

Socio-Cultural Obstacles to Women's Participation in Politics, In Rural Areas of Balochistan, Pakistan

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Abstract

Women's equality in terms of political participation is hindered by customs and traditions. Women in Pakistan are restrained by old customs and traditions that limit their involvement and contribution within the four walls of their home. This study investigates various socio-cultural barriers to Baloch women's participation in political life in Balochistan, Pakistan. Data for the study was obtained through interviews using snowball (chain referral) sampling method. Respondents were interviewed until saturation was reached. It has been found that socio-cultural norms are the barriers that prevent Balochwomen from participating in political activities. Socio-political conditions prevailing in Balochistan are found to influence women empowerment thereby depriving them of improved quality of life. The result of this study can be useful for policymakers in formulating policies that will lead to emancipation of Baloch and Pakistani women.

Keywords: Political participation, Women, Socio-cultural barriers, and Balochistan.

1. Introduction

The countries where women are politically empowered and participate in leadership tend to be more egalitarian, inclusive, democratic and responsive (Naz, Ibrahim & Ahmed, 2012). An indicator of the level of social development of a society is the extent of empowerment of its women (Aamir, 2015). Women's participation in politics is an important metric of the extent of development of a country (Latif, Usman, Kataria & Abdullah, 2015). Because of their reproductive role, women contribute more to society than is mandated by their share of the population (Naz, 2011). Although women constitute more than 50% of the world's population, they do not receive adequate representations in politics, the primary decision making platform of the society (Latif, *et al.*, 2015). Globally, women have attained only 15% representation in politics. Only 12 countries reserved one third of the parliamentary seats for women (UNDP, 2005).

Moreover, there is considerable difference in the type and intensity of concentration of participation in political affairs across countries and regions. This is created due to the differences in their economic situations and the socio-cultural setups (Naz, *et al.*, 2012) (Naz & Chaudhry, 2011).

Despite the fact that the Constitution of Pakistan provides full rights to women to enjoy participation in political activities, even then, their participation in politics remains negligible. Historically, Pakistan's parliament and highest concentration of women parliamentarians has been much lower (Awan & Zartashia, 2015).

Awan and Zartashia (2015) further endorsed the assertion that due to geographical and religious factors, women's participation in the politics of Pakistan is significant. Because their lower literacy rate deprives Balochwomen of their fundamental rights, they do not have the opportunities to play an important role in the development of a society. Development of the country is adversely affected because regulations and customs favor men and providing only an inferior status to women in cultural, economic, religious and political activities.

However, the province, Balochistan, is the least developed among the five provinces of Pakistan (Punjab, Sindh, KhaiberPakhtoonKhuwa and GilgitBaldistan). Problems such as lack of employment and of commercial activities abound. Baloch society is conservative. It is nearly impossible for women of Balochistan to participate in public campaigns because they are likely to be disowned by their own families. The powerful conservative forces of religion and tradition make it hard for women to reshape their roles (Paterson, 2008). Although, Balochistan is most richly endowed in terms of natural resources, the political environment and culture suffer from a platform of problems such as the low literacy rate of women, high maternal mortality rate, lack of employment and the widening gender gap. The poor condition of women in Balochistan is normally attributed to the rigid customs of society. This has been accentuated by discrimination against women in different grounds by the state (Baloch, 2012).

Lack of awareness of their rights and unavailability of resources and cause women to be deprived of their rights in all spheres of life, by the society and culture of Balochistan (Awan, 2012). The tribal nature of Baloch society deprives Baloch women of the kind of liberty enjoyed by women in urban Pakistan (Aamir, 2015). However, there are no historical records of Baloch women having ever been prevented from casting votes (Shahid, 2013). The primary focus of this research is to determine how the inclusion of Baloch women in politics has been impacted by the hurdles created by the society and culture of Balochistan.

This paper commences with a review of the extant literature. The supporting theory will be identified next. This will be followed by a description of the methodology adopted and conclusions obtained.

2. Literature Review

Long-term well-being in the realms of culture, society, economics and politics can be achieved only when women are politically empowered (Harris, 2010). The country can develop only when its entire labor force consisting of men and women is put to productive work. Women can be considered to be fully empowered if they are suitably represented in the politics and they can participate fully in the decision-making process (Shah, Aziz, & Ahmad, 2015). Political participation authenticates the Association and the identity of the top it also makes possible for them to be aware and Parmesan of their attachment with other groups of people made by and to be proud of it (Weitz-Shapiro & Winters, 2008).

Further, Women can be deemed to have achieved political empowerment when they are given full representation in Central and provincial parliaments and full right to unimpeded adult franchise. Women can be deemed to be personally empowered when they have the liberty to make decisions about their private issues (Sohail, 2014). Women encounter hurdles globally when attempting to participate in political activity. The deprived legal encountered by women who desire to participate in politics is the traditional notion that women are weak, require the support of the male person, and are therefore unsuitable for the demands of political work (Latif *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, Social and cultural values as well as the restrictive economic environment make women appear to be inferior citizens. This discourages them from participation in politics (Naz, *et al.*, 2012). In male-dominated Pakistan, any woman who has made headway in Pakistani politics has done so only because of her relation to a powerful male politician who has decided her level of political involvement (Latif *et al.*, 2015). All attempts for the betterment of the society would be futile if women are not empowered and not provided adequate representation (Naz & Ahmad, 2012).

Despite the fact that women in Pakistan are insured rights equal to those enjoyed by males, they continue to be discouraged in all spheres (Beal, 1994 cited in Naz, *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, social and institutional incorporation process is also empowered males in the male dominated system (Basu, 2009). Naz (2011) supports the protection that political power in this world is under control of men.

This perception is applicable to the leadership of political parties, and officers elected or appointed to policy formulation bodies in civil services. Lack of adequate representation of women in politics is a consequence of male domination of political and economic resources (Aslam, 2002).

Women in tribal areas of Balochistan live in conditions that are socially more adverse than those prevailing in other parts of the country area. Social norms restrict women's mobility. This limits the range of employment opportunities possible and women have to work for lower wages as compared to men for the same work (Shah *et al.*, 2015). Women's reduced mobility and their limited visibility both adversely affect their political participation at all levels starting from the simple act of casting their vote to standing as a candidate. Purdah as well as security concerns of women in rural areas also negatively impact their political empowerment (Kalam, 2014). The social

cultural environment of Balochistan is principally male-controlled. This reduces female access to education and political participation (Naz, 2011).

Women are blatantly discriminated against in Balochistan. They have no access to enabling opportunities which are available to women in any modern and civilised society (Baloch, 2012). (SDPO, 2009 cited in Shah *et al.*, 2015) maintained the position that country-wide gender-based inequality exists in Pakistan despite Constitutional guarantees and several policies and programs initiated for this purpose. Constitutional reforms have been unable to produce any impact on the rise and prevalence of security issues that affect women. These informal and formal barriers to women's participation in politics need to be taking cognizance of and addressed by legislators, party members and citizens in order for women to use fully participate in politics (Markham, 2013).

Women's empowerment in the Balochistan region has been widely influenced by traditional religious and cultural factors. The cost the women to remain, backward, unmotivated, suppressed and confined to the domestic chores (Paterson, 2008). The liberal Feminism theory also postulates that women have been excluded from many of the most important public spheres of modern social, political and economic life. They aim at, as Alison Jaggar writes, "to incorporate women into the mainstream contemporary society". Liberal feminists who examine women and world politics have outlined the extent to which women are underrepresented within traditional areas of (national) and international political activity. They also seek to show ways in which women may overcome barriers to their participation (Jaggar, 1983).

Various reasons are offered for the underrepresentation of women in politics. Popular forms of explanation are our society's steering of women away from political activities, security issues and the notion that political decision-making and public responsibilities are "a man's topic" about which women are assumed to have neither interest nor expertise (Barlow & Selin, 1987; cited in Bello, 2013; Wicks & Lang-Dion, 2007).

Social arguments and systematic barriers are used to explain women's underrepresentation in national and international decision making bodies. This does not automatically conclude that women lack the will or the ability to participate in the upper echelons of national and international political activities. It indicates the systematic discrimination against them by men in authority who refused to promote and as well as by legislation which limits their opportunities for employment, training etc; Shvedova(2005).

Proposals emerging from the Feminist theory suggest that the concept of division of labor within the home, societal attitudes, carrier, and educational opportunities must change before women in greater numbers are unable to participate in national and international decision making positions. Liberal feminists and accepted the distinction between public/private, political/nonpolitical matters. They accept the view that women have been excluded from politics because elections, foreign policy, diplomacy, who, and "high politics" are not issues which are of interest to women especially and leaving children (Whitworth, 1994).

This point of view predicts that greater inclusion of women in the public and political realm will eliminate gender equality in this sphere. It ignores the structural features of societal and political actions. Stated differently, liberal feminism accepts the prevailing power structures as legitimate.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative research approach in order to identify the influence of socio-cultural practices in hindering participation in politics in the rural areas of Balochistan, Pakistan. Qualitative research provides detailed description and analysis of the quality of the human experience (Marvasti, 2004). Qualitative analysis ensures its thorough understanding of the subject matter, especially when the interview is used to help obtain an in-depth explanation of the current situation.

Snow ball chain referral sampling method was adopted to provide a basis for validating the findings. Informants were selected through referrals made among people who are knowledgeable or know of others who possess characteristics that are of interest to this research. This is particularly important when the focus of study is a sensitive issue and concerns a relatively private matter. It requires contact with many cable insiders to help locate people for study (Blernackl& Waldorf, 1979).

In general, qualitative researchers are more attentive to the role social and cultural context playing in all phases of research, from developing a research question, through data collection and to writing and reporting the findings (Bamberger, 2000 cited in Marvasti, 2004).

3.1 Data Collection

The paper uses interviews as a measure for collection of data. The interviews conducted were semi structured comprising of open ended questions. There is a difference of opinion between researchers about the appropriate size of the sample (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002). Merriam (2002) further argued that it is important to interview individuals from which one can learn a great deal about the issues central to the purpose of the study. Therefore, to understand the views of men and women in regard to the socio-cultural barriers, the researcher selected men and women whom it was believed were able to provide rich information on the topic. Five women and five men were interviewed to understand and obtain a clear picture of the involvement of the socio-cultural barriers hindering women's participation in politics. Ten informants were interviewed similar to the work of (Anigwe, 2014).

The participants were women and male members of their families. All residents of rural Balochistan. The 10 participants were located and contacted with the help and reference of the local person who is knowledgeable about this community. The participants were also selected on the basis of their willingness to share their views and opinions about matters which restrict and prevent them from taking active part in politics, their knowledge of the subject matter and their life experiences. These individuals ranged in age from 25 and older. They were accessed easily and, through informal conversations, expressed a great desire to voice their opinions and beliefs and his research along. The interviewees had varying educational and socio-economic backgrounds. Some tribal chiefs also extended their cooperation in research work by helping locate the interviewees stop.

The tribal chiefs wield great influence on the lives of the tribes. They impose their cultural customs and norms on their communities and have an impressive impact on the lives of women. Most of the women had never been to school. Some of the men also were not well educated. Some of the females were interviewed in their homes. The men were interviewed in the fields while they were working. Some interviews took place in the tribal chief's homes. Women of nomadic tribes undergo greater hardship and suffer more than women living in villages suffer. Nomadic women could not be interviewed because of their tribe's movement and migration across the Baluchistan Afghanistan border. Some details of the informants are given in the table.

Table: Details of the informants

| Respon dent | Location | Code Name Edu | Age | Designation |
|------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|------------|------------------------|
| R1 | Rural Boundaries | Primary | 25 | Housewife |
| R2 | | Illiterate | 34 | Housewife |
| R3 | | Illiterate | 38 | Housewife |
| R4 | | Illiterate | 42 | Housewife |
| R5 | | Illiterate | 50 | Housewife |
| R6 | | Secondary level | 55 | Tribal head |
| R7 | | Illiterate | 60 | Farmer |
| R8 | | Illiterate | 65 | Farmer |
| R9 | | Middle | 68 | Shopkeeper |
| R10 | | Illiterate | 70 | Caretaker of livestock |

4. Data Analysis

In the case of women's empowerment in politics, their involvement in decision-making is of equal importance to the provision of opportunities for illiterate voters to fully participate in elections (Rai, 2005).

No standardised tool has been developed for the purpose and women empowerment is studied with the help of its dimensions (Rehman *et al.*, 2015). This section first examines in detail the main issues such as the social and political aspects. This is followed by an examination of the general issues involved with studying Baluchi culture and lifestyle.

5. Result and Discussion

Moreover, Most of the interviewees elaborated upon three significant social-cultural barriers that restrict women's access to political participation. The first barrier was male domination and the second was a misinterpretation of religious edicts regarding women and their participation in politics. The last barrier to women's participation in politics was the nomadic way of life. Male domination refers to the complete superiority and authority possessed

by the men over the women. In this system, men exercise all power where as women are kept subordinate to the in every way (Sultana, 2012).

Classic Islam enjoins equality between men and women. Islamic rules are often misinterpreted by men so as to become biased against women and in favor of men. This is accentuated in a male-dominated partly out of a society where the interpreters of Islamic laws have not received any substantial theological education. Such misconceptions are convoluted and more prevalent than simple misunderstandings caused by innocent incomplete information (Marshall, 2003). Because the nomadic people do not settle down permanently in one location, they cannot be reached by development programs. These people develop severe limitations in regard to basic human rights and needs. These include access to education and health. They live in harsh conditions where survival as a greater priority than providing their women folk with political empowerment (van der Kwaak, Baltissen, Plummer, Ferris & Nduba, 2012).

In this study, the target population was selected through snowball sampling, which included those women who did not have national identity cards, which is prerequisite for casting vote. The sampled population, women living in rural Balochistan, do not possess National Identity Cards (NICs). These cards are prerequisite to casting vote. Their lack is another barrier to participation in politics by rural women. The results of the analysis presented three major themes: underrepresentation of women in political participation was male dominance, religious misconception, and nomadic life. The participants across the interviews believed above mentioned factors were the main obstacles that the women believed restricted their ability to participate in the politics in rural areas of Balochistan. Three major themes appeared as a result of the analysis. These were male domination, misinterpretation of religious edicts and the nomadic way of life.

Table: Summarised Findings of the Socio-Cultural Obstacles Hindering Women's Political Participation

| Socio-Cultural Barriers Hindering Women's Political Participation | Mentioned by |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Male Dominancy | |
| Women do not have decision making power. | R1, R2, R3, R4, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10, |
| Purdah (men do not want to allow women to come in contact with other males) | R1, R2, R3, R4, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10, |
| 2. Religious Misconception | |
| Unethical and Unreligious | R1, R2, R3, R4, R7, R9, R10, |
| Violation of Islamic rules (women cannot be a leader) | R1, R2, R5, R8, R9 |
| 3. Nomadic Life | |
| Lack of awareness about political participation (as Primary aim to care of the livestock) | R1, R3, R5, R7, R8, R10 |

Source: Authors

This study clearly indicates that the majority of the women blamed male dominancy being a serious hurdle on their way to political empowerment. It can be seen in column 1 where the following responses were obtained.

This connotes the ideas of the Tribal chief of the prominent tribe of "Mengal" as saying:

"...women who are in politics have direct contact with men, she might be an open invitation for harassment, women are our honor, our prestige, we don't want to expose it in front of other males, politics is the game of men, outside social environment, security issues, do not allow us to let our women to join any political party, women have their own role inside the home they have to play". (7 interview)

Because Baloch women are not politically empowered, they are unaware of the political environment of the country. Women are not permitted out of the four walls of the home and are not permitted to join any political party. Any empowerment of the women, political or economic is considered as a threat to their authority by the man. The security situation in the province also is a cause of concern for all. Women are more vulnerable because of their gender. The few female field workers available were prevented from leaving their homes to cast their vote. Even women candidates and complained about the threats and harassment they encountered during elections. However, at the moment, women's participation in politics as assumed a less important position as a burning issue as compared to several others that will Baluchistan faces.

This fluid unsettled situation of subjugation, which favors male empowerment and domination in all spheres of life including political. This domination of the political structure by men is a factor that has ended women's

political empowerment (Bari, 2005; Aamir, 2015; Naz, 2012; Naz *et al.*, 2012). Men dominated the political process to the extent that women who possess identity cards were allowed to cast their vote according to the choice of their menfolk. It was found that in areas bordering Afghanistan, the limitations imposed by tradition were reinforced by those imposed by “religion”.

It is also observed that:

“In this area religious party is active, the majority of the people are followers of this religious party so, the opponent parties decided mutually that they will not ask and allow us to vote. Since then even we donot have female polling stations. According to these religious party women political interference is unethical and unreligious, because any women who want to join politics, they have to come out from their homes which is against Islamic laws”.(Interview 4)

Misinterpretation of “Islamic” edicts is also a significant obstacle to women’s empowerment. This is in spite of the fact that Islam offers complete equality between men and women. Religious parties and pseudo-religious people tend to impose restrictions on women from participating in politics. Misinterpretation of religion is a significant barrier to women’s participation in politics. Rural Baloch culture is based on custom and traditions that are male-biased and patriarchal. Since two Baloch women depend upon them as economic, social, legal, and other support, they follow their traditional way of life and never deviate from the existing order and social norms. Religious extremists prevent women from political involvement. “Religious” values and social traditions work together and strictly prohibit women from deviating from social norms. These norms include resistance to women leaving the four walls of the home and participating in politics (Kalam, 2014).

Lack of ability to participate in politics is one of the significant factors that strongly impede women’s empowerment in Baluchistan. Many Baluch tribes herd livestock and follow a nomadic way of life. They do not remain in one place long enough for the menfolk to want to participate in local politics. In a situation like this, it is unthinkable that their women folk who participate in local political life.

A middle aged man observed that:

“We are nomads we are seasonal migrants in summer we come to this [study area Noshki] place in the winter we go to warm places. We don’t have any official legal document through which we can claim our permanent residence, we just think about livestock, we are not aware about any government, being a male I have never cast a vote in my life so how my wife can. We have our own tribe our own social set up. We never needed any government agency to resolve our problem” (Interview 10)

Because tribespersons are constantly moving in search of forage, they are not registered by the government as residents and therefore voters of a particular area. Consequently, most women (and men) and not voting National Identity Cards. Without these cards, it is impossible to vote. Interviewees living close to border areas highlighted the fact that the nomadic way of life and non-availability of National Identity Cards prevented political activity. Because of the lack of communication facilities and existence of the vast empty spaces, the government lacked the resources and the willingness to launch a program for registering the tribal people as voters.

The research by Marry Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mills Reveals that the prevalence of gender-based educational policies, male-oriented laws and the rigidity of the male-dominated culture introduces practices that discriminate towards women. Liberal Feminism maintains that women in the miserable lives in traditional societies and our deprived of most of the social and economic right such as the right to political affiliation, contesting elections and casting votes.

The philosophy of Liberal Feminism as argued by Ritzer (2000) maintains that women can claim equality with men and that gender inequality is a result of patriarchal and sexist patterning of division of labor. Ritzer (2000) maintains that gender equality can be produced by transforming division of labor through re-patterning of key institutions such as law, work, family, education, and the media.

This study aims to explore the socio-cultural barriers that hinder women’s participation in politics of rural Baluchistan. The study finds that women in Baluchistan continue to remain underrepresented in politics due to male domination of society. They lacked the power to make decisions. Religious laws are misinterpreted by men to safeguard male interests. Nomadic way of life prevents permanent residency of rural women in a given area. All these factors aggregated together to deprive women of all their socio-economic and political rights.

6. Conclusion

The existing social norms and cultural values adversely impact the lives of Balochwomen. Their ability to participate in political life is significantly and adversely impacted by male domination, misinterpretation of religious laws and the nomadic way of life. This study investigated socio-cultural barriers that hinder Baloch women's participation in politics. Data was collected through interviews of respondents who had been approached using snowball chain referral sampling. The study revealed that the main sources of deprivation of the women were male domination, religious misconception is and the nomadic way of life of the population. Their women lack National Identity Cards, a lack access to polling stations, and are prevented from leaving the four walls of the homes to participate in political activity. The factors given above are compounded by the government's failure to provide security to the women candidates and voters.

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