

Giving Voice to the Voiceless: Women's Political Participation and the Socio-Cultural and Infrastructural Barriers in the Newly Merged Tribal Districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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ABSTRACT: The merger of the former FATA region with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018 has, on the one hand, opened new opportunities for elevating the socio-economic and political indicators of the Newly Merged Tribal Districts (NMTDs), which remain at the lowest levels compared to the national average, and on the other, raises questions about issues of gender equality and empowerment. This study examines how the merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa addresses centuries-old inequality and disempowerment among its female population, and how such reform processes impact the position of tribal women by increasing their access to formal political spaces and processes. Using mixed methods, the study draws its findings from the primary data collected from all seven districts of NMTDs. Quantitative data for the study is collected through surveys with selected women from all the NMTDs, and qualitative data is gathered through semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders. This study argues that despite incremental improvements, the political participation of women in NMTDs is still limited due to the continued dominance of patriarchal norms embedded in local culture and a lack of infrastructural development due to governmental neglect. Socio-cultural and infrastructural barriers, along with a precarious security situation, still hinder women of NMTDs from getting political awareness, utilising modern means such as social media, participating in elections as candidates and voters, raising their voice, and mobilising for their cause.

KEYWORDS: Newly Merged Tribal Districts, Women Political Participation, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, FATA Reforms

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Introduction

The predicament of Pakistan is multifarious, yet it is outstandingly ingrained in the limited access to socio-economic and political spaces and a non-participatory socio-political ethos for marginalized identity groups such as women. Such limitations are further exacerbated by situations in societies that inhabit the border or peripheral regions of the state, often marred by perennial conflict and governmental neglect. The merger of the former FATA region with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018 has, on the one hand, opened new doors

of opportunities for upscaling the Newly Merged Tribal Districts' (NMTDs) socio-economic and political indicators, which remain at the lowest ebb in comparison to the national average, and on the other, raises a question mark on issues of gender equality and empowerment. This study examines how the merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa addresses centuries-old inequality and disempowerment among its female population, and how such reform processes impact the position of tribal women by increasing their access to formal political spaces and processes.

The women from NMTDs for centuries have suffered under outdated, discriminatory and oppressive cultural norms and governmental neglect, which have not only deprived them of their due rights, but also victimised them through a denial of public spaces in the political, economic, and socio-cultural realms. This absence from public space and denial of rights ensures that women are hardly represented in political and electoral circles. The women have also disproportionately suffered as a result of a prolonged spate of conflict and war in the tribal belt since the last four decades, and more so in post 9/11 period, which has not only skewed the public presence further, but also displaced them and led them into a totally new world of uncertainty in camps and host societies. However, the merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa created hopes for the women of NMTDs to carve out political space for themselves in the new dispensation and change their status from a marginalized and disadvantaged section of society to more vibrant and active state citizens.

In the wake of the merger of former FATA into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the question of how such reform processes affected around half of the tribal population, i.e., its womenfolk, is extremely urgent and critical. The merger of FATA presents a good opportunity to assess the socio-cultural, political, and economic prospects that the reform process can open up for tribal women. It is also highly critical to understand how public spaces can be made more approachable and accessible for her in the post-merger period. This means opening up the political arena in terms of meaningful political representation and electoral participation.

This study addresses a critical academic question, inquiring into *how women in Newly Merged Tribal Districts engage in political processes*. Moreover, it examines *how women in NMTDs actively participate in politics at both local and national levels by voting in general elections and politically mobilising through raising their voices and gathering support for local causes*.

Research Methods

The research design chosen for this study was a mixed-methods design. Quantitative surveys and semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted in all seven districts of NMTDs. Data for this study were collected from December 2023 to February 2024 by teams of male and female students serving as data enumerators from the University of Peshawar, representing the respective districts of NMTD.

Surveys were conducted to gather data on the perceptions of tribal women regarding reform processes, the impact of reforms on women and their status, and the issues and problems they face in accessing their due rights. A total of 30 surveys were collected from each NMD through a convenient sampling technique. A total of 210 surveys were collected from all 7 NMTDs. The survey participants were all female, encompassing categories such as educated, uneducated, employed, unemployed, married, and unmarried women from the NMTD. A survey tool has been used to collect data from the field.

Semi-structured Key Informant Interviews were conducted with the participants from the 7 Newly Merged Districts. The interview participants were grouped into broad categories: 1. Tribal women, 2. Tribal leaders (*mesheran*), including maliks, religious leaders, and public representatives (MPA/MNA); 3. Common tribesmen 4. Government (district administration) and Non-Governmental Organization members. In each of these categories, 20 interviews were conducted with all NMDs, making a total of 80 interviews with male and female participants. The participants were selected through various qualitative sampling techniques, particularly, purposive and convenience sampling. The nature of the interview was semi-structured and in-depth. The participants were asked to share their expertise as well as their lived experience. Interviews were audio-taped and will be transcribed after obtaining proper permission from the respondents.

The data was systematically recorded (audio where allowed), stored, and organised. It was then analysed. Strategies for qualitative data analysis involved categorising (coding, thematic analysis), connecting or contextualising (narrative analysis, relating data through contextual analysis) under themes identified in thematic clusters. Quantitative data was analysed for basic descriptive statistics by calculating percentages and frequencies.

Literature Review and Research Gap

Most studies examining how legal and governance reforms impact women's empowerment in the NMTDs, or previously in FATA, regard legal and constitutional reforms as a strategy for cultural change towards gender mainstreaming. These studies almost universally identify the exclusion of women from powerful mechanisms such as Jirgas and from formal institutions like commissions and legislative bodies as key sources of women's marginalisation. Sometimes by implication, and at other times explicitly, these studies recommend that the lives of women in tribal areas could be improved through greater inclusion and representation in mechanisms and formal institutions via legislative reforms.

To understand women's political participation in NMTDs, it is important to analyse how women were included or excluded from political institutions and processes during both the pre- and post-merger periods. Studies on pre-merger are especially critical of the patriarchal institutional structures, cultural norms, and socio-economic conditions that placed women in marginalised and disadvantaged positions much before the creation of Pakistan. The continuation of the British colonial practices by the state of Pakistan (Khan and Zubair, 2024; Mahsud et al., 2021), particularly the legal and administrative systems established under the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR), is criticised for working against women's interests (Mehsud et al., 2016). The governance framework in FATA, mainly maintained by the FCR, reinforced 'existing patriarchal, tribal, [and] customary practices (Pakhtunwali)' (Khan & Samina, 2009) and denied women the rights and protections they needed in pre-merger FATA (Khan, 2012; Mehsud et al., 2016). Due to these conditions, in 2012, the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) called on the President of Pakistan to use his authority under Article 247 of the Constitution to extend legal protections available to women in recent years in other parts of the country (Khan, 2012).

One specific aspect of women's exclusion from institutions of power is their absence from the local council, known as the Jirga (Yousaf & Furrukhzad, 2020; Naseer, 2015). This led to jirga decisions that often violated the rights of women in the erstwhile FATA (Yousaf & Furrukhzad, 2020). Furthermore, women were excluded from legislative bodies, such as provincial and national legislatures that enacted laws affecting women, as well as various commissions that proposed laws impacting their lives (Naseer, 2015).

However, the extent to which women's voices were included in the reform efforts remains a matter of debate. Khan & Samina (2009), who interviewed women in Khyber and Kurram, reported that women said female voices are missing from the existing institutions and from any serious conversation on reform. Naseer (2022) attributes the ongoing reform efforts, which resulted in the merger of the Tribal Areas with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, at least partly to the efforts made by women from the erstwhile FATA towards improving their status. She asserts that women's rights activists from the tribal areas drew inspiration from feminist movements elsewhere to achieve their goals. Similarly, Khan et al. (2022) call for greater inclusion of women in the reform process to make it more representative. The issue of legal and administrative reforms is often viewed in the context of security and conflict in the region.

Studies on post-merger NMTDs also present a mixed view on the impact of the merger on women, particularly their inclusion in political institutions and processes. Some seem more optimistic (Ijaz & Jafri, 2021; Orakzai & Ali, 2023; Khan & Hussain, 2021; Munir, 2025) also specifically focus on the potential improvement the post-merger administrative structure can bring for the women education in the NMTDs), stating that the passage of the 25th Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan and the merger of the Tribal Areas with the Province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa marked a significant step towards a more participatory society for women. The initiatives undertaken by the government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to rehabilitate education, especially female education, in the tribal districts are expected to improve educational opportunities for women and reduce the literacy gap (Ijaz & Jafri, 2021; Orakzai & Ali, 2023), ultimately increasing their presence in the political sphere. Similarly, the proposed 10-year development plan of the government for NMTDs will improve women's socio-economic status (Khan et al., 2023).

Various scholars have identified the potential political development of women in NMTDs after the merger in their studies. Khan & Hussain (2021) welcome the extension of the Local Government Act to the NMTDs. Their study argues that by allowing women to participate in local government affairs from their homes, rather than requiring them to work in offices, the local government system aligns with local cultural norms. It would, in their opinion, enhance women's participation in the region's affairs. Some (Fayaz et al., 2021) identify that the 25th Amendment allows women from the NMTDs to have a voice in the formal governance hierarchy, such as the provincial legislature, where they will be represented through reserved seats. However, other studies (Ullah, 2015; Naseer, 2022) highlight that the continued reluctance of the government to extend laws favouring women and the constitutional and judicial rights available in other parts of the country remain a continued source of repression for women. Similarly, studies have highlighted that these reforms have been far from realising the dream of women contesting elections from their areas (Asghar, 2024).

Some studies (Naseer, 2022; Mohsin, 2013; Khan et al., 2023; Khan & Zubair, 2024) have emphasized the role of patriarchal cultural norms such as *pardah* and *nang* in keeping women of NMTD disempowered even after the merger. Studies have highlighted the need to organize feminist organizations and civil society in NMTD to enable women to raise their voices (Naseer, 2022). Naseer (2022: 75) has emphasized that cultural norms and a militarized state approach keep women disadvantaged even after the merger. The struggle for merger was jointly led by men and urban-based tribal women (Naseer, 2022, p. 77). Women of tribal areas, in particular, had been empowered by the urban exposure during forced displacement (Naseer, 2022, p. 77). Similarly, Khan et al. (2023) emphasise the more visible role of religious and cultural norms in determining the lives of women in NMTDs.

There have been very few substantive studies of whether the merger has indeed helped the mainstreaming of women in the NMTD's politics and administrative life. A study by Khan & Khan (2023) in their study of Bajaur District found that more than 55 percent of respondents from Bajaur District agreed that the merger did, to some extent, improve educational opportunities for women (Khan & Khan, 2023). Another study (Khan & Zubair, 2024: 308) on District Khyber highlighted the impact of cultural norms on the development of democratic culture and inclusivity in NMTDs. The study has emphasised the need to account for the voices of marginalised sections of society, such as women, in promoting democratic culture in the NMTDs. The study highlights that a lack of trust in the democratic system requires the government's investment in infrastructural development, such as health, education, and NMTDs (Khan & Zubair, 2024: 309). The study reveals that there is a strong aspiration in the NMTD population for political change. Munir (2025) begins on a hopeful note, suggesting that after the merger, women gained more opportunities to express their political agency, but concludes on a cautious note, highlighting that patriarchal structures and violent conflict still threaten the realisation of these opportunities. He warned, *'both terrorism and patriarchy reinforced a terrible web of constraints that significantly shapes and re-shapes Pashtun women's oppression and voicelessness'* (Munir, 2025: 893).

The study by Zeb & Nawab (2023) yields interesting findings. They argue that their research participants from Bajaur District show cautious optimism about the merger. 68.6% of the research participants believe that the merger has had a positive impact on the politics of NMTDs, but 25.7% showed reservations about the impact of these reforms on politics. Interestingly, 54.3% of the participants believe that the FCR continues to influence the political sphere in NMTDs. Moreover, most of the participants (68.8%) believe that the influence of the traditional elite and civil bureaucracy has declined. Similarly, another interesting study, conducted by UN Women (UN Women Pakistan, 2020), reveals interesting findings. The study argues that the main hurdles to women's participation in political processes such as elections are both socio-cultural and infrastructural. The socio-cultural hurdles include social stigmatization, male influence over females' decisions and participation, lack of awareness, gender discrimination, and restricted mobility. The infrastructural hurdles include Lack of women's polling stations, a lack of transportation, fear and lack of security, ill-treatment of women within the political parties, women's disinterest in politics and political process (UN Women Pakistan, 2020: 23). The study (UN Women Pakistan, 2020: 23-25) reported that 37% of women participant of the study revealed that they voted in the influence of their men family members such as husbands, fathers or brothers. 40% of the women participants revealed that the main hurdle to the electoral participation of women is the social stigma attached to politics. 18% of the research participants believed that a lack of awareness or education kept women away from political participation. Afridi (2023) has highlighted several cases from these NMTDs where women candidates attempted to contest in general elections after the merger. Even though these women did not succeed in winning their seats, they expressed their right to be candidates from the areas (Afridi, 2023: 939-941) where they were denied these rights earlier, and there is still very strong opposition to their actions. Similarly, a study on Khyber has shown that 'misogynistic traditions' have allowed men to control women's political choices and created hurdles in the women's participation in politics (Khan & Zubair, 2024: 304).

The above accounts demonstrate that there is considerable literature showing how the merger affected women's empowerment generally and their political participation specifically. Some of these studies used

primary data from one of the seven districts of NMTDs. However, these studies do not comprehensively incorporate empirical data from all the NMTDs to reflect women's perspectives and those of other stakeholders in these areas. Furthermore, none of them provide a broader view of political participation encompassing electoral engagement, political articulation, and mobilisation across multiple platforms by women in NMTDs. This research gap is what this study aims to fill through its findings.

Data Analysis

Lack of Awareness Affects Political Participation in District Khyber

In the newly merged Khyber district, the merger was widely appreciated by many people. People also welcomed the promised change in their political situation. However, regarding women's participation in the political process, many are dissatisfied with their current status. During our discussion, women argued that such political changes require a shift in socio-cultural norms. Within their existing normative framework, they are often unaware of their citizenship rights, and when they attempt to participate in the political process, they are frequently not accepted. As our survey data indicate, 90% of the women participants have never engaged in a political discussion, 77% are not available for online political discussions, and consequently, 73% did not vote. Similarly, 83% of women participants are unsure whether there was any woman candidate from their area in the election.

Discussing the political participation of women, a local activist from Khyber openly questioned the lack of government facilitation. She said,

Many women do not possess ID (CNIC) cards and lack information about the voting procedure. Oftentimes, they are not allowed by their families to go vote. In the case of women who are political candidates, they often lack proper training and have limited access, facing financial constraints in reaching voters. Cultural barriers also exist. Society does not accept such women and does not value autonomy, empowerment, and self-determination. Although I now see some progress in the tribal regions, the overall situation remains unpromising (Gul, Personal Communication, February 2025).

In addition to the qualitative data, our survey data suggests that 73% of women participants did not vote in the 2024 general elections. Only 10% of women participate in online political discussions, and 77% of women participants, for some reason, do not use social media platforms for political awareness. Similarly, 77% of women are not aware of the political manifestos of different political parties.

The Slightly Improving Conditions of Women's Representation in Politics in the Bajaur District

During the interviews in Bajaur, it was reported that on the one hand, due to the lack of literacy and education, women are unaware of their civil and political rights. On the other hand, *Pakhtunwali* and the misinterpretation of religious discourse by the clergy also hinder their ability to exercise these rights. As one respondent, a community activist, stated, probably 1 per cent of women have some understanding of politics or social mobilisation. He estimated that literacy rates in the area are as follows: primary level, 10% to 15%; middle level, 3% to 4%; and higher education, 1% (Ahmad, Personal Communication, February 2025). We observed a different perspective in another interview with a local member of the provincial assembly (MPA). He argued that women have enjoyed freedom even within the tribal system, with no barriers to their political rights.

Furthermore, the tribal structure has never alienated women from their rights. He cited the recent local government election, where a woman contested for a seat on the village council (VC). Similarly, a local Malak stated that women's political participation is closely linked to their level of political awareness and literacy. In his view, people are gaining awareness, and as a result, there has been an improvement in women casting their votes; they are no longer deterred from participating in elections by men (Tariq, Personal Communication, February 2025).

According to our survey, nearly 60% of women participants cast their votes in the 2024 general elections. Several women, 29%, argued that their male family members did not allow them to vote. Almost 67% of the women participants are aware of the different political parties' manifestos. Participation in online political discussions among women is approximately 52%, and those who participate online primarily use platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), and Instagram. 32% of the survey participants (women) are unaware of different political parties and their manifestos because they are busy with household chores. It also indicates that 19% of women participants do not have access to social media. Regarding awareness of the reasons for casting a vote, 19% of women vote to become aware of their rights, and 16% consider raising their voices as the reason for voting.

The Lack of Trust in Political Leadership in Orakzai District

When it comes to women's political participation, a mixed response was noted among the respondents. Some argue that women in the Orakzai district face significant challenges in political participation. While talking to a social activist, he said,

I have served as a political agent at the polling station. The problem is that people do not want their women to go to the polling station. Women are not permitted to go outside their houses. And when it comes to voting, it is prohibited. I think this is one of the main obstacles to women's participation in politics (Rahim, Personal Communication, February 2025).

Another respondent, who was a religious leader, said that women are not "*samajhdhar/ba'khabar*" (conscious/aware) of their rights, and therefore, they are not participating. He added that,

There are no explicit restrictions on women's participation in politics because women are not sufficiently aware to understand politics. However, in the tribal structure, our conscience does not allow us to permit women to go outside and ask for a vote (Nasir, Personal Communication, February 2025).

While discussing these issues with Malik, he believes that people do not trust their tribal leadership; therefore, they do not participate in elections. He also asserted that tribal customs are creating hurdles for women in casting their votes and contesting elections (Yousaf, Personal Communication, February 2025).

Another respondent, a local activist, contradicted the above statements by stating that he served as a Presiding Officer in the 2022 local government elections and observed equal participation from both men and women. However, he acknowledged that there are hurdles for political candidates during their election campaigns (Khan, Personal Communication, February 2025). Discussing these issues with a local female teacher, she also supports the above-mentioned claim that women can not only cast their vote but also contest elections. However, the lack of trust in the political leadership prevents women from participating in

the electoral process. Now, there are many women with MPA and MNA degrees in the area, but the problem of education and awareness remains.

Our survey data indicates that almost 67% of women did not cast their vote in the 2024 general elections. Several reasons contributed to their non-participation, but the primary reason was the accessibility of the polling booth. 34% women participants could not cast their vote just because the polling booth was far away. Similarly, it was reported that 67% of women were unaware of any female candidates contesting for the elections. Sixty per cent of the women participants do not know about the last general elections, political parties, or their candidates. Moreover, 70% women never participated in an online discussion. While talking about the possible reasons, 44% women consider their household chores as one of the major reasons for their lack of participation.

Religious and Cultural Backlash to Women's Representation in the Mohmand District

The religious leaders in Mohmand District held more critical views of women's participation in politics. Focusing on the representation of women in Mohmand District, a religious scholar argued that Islam has given a 'proper space' to women in society, and it is against their dignity when they hold a public office. His view is simply based on a literal and decontextualised understanding of Islam, which, according to him, practically does not recognise the role of women as political beings. He argued that *Shariah* has the solution to all the problems, and it does not allow women to become political leaders, as the Holy Prophet (PBUH) warned that any nation cannot make progress whose political head is a woman (Qasim, Personal Communication, March 2025). In the same vein, he considers access to social media for women as dangerous and misleading. At the same time, he argued that women were given a proper share in representation during the local government elections. (Qasim, 2025)

Not all men participants from Mohmand share the same view on women's representation in politics or on their participation as local activists. Another respondent, discussing women's political representation, argued that the clergy does not like to see women in positions of power. He said,

I believe that women, after the merger of the tribal areas, are being oppressed, and the clergy does not like to acknowledge women's voices. In local government, women were reluctant to participate in elections; men also did not permit them, and it was considered embarrassing if someone's daughter or wife entered politics. Women face discrimination based on a particular religious discourse. They are being confined to their homes through the use of religion. I have not heard of any Molvi (religious cleric) who discusses women's empowerment (Rahman, Personal Communication, March 2025).

The Member of the National Assembly (MNA) from the same area responded similarly, but with a touch more optimism. He stated that legally, there are no restrictions on women participating in politics, either as voters or as candidates. In the ongoing elections, the proportion of women was higher than before. They are becoming more active each day. The only barriers might be the family system and cultural restrictions. Many women have engaged in social movements such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM). Some people consider it a sin to leave the house and participate in the system. However, they do not use social media because they lack access. He further added,

Pashtunwali is the main culprit; it is responsible for lowering their voice and status. Honor and dignity should not be restricted to women. People were not aware earlier, and *Pashtunwali* is responsible for their lack of participation in politics. Islam has fully empowered women, but the problem is that we have moulded religion according to our desires. No Molvi (religious cleric) talks about women's right to inheritance. They do not talk about women's education. If religion is properly interpreted, then it is highly likely that we may see a rise in women's voices (Obaid, Personal Communication, March 2025).

On the other hand, when speaking with women, it was observed that the previous understanding of religion and misconceptions can be addressed through a renewed perspective on faith. When discussing these issues, a female teacher argued that in tribal structures, women are not given political representation because they believe they are less knowledgeable in decision-making. She also stated that they feel powerless, but the fact is that God has created women remarkably. She said,

Women do not receive proper education, and therefore, they are neither aware nor active. Religion partly contributes to preventing women from going outside. It does not support them in voicing their opinions. Women are being oppressed under the guise of *pardah* (a cultural norm of gender segregation). Men control politics and society, and they dominate thought and action; hence, women leaders are rare. In reality, women have no rights. I do not believe religion restricts women from achieving economic independence and social self-reliance. I think religion should be reinterpreted (Farzana, Personal Communication, March 2025).

Another female resident argued that the biggest obstacle to women's emancipation is stopping them from voting. They are not even allowed outside the house, and their vote is considered worthless. As a result, only men go to the polling stations. However, after 2018, it was observed that many women went outside to vote for Imran Khan or other candidates. And in February 2024, many women can be seen casting their votes (Rizwana, Personal Communication, March 2025).

A Malik from Mohmand highlighted that mainly the clergy is responsible for making the social sphere rigid and stringent for women. The Malak argued that almost 60% to 70% of women can vote in the election. Legally, they are allowed to participate in politics, but the culture typically does not encourage women to be politically active. Therefore, there is no permanently organized women's movement in the region. However, on rare occasions, women come out to protest. Women participated in local government elections, and both men and women were given equal representation. The entire voting system is new, even for men. Earlier, only Malays were given the right to vote, not the common people. In the current elections, almost all women have voted. He further said that the discrimination begins with the clergy, not with religion. They use religion for their purpose and tell women to vote only for religious parties. He said,

Men are trying to be the problem solvers in the area, women are '*sinf e nazuk*'. They are not considered as responsible as men. The religious clergy is responsible for caging women because they argue that outside the house, women are not allowed either by religion or by *Pashtunwali* (Abdullah, Personal Communication, March 2025).

Men, while interpreting religion in opposition to women, also actively censor women regarding their social and political existence. In this way, women face obstacles both as candidates and as voters, particularly in terms of political representation. A female teacher explained that everything depends on men's decision-making power. Men have the resources and platforms; women are dependent. Overall, society sustains

censorship of women through the male gaze. She further added, *'In the local government elections, I have observed that there were very few women. The Majority of the women do not have ID cards, and those who hold them are not allowed to go outside'* (Shahida, Personal Communication, March 2025). Additionally, the issue of illiteracy also presents challenges in local government elections. In every union and village council, there is a seat reserved for women.

Talking to a local activist, he noted that it has often been observed that women councillors are often unaware of their rights and powers. In the existing patriarchal structure, she also becomes a victim of the system. However, women are still underrepresented in general elections and politics overall. Certain roles, such as staying indoors, covering herself, and raising children, are reserved for women. Women are now using social media, but they are not aware of its positive uses. He said that since women are illiterate, even though they are working as councillors (65 councillors in Mohmand district), they don't understand their rights and duties. Men do not like their daughters sitting on the council, as it is not encouraged by *Pashtunwali* and *Pardah*. Some women dare to take action, but they lack awareness. In the Mohmand area, women are primarily engaged in their religious activities. Religion itself is also used as a tool in society (Irfan, Personal Communication, March 2025).

Despite the cultural and social challenges, our survey indicates that 80% of women participated in the 2024 general elections. Moreover, a large number of women (80%) were unaware of any women's political candidates in the area. Notably, 97% of women never participate in online discussions regarding politics. Similarly, 83% of women are not aware of the political manifestos of different political parties. While discussing the possible reasons behind their lack of participation in politics, 17% of women are illiterate, 36% of women have no access to social media, and 20% of women are prevented by male family members from using social media or watching TV.

Insecurity and Lack of Accessibility to Women's Political Participation in the District of North Waziristan

In the district of North Waziristan, the biggest hurdle to women's political representation and participation is militancy and the Taliban. A woman participant from the area said, During the February 2024 General Elections, a woman in our family registered herself to vote, but she was afraid that the Taliban would attack her or stop her car. Because in our society, women are discouraged from taking part in such activities. So, just recently, the Taliban have closed roads, and they have been reactivated. If someone sees the name of a woman on a banner, it is considered a matter of honor, so there is a risk of honour killing. If women were found in the public sphere, it would create a problem of social ostracism and boycott. People are afraid that a social boycott would ruin their existence. They hang a stone in front of the house, which is considered a symbol of social boycott (Sidra, Personal Communication, April 2025).

One of the positive impacts of the merger of the NMDs is that it has enabled many political parties to operate independently. However, women can only fully participate in politics when they have economic independence, but it is only possible if they have cultural support. Until now, women have had no substantial role as political representatives in the area, particularly in local government. However, if political parties succeed in establishing a presence, women may be supported by them. In this context, women's role in the

social movement is almost non-existent, but there are some inspirational historical women, such as Malala Maiwand, whose role cannot be ignored (Alam, Personal Communication, April 2025).

A local social activist, discussing the representation of women, argued that currently, there is not a single woman in a leadership position. Women are not part of the public sphere, so how can one expect them to participate in politics? The most pressing issue is the lack of literacy in tribal areas, which is responsible for all the inactivity of women. At the same time, religious clergy are not playing their role in raising awareness and politically educating people. Consequently, there is a very narrow-minded mindset that creates hurdles for women's representation. Women in local government are almost non-existent (Ahmad, Personal Communication, April 2025). In terms of social movements, only a few women are actively involved—for example, Nausheen, who worked very hard in the process of NMDs and abolishing the FCR in our area. However, there are no other active women in social mobilisation. Nobody wants women to play an active role in rebuilding the community, and those who try are often forced to stay inside their houses. A social activist noted that only a few women are active on social media, trying to raise women's voices, but overall, the youth are not very active.

Talking with women in the area revealed that a local female respondent argued that the main barrier to women's political rights is their lack of awareness about the importance of voting. When it comes to voting, they often don't know where to cast their vote or what it means to cast a vote (Gul, Personal Communication, April 2025). There is a need to accelerate education in the area, not only for women but for everyone. The issue is also rooted in the patriarchal structure that influences women's decisions. Additionally, insecurity further worsens the situation for women (Gul, 2025). Women's presence on social media is nearly nonexistent, and even when some women are active online, they are constrained. First, there is no internet access, so how could they be active? Regarding radio programmes, they are all operated by men, with women as mere silent listeners (Gul, 2025).

Our survey data suggest that only 36% of the women participants cast their vote during the 2024 general elections. 21% of women could not vote because the polling booth was too far away, and 18% of women were not allowed by the male members of their families. Women are aware of their political candidates, as 64% know their political candidates. Additionally, almost 82% of women have never participated in any online political discussion. It may also indicate cases where online platforms, the non-availability of the Internet, or even family-based constraints are present. Only 4% of women participants have access to online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (now X). Only 46% of women are aware of the political manifestos of different political parties.

The Lack of Awareness and Restrictive Cultural Norms in the Kurram District

Restrictive cultural norms created obstacles for women's participation in the politics of the Kurram District. A local leader from Kurram stated that nearly 5% to 10% of women are active in politics, but whenever they attempt to raise their voices, tribal customs hinder their efforts. He referenced the case of Baigum Sahiba, the only woman from Kurram District to pass the civil service exam, who became a symbol of hope for others seeking education. However, tribal customs prevent every progressive activity within tribal society. In local government elections and general elections, the percentage of women participating is almost negligible. At the same time, he said, *'I would like to state that there is no freedom for women in tribal structure; when there is*

no freedom, then neither religion nor court can protect women (Zada, Personal Communication, April 2025). Additionally, in the case of women's religious education, there are fewer obstacles than in accessing a Western education. Overall, due to the male-dominated environment, women are deprived of their status as equal members of society. Therefore, there can hardly be any instances of women being active in social mobilisation.

A social activist from Kurram argues that society in its existing form lacks socialisation; therefore, people have no understanding of political participation. According to his observation, the political participation ratio of women is very low; however, in Upper Tehsil, it is around 40%, which is quite good. According to his estimate, in the local body elections, nearly 40% of women participated in their quota. But in the remaining two tehsils, the ratio was only 2%. While addressing the issue of low participation, he argues that the major problem is our Pashtun culture. Women are not allowed to take part in the Hujra system; they are not part of the decision-making process. If they have access to the process of socialization, then we can overcome the low participation issue (Khan, Personal Communication, April 2025).

At the same time, women tend to consider themselves inferior to men, which is also a major obstacle to their accessibility and performance in local governments. In the case of social movements, women have played a significant role in various issues; however, the problem is that much of it remains behind the curtain. Since the tribal structure does not allow women to be part of the front line due to Pashtunwali norms of honour. Women try to raise their voices in different human rights organisations, but all of it happens behind the curtain. He further added that women have very little access to social media to raise their voice because of the unstable connection, and they are not allowed to use mobile phones. In the post-merger scenario, the government must adopt certain measures through the development of infrastructure that allows space for women's participation. For example, earlier, there was no women's counter in the Police in District Kurram (Khan, 2025).

A local religious leader argued that the local customs are creating the biggest hurdles for women's participation in politics. But now he is optimistic that with the merger, women have been participating in politics, and the whole process was almost 80% successful. At the same time, he believes that women should be properly trained in politics. They should be taught about politics. Many women who have won local body elections are unaware of their powers and functions because they have not received proper training. There should be some kind of training center or an institute where they could be taught about their role as a representative in the local government. Moreover, he emphasised that people had participated in the local government elections with enthusiasm, but later, the government failed to address their problems; therefore, people felt disappointed (Karim, Personal Communication, April 2025). They are not active on social media platforms because their parents do not allow them to use social media; therefore, they often use fake IDs (Karim, 2025).

A female teacher in the area argues that women cannot even consider participating in local elections because they face numerous hurdles. First, they lack self-confidence, which prevents them from presenting their case properly. Second, men do not allow women to go outside their houses. Third, the cultural norms also discourage women from participating in politics. Fourth, men interfere in women's business. Additionally, the political parties do not encourage women to participate in politics; instead, they tend to focus on men.

Therefore, they are unable to participate in politics. In the 2018 elections, many women participated in local government elections; however, they face numerous challenges. Women are always dependent on men economically, and this deprives them of exercising their liberty and doing something for themselves. Women need proper education, and they should be supported and facilitated by the government. They must have access to the internet, and they should be made aware of their condition (Salma, Personal Communication, April 2025). She further added that if there were no hurdles from cultural and tribal customs, women could work in the most efficient ways in various walks of life. Most of the time, family pressure keeps women from realizing their potential. In many ways, they are harassed and attacked violently. These days, social media is a powerful tool for empowerment, and many women can raise their voices on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. It connects the tribal women with the outside world (Salma, 2025).

A Malik from the area argued that women are not allowed by their men to participate fully in the political landscape. He gave the example of Ali Begum, a political candidate in the local government election, but during that critical moment, people removed her from politics. That is why, in his opinion, women are very inactive (less than 5%) in politics. The major reasons behind their inactivity are Pashtun culture and customs, honour, and the tendency to keep women dependent on men (Shahid, Personal Communication, April 2025). For him, the community needs to discuss these issues and work to protect their rights. One may find many women who have been actively working as social activists. He added that often, women who are lecturers, medical doctors, and lawyers are trying to be a part of different social change. However, most women stay inside their houses. The major hurdle to their participation is tribal culture and customs. In the case of social media, women are less active due to family pressure (Shahid, 2025).

Another local, Malik, argues that in the tribal system, only 30% of women are active, while 70% face restrictions from local community elders and religious leaders. They are not allowed to leave their houses. Similarly, women are often unable to participate in local social movements, as their involvement is viewed as contrary to traditional tribal norms. Even on social media, they experience pressure from their families. Moreover, they lack the necessary resources to utilize social media effectively. Consequently, due to these obstacles in local body elections, women's representation is very low or virtually nonexistent (Yasir, Personal Communication, April 2025).

According to the local leader, there are 81 village councils in the Kurram district, yet only one woman has been elected as a village councillor. A male-dominated environment and tribal structure prevent women from active involvement in politics, although they strive to participate. If community-based organizations are mobilized, women's participation in elections might improve. There should be a women's union where they can meet in a safe environment and discuss the challenges to their political representation. He further reiterated that, due to family pressure and cultural restrictions, women are unable to play an active role in politics (Khan, Personal Communication, April 2025).

Our survey data suggest that almost 70% of women never participate in any online political discussions and are also not aware of any political parties' manifestos. A large number of women are not allowed by their male partners to participate in online discussions. Moreover, 17% of women have no access to social media, and a significant number of women are illiterate. Moreover, 53% of female voters were unaware of women candidates in the election.

Masculinity, Violence, and Unawareness Limit Women's Participation in Politics in South Waziristan District

Research participants from Waziristan reported that it is considered unacceptable for a woman to leave her house. Consequently, they cannot participate in a political campaign like men. Even if they wish to take part, tribal customs pose a significant barrier. In South Waziristan, as in many other tribal districts, women's political participation is nearly nonexistent. Although society is gradually changing over time, significant progress is still premature. It is crucial to raise political awareness and provide women with access to education (Ali, Personal Communication, April 2025). In social movements, women often play a minor role, mainly as voters. However, he argued that women are quite active on social media, as evidenced by their involvement in PTI and PTM. Yet, those unaware of women's role in society often attempt to undermine their voices. He further noted that in the local government system, women's representation is less than 2 per cent. All these cultural norms, which operate under male dominance, present substantial barriers for women (Ali, 2025).

A female student stated that in South Waziristan, there are no women who can go out and cast their vote. Based on her experience living in Islamabad, she was unable to cast her vote. Only men participate in elections. Furthermore, it has been observed that women lack CNIC cards, and no one cares about their votes. Additionally, even if they possess a CNIC and go to vote, they are uncertain about whom they should give their vote to and why. She states that women are being told, *'your vote is not needed, stay inside the house'* (Iqra, Personal Communication, April 2025). So, what can be done? She suggests that, first and foremost, it is essential to run an awareness campaign; secondly, men should be advised to refrain from influencing their opinions. The biggest challenge is that women do not even know what is happening in the political world. They are unaware of what occurs outside their homes because they are not informed in the first place. Regarding social movements in the tribal areas, she argues that there are very few instances of women participating. Although NGOs have been actively working in these areas for the last 10 to 15 years, much remains to be done that could have a profoundly positive impact on women's lives. They have established some schools, and now one can notice that little girls are attending school.

Similarly, women's participation in social media is also very rare. A renowned badminton star named Maria Toor is active on social media. However, in the realm of politics, one can hardly see women actively campaigning. According to the female student, there are two kinds of people: those who live in the tribal area and those who belong to the tribal area but live outside. So, the latter ones are active on social media. One can also notice that in South Waziristan, there are connection issues; one can get access to mobile signals in a few places. In addition, the whole problem regarding women's mobilization and activation revolves around social restrictions. Women often need permission even for minor tasks outside the home (Iqra, 2025). She argues that it is important to provide safe spaces for women where they can openly discuss important issues. A safe environment for women would ensure more participation and inclusion. It would also set a precedent for other young girls to access education and participate in public spaces. There should be equal representation of women in the government, allowing both to participate on an equal basis (Iqra, 2025). She says that a few days ago, she checked a list of women who were elected from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; there were only 2 or 3 women representing the province, which highlights the underrepresentation of women in politics. The situation in tribal areas is the worst; there is not a single woman in South Waziristan who has been elected in either local or non-local elections. The first hurdle in this process is the separate quota system,

which shows that women are considered different. Secondly, politics in our society is stigmatised as a nasty profession; therefore, they are not encouraged to participate in it (Iqra, 2025).

In the view of a University student from South Waziristan, the environment is not conducive for women to participate in politics. There was only one tribal woman, Razia Mehsud, who ran for the election, and she was respected by everyone. Men in the tribal areas respect women. He provides an example of how, whenever women travel in a coach, men leave the better seats for them so that they can travel comfortably (Mehsud, Personal Communication, April 2025). Additionally, women's participation in politics is often opposed by tribal culture. At the same time, there is a lack of educational opportunities in the area, and nearly 70% of girls' schools are closed.

Similarly, women's participation in social welfare and journalism is typically around 5% to 10%. The culture does not permit women to participate in public activities. It sounds like a very narrow way to suspect girls of immorality, but one male student from South Waziristan argues that people like the tribal culture, and the problem is that whenever girls from these areas go to other cities and attend colleges and universities. Later on, they become involved in social media and participate in immoral activities. In this manner, their minds change to something reprehensible (Mehsud, 2025). It reflects how men perceive women's use of social media. According to a female teacher from the area, in elite families, there is no issue with women participating in politics. However, for ordinary women, due to the security issues, poverty, and ignorance, it gets complicated for them to participate in politics. She believes that political awareness, as promoted through seminars, press releases, and social mobility, can improve women's participation. In the current scenario, women are almost entirely absent from the local government system. It is also important that at the family level, they receive men's support (Gulrukh, Personal Communication, April 2025).

While speaking with the Union council chairman, he argued that in his area (Ladha), nearly 20% of women have cast their votes. However, due to a lack of security, women hesitate to participate in active politics. There are very brave women, but they are active in settled areas. He added that women have little to no role in social movements due to tribal customs. At the same time, people feel threatened if they try to raise their voice against any kind of oppression (Barki, Personal Communication, April 2025). Similarly, one cannot see any women in leadership positions because people are not aware of their political affiliations. They lack basic education.

Our survey data suggest that almost 71% of women participants never participated in online political discussions and also did not cast their vote in the 2024 general elections. Moreover, almost 15% of women are available on Facebook to participate in political discussions. Additionally, only 39% of women have some understanding of the manifestos of political parties. At the same time, 61% are not aware of the manifestos of different political parties. To identify the possible reasons for their lack of participation, 48% of women participants stated that they are busy with household chores and therefore have no time to engage in political discussions.

Conclusion: Contextual Variation and General Trends of Women's Political Participation in NMTDs

This study argues that perceptions about the impact of reforms on women's empowerment are mostly contextual, making it difficult to draw broad conclusions from all the NMTDS. The variation in findings across

different districts shows that scholars must consider the local context when drawing conclusions. Nonetheless, despite this limitation, some patterns in the data can still be identified that are useful for understanding NMTDs.

Therefore, this study argues that in all the NMTDs, women's participation in political processes, such as elections, has increased slightly due to the reforms introduced by the government. The data indicate that women now have opportunities for political involvement, and they have occasionally expressed their agency in seizing them. Women have voted in general elections and contested elections in a limited capacity, and educated women are participating in online political discussions in a rudimentary manner. However, there has not been a more noticeable change in women's political participation. Electoral participation is limited by inadequate infrastructure, such as the proximity of polling stations and voter registration. Also, electoral participation does not necessarily reflect the choices of women, as male family members often influence their electoral decisions. Women's representation is severely restricted by social stigma attached to politics, cultural norms of honour, and security concerns in NMTDs. Online participation by women has increased, but is limited by variations in access to the internet and literacy levels. Moreover, a visible rift exists between the thinking of women and the local elite. Our data shows that opinions of religious and non-religious leaders, such as Maliks or MPA/MNA, differ on the question of women's participation in politics. This is primarily because of the different world views they represent. Patriarchal norms still influence the thoughts and actions of the local elite, and this leads to contestation between such an elite and women. We argue that this contestation demonstrates that women's perspectives are critical in any governmental intervention in the region, as they visibly differ in their opinions.

Based on the above discussion, we offer these modest recommendations. First, we believe that cultural norms do not change easily or quickly. Therefore, it is essential to find ways to navigate these cultural restrictions and facilitate women's participation in politics within the cultural requirements, such as the *pardah* and *nang*. This does not mean that we endorse or oppose cultural practices, but we suggest that, where these practices are firmly in place, alternatives should be explored to enhance women's involvement in politics. Second, digital platforms like social media are less effective in promoting women's emancipation, despite the widespread belief in their transformative potential. These platforms are also influenced by cultural norms and are often restricted for women or barred from political engagement. Consequently, behavioural change is necessary, along with increased access for women to these digital platforms for political participation. Third, women's voices must be included in any reform or development initiatives. This will enable the government to design interventions that genuinely support women's empowerment. Finally, it appears that political parties have been less supportive of change regarding women's participation in NMTDs. They must create opportunities for political socialisation for women from NMTDs who are unaware of how political processes work and why active participation is important. This can only happen if political parties from NMTDs seriously consider women's needs and work to increase their support among women.

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