

Barriers to the Political Empowerment of Women in Dir Lower

Asif Khan

Department of Sociology, University of Malakand Chakdara Dir Lower Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Abstract:

Women's political participation in Malakand Division in general and Dir Lower in particular confronts a number of social, cultural, economic, political and religious barriers which hinder their empowerment.

This study investigates various barriers to the political empowerment of women in Dir Lower. Main aim of the research work is to identify the various social, economic, political, religious and cultural factors and barriers which deprive women from participation in the political activities.

The study has been conducted in four tehsils i.e. Balambat, Timargara, Khall and Maidan of District Dir Lower in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Data for the study was obtained through semi structured interviews and focused group discussions with political leaders, elected representatives, female councilors, village elders, male and female students and female folk of the area.

The data reveals that there exist various barriers in the form of patriarchy, orthodox attitudes of the people, talibanization, lack of education, misinterpretation and wrong practice of *Pakhtunwali* and Seclusion (*Purdah*) etc. towards the political participation and political empowerment of women.

Introduction

At the time of independence in 1947, Dir was a state ruled by Nawab Shah Jehan Khan. It was merged in Pakistan in 1969 and later on declared a district in 1970. . In 1996, the district was divided into two, with Upper and Lower Dir forming two separate district respectively. District Lower Dir is located in the north-western part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and is spread over an area of 1583 square kilometers. Apart from small areas in the south-west, the District is mostly a rugged mountainous terrain. The District borders with swat District on its East, Afghanistan on its West, Upper Dir and Chitral on its North & north-west respectively and Malakand & Bajaur Agency on its South. The district is represented in the Provincial assembly by four elected MPA's and in the National Assembly by one MNA.

Although women in large number are exercising their rights and duties within the fold of Islam in Dir Lower, however their participation in political activities is almost nil. In Dir, which is considered as one of the most socially conservation region, politics is considered as a men-only affair. Since the merger of the princely state of Dir with Pakistan in 1969, there have been 10 general elections in the, but women were never allowed either to actively participate in politics or vote. However it was in May, 2013 that in an unprecedented development, all political and religious parties of Dir Lower district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa expressed willingness to allow

women of the region to cast their votes in the local bodies' elections. This research work examines the various barriers in the way of political empowerment of women in the area.

Long-term well-being in the realms of culture, society, economics and politics can be achieved only when women are politically empowered (Harris, 2010). Women can be considered to be fully empowered if they are suitably represented in the politics and they can participate fully in the decision-making process (Shah, Aziz, & Ahmad, 2015).

Women can be deemed to have achieved political empowerment when they are given full representation in Central and provincial parliaments and full right to unimpeded adult franchise. Women can be deemed to be personally empowered when they have the liberty to make decisions about their private issues (Sohail, 2014). Women encounter hurdles globally when attempting to participate in political activity. The deprivation encountered by women who desire to participate in politics is the traditional notion that women are weak, require the support of the male person, and are therefore unsuitable for the demands of political work (Latif et al, 2015).

Additionally, Social and cultural values as well as the restrictive economic environment make women appear to be inferior citizens. This discourages them from participation in politics (Naz, et al., 2012). All attempts for the betterment of the society would be futile if women are not empowered and not provided adequate representation (Naz& Ahmad, 2012).

In Pakistani society, women's political empowerment is obstructed by three distinct interconnected categories; socio-economic, societal structure and religious argumentation (Shaheed et.al, 2009:26). Each of these also prevents women from developing political skills and experiences. At the most physical level, the heavy burden of children bearing/rearing, hampers women's entry to the political arena. Their lack of financial resources negatively effect on decision making powers within both family and community (Aderinwale, 1997). The cultural norms of Pakistani society promote the segregation and seclusion of women, often justified through the use of religion. For example, religiously formulated positions that argue for gender segregation and female seclusion (*Purdah*) limits women's access to resources in general; restrict from the simple act of casting vote and their candidature (Shaheed et al, 2009:26-29).

Women in Dir Lower live in conditions that are socially more adverse than those prevailing in other parts of the country area. Social norms restrict women's mobility (Shah et al, 2015). Women's reduced mobility and their limited visibility both adversely affect their political participation at all levels starting from the simple act of casting their vote to standing as a candidate. *Purdah* as well as security concerns of women in rural areas also negatively impact their political empowerment (Kalam, 2014). The cultural environment of Dir Lower is principally male-controlled. This reduces female access to education and political participation (Naz, 2011).

The powerful conservative forces of religion and tradition make it hard for women to reshape their roles (Paterson, 2008). The poor condition of women in Dir Lower is normally attributed to the rigid customs of society. This has been accentuated by discrimination against women in different grounds by the state (Baloch, 2012). Lack of awareness of their rights and unavailability of resources cause women to be deprived of their rights in all spheres of life. The

rigid customs and traditions of the people of Dir Lower deprives the women of the kind of liberty enjoyed by women in urban Pakistan (Aamir, 2015).

Cultural practices and perceptions in Dir Lower represent major obstacles to women's political empowerment in Dir Lower. Practices such as early, forced, and/or arranged marriages impede women's empowerment and affirmative action in particular. Such practices, limit women's chances to advance their education which may open doors for political participation of women. Communal stereotypes, long held traditional anachronistic belief have for long viewed women as suited only for domestic chores and politics a domain for men only (Thomas, 1994).

Structural factors that negatively impact on women include: male resistance to women in leadership positions, absence of policies and legislation to ensure equal participation of women, discriminatory appointment and promotion practices, and limited opportunities for gender mainstreaming (Smulders, 1998). Cultural factors are linked to stereotypical views about women's abilities within the cultural context. Also connected to cultural factors is the patriarchal ideology which provides the context upon which women play and accept a subordinate role. The above three factors will guide this study.

Significance of the study:

Literature on women in electoral politics in Dir Lower is scanty. There is no sufficient data on the factors affecting women's involvement in political dispensation. Not much is known about women's participation in political process, their experience as elected representatives, their influence in the decision making process in the houses for which they have been elected, and the perception about factors that would inhibit or enable their participation in the political process in future. In the absence of published knowledge, not much can be said about the general issues of gender disparity or opportunities that exist in relation to women political empowerment. In the absence of empirical studies, it is often difficult to evaluate the real impact of factors affecting women political participation, representation and empowerment in the area. There was a need to fill this knowledge gap and the present study is an attempt in this regard. The significance of this study derives not only from its ability to determine the level of participation of women in electoral politics but also its examination of the factors that affect women's effective participation and empowerment. It is hoped that the data gathered from this study would lead to new affirmative action policies that will enhance gender mainstreaming and equal participation in all leadership and development processes. The data will also be resourceful to scholars and policy makers as well as contribute to the in-adequate literature on gender participation in electoral politics in Malakand Division in general and Dir Lower in particular.

Objectives of the study:

The general objective of this study is to investigate into factors that affect women's political empowerment in Dir Lower. Specifically, the study aims at:

- To examine how social, personal, political, economic and religious factors influence women political empowerment in Dir Lower.
- To investigate whether Pakhtun code of life is an impediment in women's political empowerment or not?

Methods and Procedure

This paper adopts a qualitative research approach in order to identify the various barriers hindering political empowerment of women in Dir Lower. The research focuses to empirically analyze various socio-cultural constraints to women's political empowerment in Dir Lower. This research study was conducted in four tehsils of Dir Lower. The existing literature shows that most of the researches conducted on this field used quantitative techniques and merely used statistics to show the women political participation. However this topic requires a more detailed and in-depth understanding to know the issues and challenges faced by the women in political arena. So the researcher used qualitative method to investigate the phenomena of women political participation. So keeping in view the complexity and sensitivity of the topic in-depth interviews and focused group discussions were conducted. The interviews conducted were semi structured comprising of open ended questions. Merriam (2002) argued that it is important to interview individuals from which one can learn a great deal about the issues central to the purpose of the study. Therefore, to understand the views of men and women in regard to the socio-cultural barriers, the researcher selected respondents whom it was believed were able to provide rich information on the topic. The respondents were interviewed in depth to understand and obtain a clear picture of the involvement of the socio-cultural barriers hindering women's participation in politics

Results and Discussions:

Results and discussion of the study have been made under various heading as suitable according to the objectives and theoretical framework of the study.

1. Insecurity, lawlessness doesn't permit women to venture out and be political

Concerns about lawlessness and the resulting insecurity are a big hurdle which withholds men allowing their family women to participate in politics. Fear of Taliban and terrorism hinders the way of women specifically to participate in politics Overall political parties' environment too is not women friendly, they have to struggle hard and face multi-dimensional issues to create space for them in the party. When a woman enters politics, she faces problems from the start. People create hurdles in her way, discourage her and even do character assassination of her. In our society there is sexual deprivation and fear of exploitation because of which males over-protect their women-folk. Some of the respondents mentioned sexual harassment in gender non-segregated environments as a challenge to women's political participation. The respondents were of the opinion that lack of mechanisms for protection of women within the political parties is one of the reason for not participating in the political parties.

2. Women are not strong and cannot deal with prevailing vandalism in politics and law enforcing agencies

It was the general perception of the respondents that politics is a field for men where a show of power is essential; mostly demonstrated and established by open display of arms. Women obviously cannot match this show of strength. They also observed that an MNA or MPA has to get work done for the people through law enforcing agencies and land/revenue department. Women cannot go to police stations and *katchehri* and deal with SHO and patwari to get things

sorted out for the people of the constituency and thus fail to muster support from the communities. A political party worker concluded that women cannot physically handle men in such an environment. A woman cannot be expected to physically tackle a man (in a difficult situation) because she is weak.

3. Religious Orientation

Religious orientation or affiliation came up as a very strong determinant in restricting the women from politics. Most of the respondents think that women should not allow participating in politics because they cannot mingle with opposite sex openly, because religion does not allow or permit them to do so. People who are more religious tend to restrict and oppose women participating in politics.

Likewise, religious practices are used as powerful instruments of stereotype against women political aspirants in the area. For instance, the *Purdah* system strictly bars women from participating in politics either as voters, political aspirants or even participating in campaigns/other electoral activities.

The Islamic law in Dir Lower is typically interpreted in a manner that constrains the activities of women. Hence, religious is one of the anachronistic cultural beliefs in the area that excludes women from the mainstream of leadership. Some men and women from these communities considered women's participation in politics as un-Islamic. They were of the opinion that leadership of societies is men's job as per their religion, and women have been given the responsibility to stay inside home. They were of the opinion that women's participation in politics and public life will destroy the social fabric. Religious interpretations, self-made Mullahs' argumentation on Friday sermon and traditional religious knowledge also hinder women's political empowerment.

4. Women are not financially independent

Finance is a crucial issue that females encounter in politics as they are dependent to men. Since a vast majority of the women is financially dependent to their males, they cannot contest elections without the consent of their families. Majority of the respondents said that women need financial support of family i.e. father, husband or brothers to contest elections.

In Dir Lower women have no right to decide on one's own property in the house hold because the household head is always the father which can control every asset and property of the family. Even if women are salaried, most of the time their income is controlled by men, so women are always dependent on men economically which is the main cause for their low participation to politics. Politics is a commercialized game which needs money as well as economic resources but women in Pakhtun society are totally dependent and not economically emancipated thus posing a major challenge for the political empowerment of women.

5. Male chauvinism and their ego doesn't permit women to enter politics

Some of the respondents admitted that it is hard for them to accept women in a superior or managerial role. One of the respondents commented that women need to struggle far more than males but are appreciated less. Good performance and responsiveness can do well for women to grow in politics. Males' narrow perception about females' qualities and capabilities is a major

hurdle for females' progress and emancipation. Some women are also engaged in leg pulling but men try to create such an environment that hampers a woman's progress. The macho male inside his self emerges when he realizes that a woman, who entered politics after him, is "threatening" to take the lead.

6. Women being mothers can contribute effectively in the fields of education, health and social welfare

The current study found that it is the general impression among the males of the society that women are more appropriate to contribute in the fields of health and education rather than politics. The female's body structure and emotional placement make them unfit in the field of politics. Being emotionally sensitive women can be tender and more contributing in the domain of welfare and education in the form of teachers and mentors..

7. Political Barriers

Politics in Dir Lower has always been associated with masculinity thus "a men only affair". Most political parties are dominated by men thus making it difficult for women to have political networks for mobilization. Women in Dir Lower have never been oriented towards politics and their training is not tailored towards political leadership representation. Our electoral politics is prone to violence most of the times thus scaring away most women

The political party discrimination against women in politics in Dir Lower is often a deliberate effort to humiliate and frustrate them into losing focus and excluding them from active participation in politics. For instance, the timing of political meetings (mostly late in the night) and serious politicking which involves a lot of traveling automatically exclude mostly married women from active participation in politics. The highest position held by women if any in a political party include most insignificant posts of ex-officio members and women leaders whose importance is only for mobilizing womenfolk to vote for men. Thus, they are usually unable to assert themselves or push for the interest of women during nominations leading to marginalization of women during election. The respondents were of the opinion that the political parties are not women friendly, don't offer opportunities to women, and often women are left out in the political campaigns. The political parties are dominated by men, the leadership is controlled by men and often men makes the face of the political parties. The political parties also do not talk about women rights and issues of women. The respondents said though large rallies are organized for men before elections to mobilize and engage them in the electoral processes but when it comes to women only few corner meetings or door to door campaigns are conducted to reach out women. During the political campaigns often the head of the families who are men, are reached out to ask for votes of the whole family, thus women are left with little information about the candidates who are running for elections.

8. Wrong Perception of Women in Politics

In Dir Lower, women who are actively participating in politics are seen and treated as free women (prostitutes/wayward) of easy virtues, stubborn people, too domineering and culture rebellious, etc. It is observed that during campaign, the political opponents (mostly men) use the alleged loose moral standing of these women against them and often insult them directly in public. Thus, they are often subjected to public ridicule and are socially stigmatized by both men

and women. The use of negative labeling; derogatory names; abusive language and expressions to describe the women in politics discourage many of them from active participation in the area's politics.

9. Lack of Family, Fellow Women and Media Supports

Lack of family support is a critical challenge to women active participation in politics in Dir Lower. The politically aspirants women in Dir Lower lack support of their fellow women politically which is a major challenge to their active participation in politics. Lots of women in Dir Lower psychologically regard and perceive the social stigma that politics is a "dirty game" and as such tend to wrongly perceive fellow women into politics as arrogant and irresponsible and want to pull them down. As a result of this syndrome, most of the women dread politics to retain their good personality traits and not break their matrimonial home (for the married ones).

Another serious challenge to women active participation in politics in Dir Lower is lack of media support. Unfortunately, most of the journalists refuse to project the female political aspirants.

10. Socio-cultural factors

In the context of Dir Lower, there is a traditional belief that, women are made to take care of children and do kitchen works than participating outside home activity. Women are overburdened with different household activities impeding their involvement in the politics of the country. Illiteracy and ignorance of women folk regarding their rights and duties in relation to politics hinder women's political empowerment. Because of the *Pakhtun* culture, women have restricted mobility and they are not allowed culturally to give public appearances to both men and women which poses a huge challenge to women to become active in civic and political life.

Culturally, there is a belief that women are supposed to be led but not to lead. In fact stereotyped notions about women constitute major barriers; societal perception about leadership ability of women, women's lack of assertiveness are some barriers that hinder the participation of women. In this regard traditional attitudes towards gender equality influence women's advancement in political participation.

Some women in these areas still don't have National Identity Cards and their votes aren't yet registered which becomes a barrier in polling vote. Some women couldn't participate in the elections because they don't have access to the polling stations either because the polling stations are very far away or because no transportation is available.

11. Gender roles-patriarchy

In Dir Lower, men and women have clearly defined roles that are dictated by the dominant ideology which is patriarchy. Most of the time men are taken as breadwinners; head of the household who has the authority to represent the family outside of the home. Women in Dir Lower has no such power to take initiative of political activities because power politics is best suited to man instead of women. Decision relating to her career, selection of life partner, vote casting, political affiliation and contesting of elections as well as political demonstration is man oriented in nature.

12. Lack of Information about Political Process:

Most of the women do not have information or access to information about the political, civic and electoral processes. They remain unaware of the opportunities for women's political participation and their rights. Lack of awareness about rights and opportunities lead to lower participation of women in the political processes.

13. Family work and time constraints:

Like many other women, in Dir Lower women are traditionally in charge of domestic chores, while men are responsible for activities outside the home and men often spend their free time socializing outside the home, while women take care of the household which makes them difficult to engage in politics.

14. *Pakhtunwali* and Women's Political Empowerment

Pakhtun being a different nation practice the specific and centuries old codes, which direct, redirect and channelize their activities in daily life. *Pakhtun* code of life includes few traits that are mostly linked with man e.g., *Ghairat* (Valor), *Badal* (revenge), *Jirga*, *Hujra* (Common guest house) etc, where men control the above mentioned traits. These are the traits which are mostly linked with power, authority and prestige .while women are linked with the traits of *Tor* (stigma), *Peghor* (satire), such traits are mostly considered subordinate and lacking power, authority and prestige. Women political empowerment in most condition is considered a threat to family honor and projected as like *Tor* (social stigma), *Peghor* (satire) in the prevailing strict condition of *pakhtunwali*, to *pakhtun ghairat* (valor). Socially constructed reality is not conducive to provide ground to women political empowerment. It is clear from the above discussion that the strict norms of *Tor* and *Peghor* strictly discourage women voting behavior, party affiliation, and political demonstration and contesting elections because it is considered a threat to *pakhtun* honor and dignity.

Conclusion:

As to the case of Dir Lower, women's status in the political and public sector is very recent phenomena and still their participation is very low. They are still largely underrepresented in decision-making positions at all levels. Although women's political representation and participation is improving with the passage of time, negative social perceptions about the leadership ability of women, their low socio-economic status, low educational and skills levels and lack of strong role models all contribute to the less political empowerment of women in Dir Lower. The burden of household chores and inequitable access to higher education also limit women's ability to enjoy the opportunities and benefits of citizenship as men on an equal footing in the political sphere. Generally women in Dir Lower have little independents on decision making on most individuals and family issues. Women are also discriminated on the ground of being women and as such low status is characterized virtually every aspects of girls and women's lives.

Generally in Pakhtun society and particularly in Dir Lower women are influenced by the norms and values of the culture into which they are socialized. Their social lives status and role are also crucially influenced by dominant cultural ideology and discriminatory social structure. In this regard according to Pakhtun code of conduct politics and empowerment is supremely public process requiring high mobility for interaction and constant public appearance while cultural norms of *Pakthunwali* promote the segregation and seclusion of women often justified through the use of religion. Results of the study and ethnographic detail reveals, women power politics is highly commercial game which need money.

At most of the level in research area women either for home or for grave further intensifies their lack of education. In this regard lack of education and illiteracy in major cases too hamper their empowerment. Women are facing the problem of illiteracy, sex segregation, gender sensitivity, lack of awareness in regards of their political rights. In this context as the field data reveals the socially marginalized position and unfavorable self-image of women in regards of power politics also hinder their political empowerment.

In cultural context as the data highlights *Purdah* restricts women's mobility and visibility both of which negatively affect their political participation at all levels from the simple act of casting vote, to standing as candidate. Further, the data explicitly show that women political empowerment is culturally undesirable and has been considered as like social stigma under Pakhtun code of conduct. In addition to this, women political empowerment is considered to be against the modesty and piousness of women, an immoral act a threat to male authority.

Details of the study show that women are economically dependent and not emancipated that barricade their political empowerment. The economic structure is monopolized by male where the property and inheritance rights are under the control of male in the research community. The patriarchic structure of the area project male as the breadwinner and symbol of authority and power. In this connection, women economic emancipation has been considered like social stigma which is the main hurdle in their political empowerment as the field study highlights.

Recommendations:

Women Political empowerment needs a holistic approach. The following steps are suggested for the political empowerment of women in Dir Lower.

As the data reveals in *Pakhtun* society women education is not up to the mark as like men. Women should be given maximum chances to get quality in education because education provides base for economic, social, political and gender empowerment. A good educational qualification will enable them take up issues and improve their chances of their political empowerment.

Discriminatory socio-cultural and religious practices against women active participation in politics in Dir Lower should be reviewed by stakeholders and ensure that cultural/religious practices that discriminate against women are discouraged and their perpetrators are adequately punished to serve as deterrent measures.

The use of negative labeling, derogatory names, abusive language and expressions to describe women in politics should be discouraged through sensitization and public enlightenment campaigns in Dir Lower. The campaigns of male political opponents that portray women in Dir Lower who want to participate in the political activities women as acting against the culture of the area and to marginalize them should be discouraged.

Family members (especially husbands of married women) should give women political aspirants the relevant consent and support to venture into politics. Through awareness campaign and voters' education programs, women should be informed of their political rights to participate actively in politics not only as voters but also to be voted for in the numerous political positions and be encouraged to support and vote for their fellow women political aspirants/politicians. Furthermore, media should support women political aspirants in Dir Lower by publicly projecting their positive images; emphasizing their important roles and contributions to national development; raising their participation awareness in politics; deploring discriminations against them. The gender stereotypes in the media should be discouraged. All laws and regulatory frameworks that ensure equal opportunities and inclusion of women in the political processes, elections and voting etc. should be promoted through media campaigns and should also be implemented in letter and spirit.

Since poverty is a factor to women participation in the politics, economic empowerment could be a better way of enhancing women participation.

The National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) should take measures, such as mobile registration facilities, to ensure facilitation of citizens in the far flung areas in getting CNIC to enable them to exercise the right to vote.

The ECP should consider the special needs of women, especially in culturally conservative areas, in setting up polling stations and deploying polling staff during elections. The presence of male polling staff in female polling stations discourages a significant number of citizens to allow their female in casting votes during elections.

The Election Commission of Pakistan should take punitive measures against the violators of election code of conduct to discourage the practice of banning women voters in future elections.

Women should be provided protection from harassment. In our society women do not feel safe when they are away from their homes. Provision of security to the particular women who are contesting election will boost up the courage of other women to come out and play their role in politics just like other fields where they excel men.

Women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved. If half of the world's population remains vulnerable to economic, political, legal and social marginalization, the hope of advancing democracy and prosperity will remain in serious jeopardy.

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