wives should not possess computerized national identity cards, perpetuating the cycle of women's disenfranchisement. Additionally, many women are not even cognizant of the existence of such cards. One female respondent recounted how her husband prohibited the acquisition of computerized national identity cards due to cultural and honor-related reasons. Another lady reported that numerous women face challenges in obtaining these cards due to the complexity of the process. Furthermore, older women encounter difficulties as they often lack marriage certificates, making it arduous to obtain computerized identity cards.

Women voters encounter formidable barriers in exercising their voting rights, thereby finding themselves marginalized in the power dynamics. The issue of low female voter turnout is deeply ingrained in cultural norms and perceptions of honor, particularly in regions where individuals prioritize familial names in the voting process.

CONCLUSION

The study's findings highlight several factors hindering women's political empowerment, including narrow interpretation of Pakhtun culture, economic dependency, religious ignorance, lack of awareness, limited access to polling stations, and absence of national identity cards. A study focusing on the progressiveness of Swabi district's women reveals that although women make up 46% of the population, their involvement in the electoral process remains neglected. This is a point of concern as the electoral process is a fundamental institution that is crucial for inclusive decision-making. The survey conducted in this research highlights several obstacles faced by female voters. In Pakhtun society, women often face financial dependency, which impacts their ability to obtain necessary documents like identity cards for voting. Additionally, religious misunderstanding is also playing a role, as some people interpret religion as either supporting or restricting women's involvement in electoral politics. Many people are unaware of the opportunities available to women for electoral participation and their rights in this regard. Nonetheless, the government is paying attention and measures have been adopted at national, provincial and local levels to encourage women to cast their votes in general elections and the tide seems to be shifting with education and continuation of the political and democratic processes playing a pivotal role in altering the voting landscape at district Swabi, Pakistan.

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