



RESEARCH PAPER

Causes of Low Turn Out of Women in the General Elections: A Case Study of District Peshawar

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the causes of low turnout of women in the General elections of Pakistan and KP generally and Peshawar specifically. The study was conducted on the causes of women low participation in the electoral process especially during the last three general elections (2002, 2008, and 2013) in the light of expert opinion of female political representatives, political activists and experts. Women as a voter, their participation in electoral process and the problems they faced have been discussed. The paper is based on qualitative method. Total 20 MPAs, MNAs, and female right activists were interviewed for qualitative analysis. The interviews were unstructured allowing flexibility, liberty of conversation and flow of information. It was found that there are still many difficulties faced by Pashtun women. The study concluded that ideological, economic and patriarchal mind-sets are the main factors that hinder women participation in the electoral process. The findings of the study can be used effectively to increase women participation by bringing awareness at local level and making appropriate policies at national level

Introduction

Women comprise about half of the world's population. However, their participation in politics does not match their numerical strength. Women have struggled a lot to increase their political participation. Despite the relative progress and softening of the rigid stance and attitude of the society vis-a-vis women participation in politics, women in legislature and at other levels of political engagements are still facing manifold challenges and problems.(Rogers,2005).

Political participation has various dimensions, such as the exercise of the right to vote, right to self-governance, propagation of political ideology, right to local government politics and contesting elections. It is an irony that in the developing countries, a large number of the females have considerably contributed to freedom struggles and in the creation of several national political organizations, alliances or parties, but they have always been underrepresented in the decision-making

processes. Women participation in politics is still not very satisfactory, notwithstanding the fact that several women so far have been elected as heads of the states and governments (Valadez, 2018).

Discourses on feminism and women suffrage rights in an Islamic country like Pakistan necessitates its discussion within its social, cultural, religious and political frameworks (Shami, 2009). Pakistan is unique in the sense that its existence owes to Islamic ideology, deriving its legitimacy from Islam. In this connection, the example of Objectives Resolution can be cited which was passed by the First Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on 12th March 1949. The resolution enshrines principles of Islam must the guiding principles of the public policies in the country. It is worth noting that the resolution has been incorporated in the 1973 Constitution as a preamble.

According to the 2017 census, women population is almost equal to the male population of Pakistan, yet gender discrimination is rampant everywhere in the country, notwithstanding the official claims of gender equality. The constitution of Pakistan has assured full political participation of women as Article 25 of the 1973 Constitution states, "All citizens are equal and are entitled to enjoy equal protection before law. There shall be no gender discrimination." Similarly, the constitution guarantees an effective role of women in the local government bodies. It says, "Local Government institutions composed of elected representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions special representation will be given to peasants, workers and women" (Article 32). More emphasis has been given on women participation: "Steps shall be taken to ensure full participation of women in all spheres of national life" (Article 34).

However, there are some potent long-term factors, ingrained in the very fabric of Pakistani society that is uncondusive for the development of pro-women politics. The most obvious ones are the socio-cultural norms and practices, ideological orientation of the state, and the material conditions of women (Bari, 2005). Keeping in consideration the numerical strength of women, it is miserable that because of social cum cultural components women confront hardship in their active participation, (Shami, 2009).

As mentioned earlier, women's right to vote is guaranteed by the constitution of Pakistan, yet in some districts, particularly tribal and rural districts of Pakistan, women were deprived of their vote by men, with explicit agreement among the competing political parties. This indicates the flaws in the legal system of the state to safeguard women's right to vote (Hellum & Aasen, 2013). Although turnout at the polling stations has increased, women's participation is still not satisfactory. Participation is ironically understood as merely some event, not taken as a dynamic process and product of development. The concept of time, in terms of a process of participation, is related to the task undertaken and in itself a function of historical processes unfolding.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a Pakhtun-majority province of Pakistan, is considered more conservative, patriarchal, and under the influence of extremist religious forces than the rest of Pakistan. The province remained under the influence of religious elements during the 2010 elections, depriving them of effective participation in the elections. As a result, women empowerment suffered a setback (Khan, 2010).

It has been observed that women have frequently been debarred from expressing their views and from making their choices during elections. They comply with the wishes of their fathers and brothers and cannot cast vote for the candidate of their own choice. Patriarchal system is still in vogue and has firm roots in the electoral processes and general politics of the country. Political apathy of women is evident from the fact that in the 2008 elections only 15 percent registered women voters cast their vote in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Islam, 2013).

Patriarchy can be witnessed everywhere in the Pakhtun belt of Pakistan. Women are considered as instruments in the hands of men, used only as a source of domestic chores, and sexual and aesthetic pleasure. According to the opinion of sociologists, such as Mascarenhas, M. N. (1993), patriarchy is a familial, social, ideological and political system through which men subjugate women in every conceivable way, such as direct pressure, rituals and norms, law, division of labor and education.

In *Pakhtunwali*, the way of life of Pakhtuns, women are not considered to partake in what are considered as men's activities and enterprises. Considering them as the embodiment of all social evils, Pakhtun culture is reluctant to give women any freedom of movement, leaving aside political participation. It is held against the valor and dignity of man if women undertake any manly enterprise and activity. (Naz & Chaudhry, 2011).

Registered women voters are less in number than men registered voters. The gap between registered women and men voters was 20% in 1950; 12% percent, in 1970; and ten percent during 1993-1997. The situation of women in the former FATA and the remote areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is even worse. The difference between women and men registered voters is 25 to 75 percent in these areas, where it is 45 to 55 percent in the rest of the country. In general elections, 2013, the number of registered male and female voters in Peshawar was 864496 and 618073, respectively, for 4 National and 11 Provincial constituencies. Only 39.57 % of men and 23.08 % of women exercised their right to vote. None of the contesting political parties nominated any woman candidate for the elections in the aforementioned constituencies. All the female parliamentarians, including 8 for NA and 22 for the KP assembly, were nominated on the reserved seats. In the 2015 local government elections, 861996 male and 617006 female voters were registered, and 39.69 % and 23.12 % was the turn out for male and female voters, respectively (Election Commission of Pakistan, ECP, 2017).

Some of the other factors, besides, affecting women's right to vote are the long distances to be traversed to reach the polling stations, the hectic process of obtaining

Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) and non-availability of women presiding and returning officers at the polling stations (Saiyid, 2001). In addition, women are victims of patriarchal customs and social institutions, contributing to their marginalization and disempowerment. In a study, Arab Naz, U. D., Khan, W., & Khan, T. (2012). It has reasoned that gender political equality is the need of the hour. Women go through this existence under the shadow of customs and traditions which turns into an extraordinary obstacle in the way of their political empowerment.

Material and Methods

This topic needs more detail and in-depth study to know the issues and challenges to women electoral Participation in Peshawar. Subsequently, the researcher used qualitative method to investigate the causes of women low turnout. In order to make this research more realistic and cosmopolitans, the participants were selected on the basis of different characteristics, experiences and opinions, which were of direct interest. Thus totally 20 MPAs, MNAs, and female rights activists were interviewed for qualitative analysis. This study was conducted on the obstacle that these female faced in casting vote in the last three General Elections (2002, 2008, and 2013) in the light of expert opinion of female political representatives, political activists and experts' opinion. In the given discussion women participation in the electoral process and the problems they faced in using their right to vote has been discussed. The interviews were unstructured allowing flexibility, liberty of conversation and flow of information.

Analysis and interpretation

The women interviewed ranged from 26-56 years, having different social background. Majority of the respondent were of political background. A few of them belonged to middle class. All of the respondents were familiar with the legislative and policy making process. 10 respondents were provincial assembly members between 2002 and 2013 while one was the member of National Assembly and the rest were political activists and NGOs heads. The interviews were based on the following point:

- To find out the causes of low turnout in the General Elections in KP generally and District Peshawar particularly, and to suggest measures to insure maximum female electoral participation.

Local and global political experts time and again criticize the general elections in Pakistan because of low turnout in general and near to the ground turnout of female in particular. It is perhaps for the reason that they don't use their authority to cast their vote. One important point highlighted during different interviews was that even in posh area of Peshawar, we found that most of the female were still not registered. The flaw is in the mechanism during registration process we put the burden on teachers and they didn't know the procedure and are overburdened by this task. A female activist describes the situation in these words: "Although today women have the authority, but they don't exercise it. They do not use their voices in political and

decision-making process which ultimately affect their voices in the parliament and beyond", (Kalim. T. 2018).

Another reason for women's low participation as voters was having no photographs on their Computerized National Identity Cards (CNICs). The main reason for this is the strict patriarchal structure where men always dominate the social and political scenario. Women are not allowed to show their faces even in photographs. In the last general elections, the mechanized Electoral Roll (ER) failed to support pictures that caused difficulties on voting day. So, 2.7 million women did not cast their vote as their CNICs were not acceptable to the new ER mechanism. A report released by the government prior to the elections shows that almost ten million eligible women were not registered for vote due to different factors. According to the report, the male registered voters were 48 million and the female were 37 million. Almost in 500 polling stations not a single woman cast her vote. Such limitations and restrictions like not allowing them to get registered without male family member's permission, and not allowing them to have photograph on CNIC hamper women's participation to a great extent.

The issue that seriously harms female registration process is the particular mechanism used for the registration of women. Research indicates that the staff hired for registration process is usually untrained teachers, having no former training of the entire process, thus making the entire process extremely inefficient. Amna Sardar also highlighted that the age limit for identity card is 18 years. The CNICs are must for the identity of voters, but it is sorrowful condition that people face many procedural difficulties in getting the CNICs. Many interested candidates fail to cast their votes because of not holding their identity cards. And thus a considerable number of female remained unregistered and did not cast their vote.

Some respondents also emphasized that apart from the allocation of far-flung polling stations, poor arrangement within the polling stations also caused low turnout of female in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa generally and Peshawar particularly. Nearly all of the polling stations were devoid of toilet facilities for female. The absence of such basic facilities cause hurdles for female voter as well as for female staff. Poor arrangements, absence of trained female staff and several other issues and were highlighted during discussion that creates obstacles to active female engagement in state affairs. One of the respondents said: "The challenges that hold women back from voting are lack of facilities, poorly arranged polling booths, usually shared with men, absence of female staff, lack of secrecy, and many other things creates hurdles for women while casting their votes" (Amna Sardar, Personal Communication, 2018).

Almost every respondent (18) argued that Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is a prototypical patriarchal society where the male dominated setup hardly gives a chance to the other half of their population to flourish and stand up for its cause. They said that the feudal system of our society has also caused antipathy toward the female cause. They observed that in the last few general elections some of the political party's candidates on behalf of local elders concluded agreements to stop female from casting

their votes. Thus, almost half of the population became victim of the patriarchal structure, which resulted in systematic exclusion of women from political participation. This in various districts of Pakistan's either in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, FATA, Punjab, Sindh, and Baluchistan. They asserted that: "The deep-rooted patriarchal nature of our culture is holding our women back from voting, especially our rural area's women are not allowed by their husbands and fathers to cast their vote" (Gulalai Personal Communication, 2018).

In order to deal with the patriarchal, authoritarian practices, the role of social and electronic media was appreciated by many respondents. They said that social and electronic media played a vital role in highlighting the voting issues faced by women. They highlighted these agreements of political parties and local elders to stop female from casting their votes. Therefore, the District Returning Officer (DRO) was requested by the Ministry of Human Rights to take required actions to stop the violations of women right to vote. This alertness by media and interventions of other organizations proved fruitful even though in few countryside polling stations female turnout remained zero. Thus due to cultural and structural barriers women role remained insignificant.

A great majority of the respondents (18) suggest that the lack of political awareness on the part of women is the one of the important factors that debar women from political participation. They opined that females need to be educated about the importance of their right to vote. The respondents blamed the feudalistic nature of Pashtun society for enforcing strict practices of *pardah* that indirectly keeps women ignorant of the importance of their right to vote. Women are kept inside they are scarcely allowed to participate in political matters. Due to this reason, majority of them do not know as to how to get themselves registered and how to cast their vote. Lack of awareness on the part of women is a major cause for the meager participation. One of the participants, who was a member of the KP provincial assembly too, said that:

The most difficult for us women is to talk and argue for our rights. The women inside the wall have a lot to say but they need to be encouraged not only about politics, but also about her problems, her life and the issues that concern her. The only way to encourage her to speak out is education. It is solely possible through education that we can see women joining political parties (Nagina Personal Communication, 2018).

A little more than half (12) of the respondents agreed that lack of adequate mechanisms for the monitoring of electoral outcomes and protection of women's mandate, are responsible factors for their political decline. The respondent highlighted the flaws in monitoring of ECP. They said that ECP made an effort to get the record of the male and female turnout separately but the staff failed to observe this practice during counting the ballot papers because of mixing the ballot papers and consequently, could not differentiate between male and female ballot papers. Although ECP provided Gender-Segregated form-XIV to collect separate counting but it failed due to the absence of arrangements (especially no instructions were given to

Presiding Officers). Thus, ECP failed to provide Gender-Segregated Data (on separate form) on votes polled.

According to them orthodox religious orientation and affiliation came up as one of the strong determinants in restricting women from political participation. The untrained and stubborn Mullahs play their role in stopping women from political participation. A senior politician appreciated the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government for taking two new steps in May 2013 general elections. The then caretaker government of the KP issued an order that gave women of the KP the courage to take part in elections. Equally, the Council of Ulema (religious scholars) of Pakistan not only encouraged the move but also reiterated that the participation of women both as voters and candidates is not in conflict with the principles of Islam. Consequently, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) issued orders of re-polling in two polling of the polling stations in Battagram, because women were being debarred from casting their votes in those polling stations. On May 23, 2013, re-polling took place in these polling stations even though the women turnout remained negligible.

Results and Discussion

In a nutshell, politics in Pakistan has remained always obstacle to women political participation for being a multifaceted, notorious, disturbing, aggressive and reactionary.

The findings of this study are based on Data Analysis. The topic where the researcher wanted to pursue the opinion of the respondents was their views about the hindrance in female electoral participation. All these aspects collectively measured the respondents' perceptions about female participation. Following are the findings that emerged in the current study regarding female electoral participation.

The immediate factors that include restricted mobility, weak decision-making power, lack of political skills, financial resources family responsibilities, cultural as well as religious "norms" and practices among the main issues that surfaced during research. Generally, in Pakistan and particularly in Pakhtun society women are influenced by norms and cultural values. In this regard, this research study primarily explored the extent of women political participation in Peshawar, KP, and Pakistan. Pakhtun socio cultural setup is deeply influenced by male dominant patriarchal structure. This patriarchal set up favors male authority and dominance in all spheres of life including politics. The data reveals that illiteracy, gender sensitivity, lack of political skill, defective electoral laws, financial dependency, poor arrangement on voting day, socio-economic and socio-cultural pattern of Pakhtun society, absence of conducive atmosphere on the election day are the main causes that hinders women participation in politics.

Another important point that was highlighted, was that socio-cultural pattern effects women participation. Majority of the respondents strongly agreed that family responsibilities affect women's participation in politics. Majority of the respondents hold the point that the challenge that holds women back from voting are lack of

facilities, Polling booths are poorly arranged, almost shared with men, absence of female staff and lack of privacy and many other challenges create hurdles for these women. Majority of the respondents hold the view that gap between registered voter's women and men also lead to women's low turnout.

Conclusion

The immediate factors that are responsible for meager participation of women include restricted mobility, weak decision-making power, lack of political skills, financial resources family responsibilities, cultural as well as religious "norms" and practices among the main issues that surfaced during research. Generally, in Pakistan and particularly in Pakhtun society women are influenced by norms and cultural values. In this regard, this research study primarily explored the extent of women electoral participation in Peshawar, KP and Pakistan. Pakhtun socio cultural setup is deeply influenced by male dominant patriarchal structure. The data reveals that illiteracy, gender sensitivity, lack of political skill, defective electoral laws, financial dependency, socio-economic and socio-cultural pattern of Pakhtun society, absence of conducive atmosphere on election day are the main causes that hinders women participation in politics.

Future Direction

To accelerate women's effective electoral participation the state authorities shall declare CNIC mandatory at the attainment of 18 years age for all citizens. NADRA should extend its full cooperation to its clients, especially the procedure of women registration both as citizen and as voters. Easy and women friendly methods should be adopted for registration, mainly in rural and remote district; particularly in FATA and in KP. For the automatic enrollment of citizen's CNIC status and correct information-shared method can link between the NADRA and ECP. To get more and more women registered female trained staff is needed to make sure female registration inside the wall of the house by herself.

As majority of the female voters after attaining the age of 18 years gets married and their addresses are changes. Therefore, such developments shall be incorporated instantaneously by the ECP and NADRA in their voter's list and CNIC respectively. The government should take the help of local organization i.e. District Election Commissions, District NADRA units, political parties, NGOs etc., to ensure that all eligible women get registered in the voter's list according to their respective status and addresses. More attention shall be paid to women with disabilities and rural areas, especially of FATA and NAs.

The provision of basic facilities at polling stations especially separate polling booths for female shall be make sure to encourage maximum number of women on polling day. Balloting is a complex method and not easy for uneducated female to cast their vote with privacy. In order to ensure more privacy of vote for female vote casting procedure should be produced among them. Likewise, maximum number of trained

workers should be allotted the responsibility in their nearby station to educate and help the women voters.

Election Commission of Pakistan should appoint well trained staff for gathering the data on sex-segregated form in order to release gender-turnout separately. This mechanism will highlight the female low-turnout polling stations as well as constituencies for which future strategies shall be devised. The religious political parties should eliminate the feelings of anti-women empowerment in general masses. For this; they should promote the policy of women's participation in elections as voters, but also must make efforts for their empowerment in all other public sphere. Government should take the help of media for educating the masses and specially the women folks about the importance of their vote and to guide them for casting the same with their own choice

"One who does not cast his/her vote does not have the right to criticize the government policies".

Social media should increase the women's political participation through broadcasting the programs of celebrities and admired artists. Media (print, electronic and social media) should make the center of attention and give coverage on priority basis to women's activities, women's mobilizations and other groups who are sustaining the women's cause during the election's campaign. This media exposure of women related problems will persuade the voters in both urban and rural parts of the state. The politicians throughout their election process should always recall the general public that women are almost 50% of the state population and their vote will promote their parties if they protect it. It will definitely build a sense of gender equality among voters.

More than half of the Pakistani populations are women, who are living inside the boundaries of the wall. Being a male dominated culture Pakistani politics is also dominated by this class who launch their election campaign outside in different gatherings. House to house campaign is needed that can be made possible only by women political workers. Political female party worker should be encouraged to arrange maximum gatherings for women during and before elections to highlight women related issues and to give them a sense of free community. It will develop a sense of oneness among the female and will boost the political process.

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