

Exploring Barriers to Women Political Participation in the General Elections (2024): A Case Study of District Mansehra

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Abstract



Women have been playing a very significant role in the political history of a country. Their participation and active involvement in the legislative and executive branch always strengthen democratic values and improve governance system. This article aims at exploring their participation through voting, getting elected to the legislature, gender equality and public offices in District Mansehra, Pakistan. Social barriers, family restrictions, patriarchal societies and lack of education may hinder them from proper working. The study is based upon qualitative research approach utilizing both primary and secondary sources for the thematic analysis. To substantiate their experience a total of fifteen women were interviewed who contested the 2024 general elections dilating upon their issues and challenges in the way of their political participation. Findings of the study pinpoint the financial dependence of women, social restrictions, and dominant role of patriarchal society. Recommendations of the study encompass a comprehensive policy reforms, need for encouragement and doing away with male dominated societies.

Keywords: Women, Political Participation, Barriers, General Elections, District Mansehra, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Introduction

Political participation originates from the broader concept of participation, meaning the act of taking part in something. In a political context, it refers to the ways citizens interact with the political system to influence governance and policy-making (Deth, 2016). In democratic societies, political participation enables citizens to communicate their interests and concerns, exert pressure on public authorities, and shape policy outcomes (Hague & Harrop, 1982). Beyond voting, it encompasses a wide range of activities such as campaigning, contesting elections, mobilization, and advocacy.

Women have been playing very crucial role in almost all walks of life to further the cause of their cause being working shoulder to shoulder with men and empower themselves (Haq, 2016). Their active involvement in the political landscape of the country helps in strengthening the democratic values help in getting their voices heard in every nook and corner of the world (Finkle, 2002). Worldwide, there is a strong consensus that women's equal political participation is essential for gender equality and empowerment. Key arguments include the justice argument, which stresses women's inherent right as half of the population; the experience argument, which values women's unique perspectives in addressing their challenges; the interest argument, which emphasizes their distinct priorities; the symbolic argument, highlighting their role as inspirations for wider participation; and the democratic argument, which views equal representation as vital for inclusive governance. Collectively, these arguments demonstrate that women's political presence strengthens democracy, fosters socio-economic progress, and advances empowerment (Kassa, 2015).

Women constitute half of the world's population, yet they occupy less than 23% of political positions, spanning from national legislatures to local governing bodies (Krook, Lena, O'Brien, & Dianaz, 2010). In patriarchal societies such as Pakistan, women's political participation faces structural, cultural, and social barriers. Patriarchal norms often confine women to domestic roles,

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limiting their public engagement and political opportunities (Shami, 2009). Male-dominated households and cultural beliefs frequently reinforce the notion that leadership and politics are male domains, thereby undermining women's electoral participation (Zakar, Zakar, & Kraemer, 2013). As a result, women's involvement in governance remains heavily dependent on male consent, particularly in rural and tribal contexts.

In Pakistan, women constitute nearly half of the population, yet their representation in political decision-making continues to lag behind. While constitutional provisions and reserved seats have expanded their presence in legislatures, direct participation in electoral politics remains restricted by financial dependency, cultural constraints, and weak institutional support (Awan, 2016). These challenges are especially pronounced in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), where traditional social structures and religious conservatism further limit women's political participation.

This research explores the socio-cultural barriers faced by women candidates during the 2024 general elections in District Mansehra, KP. By examining the lived experiences of women who contested elections but failed to secure seats, the research provides critical insights into the intersection of gender, politics, and culture in Pakistan. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on women's empowerment, democratic development, and the urgent need for policy reforms to strengthen women's political participation.

Objectives

- To identify women's hurdles restraining them from political participation in the general election of 2024.
- To investigate efficacious strategies for the active participation of women.
- To assess the influence of financial, socio-cultural, and institutional factors on women's political representation in District Mansehra.

Literature Review

Women in Pakistan, despite constituting nearly half of the population, remain underrepresented in politics due to entrenched socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers. Since independence in 1947, their presence has been minimal, with only two women in the first Constituent Assembly, despite women's significant contribution to the independence movement (Shahnaz, 1993). The persistence of patriarchy and feudalism has systematically marginalized women, confining them to domestic roles and undermining their political agency (Naz, Ibrahim, & Ahmad, 2012). Restrictions on women's mobility, low wages, and discriminatory attitudes within households further limit their ability to participate in public life (Nayak & Nair, 2005).

Although constitutional guarantees exist, they have not translated into substantive political empowerment. The Constitution of Pakistan (1973) protects women's rights through various provisions and emphasizes human rights from the outset. Article 25, under the section on Fundamental Rights, affirms the principle of equality and prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. Furthermore, under the Principles of Policy, Articles 32 and 34 ensure women's full participation in all spheres of national life. However, cultural and religious interpretations continue to restrict women's political inclusion. (Parveen, 2016).

Political history of the country reveals that most of the women who participated in politics and played leading roles in the legislative and executive machinery of the country came from the well-known families (Kassa, 2015). Contemporary scholars highlight ongoing barriers. Religious misinterpretations, financial dependence, and patriarchal attitudes remain major obstacles (Latif, Usman, Kataria, & Abdullah, 2015). Political reforms, such as Musharraf's Devolution Plan mandating 33% reserved seats for women, provided opportunities but were undermined by cultural and religious constraints (Ahmad & Bano, 2019). Recent evidence from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa suggests that political reforms have improved awareness and civic engagement, yet literacy and education remain critical for meaningful participation (Bilal & Ahmad, 2018).

Recent research underscores both structural and localized challenges. Studies show that women's voter turnout has consistently lagged behind men's (Allauddin, Alizai, & Rind, 2020). While patriarchal norms and misogynistic attitudes in regions such as Dir, Charsadda, and ex-FATA continue to hinder participation (Hussain, Jan, Khan, & Ali, 2020). Women in Pakistan face numerous challenges in participating in democracy and governance. These challenges include financial dependency on men, lack of literacy, gender segregation, male dominance, traditional beliefs, limited financial resources, lack of awareness regarding political rights, limited understanding

of party structures, and restrictive socio-cultural expectations. Increased participation of women in politics would contribute to more inclusive decision-making processes, particularly in areas that directly affect women such as education, healthcare, employment, and broader societal development (Begum, 2023). In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, women in local government face obstacles but also find opportunities for political participation. Their role includes involvement in local commerce, influence within political parties, access to municipal resources, and mobilization of civil society. Effective representation requires advocacy, family and community support, solidarity among councilors, and commitment to political responsibilities to advance women's empowerment in governance (Ullah & Ahmad, 2020). However, recent empirical studies demonstrate that socio-cultural norms remain statistically significant in impeding women's electoral participation. (Bashir, Ihtisham, & Farmanullah, 2024)

Overall, the literature reveals a paradox: while constitutional and institutional reforms have created avenues for participation, deep-rooted patriarchal practices continue to undermine women's substantive empowerment. Importantly, most existing studies examine women's political participation at the national or provincial levels, with limited attention to district-specific dynamics. This creates a significant research gap, particularly in contexts like District Mansehra, where localized cultural and socio-economic factors shape women's opportunities and barriers in the 2024 elections.

Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative research design, focusing on participants from District Mansehra. The research population consisted of all women who contested the 2024 general elections for both National Assembly and Provincial Assembly seats from the district. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents relevant to the study objectives. Data were collected through interviews using open-ended questions to explore participants' experiences and perceptions in depth. The responses were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis to identify key patterns and barriers to women's political participation.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the research findings while adhering to the study objectives based on an analysis of qualitative data source. Research analysis studied an in-depth interview to determine key themes that included financial dependency, social and cultural norms, male dominance in politics, lack of family and media support, balancing family and political life, gender-associated honor, barriers within political parties, male dependency, and physical and psychological constraints.

Themes

The thematic analysis of the interview data identified several significant themes as part of this research study.

Financial Dependency

Financial dependency was identified as a major barrier to women's effective participation in politics during the 2024 elections in Mansehra. Women lacked independent sources of income, which limited their ability to fund campaigns and compete with male candidates who had greater financial backing. Political activities required substantial investment, yet women candidates had limited access to inheritance and personal income. One respondent stated, "*Raising funding for my campaign was one of the most tough challenges. I had to rely on my husband and family for financial help, but they couldn't always contribute much.*" This highlights her reliance on family support, which was insufficient. Another respondent explained, "*In the 2018 elections, I even sold my jewelry, yet I gained nothing in return as I faced significant discouragement from society.*" Her words indicate the personal sacrifices women were forced to make, often without political success. One of the respondents shared, "*My male counterparts were pouring money into their campaigns, posters, gatherings, and even social media. I had to make do with small donations from friends and family.*" This reflects how limited funds placed women at a competitive disadvantage against financially strong male candidates. Overall, these findings suggest that financial dependency not only constrained women's opportunities but also reinforced systemic inequalities that excluded them from meaningful participation in politics.

Cultural and Social Norms

Cultural and social norms in Mansehra played a decisive role in restricting women's political activities. The patriarchal system discouraged women from actively participating in politics, as their public presence was often viewed as inappropriate. One respondent expressed, "*Women in our area*

are expected to stay at home, and when we step into politics, people question our character instead of our abilities". The analysis shows how cultural expectations limited women's political roles. Another respondent mentioned, *"Many voters told me directly that they could not vote for a woman because it goes against our traditions."* Her words reflect the deep-rooted cultural barriers that hinder female candidates. One of the respondents stated, *"Even my relatives were reluctant to support me, saying politics is not for women."* This indicates how family and community pressures discouraged women from contesting. Collectively, these responses reveal that rigid cultural norms reinforced gender stereotypes, making politics a male-dominated field where women were seen as outsiders.

Male Dominance in Politics

The dominance of men in politics further marginalized women during the electoral process. Male politicians had stronger networks, decision-making power, and influence within political parties. One respondent shared, *"Party leaders always preferred male candidates and gave them more resources, while women like me were sidelined."* This highlights institutional bias within party structures. Another respondent explained, *"Even when I wanted to hold meetings, the men in my constituency would not take me seriously, saying leadership belongs to men."* Her statement reflects the gendered perception of leadership. One of the respondents noted, *"Men control both money and votes here, so it is nearly impossible for a woman to win without their backing."* This demonstrates how male dominance affected both campaign strategies and voter behavior. Overall, the responses indicate that male dominance within parties and communities acted as a powerful barrier that restricted women's ability to compete equally in elections.

Barriers within Political Parties

Political parties play a crucial role in shaping electoral opportunities, but in District Mansehra, women reported that they were marginalized within party structures. Women candidates were often overlooked in ticket distribution and received less organizational and financial support compared to men. One respondent stated, *"Party leadership always gave preference to male candidates, even when women were more deserving."* This reflects the gender bias in party decisions. Another respondent explained, *"I had to arrange my own campaign activities because my party did not provide me any financial or organizational help."* Her words highlight the neglect women experienced within party frameworks. One of the respondents noted, *"Women are often used only for reserved seats, while men are promoted for general seats."* This shows how women were systematically limited to token positions. Collectively, these responses reveal that political parties, instead of empowering women, acted as a barrier by denying them fair opportunities and support in the electoral process.

Physical and Psychological Barriers

Women candidates also faced physical and psychological challenges that restricted their ability to campaign effectively. Limited mobility, harassment, and social scrutiny placed additional stress on women compared to men. One respondent shared, *"I could not move freely in my constituency for campaigning because people judged my every step."* This indicates how physical mobility was socially restricted. Another respondent explained, *"I was mentally exhausted throughout the election period because of constant criticism and negative remarks."* Her words reflect the psychological strain of political participation. One of the respondents stated, *"Security was always a concern; as a woman, I felt unsafe attending late-night meetings."* This highlights the physical risks women encountered. Overall, the findings show that the combination of physical restrictions and psychological pressures created a hostile environment for women, reducing their confidence and limiting their political effectiveness.

Balancing Political and Family Life

Balancing political ambitions with family responsibilities was reported as another major challenge for women in Mansehra. Traditional expectations placed the burden of household duties entirely on women, leaving them with little time for political work. One respondent noted, *"I had to manage household chores and children along with my campaign, which was extremely difficult."* This illustrates the double burden women carried. Another respondent stated, *"My family supported me, but they also expected me to fulfill my domestic responsibilities without compromise."* Her words show the conflict between personal and political roles. One of the respondents explained, *"Many women avoid politics because they fear neglecting their families, and society blames them if they fail at home."* This reflects the societal pressure to prioritize family over political engagement. Overall,

the responses indicate that women in politics are forced to juggle dual roles, and without shared family responsibilities, their political participation remains limited.

Family and Media Support

Family and media support were reported as critical factors in shaping women's political participation. In Mansehra, some women received encouragement from their families, but most respondents faced indifference or outright opposition. The role of media was also limited, as women candidates often lacked proper coverage compared to men. One respondent said, *"My family allowed me to contest elections but they did not stand with me during my campaign."* This reflects the lack of active family support. Another respondent explained, *"Local media gave more coverage to male candidates, while my activities were completely ignored."* Her words highlight gender bias in media visibility. One of the respondents noted, *"Without family encouragement and media recognition, it was difficult to convince voters that I was a serious candidate."* This shows how family and media neglect weakened her credibility. Overall, the findings reveal that both family backing and media exposure are vital for women's political success, but in reality, most female candidates in Mansehra lacked both, which weakened their political campaigns.

Gender-Associated Honor

The issue of gender-associated honor significantly restricted women's participation in politics. In conservative communities like Mansehra, women stepping into public roles were often seen as a threat to family honor. One respondent expressed, *"People taunted my family, saying a woman in politics is dishonorable."* This reflects the stigma attached to women's public presence. Another respondent said, *"My brothers asked me to quit politics because they felt it would damage the family's respect."* Her words highlight how notions of honor were used to control women's choices. One of the respondents stated, *"Whenever I spoke in public gatherings, people whispered that my family had no shame letting me do so."* This shows how women were judged through the lens of honor rather than capability. Collectively, these responses demonstrate that associating women's political participation with family honor created strong cultural resistance, reinforcing the idea that politics is a man's domain.

Security Concerns

Security concerns emerged as another barrier that discouraged women from contesting elections. The political environment in Mansehra was often unsafe, with women facing harassment, threats, and fears of violence. One respondent noted, *"I was afraid to hold rallies because of security risks, especially at night."* This shows the physical danger associated with campaigning. Another respondent explained, *"Men threatened me to withdraw from the contest, which created fear for myself and my family."* Her words highlight the intimidation tactics used against women. One of the respondents shared, *"There were no proper security arrangements for women candidates, so we felt exposed and vulnerable."* This reflects the lack of institutional support for women's safety. Overall, the findings suggest that the absence of security measures not only limited women's mobility but also discouraged them from fully engaging in the electoral process.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the persistent challenges that women face in entering and sustaining political participation in District Mansehra during the 2024 general elections. Respondents' accounts showed that women continue to struggle with structural, cultural, and institutional obstacles that hinder their ability to contest elections effectively. These results resonate with earlier scholarship on gender and politics in Pakistan, which has consistently demonstrated how deeply embedded patriarchal traditions intersect with structural inequalities to marginalize women in public life (Azhar, Khan, & Waris, 2018).

One of the most significant barriers identified was financial dependency. Respondents emphasized that political campaigning requires substantial resources, and women often lack access to independent financial means. Many relied on male family members for funding, which limited their autonomy and decision-making power. These findings echo previous research showing that women's economic marginalization directly undermines their ability to participate in political processes on an equal footing with men (Choudhry, 2018). Financial independence thus emerges as a precondition for meaningful empowerment in political life.

Another central theme concerned patriarchal norms and gendered notions of honor, which restrict women's mobility and discourage their visibility in political spaces. Several respondents

described how families and communities pressured them to withdraw from political activities to preserve family reputation. Such narratives align with studies that illustrate how honor-based cultural codes regulate women's behavior and limit their public roles, particularly in rural and tribal areas of Pakistan (Rahim, 2024). These cultural pressures not only reduce women's political participation but also reinforce systemic gender hierarchies.

The findings also revealed the existence of institutional barriers within political parties, where women are often given symbolic representation rather than substantive opportunities. Respondents noted that male candidates were prioritized for party tickets and leadership roles, even when women demonstrated strong grassroots connections. This observation mirrors research which shows that while gender quotas have increased the descriptive representation of women, they have not necessarily translated into equal participation in decision-making within party structures (Begum, 2023). Without structural reforms inside political institutions, women's roles risk remaining tokenistic.

Respondents additionally described psychological and physical barriers, such as harassment, stress, and insecurity associated with political activities. These challenges correspond with previous findings that women in Pakistan face unique vulnerabilities when stepping into public roles, which limits their capacity to campaign effectively and often deters others from entering politics altogether (Sharif & Hina, 2018). Addressing these challenges requires ensuring safer political environments and mechanisms of institutional support for women candidates.

The role of family and media support emerged as decisive in shaping women's experiences. While some respondents benefited from family encouragement, others faced resistance that curtailed their political involvement. Moreover, limited media coverage restricted their outreach, undermining their visibility in electoral politics. This finding is consistent with prior research showing that family backing and media representation significantly influence women's credibility and legitimacy as political actors (Begum, 2023). Strengthening family and media support could therefore play a vital role in normalizing women's active participation in politics.

Taken together, these findings confirm that women's political participation in Pakistan is constrained by the interplay of financial, cultural, institutional, and social barriers. While legal frameworks such as gender quotas provide opportunities for descriptive representation, structural inequalities continue to prevent women from achieving substantive political influence. The evidence suggests that dismantling these barriers requires not only policy-level reforms but also deeper cultural and institutional transformation to normalize women's presence and leadership in political life (Noreen, Zakar, Yousaf, Saqlain, & Farhat, 2025).

Conclusion

This study examines the barriers to women's political participation in District Mansehra, Pakistan, within the broader historical and constitutional framework of gender equality. Despite constitutional guarantees under Articles 25, 32, and 34 of the 1973 Constitution, women continue to face systemic obstacles rooted in socio-cultural norms, patriarchal structures, and economic dependency. The analysis of interviews with women candidates from the 2024 general elections revealed that traditional gender roles, exclusion from male-dominated political parties, and limited financial resources significantly restrict their political engagement. These challenges undermine both women's representation and the democratic process. The findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive strategies, including policy reforms, financial support mechanisms, and community-level initiatives that challenge discriminatory norms and expand opportunities for women in politics. Strengthening women's political participation is essential not only for gender equality but also for fostering inclusive governance that reflects the diverse voices of Pakistan's population.

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