WOMEN’S PERCEPTIONS OF FACTORS BARRING THEIR POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA: A CASE STUDY OF DISTRICT DIR UPPER

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Abstract

Sex-segregated structure and conservative attitudes impede women’s participation in public-space activities in the Pakhtun population of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, particularly in the District Dir Upper. In this region, women’s political participation and voting are viewed as sinful, against the local traditions, and punitive. This paper aims to explore women’s perceptions of factors barring their political participation in district Dir Upper, Pakistan. Data for the study were collected from 200 registered women voters from various age groups and social background in different union councils of district Dir Upper in 2016. The results reveal that entrenched patriarchal norms, misogynist attitudes, gendered secluded norms, shame and stigma factor, fear of victimization, and lack of support and facilities from the government and political parties have significant association (P=0.000) with women’s political participation and voting. As a way forward, to ensure women’s maximum political
participation and their uninterrupted voting turn out, this study makes several recommendations.

**Keywords**
Women’s political participation, voting rights, Dir Upper, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

**Introduction**

There is growing evidence that women’s inclusion in decision-making processes improves their condition and benefits society (UN-Women, 2017). Globally, women exhibit impressive political leadership by working across party lines and addressing issues pertaining to health, education, equality, and governance (Inter-Parliamentary Unit-IPU 2017). However, despite existing progress in women’s development, a great gender divide still exists (Epstein 2007), obstructing women’s potential, particularly their political participation and representation (Iwanaga, 2008). The axle of this gender divide is the patriarchal system and attitudes (Pape, 2008; Mies, 2014). This point is evident from the fact that women comprise half of the world’s population (Worldometer 2018), but they account for only 23 percent in parliaments and senates globally (Inter-Parliamentary Unit-IPU 2017). However, regionally, a wide variation exists in the average percentages of women’s political representation. For example, as of June 2017, Nordic countries have the highest percentage of women parliamentarians, 41 percent; the Americas 28.1 percent; Europe, including Nordic countries 26.5; Europe excluding Nordic countries 25.3; sub-Saharan Africa 23.6 percent; Arab States 17.4 percent; Pacific 17.4; and Asia 19.4 percent (UN-Women 2017).

Pakistan exhibits a dismal position in gender development. For example, the World Economic Forums’ Gender Gap Index (2017) ranks Pakistan 143rd out of a total of 144 countries. Further, the gender gap is considerably wider in the area of economy (rank 143), health (rank 140), education (rank 136), and relatively better in politics (rank 95) (World Economic Forum 2017). The Inter-Parliamentary Union’s report (2017) has ranked Pakistan 93 out of 178 countries in terms of women’s percentage in parliaments, with 20.6 percent (70/340) women in lower houses and 19.2 percent (20/104) in upper houses. It is important to mention here that the existing number of women parliamentarians in Pakistan is owing to 33% of women’s reserved seats in legislative bodies, introduced by Musharraf regime in 2002 (Weiss, 2012). Pakistan’s general election records of 2008 and 2013 shows less than one percent of women’s parliamentarians elected through direct elections (Aurat Foundation 2013). This figure means that the majority of women
parliamentarians come through indirect election, either because they belong to the political elite class or are close relatives of political leaders (Zakar et al. 2018).

Such women are therefore seldom aware of the sufferings of common women, their only job being to serve the agenda of the political parties that bring them to parliament; they are not given important portfolios (Zakar et al., 2018). It is in this sense that some women in Pakistan such as Benazir Bhutto, through political surrogacy in the view of Rasul (2014), reached the highest level of leadership and echelon of the power corridor, but no significant progress was made in the plight of Pakistani women (Stan 2007). This lack of progress is because women in Pakistan live in a subservient position (Bhattacharya 2014), due to a secluded, conservative and masculinist social structure(Zakar et al., 2018). Thus, women’s social condition in Pakistan will not improve unless they get equal access to public activities, particularly the political realm; a fair and gender egalitarian system is established; and misogynist attitudes are ditched (Bari 2005; Ghafoor and Haider 2018; Latif et al. 2015; Mumtaz 1998, 2005; Shami 2009; Shaheed et al. 1998; Zakar et al. 2018).

Research studies show that obstacles to women’s political inclusion in Pakistan are deeply rooted in social and cultural patterns (Acharya 2003; Rasul 2014; Sigdel 2009; Tiessen 2008; Naz and Ahmad 2012; Zakar et al. 2018), a conservative-patriarchal structure (Sanauddin et al. 2016; Latif et al. 2015; Saeed 2012; Kabir 2003; Moghadam 1992), and intense competition in politics at large (Omvedt 2005; Shvedova 2005). Women’s gender role in Pakistan demands that they stay at home and do household work (Saeed 2012; Sanauddin et al. 2016; Weiss 1999; Bhattacharya 2014). Since men dominate the political sphere, political structures and norms in general are male oriented (Shvedova 2005). Public space is regarded as a source of power and prestige, and thus it is men’s prerogative in Pakistani culture (Saeed 2012).

A masculinist, confrontational and alienating culture marginalizes Pakistani women (Bock and James 2005; Lister 1997; Omvedt 2005). Fear of stigmatization, harassment, violence and victimization discourages women from taking part in politics (Waring 2010). Time management due to the dual burden of the family, limited access to information and technology, and economic dependency on male family members obstructs women’s political participation (Greenberg and Okani 2001). All these factors mentioned are perfectly true in the context of district Dir Upper. Because of these factors, women in Dir Upper face immense exclusion from public activities, including political participation and exercising their right to cast votes. This study, therefore, aimed to explore women’s perception of the reasons barring them from political participation and exercising their right of voting in district Dir Upper.
Women and the political landscape of Pakistan

Women played a significant role in the creation of Pakistan. The founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, envisioned a gender egalitarian base for the development of the new country. After the inception of Pakistan in 1947, many women were at the forefront and contributed to the development of Pakistan. For example, Begum Rana Liaqat Ali Khan, the wife of the first Prime Minister of Pakistan, formed the organization APWA (All Pakistan Women Association) in 1949, which played an effective role for women’s empowerment in the initial years of Pakistan. Jinnah appointed his sister, Fatima Jinnah, as the head of a women’s committee to work and ensure maximum involvement of women in every field (Ali and Akhtar 2012). Similarly, women in the Pakistani Legislature, such as Begum Shaista Ikramullah and Begum Jahanara Shah Nawaz were instrumental and inspiring in many ways (Ayaz 2008).

However, unfortunately the vision of the founder, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, concerning the political role and participation of women in national development was not pursued by subsequent governments (Shami 2009). Ayub Khan, the military dictator, nurtured religious fanaticism and caused misogynist attitudes to flourish in the country (Haider 2016). Consequently, Fatima Jinnah did not succeed in the presidential election of 1965 against Ayub Khan, who launched a malicious propaganda campaign against her, portraying her as a woman of low talents and as an agent of India (Haider, 2016). Ayub’s tactics patronised religious fundamentalists in Pakistan. Hatred sowed by the military establishment of Ayub Khan adversely affected women’s leadership and their political participation in Pakistan in the 1960’s (Shami 2009).

After a long gap and various rendezvous with misogynist obscurantist forces, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto’s regime (1970-1977) promoted liberal attitudes towards women by granting them access to all governmental services that were denied to them earlier Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987). Further, Bhutto reserved 10% of seats in the National Assembly and 5% of seats in the Provincial Assembly for women (Shami 2009). This move encouraged women to contest for general seats in the country's elections (Shami 2009).

Once again the pace of women’s social development initiated by Bhutto’s regime stagnated due to the Islamization doctrine of the military ruler, Zia-ul-Haq, from 1977 to 1987. Zia initiated discriminatory legislation against women in the form of Hudood Laws. This legislation not only institutionalized patriarchy but also normalized women’s oppression in Pakistan (Jafar 2005). Zia’s reign witnessed social confusion and antagonism within the country, much of which focused on the place of women in society (Weiss 1999). Consequently, women pulled out from sports and other public activities as women’s public activism was wrongfully regarded as contrary to Islamic values (Bano 2009). Zia put off all
fundamental rights of women granted to them by the Constitution of 1973, including the right to be free of discrimination based on sex (Imran 2005). However, pressure from the international community and feminists caused Zia to introduce some measures for women’s uplift (Weiss 2003). For example, Zia established a Women’s Division in the Cabinet Secretariat, established a Commission on the Status of Women, included a chapter on women’s development in the Sixth Development Plan, appointed 20 women as members of the Majlis-e-Shoora in 1981, and doubled women’s reserved quota (20%) for the National Assembly (Awan 2016).

Benazir Bhutto appeared as the most impressive model in contemporary politics for women after she became the first-elected woman prime minister of Pakistan in 1988 (Weiss 1999; Anderson 2013). Her political triumph in a male-dominated conservative society appeared to mark the beginning of a new era and a psychological revolution because she reintroduced democracy to the people of Pakistan and emerged to reverse the masculinisation of public space brought about by military regimes (Khan 2010). Benazir apparently became a strong voice for Pakistani women (Weiss 1990). Her government announced different plans for women’s empowerment, for example, women’s police stations, women’s courts, and a women’s development bank. She also pledged to reverse the Hudood Laws of Zia-ul-Haq that had curtailed the rights of women (Khan 2010). However, disappointingly, during her two terms in office (1988-1990 and 1993-1996), no significant progress was made in the social status of Pakistani women (Khan 2010). She did not even propose any legislation to repeal Zia’s controversial Islamization laws (Khan 2010). Stan (2007) comments that despite “her lack of action on behalf of Pakistan’s women, Bhutto was a potent symbol of their potential empowerment”. Nevertheless, in the face of all odds, Benazir’s political struggle and ideology spurred the confidence of women and opened the avenue of politics for women.

Comparatively, General Musharraf’s era (1999 to 2008) was considered a political boom for women of Pakistan (Shami 2009; Jafar 2005; Khattak and Hussain 2013). Musharraf reinstated the women’s rights curtailed by General Zia-ul-Haq’s Islamization project (Weiss 2012) and undertook several measures to implement these changes. Some such measures included the promulgation of the Local Government Ordinance in 2001, reservation of 33% seats for women in local legislative bodies, establishment of the Ministry of Women’s Development as an independent ministry in 2004, passage of a Women’s Protection Bill by the Parliament in 2006, repeal of some of the Hoodooed Ordinances, and approval of 10% quota for women in the Central Superior Services and Provincial Services (Weiss 2012; Khattak and Hussain 2013). Consequently, women’s political representation remarkably improved with the increase in number of reserved women’s seats from 2% to an unprecedented 20% in the assemblies and 17% in the senate (Bano, 2009; Shami, 2009; Zakar, n. d). Enhanced legal facilitation
unprecedentedly increased the number of women at the level of local government; however in the national and provincial legislatures, the number of women did not increase substantially through direct election (Zakar, n. d; Aurat Foundation 2013). For example, only 10 women were directly elected to the four provincial assemblies in the 2008 general elections, and that number increased to 12 women in the 2013 general elections (Zakar N. D).

Yet women’s turnout increased by 11% in the 2013 general election compared to the 2008 general election, which was 44% (Aurat Foundation, 2013). Albeit, presently female voter registration is almost equal to that of men, i.e. 43.6%, but the low ratio of female candidates for the National Assembly (less than 1 percent) is an indication of overwhelming dominance of masculinist norms in Pakistani politics (Ansari 2012). Even in some regions of Pakistan, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa in particular, women are not allowed to exercise their legal right of casting votes.

Incidents of women’s barring from the voting in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa

During general elections in Pakistan, a ban is imposed either by the community or by family elders, or an understanding is developed between the contesting candidates that women should not come out of their houses to vote (Sherazi 2013). There are cases where election officials, contesting candidates and political parties prevented women from voting (See Ansari 2012). Following are some example of barring women from voting in the Pakhtun regions of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province:

- In March 2001, during the local government elections, thousands of women were barred from casting votes in a majority of the union councils of Swabi district, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. The local Jirga members, religious leaders of political parties, leaders of other mainstream political parties and contesting candidates signed an agreement to disallow women from voting (Ansari 2012).
- During a by-election for the National Assembly in Buner district, on 28 December 2008, women were completely banned from voting at nearly one-fourth of polling stations (Ansari 2012). According to the ECP data, women registered at 35 polling areas were 18,939; none of them cast a vote (Ansari 2012).
- During the 2013 general election, women were stopped from casting their votes in many parts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa as shown in Table 1.
Table No. 1. Constituencies where women were stopped from casting votes in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.

| S. no | District     | National Assembly | Provincial Assembly | Union Council /Polling Stations | Status                                                                 |
|-------|--------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1     | Dir Upper    | 33                | 91-93              | All Union Councils              | Women were barred in all UCS, only one women cast vote in UC Darora   |
| 2     | Dir Lower    | 34                | 91                 | Nasafa                          | Women were not allowed to cast their vote                            |
|       |              |                   |                    | Kamangara                       | Women were not allowed to cast their vote                            |
|       |              |                   |                    | Bajawaro                        | Women were not allowed to cast their vote                            |
|       |              |                   |                    | Pato                            | Women were not allowed to cast their vote                            |
|       |              |                   |                    | Bankot                          | Women were not allowed to cast their vote                            |
|       |              |                   |                    | Sari                            | Women were not allowed to cast their vote                            |
|       |              |                   |                    | Ouch                            | Nuzhat Begum (a candidate) cast her vote                             |
| 3     | Buner        | 28                | 77-79              | 17 UCs                          | Among 27 UCs women didn’t cast their vote in 17 UCs                  |
| 4     | Mardan       | 10                | 28                 | Kotki                           | Women were not allowed to cast their vote                            |
| 5     | Katlang      |                   |                    |                                 | Women were not allowed to cast their vote                            |
| 6     | D.I. Khan    | 25                | 67                 | Garah Essa Khail                | Women were not allowed to cast their vote                            |
| 7     | Nowshera     | 5                 | 12                 | Chokimumraiz                    | Women were not allowed to cast their vote                            |
| 8     | Batagram     | 22                | 59                 | Ajmera                          | Women were not allowed to cast their vote                            |
| 9     | Malakand     | 35                | 98                 | Govt. Degree College, Govt High School Dargai Heroshah, Haryankot Primary School Nary Obo | Women were not allowed to cast their vote                            |

- Source: *Aurat Foundation*, 2013.
Women barred from voting in district Dir Upper

Social activists and women rights advocacy groups such as the Aurat Foundation reported on the barring of women from voting in different regions of Dir Upper and Dir Lower. For example, an independent team monitoring 2013 general election (see, for example, https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2017/12/26/no-woman-vote-in-local-government-by-polls-in-dir-districts-report/) reported that there were more than 6000 registered female voters in the three union councils such as Darora, Chukiatan and Barawal of district Dir Upper, but all women were deprived of casting their votes. Thus, Shah (2013) has reported that in the constituency of Upper Dir for the National Assembly elections only one female cast a vote in the Darora area. Similarly, in 17 out of 27 union councils, not a single woman voted. Political parties in these regions often struck a verbal deal, some days before the polling day, that women would be disallowed to cast their votes (Shah 2013). Further, workers of different religious groups and political parties, who had banned the nomination of female candidates, patrolled the premises of the Districts' Courts with sticks and armaments to stop the nomination papers of women candidates for local government elections. Due to such threats, no one filed for reserved seats in the district (Shah 2013). During those polls, several religious announcements were issued ruling the participation of women in elections and the casting of votes as un-Islamic and a sin (Shah 2013). In certain areas, people were warned not to participate in the funeral prayers of females and their family members who participated in local government polls (Shah 2013).

Similarly, in a by-election for the Provincial Assembly (PA-95) in district Lower Dir, not a single woman of the eligible 50,000 registered voters showed up to vote (Aurat Foundation 2013). Before the election, all the contesting candidates signed a pact that women, due to security reasons, would not be allowed to vote, and that deviators from the pact would be liable to pay a fine of Rs. five million (Aurat Foundation 2013). Further, in this constituency, the reports said that warnings were broadcast on loudspeakers from different masjids for women to abstain from voting, and polling stations guarded by armed men stopped women who tried to vote (Boone 2015). This deterrence led some women from Lower Dir to lodge a petition in the Peshawar high court demanding re-election. However, the court dismissed the petition as the judge seemed unsure whether women were really forcefully stopped from voting (Boone 2015).

Penalties do exist in the laws of Pakistan for perpetrators preventing women from exercising their voting rights. For example, the 1997 Code of Conduct for General Elections prohibits political parties, candidates and workers from barring women’s participation. Similarly, the Election Bill 2016 mentions that if female voter turnout is less than 10 percent of the total number of women voters in the same constituency, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) would presume that female voters had been
obstructed from casting their votes and would not notify the results. After the by-election for the Provincial Assembly at Dir Lower in 2015, the ECP withheld the result on the same ground that women's voter turnout was less than 10 percent, and that women were barred from polling through an agreement among the contesting candidates. However, the Peshawar High Court suspended the decision of ECP and decided the case in favour of the winning candidate from Jamaat-Islami (JI) on the basis that nobody prevented women from voting and that women themselves were not willing to show up for voting.

This verdict caused extreme disappointment to women rights activist groups, which considered the decision of the High Court gendered-biased. The absence of political will and the lack of effective actions on the part of judiciary and the ECP allowed such disparities and injustices against women in Pakistan (Boone 2015). Excluding women from mainstream politics means that the government of Pakistan is paralysing and oppressing almost half of its population, and thus strengthening the structural degeneration, misogynistic attitudes and forces, as well as violating the charters of UN human rights to which it has consented (Haider, 2013). Lack of faith in the political system of Pakistan has led to a decreasing trend in the turnout of women voters (Ansari 2012).

Women in remote rural and tribal areas, such as Dir Upper, depend on the male members of their families for access to resources of redress, mobility and other necessities and amenities such as acquisition of the National Identity Card and passport (Ansari 2012). Women in these regions are banned from political participation and voting by their immediate families, and local community (religious) leaders threatened them with harm by physical violence and social ostracization by enforced community boycott (Ansari 2012).

Methodology of the study

This study was conducted in the District Dir Upper of Pakistan. This region was selected because despite their legal right, women here did not cast votes in the general elections of 2008 and 2013. District Upper Dir consists of three administrative divisions called tehsils: Dir, Wari and Sharingal. As the culture of Dir Upper is highly conservative and highly sex-segregated, women observe strict purdah (veil) and do not mix with men. Since this study aimed to know the response of women about barriers to their political participation and voting, we had to adopt a suitable research methodology for data elicitation. In this regard, convenience sampling strategy for the selection of areas and recruiting of study participants seemed appropriate. Convenience and purposive sampling according to Bhattacherjee (2012) is a technique in which a sample is drawn from the population that is close to hand or readily available. This technique provides freedom and flexibility to the researcher(s) to devise plans for data elicitations fitting with the local social and cultural environment.
(Bryman, 2008). Using this strategy, we selected five union councils such as Dir Urban, Chukyatan, Ganori, Bebyawar and Jabbar of Dir tehsil for this study.

Accessing and recruiting women participants for this study was a tedious task in the gendered secluded social setting of Dir Upper. The use of our insider identity, as belonging to the same area, dressing in the same way, and speaking the same language, as well as our social network, facilitated identifying and recruiting appropriate women participants. Actually, at the initial stage we contacted our female relatives in each of the five areas from whom we anticipated cooperation and help. At the second stage, we trained one educated women from our relatives in each of the five areas about the topic, the research plan, the nature of our questions, and the method of filling out the questionnaire/structured interview schedule from the study participants. During the field-survey, our women relatives would ask women participants for their help in finding other women participants for this study. The use of this snowball technique was helpful in the recruitment of other study participants.

Data were collected from 200 women registered voters. Forty women, 20 uneducated and 20 educated, aged between 25 to 50 years, were recruited from each of the five union councils by convenience sampling and snowballing technique. After, the data collection process, the numerical data were then organized, tabulated and quantitatively analysed through a Chi-square application.

Data analysis and discussion

The results show that an entrenched patriarchal system has a significant association with women’s political participation in the District Dir Upper (P=0.000), as shown in the Table. No.2 below.
Table No. 2. Association between patriarchal system and women’s political participation

| Statements                                      | Extent of Patriarchy system | Total |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------|
| Male enjoy superior status                      | To greater extent: 34 (17%) | 67 (33.5%) |
|                                                 | To some extent: 27 (13.5%)  |       |
|                                                 | Not at all: 6 (3%)           |       |
| Male's consent is highly valued                 |                           | 44 (22%) |
|                                                 | To greater extent: 21 (10.5%) |       |
|                                                 | To some extent: 20 (10%)     |       |
|                                                 | Not at all: 3 (1.5%)         |       |
| Female’s lives based on men’s will              |                           | 21    |
|                                                 | To greater extent: 11 (5.5%) |       |
|                                                 | To some extent: 4 (2%)       |       |
|                                                 | Not at all: 6 (3%)           |       |
| Decision making power lies men                  |                           | 10 (5%) |
|                                                 | To greater extent: 10 (5%)   |       |
|                                                 | To some extent: 0 (0%)       |       |
|                                                 | Not at all: 0 (0%)           |       |
| Men consider women’s political participation and |                           | 26 (13%) |
| voting a threat to their dignity and power      |                           |       |
|                                                 | To greater extent: 11 (5.5%) |       |
|                                                 | To some extent: 10 (5%)      |       |
|                                                 | Not at all: 5 (2.5%)         |       |
| Women are considered inferior, unwise and       |                           | 32 (16%) |
| incapable of leadership                         |                           |       |
|                                                 | To greater extent: 15 (7.5%) |       |
|                                                 | To some extent: 8 (4%)       |       |
|                                                 | Not at all: 9 (4.5%)         |       |
| Total                                           | 102 (51%)                   | 200 (100%) |
|                                                 | 69 (34.5%)                  |        |
|                                                 | 29 (14.5%)                  |        |

\[ \chi^2 = 39.129, \, d.f = 12, \, P = .000^{***} < .05 \]

Source: Field data

The primary field data indicates that males are regarded as superior to females among the Pakhtuns. Seventeen percent out of a total of 33% respondents mentioned it to a greater extent, 13.5% to some extent, and 3% thought that males are not superior to women. The field data reveals that males’ consent is valued more than that of females in the family i.e., 10.5% out of total 22% mentioned it to a greater extent, 10% to some extent and 1.5% mentioned it not at all. Research on Pakhtuns has noted that males (opinions), due to several social and cultural reasons, are given more preference and value over females (see for example, Ahmed 1980; Barth 1959; Saeed 2012; Arnold 1997). The table data reveals that women’s lives are based on men’s will, as 5.5% out of 10.5% mentioned it to a greater extent, 2% mentioned it to some extent, and 3% considered it not at all. Eisenstein's study (1984) documents the fact that in conservative societies, female life decisions are taken by
their males, i.e. father, brother, husband and other close male relatives. Thus men are hegemonic and are the masters of women in Pakhtun society (Saeed 2012). Men excessively control women’s sexuality, bodies, choices and important moments in Pakhtun culture (Saeed, 2012).

The field survey shows that decision-making power lies solely with men, i.e., 5% out of 5% of the respondents mentioned it to a greater extent. Research studies show that men enjoy absolute authority and dominate all decision-making spheres in Pakhtun culture: businesses, income and productive resources. They also control the sources of redress and the policymaking council called Jirga (see for example, Saeed 2012; Glatzer 2002; Yousufzai and Gohar 2012).

Women’s participation in politics conceivably could threaten the dignity and power of males in Pakhtun society. The field data reiterate this notion; for example, 5.5% out of 13% of the respondents mentioned this happening to a greater extent, 5% to some extent and 2.5% respondents not at all. Responding to a question that “are women regarded inferior, unwise and not capable for leadership role”, 7.5% out of total 16% indicated it to a greater extent, 4% to some extent, and 4.5% remarked that women are not inferior. Ali and Akhtar (2012) found that women in Pakistani society, specifically in the Pakhtun social structure, are considered inferior to men, and occupy the bottom ranks in the social hierarchy. Alam (2012) notes that women are considered unwise in Pakhtun society.

Overall, the chi-square value (39.129 with a degree of freedom d. f=12) shows a high significant relationship (P=0.000***>0.05) between the patriarchal system and women’s political participation. The data concludes that the prevalent patriarchal system in the research area restricts women from political participation. A recent study by Asad et al. (2017) also found a significant association (P=0.000) between patriarchy and women’s political participation in Pakhtun society. Similarly, the report of the United Nations Development Programme (2005) supports the finding of the current study that women’s involvement in the political process in patriarchal structures is dependent on men’s choices.

**Pakhtun traditions:**

**Conservative-misogynist attitudes and women’s political participation**

In this study, we aimed to examine the association among variables such as Pakhtun traditions and conservative attitudes towards women’s political participation. After the quantitative analysis of the field data, we found that prevailing Pakhtun traditions and
conservative attitudes have a significant association (P=0.000) with women’s political participation as shown in Table. No. 3 below:

Table No. 3. Prevalent Pakhtun traditions, conservative attitudes, and women’s political participation

| Statements                                      | Extent of Pakhtun traditions and conservative-misogynist attitudes | Total |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
|                                                  | To greater extent | To some extent | Not at all |
| Tribal traditions govern everyday affairs        | 16 (8%)           | 10             | 4 (2%)     | 30 (15%) |
| People resist women’s inclusion in public activities | 23 (11.5%)        | 11 (5.5%)      | 5 (2.5%)   | 39 (19.5%) |
| Society promote conservative and misogynist attitudes | 27 (13.5%)        | 12 (6%)        | 5 (2.5%)   | 44 (22%) |
| Misconceived social and cultural beliefs         | 20 (10%)          | 15             | 2 (1%)     | 37 (18.5%) |
| Men believe that women should be kept in tight control | 7 (3.5%)          | 6 (3%)         | 3 (1.5%)   | 16 (8%) |
| Women’s public mobility and political participation can defame the family | 18 (9%)          | 11 (5.5%)      | 5 (2.5%)   | 34 (17%) |
| Total                                           | 111 (55.5%)       | 65 (32.5%)     | 24 (12%)   | 200 (100%) |

\[ (\chi^2 = 4.829, d.f = 12, P = .000*** < .05) \]

Source: Field data

Recent studies document the fact that Pakhtuns strictly adhere to their tribal traditions called *Pashtunwali* and hardly accept any change in it, specifically pertaining to women’s free mobility, their economic emancipation, their participation in the political process, and their access to sources of redressal (Asad et al. 2017; Saeed 2012; Šanaudin et al. 2016; Naz and Ahmad 2012). This description is perfectly accurate in the context of this research study as findings significantly support views of the aforementioned studies. For example, in their response to the question, “do tribal traditions (*riwaj*) govern everyday affairs?, 8% out of 15% respondents said yes to a greater extent, 5% to some extent and 2% indicated not at all. Similarly, in their response to the men’s resistance towards women taking part in public activities, 11.5% out of 19.5% conceived of it to a greater extent, 5.5% to some
extent, while 2.5% of informants indicated not at all. Traditional norms of Pakistani society restrict women to household activities (Shvedova 2005; Shaheed et al. 1998; Mumtaz, 1998 2005). Alam (2012) notes that Pakhtuns do not accept change in their culture and traditions pertaining to women’s mobility and public participation.

Regarding a question about the pervasiveness of conservative and misogynist attitudes in society, a majority of the respondents, 13.5% out of 22%, acknowledged it to a greater extent, 6% out of 22% mentioned to some extent and 2.5% out of 22% mentioned not at all. Mumtaz (1998) opines that women’s political participation is misconceived in the social and cultural context. The filed information purports to this misconception, as 10% out of 18.5% mentioned it to a greater extent, 7.5% to some extent, and 1% not at all. Saeed (2012) mentions that Pakhtun men largely believe that women are not intelligent, cannot make a wise decision, and therefore should not be involved in such (men’s) jobs.

To a question on men’s belief about holding women in tight control, a majority of the respondents, 3.7% out of 8%, mentioned it to a greater extent, 3% to some extent and 1.5% mentioned it not at all. Woman in the Pakhtun culture is regarded as a commodity owned by men, and therefore should be kept under tight control and surveillance (Saeed, 2012). Other reasons for tight control of women by Pakhtun men, mentioned by Saeed (2012), include men’s perception of women as a potential factor of bringing shame to the family if not in tight control. One of the features of Pakhtun hegemonic masculinity entails a tight control over women (Saeed 2012). Since women are thought of as the mother of all evils, it is better to keep them under tight control (Saeed 2012).

Primary information shows that women’s public mobility and their participation in politics can defame the family, as 9% out of 17% of respondents mentioned it to a greater extent, 5.5% to some extent and 2.5% not at all. A chi-square value (4.829 with degree of freedom d. f=12) shows a high significance (P=0.000***>)0.05) among the variables pertaining to Pakhtuns, conservative attitudes and women’s political participation.

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper explored women’s perception of the reasons barring their political participation and voting in district Dir Upper, Pakistan, which shows zero women’s polling turnout in General and Local Government elections. Research studies show several reasons for this, such as gender segregated norms and roles, restrictions on women’s mobility in the form of a strict Purdah (veil) system, and misconceptions about women’s politics and leadership roles as being against Islam and local traditions. Data for this study were collected from
200 female registered voters from different union councils of tehsil Dir and district Dir Upper. Study participants were accessed and recruited through convenience sampling, family networks of the researcher, and by applying a snowball data-generating technique. Data were elicited through questionnaire/structured interview schedule.

Quantitative analysis of the field data revealed that the strong hold of patriarchal norms has a significant association (P=0.000) with women’s political participation in district Dir Upper. Second, this study found that the prevailing conservative or tribal Pakhtun traditions and misogynist attitudes have a significant association (P=0.000) with women’s political participation. Thus, women face grueling troubles to access the public sector or take part in public activities, and therefore are exceedingly disenfranchised. Existing gender-secluded norms and roles, conservative social structure, restrictions on women’s mobility, misconceived religious dogmas about women’s leadership roles and empowerment, and lack of appropriate legal and social support from the government, the judiciary, the Election Commission and political parties, erode women’s political stake and dilute their political power at district Dir Upper.

To ensure maximum political participation of women and their exercise of voting right in district Dir Upper, this study puts forward the following recommendations.

**Strict action against the perpetrators barring women from voting**

Rules and regulations are in place for punishing perpetrators barring women from voting. However, despite written proof of an agreement signed by all male contesting candidates disallowing women to vote, no legal action so far has been taken against them. We agree with Ansari’s (2012) view that malfunctioning and incompetent election tribunals have failed to resolve post-election disputes in Pakistan.

The ECP (Election Commission of Pakistan) should firmly adhere to and impose the Election Bill 2016 in Dir Upper. In this regard, the ECP should consider the election of a constituency as invalid and should go for a re-poll if a constituency has less than 10 percent of women turn out, of the total number of registered women voters. This result would ensure the political participation of women in Dir Upper.

However, the actions of the ECP are not effective without full support from other stakeholders such as the legislature, political parties, civil society, media and the judiciary. It has been observed, that usually the perpetrators find safe passage through the judiciary in terms of taking stay orders, either against the actions of the ECP or against the opposing contenders and women advocacy groups. Further, the judicial system often takes a long while in deciding post-election matters. Sometimes, the judiciary decides the case in
favour of the winning contenders, as happened in the case of a by-election for PA-95 of district Dir Lower. We agree with Boone’s (2015) affirmation that the absence of political will and the lack of effective assenting actions on the part of the judiciary and the ECP allow such disparities and injustices against women in Pakistan.

Nomination of women on reserved seats from Dir Upper

The reservation of women’s seats in legislative bodies is indeed a positive step for women’s development in Pakistan. However, this initiative would encourage a gender perspective on policymaking, and would lead to real empowerment if the filling of these reserved seats were fairly done. For example, these seats should be filled through direct elections among women candidates instead of through indirect selection, which obstructs the growth of genuine women leadership. Usually, it has been observed that political parties give these seats to family members of influential party leaders as a reward for their contribution to the party or to members from the families of the feudal or industrial political elite.

This study recommends that political parties should also nominate some proportion of women from conservative regions or places, like Dir Upper, where women have been restrained from exercising their political rights. This move would give voice, courage and a platform to the women of Dir. We agree with Ansari’s (2012) statement that women should be brought into mainstream politics and political posts with sustainable actions instead of the present system of reserved women’s seats, which downgrade women and restrict their political voice and empowerment. Further, charters of political parties should encourage women’s inclusion as well as clearly implement party policies in line with gender equity and empowerment (Ansari, 2012).

Mass awareness and attitude change programme about the significance of women’s public participation

Conservative cultural beliefs and misinterpretation of traditional folk wisdom towards women echoed in the notion such as “a woman’s place is either home or grave” should change. Further, the prevailing misogynist attitudes towards women being delicate, incompetent, less important, and a potential factor of bringing shame to the family should be shunned. Such attitudes could be debunked by projecting scientific evidence about gender-equality in terms of competencies and capabilities through media, educational institutions, mosques and public discourse (Zakar, n.d). People should be educated and sensitized to the fact that no society can make progress without the full involvement of its women. In this regard, political parties can also play a leading role in promoting gender equality and women’s inclusion in active politics, specifically through women wings, by providing a grooming platform for the emergence of women leadership.
Educational institutions, according to Zakar (n.d), can be highly instrumental in the capacity-building of socializing young girls for taking up roles as politicians. In this regard, the educational curriculum, in sections on learning opportunities, should also provide co-curricular activities by portraying the achievements of prominent women political leaders. Similarly, the qualities and achievements of women leaders may be projected through academic debates, textbooks, and the media (Zakar, n. d). These efforts will encourage a positive shift in society by boosting the self-esteem and confidence of women, and changing men’s attitudes towards women’s constructive role in society.

The above-discussed grave situation, of confiscating and usurping women’s political rights, not only turns women into men’s property, but it jeopardises national growth as well. The following recommendations, emerging from our discussion and research, qualify for immediate adoption. These change-making strategies include imposition of the Election Bill of 2016, strict legal actions against candidates and their political parties barring women from voting, setting up of separate women’s polling stations managed by female staff only, and finally and most importantly, a multi-pronged attitudinal change-making programme for all the stakeholders, including women.

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