FEMALE VOTING PREFERENCES IN DISTRICT BUNER, PAKISTAN

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INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the influence of socioeconomic, religious, and cultural factors on female voting preferences in District Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Limited employment opportunities and insufficient voter's education among women influence female's voting preferences. Insufficient voter's education among women makes them unable to evaluate election candidate properly and prefer her/him for voting. Our findings show that economic dependency weakens women's political decision making that influences female's voting preferences. Socio-economic restrictions and gender norms have curtailed women's independent voting preferences in the region. Pakhtun cultural norms and religious interpretations have affected females' voting preferences. For instance, Purdah (veil) restricts women's movement and political engagement that influence women's voting preferences. The role of religious factor is also undeniable in this discussion. For example, religious identity and misinterpretation of religious values and practices have affected female voting preferences.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methodology was used to explore female vote preferences and their dynamics in Buner. First, secondary data were acquired from Election Commission of Pakistan on 2018 and 2024 general elections. In document studies (2018 and 2024 general elections), descriptive analysis was used to assess women's voting preferences. This examined which political party women voters preferred in the elections. Descriptive analysis in document studies summarizes data, identifies trends, and provides descriptions.

The second step involved FGDs and in-depth interviews with women voters and political activists, including men politicians, lawyers, and academicians, to corroborate the voting preferences identified and reported in the first stage. Women political activists and voters were interviewed 23 times and in four focus groups. Focus group use varies by research paradigm. Focus group talks in qualitative research allow us to develop meanings about a variable. We ran four Focus Group Discussions (FDGs) with female voters and political activists, including male politicians, attorneys, and academics, to examine how socio-cultural and religious elements affected their voting decisions. This approach revealed how societal and religious variables shaped female's voting

preferences. These focus groups revealed various societal and religious elements that affect female's voting preferences, which were addressed in individual interviews.

We conducted 23 interviews with women voters and political activists. Qualitative research uses interviews to give participants a flexible and free setting to explore the study problem. So, we used an interview guide with some preliminary questions about how socio-cultural and religious factors, such as men dominance, social relations, *Baradari* system (*Dala Tapala*), social ties with a political party, and religious thoughts influenced female's voting preferences. We asked respondents additional research problem questions during the discussion. After recording the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed into comprehensible text and reread to absorb the material. Similar responses were grouped and codified. Next, this research analyzes secondary and primary data.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study puts forward the following findings:

Socioeconomic Factors Affecting Women's Voting Preferences: The examination of female's voting preferences during the general elections of 2018 and 2024 in District Buner, underscores the notable influence of socio-economic factors. Women's economic dependency has emerged as a significant factor that restricts their capacity to make autonomous political decisions. A significant number of female respondents, especially housewives, reported that their voting decisions were influenced by the directives of male family members, thereby supporting the assertion that financial dependence diminishes women's in decision-making. The findings correspond with the notion of structural intersectionality, illustrating how interrelated social, economic, and familial structures influence women's roles in public and political domains. The deficiency in voter education among women intensifies their political marginalization, as many are uninformed about the significance of informed voting. Multiple participants indicated that insufficient political awareness hindered their ability to critically evaluate candidates and parties, frequently leading them to depend on male guidance during the electoral process.

Moreover, restricted employment opportunities for women exacerbated their economic dependence, thereby limiting their political agency. Numerous participants recognized that financial independence would have enabled them to exercise greater autonomy in their voting decisions. This viewpoint aligns with the assertion that structural barriers, including economic and social constraints, impede women's empowerment. Furthermore, the literature indicates that socioeconomic factors play a significant role in influencing women's political participation. The Theory of Change model posits that incremental advancements, especially in employment opportunities, can empower women and progressively improve their political participation. The study concludes that economic dependency, insufficient voter education, and restricted employment opportunities collectively influenced female's voting preferences in Buner, highlighting the necessity for targeted interventions to enhance women's political empowerment.

Pakhtun Culture and Women's Voting Preferences: The analysis of women's voting inclinations in Buner underscores the significant impact of Pakhtun culture, especially via social identification, familial and tribal connections, and cultural principles. The social identity of women, influenced by their association with particular social and ethnic groups, significantly impacts their voting decisions. A multitude of participants indicated that their affiliation with these groups constrained their autonomy, necessitating their support for politicians favored by their family or community. This corresponds with the notion of the interpersonal domain of intersectionality, highlighting the impact of power dynamics inside social structures on political decisions. Likewise, familial and tribal affiliations appeared as significant influences on female's voting preferences, with numerous respondents acknowledging that they had never voted without their family's approval.

In addition to social identity and familial connections, Pakhtun cultural values and traditions, including the practice of *Purdah*, impose further limitations on women's political independence. Cultural norms require women to obtain permission from male family members for mobility, thereby reinforcing their dependence in various aspects of life, including voting. Participants indicated that these traditions and cultural codes hinder their ability to make political decisions freely, aligning with the notion of the structural domain in intersectionality, wherein cultural frameworks perpetuate gender-based limitations. It is generally posited that women's liberty is crucial for political empowerment; however, in Buner, cultural expectations and societal norms persistently restrict women's electoral agency. The study concludes that the intersection of social identity, family and tribal ties, and cultural values significantly limits women's voting independence, thereby reinforcing patriarchal control over their political participation in Buner.

Religious Factors Influencing Female Voting Preferences: The study indicates that religious factors also play a significant role in shaping female's voting preferences in Buner, especially through religious identity, misinterpretation of Islamic values, and the interplay of religion with socio-cultural norms. A significant number of women indicated a preference for religious political parties, asserting that these parties uphold Islamic values and promote women's rights. This trend corresponds with the notion of structural intersectionality, wherein religious identity intersects with political life to influence women's electoral decisions. Participants indicated that their preference for religious parties arises from the perception that these parties safeguard Islamic principles, thereby highlighting the influence of religious identity on voting preferences. The misinterpretation of Islamic teachings significantly restricts women's political engagement. The belief that women ought to be limited to domestic responsibilities and excluded from public engagement has diminished their political agency, resulting in a predominance of male influence in voting decisions.

The intersection of Islamic values with Pakhtun socio-cultural norms significantly influences female's voting preferences, as traditional cultural practices frequently overshadow Islamic teachings on gender equality. Numerous participants indicated that Pakhtun cultural norms impose greater restrictions on women's political engagement than religious factors, as women are anticipated to maintain family honor by refraining from independent voting. This corresponds with the notion of classical liberty, highlighting that the political empowerment of women necessitates

liberation from oppressive socio-cultural and religious frameworks. Cultural traditions have overshadowed Islamic teachings, resulting in the exclusion of women from political decision-making and the reinforcement of male authority in electoral matters. During the 2018 and 2024 general elections, numerous women encountered obstacles to voting as a result of socio-cultural concepts of honor and *Purdah*, highlighting the systemic barriers that women experience. The study concludes that religious identity, misinterpretation of Islamic values, and the cultural reinterpretation of religious teachings collectively restrict women's voting independence in Buner, underscoring the necessity for enhanced awareness and empowerment initiatives.

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.