Negotiating Patriarchy: Men Support To Women Political Participation In Pashtun Society

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Abstract

Women's political participation remains strained in the sociopolitical and cultural landscape of the Pashtun community, where gender roles are influenced by patriarchal traditions. Despite longstanding cultural and structural barriers, emerging evidence suggests that men's attitudes play a critical role in shaping women's access to political spaces. Girded in Social Role Theory, this research inquires how patriarchal norms and social structures shape men's support for women's political participation in Pashtun society and its impact on women's political agency. The study is qualitative in nature, developing rich narratives using unstructured in-depth interviews from thirty purposive male and female key informants from different socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Data analysis employed thematic coding and interpretive strategies to identify patterns and divergences in responses. Findings reveal a nuanced landscape of patriarchal support: factors such as empowered women's personal experiences, religious reinterpretations, culture and generational shifts, education, media, and men as gatekeepers reveal a complex spectrum of male support ranging from tacit consent to active support. Women participants highlighted the dual impact of enabling participation in local bodies and party politics, while traditional norms continued to restrict women's political agency. Overall, the study shows that men's support is complex rather than uniform, simultaneously enabling and limiting women's political role in the region.
Keywords: Patriarchal support, Women's political participation, Pashtun society, Qualitative study, Social Role Theory, Traditions, Political empowerment

Introduction

Women's political participation in Pashtun society remains constrained by deeply rooted patriarchal norms, social structures, and gender roles. Traditionally, Pashtun men have held authority in family and community matters, limiting women's engagement in public life. However, emerging evidence suggests that men's attitudes play a critical role in shaping women's access to political spaces, making their support an important factor in enhancing women's political agency. This study, grounded in Social Role Theory, explores how patriarchal norms and the social structure influence men's support for women's political participation in the Malakand Division, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, and its impact on women's political empowerment. Globally, women's political participation has increased over time, influenced by legal frameworks, educational opportunities, and social reforms. In South Asia, despite patriarchal traditions, women have attained high political offices, including prime ministerial roles in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. These developments demonstrate that male support, education, and socio-political reforms are key enablers for women's political inclusion. Nevertheless, women's actual political engagement is closely mediated by family structures, where fathers, brothers, and other male elders act as key facilitators or gatekeepers.

In Pakistan, women's political participation has evolved within a patriarchal framework. Constitutional reforms have increased reserved seats for women in legislative bodies, rising from ten seats in 1956 to 60 seats in 2002, with further expansion under later reforms. Political parties, such as the Pakistan Muslim League and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, have promoted women's involvement, reflecting a broader societal shift toward inclusive governance. Men have facilitated women's participation in multiple ways, including voter registration, transportation to polling stations, and civic education, particularly in the context of local elections. Prominent women leaders, such as Fatima Jinnah, Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan, Benazir Bhutto, and others, exemplify how male support has historically contributed to women's political empowerment.

Pashtun society, however, presents unique challenges. Guided by Pakhtunwali, the customary code of conduct, men and elders exercise considerable control over decision-making. Women's roles are traditionally confined to domestic spheres, where they manage household affairs, including childcare, family finances, and social responsibilities. While women are accorded respect within the home, their mobility and engagement in public life have historically been restricted. Nonetheless, progressive interpretations of cultural and religious norms, combined with education and civic awareness, have created spaces for women to participate politically. Women now increasingly cast votes and engage in elections with support from their male family members. In the Malakand Division, Pashtun women navigate a socially conservative environment marked by gender segregation, purdah practices, and historical limitations on public participation. Despite these constraints, men have emerged as critical allies. Patriarchs facilitate access to education, political awareness, and resources necessary for voting and election participation. The study reveals that male support is not uniform; it ranges from tacit consent to active encouragement, influenced by factors such as education, socioeconomic status, generational shifts, and reinterpretations of religious teachings. Women's participation, in turn, strengthens their social and political position, enhancing household decision-making and public engagement.

Social Role Theory provides a framework for understanding these dynamics. The theory posits that societal roles are shaped by social expectations and gender-based potentials. In Pashtun society, men's support for women reflects an evolving role perception where patriarchal authority adapts to accommodate women's capabilities in education, economic participation, and politics. By acting as facilitators rather than barriers, men can enable women to navigate socio-cultural constraints while maintaining respect for traditional norms. This research focuses on understanding the extent and nature of patriarchal support in the Malakand Division, a region with a significant Pashtun population and a historically conservative social environment. The area has experienced political upheaval, militancy, and social transitions, creating both challenges and opportunities for women's political engagement. By exploring the attitudes and behaviors of male family members and community leaders, this study aims to present a nuanced understanding of patriarchal support as a factor in women's political empowerment.

The significance of the study lies in its potential to inform gender-sensitive policies and inclusive governance strategies. Recognizing men as partners rather than obstacles highlights the importance of engaging men in efforts to promote women's political rights. Moreover, this research provides practical insights for enhancing women's access to political participation within culturally sensitive frameworks, particularly in conservative regions where patriarchal norms remain influential. In conclusion, patriarchal support for women's political participation in Pashtun society is complex, multifaceted, and context-dependent. While structural and cultural barriers persist, the role of men as allies demonstrates the possibility of incremental change. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for promoting gender equality, democratic governance, and social inclusion. By situating the study within Social Role Theory, this research emphasizes the interplay between cultural norms, patriarchal authority, and women's political agency, providing a foundation for future interventions aimed at expanding women's participation in the political arena.

Literature Review

The literature indicates that men's support for women's political participation in Pashtun society is shaped by entrenched patriarchal norms, social roles, cultural expectations, and power hierarchies, yet gradual shifts are visible due to education, exposure, and socio-political change, a process well explained through Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2002; Connell, 2005). Changing norms within Pashtun society show that male support for women's political voice is slowly emerging, particularly in urban and settled areas, while remaining conditional and context-specific, influenced by age, region, education, and exposure to modern democratic values (Ahmad-Ghosh, 2003; Rasheed et al., 2023). Cultural transformation literature reveals that patriarchal resistance continues alongside selective endorsement of women's political participation, often framed within religious reinterpretations, kinship obligations, and culturally acceptable boundaries rather than rights-based equality (Ali & Akhtar, 2012; Kandiyoti, 1988; Moghadam, 1994).

From a Social Role Theory perspective, male support for women's political rights is understood as adaptive and situational, responding to changing social expectations, yet critics argue that patriarchal norms remain deeply internalized and reproduced across generations, limiting substantive political agency for women (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Bourdieu, 2001; Taj, 2022). Rethinking masculinity in Pashtun society reflects a gradual shift from domination toward cooperation and empathy, where women's political

participation is increasingly seen as social progress rather than a threat, though this transformation remains uneven and contested in rural and conflict-affected regions (Connell, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Gohar, 2023). Studies on male voices of support highlight that Pashtun men are increasingly advocating for women's political inclusion and representing women's leadership as aligned with Pashtunwali and community welfare, yet such support frequently prioritizes elite or kin-based representation over independent women's leadership (Shah, 2022; Cornwall & Goetz, 2005; Taj, 2022). Male advocacy is further identified as a gap-filling mechanism in conservative settings, where male allies amplify women's political presence; however, this support often operates through guardianship and controlled empowerment, reinforcing dependency rather than autonomy (Ahmad, 2015; Sananuddin, Chitrali, & Ahmad, 2015; Kandiyoti, 2014).

Literature on guardianship and leadership promotion shows that Pashtun men provide legal, moral, and financial protection to women in politics, particularly against backlash, yet decision-making authority largely remains with male elites despite women's formal representation (Chaudhary et al., 2012; Khan, 2018; Saigal, 2020). Strategic male endorsement literature demonstrates that influential men support women's political participation to align with institutional demands, religious legitimacy, and social expectations, without necessarily redistributing patriarchal power or challenging masculine dominance (Diekman & Eagly, 2000; Ahmad et al., 2018; Connell, 2020). Research on male engagement in women's empowerment underscores that institutional backing, media, and education strengthen male support, but permission-based inclusion persists, creating a paradox where women's participation remains conditional on male approval (UN Women, 2019; Shahid & Ahmed, 2018; Kandiyoti, 2016). The transition from resistance to reform is evident as exposure to inclusive governance and modernization softens male opposition, yet deep structural inequalities continue to restrict women's political careers and leadership trajectories (Kabeer, 2015; Smith, 2010; Scott, 1990).

Faith-based and cultural analyses reveal that reinterpretation of religious teachings by male scholars and leaders has facilitated women's political participation, positioning gender equality as compatible with Pashtun identity and Islamic principles, though selective application persists (Zia, 2009; Shah, 2022; Musa, 2022). Overall, the literature reflects a gradual patriarchal paradigm shift in Pashtun society, where education, globalization, and legal reforms contribute to changing male attitudes, yet women's political participation remains uneven, symbolic, and heavily mediated by patriarchal structures (Bano, 2020; Shah & Ahmad, 2018; Moghadam, 1995).

Methodology

This study is grounded in an interpretivist research philosophy, emphasizing the understanding of subjective experiences and meanings attached to men's support for women's political participation within Pashtun society. Interpretivism views reality as socially constructed and shaped by cultural traditions and lived experiences. Ontologically, the study adopts a relativist position, acknowledging multiple realities based on shared values and social contexts. Epistemologically, it follows a subjectivist stance where knowledge is co-created through interaction between the researcher and respondents. Men's support is therefore understood as context-specific, interpreted through gender roles, cultural expectations, and patriarchal norms. Influenced by Husserl's phenomenological focus on lived experience and Heidegger's interpretive emphasis on social and historical context, the study prioritizes holistic understanding while employing

reflexivity and bracketing to minimize researcher bias. The research adopts a qualitative approach to explore perceptions, attitudes, and cultural factors influencing men's support for women's political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This approach enables an in-depth examination of community dynamics that are often overlooked in quantitative inquiry. Qualitative methods allow flexibility, contextual sensitivity, and openness to emerging perspectives, producing rich descriptive insights into how patriarchal support is formed, negotiated, and constrained within Pashtun society. Open-ended interviews were conducted until thematic saturation was achieved, ensuring that the findings remained grounded in participants' lived experiences. A single case study design was employed to examine women's political participation in the Malakand division. This design facilitates a detailed understanding of real-life social, cultural, and political settings shaping men's attitudes and behaviors. As noted by Yin (2009) and Stake (1995), case study research enables in-depth inquiry into complex social phenomena within their natural context. The selection of Malakand allows focused exploration of Pashtunwali, religious influences, tribal structures, and gendered power relations that frame men's supportive or restrictive roles. The study is descriptive in nature and applies Social Role Theory to interpret men's engagement with women's political participation in this specific context. Data were collected primarily through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted using Google Forms as an asynchronous qualitative tool. This method enabled access to geographically dispersed respondents and provided psychological comfort when addressing sensitive issues. Thirty purposively selected key informants participated in the study, including male and female scholars, political actors, civil society members, and women involved in political activities. Primary data were complemented by secondary sources such as books, journals, research articles, theses, and reports to strengthen contextual understanding.

The target population comprised individuals relevant to the study objectives, while the selected respondents represented a knowledgeable and accessible sample. Respondent selection was based on interest, experience, and willingness to participate. Participants were categorized to capture diverse perspectives on patriarchal support, political agency, and power relations. Interviews were guided by twenty open-ended questions, allowing respondents sufficient time and anonymity to express their views freely. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. Interview responses were coded systematically to identify recurring patterns, shared meanings, and divergent experiences. Themes were developed in alignment with the research questions and objectives, enabling structured interpretation while retaining contextual depth. This method ensured that analysis remained flexible, participant-centered, and reflective of the lived realities shaping men's support for women's political participation in Pashtun society.

Analysis and Discussion

Traditional Role of Women in Pashtun Society and Hurdles

Women in Pashtun society have traditionally been confined to domestic roles defined by family identity and honor, reinforcing obedience, modesty, and exclusion from public and political life (Ahmad-Ghosh, 2003; Malik, 2024). Patriarchal norms limit women's mobility, education, and decision-making power, while social stigma discourages deviation from prescribed roles. Structural barriers such as weak legal access, limited representation, and economic dependence further marginalize women (Sani, 2024). Social Role Theory explains these restrictions as culturally constructed role expectations embedded in social structures.

Education as Catalyst for Change in Socio Political Participation

Education emerges as a key transformative factor reshaping women's sociopolitical roles by enhancing awareness, confidence, and civic engagement (Chaudhry, 2017; Khan, 2024). It challenges rigid gender norms and supports gradual shifts in men's attitudes, aligning with Social Role Theory's emphasis on adaptive role change. Educated women increasingly enter public, political, and professional spaces, supported by generational change, media exposure, and advocacy, contributing to broader societal inclusion (Anwar, 2024). Economic empowerment has altered traditional gender roles by enabling women's participation in the workforce and reducing dependency on male breadwinners (Amir, 2015). Education and awareness facilitate women's entry into diverse economic sectors, enhancing autonomy and decision-making capacity. Social Role Theory explains this shift as evolving role performance leading to adjusted social expectations. Despite progress, cultural constraints continue to limit full economic and political independence (Aftab, 2024).

Cultural Shift: Women as Pillars of Societal Development

Pashtun society is experiencing a gradual cultural transition in which women increasingly contribute beyond domestic roles to economic, social, and public domains (Ahmad-Ghosh, 2003). Awareness, education, and generational change have fostered acceptance of women as contributors to development. Social Role Theory accommodates this cultural adaptability, recognizing evolving roles within customary frameworks (Jan, 2024). Women's inclusion strengthens societal cohesion and equitable progress (Rashid, 2019; Rahman, 2024). Inclusive development requires women's active participation in political, economic, and social spheres. Exclusion perpetuates inequality and undermines sustainable progress (Shah, 2020). Social Role Theory emphasizes equilibrium between genders, recognizing women's contributions across sectors including education, health, governance, and leadership (Oseiath, 2024). Balanced progress is unattainable without integrating women into decision-making structures (Pervez, 2024). Women's participation is a democratic necessity rather than a symbolic right (Khan, 2015). Mandatory voting thresholds ensure representation but often restrict women to voting rolls without broader political influence. Democratic governance requires women's inclusion in leadership and policymaking to address gender-specific issues effectively. Political participation enhances accountability, peace, and inclusive governance in Pashtun society. Cultural resistance continues to challenge women's leadership in Pashtun society, particularly in remote areas with limited education (Connell, 2005). However, modernization and education have softened rigid norms. Women's political participation is essential for rights advocacy and justice, countering exclusionary practices (Malik, 2024). Social Role Theory critiques patriarchal dominance as misaligned with evolving social realities.

Global and Local Dynamics: Shift from Barriers to Opportunities

Global human rights frameworks and liberal ideologies have influenced local discourses on women's political inclusion (Zada, 2024). Education, media, and globalization have expanded opportunities while cultural resistance persists. Respondents acknowledge progress driven by awareness, legislation, and male support, though leadership capacity building remains necessary (Ahmad, 2024). Women's political participation reflects gradual progress shaped by global frameworks and national reforms, alongside enduring patriarchal resistance (Yousafzai & Gohar, 2014). Cultural traditions continue to limit leadership roles, yet persistent struggles have expanded political spaces for women. This

ongoing transition underscores the need for sustained institutional and cultural support. Liberal ideologies and globalization have reshaped perceptions of women's political roles through exposure to inclusive governance models (Khan, 2024). International conventions such as CEDAW have pressured states toward gender-sensitive reforms. Shifts in family dynamics and shared responsibilities further support women's political engagement, consistent with Social Role Theory.

Digital platforms have amplified women's political voices by enabling advocacy, awareness, and mobilization despite cultural constraints. Social media challenges traditional norms while exposing tensions between cultural expectations and modern aspirations (Yousafzai & Gohar, 2014). Social Role Theory accommodates these evolving dynamics within changing technological contexts.

Economic Empowerment as Spark

Economic independence enhances women's political agency by strengthening decision-making power and public engagement (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). While international advocacy supports empowerment, cultural norms and restrictive policies limit impact (Nisar, 2024). Sustainable progress requires integrating economic, educational, and political strategies. Media, education, and generational change have reshaped attitudes toward women's leadership, with youth exhibiting greater acceptance (Waqar, 2024). Social Role Theory supports evolving gender roles aligned with societal development. Legislative reforms, such as the 2017 ECP rule, have increased women's voter participation while challenging cultural resistance (Dawn News, 2018). Legal compulsion has encouraged men to support women's voting, often as compliance rather than ideological change (Malik, 2024). Education and awareness are central to fostering genuine acceptance, particularly among younger and educated men (Jan, 2024). Social Role Theory explains evolving gender roles under changing social demands. Limited political awareness among men restricts support for women's participation (Ali, 2024). Patriarchal norms and religious conservatism reinforce resistance, creating uneven progress. Education and cultural shifts remain essential for reducing these barriers (Zada, 2024).

Perception of Gender Roles Importance: The Critical Role of Men's Support

Men's support is critical for women's political participation in Pashtun society (Jan, 2024). Changing household roles and shared responsibilities have gradually altered perceptions of women's public capabilities. Social Role Theory links these shifts to broader societal acceptance while emphasizing cultural balance (Kabir, 2016).

Urban areas exhibit greater acceptance of women's political roles due to education and exposure, while rural regions remain constrained by patriarchy and economic dependency (Khan, 2015; Malik, 2024). Educational inequality, financial dependence, and cultural conservatism continue to restrict participation. Addressing these barriers requires region-specific educational and economic interventions. Family and societal approval significantly influence women's political engagement (Khan, 2024). Negative societal perceptions discourage participation and reinforce gender bias (Ahmad-Ghosh, 2003). Empowerment requires addressing internalized norms and strengthening confidence through education and awareness. Media and digital platforms play a pivotal role in raising awareness and reshaping perceptions of women's political participation (Rasheed, 2024). Social media normalizes women's leadership, particularly among youth, though access remains uneven (Ali, 2024). Awareness and education are essential for dismantling stereotypes and promoting inclusive political representation (Sani, 2024).

Findings

The study, after detailed discussion, presents the following finding:

Persistence of Patriarchal Norms and Education

Pashtun society remains deeply rooted in patriarchal norms. Despite women's education, empowerment, and rights, men continue to be recognized as primary authorities. Tribal customs, hujra culture, jirga system, and Pashtun codes uphold male dominance regardless of societal development. Male guardians—husbands, fathers, brothers, or in-laws—control women's political participation. Women's voting, candidacy, and political discussions are often subject to male approval. Male family members act as gatekeepers, either supporting or restricting women's engagement in politics. Educated men are more likely to support women's political participation. Awareness of gender equality, democratic values, and constitutional rights fosters recognition of women's roles in governance. Education exposes men to international norms and legal frameworks, creating long-term potential for gender-sensitive political change. Exposure to print, electronic, and social media has increased men's awareness of women's rights. Media campaigns highlight legal frameworks, human rights, and women's political participation, encouraging men to support equality and inclusive governance, challenging traditional societal norms.

Misconceptions and Religious Interpretations

Misinterpretation of religion remains a barrier to women's political participation. Some men oppose women in politics based on religious grounds, while others, guided by progressive religious scholars, affirm women's rights to consultation and political engagement. Contextual religious interpretation can challenge gender-based restrictions. Even supportive men impose cultural restrictions. Women are expected to comply with family interests, traditional values, modesty, and male authority. Support is largely practical, not ideological, limiting women's full political independence within the Pashtun cultural framework. Younger men and women, especially university-educated, demonstrate progressive views. They support women as voters, leaders, administrators, and decision-makers, challenging traditional orthodox beliefs. Societal roles are gradually evolving. Men increasingly recognize women's potential in political leadership, demonstrating flexibility in traditional role expectations. Women's crisis management and governance competencies validate the assumptions of social role theory.

Barriers to Male Advocacy for Women's Rights

Even men aware of women's political issues often refrain from openly supporting them due to fear of social backlash, accusations of unmanliness, and lack of institutional protection, discouraging active advocacy. Moreover a growing number of men, both in urban and rural areas, actively support women's political participation. These educated male allies act as role models, bridging family and public support, indicating a shift toward cooperative gender relations in politics.

Conclusion

This study critically examined women's political participation and men's roles within Pashtun society. Findings show that patriarchal support remains central, with traditional gender roles still assigning political agency to men. However, a gradual shift is evident, especially among younger and educated men, who increasingly recognize women's political potential. Male support is often conditional, limited to women who conform to cultural expectations or family ties, reflecting a transitional societal phase. Social Role Theory underscores that roles are shaped by culture and tradition rather than biology, and

evolving societal needs—education, technology, and civic engagement—highlight the changing capacities and contributions of women. Education, media, awareness campaigns, and progressive religious interpretations emerge as key factors influencing male support. While some men act as allies in promoting women's political participation, others remain constrained by traditional mindsets. Pashtun men serve as gatekeepers and potential agents of change. Long-term gender equality in politics depends on male-targeted sensitization, broad awareness, inclusive policies, and community-level transformation of cultural norms. Despite persistent cultural barriers, the study identifies both hope and potential for transformative progress in women's political roles.

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