

FEMALE VOTING PREFERENCES IN DISTRICT BUNER, KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This project investigates female's voting preferences in District Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with a focus on two general elections 2018 and 2024. How socioeconomic, religious, and cultural factors influence female's voting preferences remained the specific objectives of this project. Interpretivist paradigm (qualitative research) guided the methodological application of this research project. Data for this project come from focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews held with women voters and women political activists. In the first phase, FGDs were held with the participants and in second phase, the respondents were individually interviewed to thoroughly investigate socioeconomic, religious, and cultural barriers to female voters when making their voting preferences. Theoretical framework of this project is based on intersectional feminism/intersectionality and liberal feminist theory which strengthened the analysis of primary data. This research project found some socioeconomic factors that influenced female's voting preferences, such as women's economic dependency, insufficient voter education among women, and limited employment opportunities. Moreover, the study explored women's social identity, family and tribal ties, and cultural values and beliefs as cultural barriers to female voting preferences. The study further found religious identity, misinterpretation of the Islamic values and practices, and the intersection of Islamic values with sociocultural norms as the main religious factors. The study recommends increasing voters' education among women and starting community outreach programs to engage with women as the major policy measures to ensure women's independent (of socioeconomic, cultural, and religious barriers) voting preferences.

PREFACE

This research was motivated by our strong interest in comprehending the intricate interactions of social, cultural, and religious elements that influence female's voting preferences in District Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The importance of female political involvement is paramount; nonetheless, numerous institutional and societal obstacles persistently affect their electoral decisions. This study specifically analyzes the general elections of 2018 and 2024, highlighting the ongoing and changing issues encountered by female voters in the region.

This research was an academically enriching and hard endeavor. This qualitative study, rooted in the Interpretivist Paradigm, encompassed extensive fieldwork, comprising focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with women voters and political activists. We want to document the perspectives of women in Buner, emphasizing how their voting preferences are influenced by economic dependence, cultural customs, familial and tribal connections, and religious interpretations.

This analysis in this study is informed by intersectional feminism and liberal feminist theory, offering a comprehensive analytical framework for examining the intersection of socioeconomic, religious, and cultural factors with female's voting preferences. The findings indicate that low voter education, economic restraints, and social norms persist in obstructing female voting preferences. This report recommends legislative measures such as voter education programs and community engagement campaigns to empower women and improve their political autonomy.

We are deeply grateful to the women of Buner who participated in this research, sharing their ideas and experiences despite the challenges they face. Their concepts have been crucial in shaping the study's conclusions and suggestions. We extend sincere appreciation to Research for Social Transformation and Advancement (RASTA) and its team for their financial and administrative support at every stage. We are grateful to our mentors, colleagues, and all who supported me during this academic pursuit. As Principal Investigator express my gratitude to the administration of University of Buner for their support in the completion of this task. I aim for this endeavor to enrich the broader discourse on women's political empowerment and to encourage further study and policy actions in this crucial area.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ANP	Awami National Party
AWP	Awami Worker Party
ECP	Election Commission of Pakistan
FAFEN	Free and Fair Election Network
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GE	General Election
JIP	Jamat-i-Islami Pakistan
JUI-F	Jamiat Ulema-e- Islam-Fazlurehman
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
MNA	Member of National Assembly
MPA	Member of Provincial Assembly
NA	National Assembly
PA	Provincial Assembly
PATA	Provincially Administered Tribal Areas
PML-N	Pakistan Muslim league-Nawaz
PPPP	Pakistan Peoples Party Parliamentarian
PPP-S	Pakistan Peoples Party-Sherpao Group
PS	Polling Station
PTI	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf
PTIP	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf Parliamentarian
QWP	Qaumi Watan Party

INTRODUCTION

Women in a traditional society in Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have been facing many challenges to their public and political life (Khan, Ahmad, & Shahid, 2024). In this context, women's political preferences are no exception. They (women) face various socioeconomic, religious, cultural and structural challenges when making their voting preferences (Begum, 2023). Socioeconomic challenges have been shaping and reshaping women's political experiences including their voting preferences. For instance, women's economic dependency makes them politically dependent too. Female's voting preferences as a part of their political life are affected by their economic dependency too. Dolan (2018) claimed that women's social status has influenced their say in making voting preferences. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province it constitutes half of the population but still they female are not independent in making their voting preferences.

According to the 2023 census, women constitute 48.5% of Pakistan's population, indicating a nearly equal gender distribution in the country (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). This means women have a substantial demographic representation but due to the social, political, and economic challenges they are unable to have independent say in casting votes. It can be argued here that women's voting preferences cannot be improved until their socioeconomic and political development is ensured. Historically, Pakistan in general and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa specifically women were excluded from the public and political domains. This happened because of the structural constraints which encompassed patriarchy, religious influence and socio-cultural traditions. The threat of violence, poor literacy rates, and societal prejudices frequently prevent women from exercising their right to vote or openly run for office. Because to local agreements or intimidation, women's turnout is still quite low in some places, underscoring the need for focused efforts (Ali et., al, 2022). The total voter turnout in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa significantly declined from 44% in the 2018 general elections to 39.5% in the 2024 elections. The decline in voter turnout is particularly noticed among female voters. Female voter turnout was about 31%, according to Form-47 of the Elections Commission of Pakistan (ECP). This indicates a sharp decline in female voter turnout from previous General Elections (FAFEN, 2024).

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, women have a complex array of problems that affect their voting inclinations. Entrenched patriarchal norms and conventional cultural beliefs frequently constrain women's political role. Socio-economic limitations, such as reduced literacy rates and restricted job prospects, exacerbate these challenges, rendering numerous women inadequately informed or equipped to make voting preferences. Moreover, security apprehensions and the potential for violence in certain regions further deter active participation in the political process. The female voter turnout in District Buner dropped to 23% in the general elections of 2024 (ECP, 2024). Moreover, according to Form-48 of ECP data out of total 81 female polling stations 21 polling stations have zero percent turnout in General Election 2024 (ECP Report, 2024). There hasn't been much of an increase in women's political engagement despite a plethora of government measures aimed at supporting women's political empowerment through various reforms. The ongoing decrease in female voter turnout suggests that long-standing socio-cultural barriers still prevent women from participating in politics.

Furthermore, the apparent ineffectiveness of these initiatives suggests that the legislation intended to promote increased female political involvement were not implemented to their maximum

potential. This inefficacy emphasizes a crucial gap that exists between the creation and implementation of policies, highlighting the difficult obstacles that women must overcome in order to exercise their right to vote. The results of the 2024 election show how urgently stronger and more focused initiatives are needed to address the underlying reasons of women disengagement from politics. Interventions of this nature need to address the systemic obstacles and deeply ingrained social conventions' that prevent women from fully engaging in politics, rather than just making cosmetic changes. In order to ensure that future policies are comprehensive and efficiently implemented, it is essential that they be planned with a sophisticated grasp of these problems. Pakistan's political scene can only become more inclusive and representative of its entire population through such unified efforts.

In district Buner, as in other districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, female's voting preferences are profoundly shaped by socio-cultural and religious issues. An intricate interplay of socio-cultural and religious factors influences several aspects of life, including political conduct and decision-making processes, significantly affecting society. District Buner is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and deeply rooted traditional social norms, providing a unique context in which these factors shape the political landscape.

Furthermore, these socio-cultural influences have a pervasive influence on female's political decision-making, frequently restricting their agency and autonomy in the election process. Not only does the community's reinforcement of gender-specific roles impact women's voting rights, but it also has an impact on their total political representation and empowerment. As a result, any study of women's voting preferences in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa needs to take into account the significant influence of these socio-cultural variables, which still influence the political choices and actions of the province's female population.

Socio-cultural issues, especially gender norms, profoundly influence female voting preferences in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Mushtaq & Adnan, 2022; Husain et., al., 2017). The region's conservative ideology imposes rigid gender roles, with men predominantly controlling family decisions, hence constraining women's political autonomy. Shah et., al. (2021) emphasize that women encounter societal pressure to conform their political preferences to those of male relatives, frequently via coercive or implicit expectations. The established patriarchal structure further limits their autonomous engagement in the political process. These gender norms impede women's political representation and reinforce male dominance in decision-making. Addressing this necessitates confronting social views via community activities and policies that enhance women's political engagement.

The political inclinations of women are influenced by prevailing societal perceptions regarding their functions within the family and community (Naz et., al, 2012). In their role as primary caregivers, women place significant emphasis on matters such as security, healthcare, and education (Gine & Mansuri, 2018). Furthermore, the impact of religious beliefs is significant, guiding women to endorse candidates who promote moral or religious principles (Rafwa, 2016; Said et., al., 2021). The convergence of socio-cultural and religious factors constrains women's political agency, necessitating that they cast their votes in accordance with familial and communal anticipations. Grasping these elements is crucial for formulating policies that promote women's autonomous engagement in the political sphere. It is imperative that interventions confront the constraining

effects of gender norms, traditions, and religious beliefs on the political agency of women. A sophisticated strategy will facilitate the development of targeted initiatives, thereby fostering a more inclusive and representative democratic process in District Buner and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

1.1 Socio-Cultural and Historical Landscape of District Buner

District Buner is 1865 Square Kilometer area located in Malakand Division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The natural beauty of Buner makes it more attractive for the people of other districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It has diverse landscapes and more than 350 archaeological sites. Geographically, District Buner is situated between approximately 34°30' N and 34°55' N latitude and 72°15' E and 72°45' E longitude. It is a strategically located area in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, sharing borders with Swat District to the north, Shangla District to the east, Mardan and Swabi Districts to the south, and Malakand District to the west (District Buner, 2024; Khan, 2018).

The environment, economics, and cultural legacy of District Buner, which is situated in the Hindu Kush foothills, are greatly influenced by its varied and untamed terrain. The district is distinguished by gently sloping plains, rich valleys, and mountainous mountains. Zafar Hayat Khan in his PhD study identified 373 archaeological sites in the different parts of Buner. One of its most notable geographical features is Elum Ghar, a holy peak that is valued for both its cultural significance and its natural beauty. Important agricultural centers are fertile valleys. There are Barandu, Budal and Chamla which are the main sources of water to its fertile land. Buner has total 136,880 Acres agricultural land which has 37,316 Acres irrigated and 99, 562 non-irrigated land (Khan, 2018). The source of income of the major portion of population is agriculture sector. Major crops are wheat, rice, vegetables, maize and tobacco.

Moreover, the other sources of income are marble industries and foreign remittances. A large number of locals working are gulf countries and Malaysia. Therefore, the local people calls Malaysia there next home. It is also observed that many local people secured nationality of Malaysia and their children have Malaysian nationalities.

District Buner also has a rich documented historical heritage. The memories of previous armies, many of whom suffered military setbacks at the hands of insurgents in these mountainous regions, reverberate across the Buner valleys. The Karakar, Daggar, Ambela, and Malndrai passes were traversed by Alexander the Great's army in 327–326 BC. The Mughal army did the same in 1586 AD. This history has been mentioned by Olaf Caroe in *The Pathan* and Sir Robin Lane Fox in *Alexander the Great*. Following land settlements by the revered Sheikh Mali, the Yousafzai tribe arrived in Buner in 1519 AD. The people of the area, especially the Yousafzai, have never been conquered by an empire, not even by Alexander the Great or the British (Caroe, 1957; Fox, 1973).

After passing through Karakar, Torwarsak, and Daggar in 1587 AD, Akbar's army was routed at Malndrai, where Raja Bairbal and his 8,000 men perished. Bairbal's body could not be recovered by Akbar. For more than 130 years, Buner served as a haven for Muslim combatants, such as Hazrat Syed Ahmed Shaheed and his supporters, during the Sikh occupation of the Frontier. The Syeds of Sitana, Malka, and Takhtaband supported the Mujahiddins against the Sikhs and the British. Syed Akbar Shah of Sitana ruled from 1849 to 1857, but following his death in 1857, the region was left without a ruler until 1915 (Caroe, 1957).

The legendary Ambela War began in 1863 A.D. when British forces tried to cross Ambela to reach Malka. The British suffered significant losses, including 238 fatalities and 670 injuries, and were unable to accomplish their goal. Only after independence in 1947 were they able to take control of Buner. Around 1000 AD, Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni overthrew the final Buddha emperor Raja Geer, allowing the Yousafzai tribe to arrive and bring Islam to Buner. Sufis and Ulamas then helped propagate Islam to Buner. This spread was sped up by Hazrat Pir Baba's arrival in 1502 AD, and his shrine at Pacha Kalay is still a revered location (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2024).

In 1915, Syed Abdul Jabbar Shah became the Badshah of Swat but was exiled in 1917 by Mian Gul Abdul Wadood, who took over as ruler. In 1949, he was succeeded by his son, Mina Gul Jehanzeb. Up until its merger with Pakistan, Buner was still a part of Swat. Buner was elevated to a district on July 29, 1969 (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2018).

The majority of the population belongs to Sunni sect of Islam. There are also a small number of Sikh and Hindu community people who are living after the independence in Buner. In General Elections 2024 a Hindu female candidate Dr. Saveera Parkash also contested on Pakistan Peoples Party ticket on provincial assembly seat. The predominant ethnic group in Buner is the Yousafzai tribe of Pakhtuns; however, the Gujars and Ajar communities are also settled in the region. Furthermore, there are also a significant number of non-Pakhtuns or Kasabgar. Kasabgars are that part of community which provides services to Pakhtuns with a reward of wheat or maize. These Kasabgars have a particular status in Buner i.e., services during Gham and Khadi . An elder from the village of Krapa related a story of how the Kasabgar people in the village refused to attend a funeral service because of their stable financial status. The village's Pakhtuns responded by blocking their entrance points and stating that they had to "buy their own paths to home". It demonstrates that district Buner has a traditional society.

The education sector of district Buner is lag behind the other districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. According to 2023 census literacy rate in District Buner is 43.7%. The ratio of male literacy rate is 60.6% and female 27.4%. One reason is the ratio of female schools and colleges are lesser than male students. In Buner 438 boys and 200 girls primary schools, 59 boys and 43 girls middle schools, 59 boys and 21 girls high schools and 27 boys and 14 girls higher secondary schools (Annual Schools Census Report of Government Schools, 2021-23). These statistics reflects a significant gender gap in education attainment in Buner.

In district Buner the male and female ratio is federal government jobs is 16:1 respectively. The ratio of male is highest than female employees in federal government jobs. In provincial government jobs the ratio is of male and female is 53:03 (Pakistan Labour Force Survey, 2020-21). Moreover, the private sector jobs are very limited that could not engage a large number of female in Buner. Thus a majority of female are household wives or unemployed. It is observed that a large number of female family members are financially dependent on male family members. Another important aspect is the presence of joint family structure in Buner. It is commonly appreciated among the community to have a joint family structure which is a symbol of power in the society. According to the 2023 Census Report, District Buner has a 0% urban population (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Jansen (2020) study suggests that individuals residing in urban areas tend to exhibit greater openness and moderation compared to those living in rural regions.

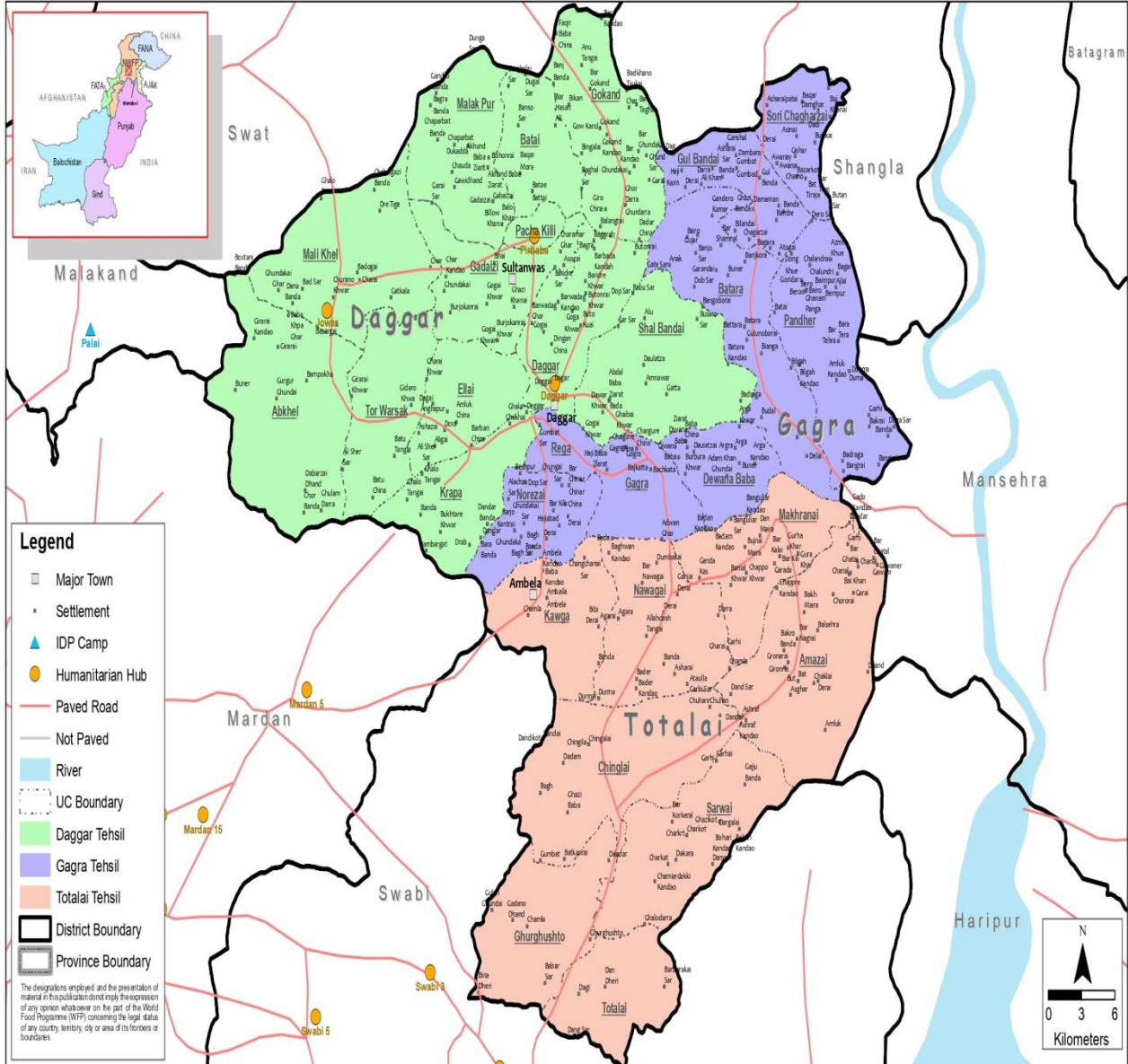
Moreover, there exists a minimal amount of opportunities for women. The stringent cultural codes, such as Purdah, Ghairat, and Paighor, constrained women from engaging in external employment. There exists a well-known Pashto proverb: “Khaza ya da kor da Goor,” which translates to “A woman is either for the home or the grave.” The proverb reflects the deeply entrenched male-dominated cultural norms that serve to reinforce patriarchal power structures while simultaneously undermining the status and agency of women within society. Moreover, religious restrictions curtailed women's political engagement in district Buner. The inhabitants of Buner possess a profound connection to Islam. Notable Sufi shrines include Pirbaba, Shalbandi Baba, and Dewana Baba. Numerous individuals from various districts of Pakistan visit these locations. The percentage of pilgrims diminished following the onset of militancy in 2008-09.

Islam functions not merely as a religion but also as a cultural identity for the Pakhtun people. The code of Pakhtoonwali is interconnected with Islamic practices. Religious practices are fundamentally integrated into their lives. The robust connection to Islam reinforced the influence of religious elites (Ulema or Mullah) within Pakhtun society (Khan, 2017). The Ulema's significant influence in the public sphere prompted their engagement in politics. Various religious political parties participate in elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In contrast to other provinces of Pakistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa exhibits a significant electoral support for religious political parties. Religious political parties frequently inhibit female engagement in politics, a trend also evident in District Buner. Data from Form-48 indicates that, among 81 female polling stations in the district, 21 were classified as locations where women were prohibited from voting. This restriction is predominantly upheld by local elders who collectively deny women the opportunity to exercise their voting rights. Moreover, numerous prominent religious political leaders endorse and strengthen this stance, thereby sustaining obstacles to women's political participation in the region.

In conclusion, the voting preferences of females in District Buner are significantly shaped by socioeconomic, religious, and cultural factors. Conventional gender roles and deeply rooted patriarchal norms often limit women's capacity to engage in voting process and exercise autonomy in making voting preferences. The constraints are exacerbated by religious interpretations that dissuade women's involvement in the voting process, bolstered by influential political and community leaders. The voting preferences of women are significantly shaped by social norms and the pressures exerted by local elders, who often prioritize family or community interests over individual choices. The interplay of these factors restricts women's political agency and shapes their voting decisions in alignment with the prevailing socioeconomic, cultural, and religious norms of the region.

Figure 1: Map of District Buner

BUNER DISTRICT



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LITERATURE REVIEW

Classical political socialization literature states that the family shapes youngsters political beliefs and conduct, regardless of gender. Salem *et. al* (2003) stated parents, teachers, friends, and the media shape a person's political views and beliefs. Parents teach their children politics, according to Jaros (1973) and Valentino & Sears (1998). According to Jennings *et. al.* (2001) and Hyman (1959), family strongly influences young people's political views. Plutzer (2002) and Rosenstone & Hansen (2003) found that educational institutions, peer groups, and volunteer organizations are alternative socializing factors besides family. Quintelier *et. al* (2007) found that parents influence their children's political views. He then examined that parents pass it on to their children. Mehmood and Rauf (2018) noted that family dynamics shape Khyber Pakhtunkhwa youth political views and conduct.

Inglehart (1977) and Norris (2003) argued that women in traditional communities tend to have a lower level of political preferences than men because they are less interested in political issues. Married women often go along with the political opinions and decisions of their husbands. Women are thought to have conservative beliefs, which make them more inclined to support political parties that are conservative or religious (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba, 2001; Almond and Verba, 1963). In district Buner it is also observed that political party or political preferences of the head of family impacts on the political preferences of the youngsters (male and female) in the household. The important argument is that the entire family, including both men and women, relies on the head of the family for economic, political, and social support.

When a given political party or a candidate is viewed positively and spoken in a favorable way, it creates a sense of connection among all family members, particularly the younger generation of both genders. On the other hand, if the head of the family does not have any political connections, the situation may be different. In these situations, various family members may acquire preferences for certain political parties, even if the family follows the voting selections of their children. In these situations, the preferences of male offspring have a greater impact on voting decisions than the needs and desires of females. The main problem could be that female family members are more dependent than male family members in social, political, and economic situations (Vanderkooy, 2011).

According to Eisenstein (1984) study, patriarchy is a system that is controlled by men and that has an impact on the political standing of women in society. The patriarchal system is a hierarchical structure that gives men more rights than women in society. Adrienne Rich describes a framework in which males use coercion, cultural pressure, rituals, traditions, legal frameworks, language, conventions, etiquette, education, and labor division to dictate the responsibilities of women, ultimately leading to the domination of women by men (Sarho, 1997). This idea consists of two components of patriarchy: the dominance of men over women and the subordinate role of women in society. The patriarchal system encourages women to be dependent on men in social, political, and economic matters. In many cultures, a typical reason given for this is that women are physically weaker than men and so cannot do hard work. This idea of physical fragility is created by society.

Since early childhood, this has had a psychological impact on girls. Observations show that in these societies, little girls are usually given dolls, whereas boys are given toys such as cars and weapons. The problem is getting worse in a traditional society like the Pakhtuns, who live near the border

between Pakistan and Afghanistan. A traditional Pashtu saying, "*Khaze La Kor Day Ya Goor*", which translates to "Women are either for the home or for the grave," illustrates the seriousness of the situation. This saying plainly shows that women are not allowed to leave their homes. That said, the fact that modern communication tools and technology are available to the general people is causing a gradual and continuous change and improvement in the situation. Every day, the ratio of female educational attainment to employment opportunities is increasing. On the other hand, "Masculinity Politics" remains a global problem. A person is continuously striving to retain his status as the most powerful figure in politics. This demonstrates a strong link between patriarchy and politics. The patriarchal structure that is common among Pakhtuns, like with other communities in Pakistan, influences women's political behavior, particularly how they vote. It has made women reliant on their male relatives for social, political, and economic assistance (Naz *et. al*, 2012).

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as a whole, and in District Buner in particular, women have far less political authority than men. Gender segregation has made the economic and social differences between men and women worse and has influenced the political views of women who vote. It has been noted that women often require the permission of a male family member in order to exercise their right to vote. The family lives in the basic tier of this social structure, which is further divided into nuclear and extended family kinds. Davies (1965) argued that a nuclear family consists of parents and their children, whereas an extended family includes a wider range of relatives, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews. A family is divided into male and female members based on a hierarchy of gender.

In our society, male family members have more social, economic, and political power than female family members. There are several reasons for the prevalence of male dominance in society. The importance of religion is emphasized in the first phase. During the 1960s, when General Ayub Khan was in power, conversations about women in leadership positions began to take place in religious communities. A large number of Islamic scholars think that women are not allowed to hold positions of power in Islam. The problem caused the general public to be uncertain about women's political engagement and empowerment. The Ulama's differing opinions on the matter of women's political participation demonstrate that an average person can easily become polarized on any issue related to religion. The argument both protected and expanded Ayub Khan's authoritarian power while at the same time discouraging women, notably Fatima Jinnah, who was the younger sister of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, from seeking any active political role in the future. In the 1980s, when Benazir Bhutto began her career in national politics, a similar conversation was started again. Both political events echoed the prevailing narrative within religious circles, which were strongly hostile to women's political empowerment and involvement.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, namely in District Buner, conservative religious communities deem it *Haram* and illicit for women to attain political empowerment and engage in political and social activities. The scholars from that group substantiate their perspectives using passages from the Holy Quran and some traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Consequently, there are no female candidates contesting for general seats from the Jamiat-i-Ulema Islam (Fazal ur Rehman group), Jamiat-i-Ulema Islam (Sami ul Haq group), Jamaat-i-Islami Pakistan, and other conventional religious (Islamist) political factions. Maulana Gul Nasib Khan, the former provincial Amir of JUI-F, articulated his and other scholars' discontent with women's elections to the parliament for reserved seats at a

discussion with academics. Gul Nasib Khan (2016) posits that the party would not have engaged women in politics absent the constitutional mandates and the operational framework of parliament.

The 17th constitutional amendment to the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan states that women must make up 33% of the members of any legislative body in the country. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has taken important steps to increase women's participation in politics. One of these steps is the requirement that at least 10% of the people who vote at each polling station must be women (ECP, 2013). These actions highlighted how important female voters are in elections in Pakistan. The leaders of political parties have now acknowledged the importance of votes cast by women.

An analysis of socio-cultural structures reveals that women occupy a relatively constrained political and social role within Pakhtun society. Her responsibilities are confined to issues pertaining to her family and household. Illiteracy, economic dependence, and social structure are the primary factors contributing to this degradation. The state's involvement is inadequate and disheartening, as a limited percentage of women in the selected regions have access to colleges and institutions. The quantity of high schools and colleges for women was insufficient to meet societal needs. The tradition is evolving in several domains due to enhanced communication and transportation accessibility. Consequently, numerous females are being relocated to distant institutions to pursue their education. The increase in women's political power is evident; however, achieving a state of balance may require a decade or more. It is somewhat comforting to know that, despite the many social, political, economic, and administrative challenges that exist, a large number of women continue to vote. However, female voting behavior and preferences are still dependent on the male members of their families.

2.1 The Impact of Women Political Exclusion on their Voting Preferences in District Buner

Political exclusion is the process of intentionally preventing someone from participating in political activities. It could be referred to as political marginalization, annihilation, or segregation. The process of women's political exclusion involves limiting or preventing their engagement in politics, which includes restricting their ability to mobilize and raise awareness. Bilal (2017) stated that there are many structural, functional, and personal factors that are different in various social situations in today's society, and these factors are responsible for the exclusion of women from political structures and processes. Women in politics symbolize conflicting ideas that limit women's ability to participate and gain power in politics. This part of the dissertation looks at a number of reasons that have led to the political exclusion of women in Buner.

According to Naz *et. al* (2012), the political empowerment of women is hindered by the values, norms, and discriminatory social structure of the society. Pakhtunwali, which is the code of life for the Pakhtuns, is the basis for all of these societal standards and ideals. According to Olaf Caroe (1958:24), Pakhtunwali is a code that governs Pashtun society. It comprises the following concepts: *Jirga* (Council of Elders), *Malmastiya* (Hospitality), *Nanawati*, *Ghairat* (Honor), *Purdha* (Veil), *Badal* (Revenge), and *Paighor* (Jan & Aman, 2015; Khatak, 2008). *Ghairat*, *Purdha*, and *Paighor* are major barriers to women's ability to vote independently and gain political power. Farzana Bari (2005:4) used the concept of gender ideology to explain how women are excluded from politics and how they are empowered. She divided society into two genders: female, who were limited to domestic roles

such as wife, mother, and sister. The second type is a society in which men have control over all social, political, and economic issues, and men are the dominant gender. Connell (1987) argued that women's dependence on others for social, cultural, and economic support leads to their political marginalization in society.

Another major factor contributing to the political marginalization of women is political parties. In Pakistan, the leadership of major political parties, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, is mostly made up of men. Women have limited prospects within the organizational systems of all major political parties. Currently, there are very few women in leadership positions in the Pakistan Peoples Party, Pakistan Muslim League-N, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, Awami National Party, Muttahida Qaumi Movement, Jamaat-i-Islami, and Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Islam-F, among other political parties. It has been observed that, when it comes to the distribution of party tickets during elections, male candidates are given preference over female candidates. As a result, there are very few female candidates who run for general seats in elections. Political parties are preventing women from participating in mainstream politics in Pakistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In the 2008 general election, many political parties made informal agreements in various areas to restrict female voting in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (SDPI, 2013).

Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) a non-governmental organization reported that, in Swat, Charsadda, Swabi, Buner, Peshawar, and Malakand Protected Area had the highest percentage of voting places with a female turnout of zero percent (0%). In the Swat area, 29% of polling stations for women had a 0% turnout of female voters. In Charsadda, Swabi, and Peshawar, the equivalent ratios were 15%, 12%, and 9%, respectively (SDPI, 2013). As a result, the Election Commission of Pakistan created a law that requires 10% of the votes at each polling station to come from women, due to informal agreements that were against women voting. If the percentage of female voters is less than 10%, the election at that polling location will be considered invalid and will be rescheduled. Figure 1 shows that there is a large difference between male and female candidates in a number of regimes. It may be concluded from this data that female politicians have been marginalized in national politics since the founding of Pakistan.

There is no clear structure for improving the representation of women in election regulations. The regulations for elections mostly give men an advantage over women. In the 2002 general election, there were seventy-one. Pakistan has nine million registered voters. According to the ECP Report from 2002, there were 38.8 million male voters and 33.2 million female voters among the total number of registered voters. Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT) reported that, the number of registered female voters in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa decreased by 45% during the general election in 2008. In 2002, there were 3.92 million registered female voters in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. By 2008, that number had dropped to 2.17 million (PILDAT, 2013). According to a new TDEA survey from 2019, there is a difference of 2.6 million between the number of registered male and female voters in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The small number of registered female voters suggests that the ECP's election procedures are focused on men and discourage women from getting involved in politics.

It is unfortunate that martial law has been imposed on several occasions during the course of Pakistan's political history. During their time in office, every martial rule administrator put a stop to and weakened the progress of democratization. They put the constitutions on hold and then got rid

of them. Martial authorities were always against politicians and political parties. The Public Offices Disqualification Ordinance (PODO) and the Elective Bodies Disqualification Ordinance (EBDO) were both enacted by General Ayub Khan. General Zia banned political parties, whereas General Musharraf overthrew the elected government of Nawaz Sharif and created new political parties to oppose the major political forces. All of these restrictions obstructed the democratic processes, which had a direct or indirect effect on the political development of both men and women.

2.2 Challenges and Barriers to Women Political and Electoral Participation

Women's electoral participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is severely hampered by institutional, social, and cultural impediments. Women's political participation is further hindered by deep-rooted patriarchal standards that frequently limit their ability to vote and run for office. They also face barriers to education and financial resources. Furthermore, these challenges are made worse by insufficient infrastructure and security concerns in the area, which deters women from taking part in the political process. Notwithstanding these challenges, attempts to empower women and advance greater inclusivity continue, underscoring the necessity of persistent programs to improve their political participation and representation.

The 2018 General Elections saw low turnout due to a number of obstacles that the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) highlighted as impeding women's ability to vote. Male family members frequently play a crucial role in women's political engagement, especially when it comes to getting a National Identity Card (NIC), which is required for voter registration. Women have a difficult time getting a NIC if they don't have the assistance of a male relative. There are accounts of men seizing control of women's NICs and casting votes on their behalf, so even in cases when women are competent to vote, their decision-making authority is usually surpassed by the male head of the household. As they prioritize their obligations to support their family, many women work in factories or in domestic tasks, which restricts their capacity to take time off to vote (FAFEN, 2023).

Sarah Khan analyzes the gender disparity in voting behavior in Pakistan in her blog post on the IGC website. She points out that although more women are registering to vote, there is still a sizable 9-10% difference in voter turnout between men and women. It's interesting to note that this difference is greater in urban than in rural settings. This research disproves the notion that metropolitan areas, where resources and knowledge are more readily available, would encourage higher female involvement rates. According to the investigation, societal and cultural barriers-which are likely more ingrained in urban settings-play a major role in this discrepancy (IGC, 2024).

However, Cheema *et. al* (2021) address the question of whether urbanization helps or inhibits women's participation in Pakistani elections. The report, which highlights a greater gender disparity in urban regions, uses data from the 2018 elections to show that women's involvement in big cities is 8.5% lower than in rural areas. The results cast doubt on the notion that greater urbanization boosts women's political participation by lowering care giving responsibilities or raising labor force participation. According to the research, exposure to political violence and low levels of political party involvement among women voters are important variables in cities. Education and women's engagement in urban contexts are favorably correlated.

Saeed *et. al* (2020) study examines the obstacles that women in District Dir Upper, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan face when trying to participate in politics. It demonstrates how gender

segregation, patriarchal systems, misogynistic views, and conservative social norms all seriously impede women's participation in politics. Information gathered from 200 female voters who have registered to vote shows that stigma, fear of becoming a victim, and lack of support from political parties and the government all work against women's participation. Recommendations to improve women's political participation in the area are included in the study's conclusion.

Hamida Bibi's qualitative study looks into why women in Peshawar, don't vote in the general elections. It lists important obstacles, such as cultural norms that uphold patriarchy, ignorance, practical difficulties, and subpar facilities at polling places. Based on interviews with activists and political figures, the study shows that structural problems like inexperienced registration personnel and cultural constraints, like not allowing photos to be used for identification, seriously impede women's ability to vote. To increase women's participation in the political process, awareness programs and legislative measures are suggested (Bibi, 2020).

This article investigates the low female voter turnout in the general elections held in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, in 2013. Administrative, cultural, political, and religious hurdles are identified as the main causes of this problem. The study emphasizes that administrative barriers rank first, followed by cultural and religious influences, and based on a poll conducted across six districts. According to the study, removing these obstacles is essential to increasing women's political engagement and guaranteeing a more inclusive democratic process (Shah, *et. al*, 2020).

The research pieces focus on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province address the topic of low political engagement among women in Pakistan. They listed various obstacles, such as cultural constraints, patriarchal social standards, and poor polling place infrastructure. Administrative difficulties, such as undertrained employees and logistical roadblocks, make matters worse. Women's participation in elections is significantly restricted by religious and political issues, which also contribute to the consistently low voter turnout among this demographic (Bilal & Ahmad, 2021).

Different studies highlight how crucial it is to raise public awareness and enact legislative changes in order to increase women's role in political process. The elimination of societal and religious stigmas connected to women's involvement in politics, as well as focused campaigns educating women about their right to vote, is among the recommendations. When taken as a whole, these pieces show how desperately systemic changes are needed to make Pakistan's political environment more inclusive of women.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Theoretical framework of this study includes of some theoretical insights borrowed from intersectionality/intersectional feminism, liberal feminism, and theory of change model. From intersectionality, the work of Kimberly crenshaw (pioneer of intersectional theory) is taken to analyze socio-cultural and religious factors influences women's voting preferences. Crenshaw's concept of structural intersectionality is specifically used to analyze how different social, cultural, and religious structures in the District of Buner affect women's voting preferences. Crenshaw's structural intersectionality states that different factors, such as social, economic, ethnic, religious, and social class intersect each other and influence women's experiences on the public domain including women's political experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). The analysis in this project is also drawn on liberal feminism. John Stuart Mill's (a British philosopher and economists) concept of classical

liberty is used to analyze how women's voting preferences adapts new shapes when they get liberty from sociocultural and religious structures of the society. By classical liberty, Mills mean that individual liberty is essential for the well-being and political progress of society (1859). The concept of classical liberty is used here to analyze how women's voting preferences can be improved while getting liberty from the oppressive sociocultural, religious, and gender structures.

The Theory of Change Model (TOC) is also significant to the analysis of data in this project of women's voting preferences. Theory of Change Model argues that a step-by-step approach in a project is paramount in achieving its goals. This process actually helps us how to identify key factors that drive change in a social or political phenomenon (Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2006). The analysis in this project is strengthened while drawing on the Theory of Change Model to know how women's voting preferences adopts changes when it comes to the sociocultural and religious dynamics of the society in District Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

In order to make an in-depth understanding of Female's voting preferences and the dynamics behind these preferences in district Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa the study employed qualitative methods and procedures. In the first stage, secondary data were collected and the main source was published data of the Election Commission of Pakistan focusing on general elections of 2018 and 2024. Doing document studies (results of 2018 and 2024 general elections), descriptive analysis method was employed to analyze women's voting preferences. This focused on which political party was preferred by women voters in the mentioned elections. Sarantakos (2012) asserts that, descriptive analysis during document studies is an elementary method that aims to summarize the data, identify main trends, and present descriptions. In this project, descriptive analysis of the election documents was done to identify and summarize the women's voting preferences made for different political parties in the general elections of 2018 and 2024.

In the second stage, primary data were collected from women voters and women political activists including men politicians, lawyers and academicians through FGDs and in-depth interviews to confirm the voting preferences identified and summarized in the first stage. Four focus group discussions and 23 interviews were conducted with women voters and women political activists. The application of focus groups varies with a research paradigm. Within qualitative research model the application of focus group discussions gives us access to the construction of meanings during the discussion on a particular variable (Sarantakos, 2005). In this context, we have held four focus group discussions with the women voters and political activists including men politicians, lawyers and academicians to explore how sociocultural and religious factors were meaningful to them when casting votes. This practice has given us the original soul of how these sociocultural and religious factors were meaningfully molding women's voting preferences. During these focus groups participants indicated some other dynamics related to sociocultural and religious factors influencing women's voting preferences for which individual interviews were conducted with the participants.

We conducted 23 interviews with women voters and political activists. In qualitative research, interviews are used as a method of data collection to provide a flexible and freely environment to the participants to explore the research problem in an in-depth way (Sarantakos, 2005). In this way, we used an interview guide comprising some preliminary questions about how sociocultural and religious factors, such as how men dominance, social relations, *Baradari* system (*Dala Tapala*), and social ties with a political party, and religious thoughts influenced voting preferences of women voters. During the discussion some other supplementary questions about the research problem raised and we asked the respondents accordingly. After recording the interviews, the voice recordings were translated into meaningful text and then visited and revisited to get familiarity with the data. Similar responses were clubbed together and assigned cods accordingly. All these processes were done in line with Clarke and Braun's (2017) thematic data analysis method. The forthcoming section of this project presents secondary and primary data analysis.

3.1 Data Analysis

3.1.1 Secondary Data Analysis

This section of the project comprised of secondary data analysis. It mainly encompasses through gender-wise turnout in the general elections of 2018 and 2024. The analysis then

moves to the polling-station wise turnout of the mentioned elections. Secondary data analysis then finally shows women voting preferences in the 2018 and 2024 general elections.

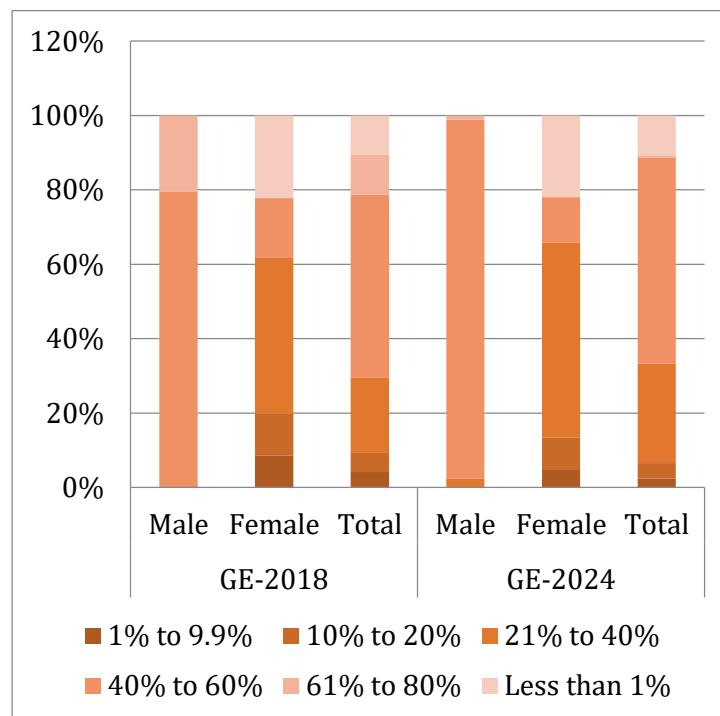
In first stage the data entry enumerators made a data sheet of the female polling station (81 GE-2018 & 82 GE-2024) and male polling stations (88 GE-2018 & 82 GE-2024) of general elections 2024 & 2018 of National Assembly constituency NA-9(10). The main objective of this data is to analyse gender wise preferences of the electorate in District Buner.

3.1.2 Gender-wise Voter Turnout in GE-2024 & 2018

In the National Assembly constituency NA-10 Buner, the number of registered women voters for the General Elections of 2024 was 259,646, representing 46% of the total electoral rolls. Out of these, 25,931 women cast their votes, making up 10% of the registered women voters.

Comparatively, in the 2018 elections, there were 195,171 registered women voters in the constituency, with only 10% exercising their right to vote. This indicates a consistent trend, as only 10% of registered women participated in both the 2018 and 2024 elections.

Figure 2: Turnout Category by Polling Stations in GEs 2018 & 2024



While the female voter turnout remained unchanged at 10% between the two elections, there was a notable decrease in male voter turnout, dropping from 24% in 2018 to 21% in 2024. Overall, the total voter turnout (including both men and women) in GE-2024 was 16%, a decrease from the 18% turnout in 2018. This represents a 2% decline in the general voter turnout for NA-10 Buner.

The voting patterns of women who turned out to vote were analyzed to understand their voting trends, decline in the overall turnout in GE-2024 with comparison to GE-2018.

This analysis compares the voter turnout percentages of Polling stations in NA-9 (10) Buner for males and females across different turnout categories in the General Elections of 2018 (GE-2018) and 2024 (GE-2024).

The provided graph illustrates the voter turnout categories by polling station (PS) type, segmented by gender (Male, Female) for the General Elections of 2018 and 2024 respectively. The turnout percentages are divided into six ranges: less than 1%, 1% to 9.9%, 10% to 20%, 21% to 40%, 40% to 60%, and 61% to 80%, each represented by a different color. Facts from the data reveals that in the 2018 elections, the majority of male and female polling stations recorded turnout in the 40% to 60% range. Significant portions also fell in the 21% to 40% and 10% to 20% categories. This pattern was consistent across the total polling stations. By 2024, while the 40% to 60% turnout range remained predominant for both male and female polling stations, there was a noticeable increase in the 21% to 40% category. This shift indicates a broader distribution of voter turnout in 2024 compared to 2018 (List of Polling Stations with 0% turnout attached in Appendix-I).

Comparing 2018 versus 2024 General election, the turnout range of 40% to 60% consistently held the majority for all polling station types. However, 2024 saw a notable rise in the 21% to 40% turnout category across both male and female polling stations. Additionally, the turnout categories of less than 1% and 1% to 9.9% continued to have minimal representation in both years. This comparison highlights a trend towards greater voter participation within the 21% to 40% range in 2024, while maintaining a significant turnout in the 40% to 60% range. These trends suggest shifts in voter behavior, with a notable increase in higher turnout categories for both men and women in GE-2024 compared to GE-2018, despite a decrease in several lower turnout categories. This indicates a growing engagement among voters, especially in the mid to high turnout ranges.

3.1.3 Voters Choices in 2018 and 2024 General Elections

The gender disaggregated turnout at the polling stations enabled research team to analyze and compare the electoral choices of men and women. It is generally believed that women voters lack autonomy and vote to the same political party as male members of their families. This perception resulted in political parties largely ignoring to campaign with women voters costing them their due representation in political decision-making structures.

Table 1: Difference between Electoral Choices of Men and Women (in Percentage)

Year	Type	PTI	PML-N	MMA/JI	ANP	AWP	Others
2018	Male	37.6%	22.0%	12.5%	19.6%	5.6%	2.6%
	Female	28.6%	26.5%	11.8%	25.1%	6.5%	1.5%
2024	Male	59.4%	9.0%	11.6%	12.4%	2.7%	4.8%
	Female	50.9%	8.8%	14.8%	17.5%	1.8%	6.2%

3.1.4 Gender-Wise Analysis of Voter Preferences in General Elections 2018 and 2024

The electoral preferences of women and men in Pakistan demonstrated significant changes between the 2018 and 2024 general elections. PTI has emerged as the preeminent party, with female support rising markedly from 28.6% in 2018 to 50.9% in 2024. Nevertheless, this statistic continues to be inferior than that of male support, which has likewise experienced an increased trajectory. Conversely, PML-N witnessed a substantial decrease in support across both genders, as indicated by the drop in women's preference from 26.5% to 8.8%. MMA/JI had a rise in female backing, surpassing male backing in both elections. ANP, while still more favored by women than men, had a decline in female preference from 25.1% to 17.5%. The AWP witnessed a significant reduction in support from both sexes, especially as women's endorsement decreased from 6.5% to 1.8%. Women exhibited a significant rise in their preference for alternative parties, increasing from 1.5% in 2018 to 6.2% in 2024. The observed changes indicate a notable political realignment, marked by PTI's growing appeal among women, a decrease in the allure of conventional parties like PML-N, and the fluctuating support encountered by smaller parties.

3.2 Primary Data Analysis

While the previous section presented the secondary data about female's voting preferences collected from 2018 and 2024 general elections. However, this section presents the primary data on how different socioeconomic, cultural, and religious factors has influenced female's voting preferences in 2018 and 2024 general elections. Socioeconomic factors influencing female's voting preferences are identified as their economic dependency, insufficient voter education among women, and women's limited employment opportunities. Cultural factors explored in this research project are women's social identity, family and tribal ties, and cultural values and traditions. Moreover, this research project has also investigated some religious factors, such as religious identity, misinterpretation of Islamic values and practices, and intersection of Islamic values with sociocultural norms. How these factors influenced women's voting preferences in 2018 and 2024 elections in Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are analysed in the following themes.

3.2.1 Socioeconomic Factors Affecting Women's Voting Preferences

The analysis in this research project revealed socioeconomic factors as of great importance to women's voting preferences in the general elections of 2018 and 2024 in Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Many participants reported that women's economic dependency, insufficient voter education among women, limited employment opportunities to influenced their voting preferences. Women's economic dependency makes them weak in decision-making that affect their voting preferences too. Shakeela, one of the house wives indicated that *'I have casted vote in favour of PTI because my husband told me to do so'*. This was not the solo case. Many house wives claimed that we were not independent in casting votes in the general elections of 2018 and 2024. Crenshaw's (1991) structural intersectionality remains appealing here those different social, economic, and familial structures intersect each other and influence women's presence on the public and political sphere. Likewise, Mahnoor, one of the voters from a village in Buner revealed that *'I have casted vote in favour of PTI because my father took me to the polling station and advised this'*. Similarly, many other house wives shared that:

We are not independent in casting vote all the time and it happened in 2024 general elections as well. We casted vote in favour of the political party indicated by male members of our family. We think this would not occur if we could have an economic independence.

Insufficient voter education among women is also one of the challenges to women's voting preferences. Many participants revealed that due to lack of voter education and proper awareness, women are not in a position to properly understand the importance of voting and cast vote in a proper democratic way. Sameena, a local resident of Buner highlighted that *'voter education and political awareness is necessary for women to understand the political party/candidate for casting vote but unfortunately due to lack of voter education women are unable to do so'*. Similarly, another female voter shared that:

Most of the women voters' face difficulties in identifying a real candidate for casting vote in favor of her/him and this is because of the insufficient voter education among women.

Similarly, women's limited employment opportunities also influenced voting preferences. This made women economically dependent and affected women's voting preferences. One of the local resident women shared that *'I am economically dependent because of limited employment opportunities which made me unable to cast my vote independently'*. The statement comes in close connection to the structural intersectionality concept of Kimberly Crenshaw (1998) where she argued that structural problems, such as economic, social, and cultural factors influence women's empowerment in the society. Bilal, Ahmad, and Mahmood (2020) also reported the role of socioeconomic factors in women's political empowerment, including women's voting preferences. Likewise, many women voters from the study area claimed that:

Women's economic dependency is the root cause of their marginalized status in the society in which limited employment opportunities for women play a significant role. This marginalized position of women has influenced their voting preferences and they have been casting votes as indicated by the male members of their families.

According to theory of change model, step-by-step change is effective in bringing women's political empowerment. The crux of this theory supports the analysis in this project because women's employment opportunities can make them economically independent and this would lead to the next step of improving women's voting preferences. The analysis in this section concluded that women's economic dependency, insufficient voter education among women, and women's limited economic opportunities have influenced women's voting preferences in 2018 and 2023 general elections in the District Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

3.2.2 Pakhtun Culture and Women's Voting Preferences

Pakhtun culture is of significant importance to women's voting preferences. Many of the elements of *Pakhtun* culture, such as women's social identity, family and tribal ties, and cultural values and beliefs affect women's voting preferences. The analysis in this project revealed that women's social identity, for example their identification with their social group has role in women's voting preferences. Participants expressed in this study expresses that our identity with the specific groups made us bound to cast vote in favour of the candidate suggested by our social group. One of the local resident women explained that *'I don't have a voting preference because it is decided by my father and elder*

brother to whom I have to cast vote'. Interpersonal domain of Collins (2000) intersectionality remains valid here. She argued that interpersonal domain of power within intersectionality influences people's social and political choices. Likewise, the analysis in this project revealed that social identity and women's affiliation with different social and ethnic groups influenced their voting preferences.

Family and tribal ties are of significant importance to women's voting preferences. Many participants in this study indicated that our familial and tribal ties do not allow us to be independent in casting vote. One of the women voters shared that *'I have never casted vote without the consent of my family/tribe'*. Similarly, another participant expressed that *'most of among us (women voters) cast votes in favour of the candidate who is suggested by their family or tribe members'*. Family and tribal ties are paramount to *Pakhtun's* culture which influences different public and political spheres of women, including their voting preferences. Madeeha, one of the local residents of Buner revealed that *'women in our family/tribe are bound to cast vote in favour of the candidate who is supported by male members of our family'*. This situation is closely linked to Crenshaw's (1991) concept of political intersectionality where she argued that women's political life has always been influenced by different intersectional factors in which their family is a fundamental factor. How family and tribal ties of women influence their voting preferences remains important to Sameena as she shared in her interview that:

In the general elections of 2018 and 2024, our family held meetings before the elections and decided to vote in favour of PTI. Women voters in our family were not in a position to deny that decision and we casted vote accordingly.

Importantly, family and tribal ties of women make them bound to family in each and every aspect of their life. Similarly, women's political life including their voting preferences is influenced by family ties. Shabana, a local resident in Buner district indicated that *'women in our family have casted votes in favour in 2024 elections as indicated by male members of our family'*. This has always been a challenge for women. Mill (1859) argued that women's liberty is significant in improving their political empowerment. In light of Mill's understanding, women voting preferences cannot be improved until they are given freedom from family and tribal ties to cast vote independently.

Along with women's social identity and family/tribal ties, *Pakhtun* cultural values and traditions also have an impact on women voting preferences. Many participants shared that due to cultural values and traditions, for instance the concept of *pardah* (veil) we are bound to take permission from our family whenever going outside. This practice makes us dependent on family in each and every decision, including our voting preferences. Cultural values and traditions are of significant importance to women's voting preferences. Nida, a local resident in district Buner discussed that *'due to many cultural traditions women are not capable of living their political life independently, even they cannot freely decide about their voting preferences'*. Drawing on Collins' (2012) understanding of intersectionality and matrices of domination, the structural domain in *Pakhtun* culture and tradition is discriminatory for women's social and political rights, including women's voting preferences. To sum up the analysis in this section it is suggested that different elements of *Pakhtun* culture, such as women's social identity, women's family and tribal ties, and cultural values and traditions have a serious influence on women's voting preferences. Due to these factors women are not independent in casting votes. Women are bound to consider their social identity, family/tribal ties, and *Pakhtun* cultural values and traditions whenever making their voting preferences.

3.2.3 Religious Factors Influencing Female Voting Preferences

Participants in this study revealed that religious factors have role in women's voting preferences. For example, religious identity, misinterpretation of the Islamic values and practices, and the intersection of Islamic values with sociocultural norms were the main religious factors that influenced women's voting preferences. Many participants shared that women's religious identity have affected their voting preferences because women prefer religious parties when casting votes. Haleema, a local resident in Buner indicated that *'I have heard many women voters who were in favour of casting vote to Jamiat Ulema Islam (F) because they thought this is a religious party'*. Another woman voter expressed that *'women liked to cast vote to religious parties in 2024 general elections because they (religious parties) talk about women rights*. Borrowing Crenshaw's (1998) concept of structural intersectionality for analysis here it can be argued that religious factor intersects women's political life in Buner and affect women's voting preferences. Crenshaw argued that different factors, such as social, economic, ethnic, and religious intersect each other and influence women's experiences on the public domain, including their political experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). Similarly, Rubina, a school teacher revealed that *"I have casted vote to Jamat-e-Islami (political party) in the 2018 and 2024 general elections because it is a religious party and they often talk about women rights in Islam'*. This discussion evident that religious identity has a role in women's voting preferences.

The study further shows misinterpretations of Islamic values and practices also affected women's voting preferences. For instance, women should not work on the public domain is one of the religious misinterpretations that make women's political perspective weak. As a result, women's less exposure to the public leads to their political dependency on men which further influence women's voting preferences. Zunera, a daughter of one of the farmers indicated that *'due to religious misinterpretations and practices, our political choices and voting preferences are affected'*. Similarly, another participant discussed that:

We (women) understand that it is a misinterpretation of the Islamic values and practices that women should work in house chores and should not be allowed outside the home. This practice makes women less exposed to the public and their political life, including voting preferences remain under influence.

Drawing on Collins' (2012) concept of structural domain of power withing intersectional perspective, it is argued that religious misinterpretation is one of the structural problems in district Buner that has influenced women's voting preferences. Religious leaders (men) Misinterprets Islamic values and practices to keep women in a subordinated position that has affected women's political life and their voting preferences in the study area. Haseena, a female interviewer shared that *'women understand that this is a religious misinterpretation that women should not cast vote. Religion (Islam) does not stop us from casting vote'*. Borrowing the theory of change model for analysis here, it can be argued that this religious misinterpretation is one of the key factors in district Buner that has affected the social and political phenomenon and influenced women's voting preferences. Kirby, Greaves, and Reid (2006) argued that understanding the concept of change model actually helps us how to identify key factors that drive change in a social or political phenomenon.

Data in this research project also revealed the intersection of Islamic values with sociocultural norms that influenced women's voting preferences. It means that *Pakhtun's* culture has dominated Islamic

values that have kept women in a subordinated position. Many participants claimed that sociocultural practices in a traditional *Pakhtun* society in district Buner have dominated Islamic values that influence women's experiences on the private and public domains, including women's voting preferences. For instance, Rehana, a medical doctor shared that '*religion (Islam) does not stop us from participating in political activities and casting vote but these culturally dominated values which do not allow us to cast vote independently*'. Likewise, Hadeeqa, one of the college teachers discussed that '*Islam has given us the right to vote independently but Pakhtun cultural values has dominated religious values that do not allow us to be independent in casting vote*'. Mill's (1959) concept of classical liberty can be used here to analyze how women's voting preferences are influenced here by oppressive sociocultural, religious, and gender structures. This analysis remains valid here that women's political empowerment cannot be ensured until they given liberty from such oppressive sociocultural and religious structures. In the same discussion, one participant revealed that:

Due to sociocultural dominated Islamic values, women in district Buner cannot independently participate in political activities. They are not free to cast even vote independently. This was seen in the 2024 general elections where many women didn't cast votes because it was a matter of honor for many families.

In terms of culturally dominated Islamic values in a traditional *Pakhtun* society in district Buner, it is evident that women's voting preferences are affected. For example, Rubeena, a house wife indicated that '*we even don't have say in many domestic affairs and when it comes to voting, we cannot think about to cast vote*'. This situation clearly expresses that due the honor and *Purdah* (veil) concepts of *Pakhtun* culture women's voting preferences are influenced. Analyzing this situation in Collins' (2012) argument, it can be said that this is a structural domain of power in district Buner which is held by men that has affected women's political experiences, including their voting preferences. The analysis in this section concludes that religious factors in district Buner, such as women's religious identity, misinterpretation of Islamic values and practices, the intersection of Islamic values with *Pakhtun* cultural norms have strongly influenced women's voting preferences.

CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this research project has explored various socioeconomic, cultural and religious factors which affected women's voting preferences in district Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This research found that socioeconomic factors have significantly shaped and reshaped women's voting preferences in the 2018 and 2024 general elections. Among those factors, women's economic dependency is of paramount significance that influenced women's voting preferences. For instance, due to women's economic dependency on men, they (women) casted votes as indicated by the male members of their family. This research further concluded that insufficient voter's education has influenced women's voting preferences and they were unable to cast votes having their own independent analysis of the elections' candidates. Likewise, limited unemployment opportunities for women raised women's economic dependency on men and most of the women casted votes as suggested by male members of their families.

Based on the analysis and discussion, this project found that *Pakhtun* culture has significantly affected women's voting preferences. For example, social identity is among one of the *Pakhtun's* cultural elements which influenced women's voting preferences. Due to women's affiliations with the social groups, they were bound to cast vote in favor of the candidate as decided by their social group. Family and tribal ties for women in this context were also part of the analysis. It was found that women were supposed to consider family and tribal ties when casting votes. Women voters were not in the position to ignore the candidate as decided by their family or tribe when casting votes. Moreover, *Pakhtun* cultural values and beliefs in district Buner have affected women's voting preferences. Due to the concept of *Purdah* (veil) many women were not allowed for voting outside the home and in some cases if they were allowed then male members took them to the polling station and women casted votes as suggested by these male members of their family.

It is essential to mention here that some religious factors were also identified in the analysis of this study affecting women's voting preferences. Religious identity, misinterpretation of the Islamic values and practices, and the intersection of Islamic values with sociocultural norms were the key factors explored behind women's voting preferences. It is found that women's religious identity influenced their voting preferences in way that religious parties were often talking about women's rights and that attracted women voters. Similarly, misinterpretation of the Islamic values and practices, such as restricting women to home with the argument that this is an Islamic compulsion, were affecting women's exposure to the public that reduced their women voter's education and ultimately affected women's voting preferences. The intersection of Islamic values with sociocultural norms was another finding in the analysis of this study. Due to misunderstanding of religious values with sociocultural norms, women's participation in political activities was poor that influenced women's voting preferences in Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis and conclusion of this research project, the following policy recommendations may be considered to ensure women's independent voting preferences:

- . Voters education among women needs to be improved by the Election Commission of Pakistan in order to ensure women have independent (from socioeconomic, religious, and cultural barriers) voting preferences.
- . Community outreach programs may be launched in rural and urban areas to engage with women voters to educate them on voting process and encourage women's participation.
- . As there are cultural challenges to women voters, gender-sensitive voting procedures may be adopted. For instance, online voting process for women may be launched.
- . As there are economic challenges to women voters, micro-finances programs and entrepreneurship support programs need to be ensured to economically empower women voters.
- . Social protection programs, such as education and health insurance programs may be introduced to improve women voters' social status.
- . Looking into cultural challenges, cultural sensitivity programs may be started by the government, community leaders, and law enforcement agencies to promote women political rights.
- . As there are women familial and tribal ties involved in women voting, tribal, familial, and religious leaders may be involved to promote women political empowerment through voting.
- . Independent resource centres or women empowerment institutions need to be established for women to improve women's advocacy in private and political spheres.
- . Monitoring and evaluation unite may be established to evaluate women voting progress from time to time.

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APPENDIX

Table 2: List of Female Polling Stations in District Buner with 0% Turnout in 2018 and 2024 General Elections

S. No	Name of female Polling Stations	Turnout in %
1	Government Girls Primary School Ambela	00
2	Government Primary School Kowga	00
3	Government Primary School No.1 Agarai	00
4	Government High School (PS-2) Amnawar	00
5	Government Primary School Amnawar	00
6	Govt. Girls High School Matwanai (PS-1)	00
7	Govt. Girls Middle School Gul Bandai,	00
8	Government High School Alami Banda,	00
9	Government High School Girarai	00
10	Government Degree College Jowar	00
11	Government Middle School Bhai Kalay	00
12	Government High School Ghazi Khanai	00
13	Govt. Girls Primary School Ghazi Khanai,	00
14	Swat Public School Batai	00
15	Government Middle School Balo Khan	00
16	Government Girls Primary School Dokada	00
17	Government Girls Middle School Elai	00
18	Government Girls High School Hisar	00
19	Government Primary School No.1 Bagra	00
20	Govt. Girls High Secondary School Bagra	00
21	Government Girls Primary School Topdara	00

Source: Election Commission of Pakistan.