

**Legal Reforms and Women's Political Participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan:
A Case Study of Malakand Division (2001-2020)**

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Received: 05-02-2026

Revised: 20-02-2026

Accepted: 07-03-2026

Published: 22-03-2026

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the barriers to women's political participation in the Malakand Division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan, with a specific focus on two dimensions: (1) the effect of the socio-cultural environment on women's political participation in KPK, and (2) the impact of the legal reforms and quota system introduced in 2002 on women's political participation in the Malakand Division. Grounded in liberal feminist theory, the research employs a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical methodology, drawing on both primary and secondary data sources including open-ended interviews conducted with female councillors, provincial assembly members, and municipal officials. The study finds that patriarchal norms, the Pakhtunwali code of conduct, religious extremism, lack of education, and economic dependency remain entrenched barriers. At the same time, the 2002 political reforms which allocated 17% of seats in national and provincial assemblies and 33% of seats in local bodies to women - have measurably increased women's political presence, particularly at the local government level. The study recommends stronger legal enforcement, educational investment, and gender-sensitization initiatives to sustain and deepen women's political empowerment in the region.

Keywords: Women's Political Participation, Legal Reforms, Malakand Division, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Quota System, Liberal Feminism, Socio-Cultural Environment, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Women constitute nearly half the world's population, yet their participation in formal political structures - particularly in South Asian societies - remains conspicuously limited. In Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province, and especially in the Malakand Division, this under-representation is compounded by a deeply conservative socio-cultural milieu rooted in Pakhtun traditions, patriarchal governance, and interpretations of religion that historically excluded women from public life. Despite constitutionally guaranteed rights and legislative reforms over seven decades, women in Malakand continue to face systematic exclusion from political decision-making at every level (Naz, Ibrahim, & Ahmad, 2012).

Pakistan's democratic history reveals a complex trajectory of women's political rights. Since the establishment of the first Constituent Assembly in 1947, which included only two women out of 79 members, successive governments have introduced incremental reforms, none as transformative as the military-era political reforms of 2002 under General Pervez Musharraf. These reforms elevated women's reserved seats from approximately 10% to 17% in the National Assembly and Senate and

established a 33% quota for women in local government bodies through the Devolution of Power Plan 2000 (Rubab, Mustafa, & Nawaz, 2020; Mirza & Ashraf, 2012).

In the Malakand Division - comprising Bajaur, Buner, Chitral, Dir Lower, Dir Upper, Malakand, Shangla, Swat, and Torghar districts - the challenges are particularly acute. The region's history of armed militancy, the dominance of the Pakhtunwali code, and geographic isolation have produced some of the lowest female voter turnout rates in Pakistan. During the 2008 general elections, for instance, 478 polling stations across KPK recorded zero female voter turnout (Gul & Sherazi, 2022; BiBi, 2020).

This paper draws on the master's thesis of Sumaira Gul (2020-2022), Department of Politics and International Relations, International Islamic University Islamabad, supervised by Dr. Manzoor Ahmad Naazer. The study focuses on two of the three original research objectives: examining the socio-cultural environment's effect on women's political participation in KPK and analyzing the implications of the 2002 legal reforms and quota system on women's political participation in the Malakand Division.

Rationale of the Study

In a democratic state, women hold the same political rights and responsibilities as men. However, Pakistan's democratic practice has been shaped by traditional policies and the patriarchal character of its political culture. This study addresses women's political rights in KPK - particularly in the Malakand Division-exploring the reasons for women's historically low political participation, the content and implications of the 2002 political reforms, and the socio-cultural environment that shapes women's political engagement in this context.

Statement of the Problem

Despite being a democratic state, Pakistan has faced persistent gender inequality in its political arena. The socio-cultural environment of KPK, particularly in the Malakand Division, significantly impedes women's political participation. Locally, women politicians have made important contributions to advancing women's political activities; yet they continue to face structural barriers in the decision-making process. Traditional values, societal norms, and misinterpretations of religious texts continue to subordinate women to men in the political sphere. The 2002 legal reforms have played a meaningful, if incomplete, role in altering this landscape (Bilal, Ahmad, & Rehman, 2018).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study is guided by the following two objectives:

1. To describe the effect of the socio-cultural environment on women's political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
2. To highlight the effect of the legal reforms and quota system of 2002 on women's political participation in the Malakand Division.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study makes a timely and substantive contribution to scholarly understanding of women's political empowerment in one of Pakistan's most politically marginalized regions. By concentrating on the Malakand Division, a geographically isolated and socio-culturally conservative area that has witnessed armed conflict and religious extremism, the study fills a significant gap in the existing literature on gender and politics in Pakistan.

Studying is significant for several reasons. First, it systematically documents the socio-cultural barriers - including patriarchal norms, the Pashtunwali code, religious conservatism, lack of education, and

economic dependency - that inhibit women's political participation at the grassroots level. Second, it provides a longitudinal analysis of women's representation across multiple elections from 2001 to 2020, enabling comparative assessment of the effectiveness of the 2002 quota reforms. Third, it opens academic discussion on the importance of women's participation in decision-making at local, provincial, and national levels. Fourth, it highlights the role of reserved seats in the KPK provincial assembly for women and their influence in policy-making. Finally, the study aims to serve as an objective resource for future researchers, policymakers, and civil society organizations committed to advancing gender equality in Pakistan (Gul, 2020).

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Historical Context of Women's Political Participation in Pakistan

Women's political participation in Pakistan has evolved through distinct historical phases marked by shifts in constitutional frameworks, military rule, and democratic transitions. The colonial legacy of gender quotas - established under the Government of India Act, 1935, which reserved nine seats in the Federal Assembly for women - provided the structural foundation for post-independence quota policies (Muhammad, Rahim, & Hanif, 2019).

In the first Constituent Assembly (1947-1954), women were largely excluded: only two women held seats out of 79 members. The 1956 Constitution reserved 10 seats for women in the single-chamber parliament, representing approximately 3% of total seats in both national and provincial legislatures (Gul, 2020). Under the Ayub Khan regime, the 1962 Constitution eliminated women's territorial constituencies, requiring women to be elected through indirect methods by male assembly members-a structural change that weakened women's direct accountability to voters and reinforced their dependence on male political patrons (Mirza & Ashraf, 2012).

The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan-drafted with the participation of three female members - established foundational guarantees for gender equality. Article 25 ensures equal protection before the law without discrimination on grounds of sex. Article 32 mandates representation for women in local government institutions. Article 34 commits the state to ensuring women's full participation in all aspects of national life. Articles 51 and 106 provide for reserved seats for women in the National and Provincial Assemblies (BiBi & Islam, 2019). Despite these guarantees, the reservation of seats lapsed after the 1988 elections, and the three general elections of 1990, 1993, and 1997 were conducted without women's reserved seats, resulting in a period in which women constituted barely 3 percent of the national legislature (Syed, Tabassum, & Afzal, 2013).

The most transformative shift came with General Pervez Musharraf's Legal Framework Order (LFO) of 2002, which raised women's seats in the National Assembly to 60 (17 percent), in the Senate to 17, and in provincial assemblies proportionally. Simultaneously, the Devolution of Power Plan 2000 established a 33 percent quota for women in local government bodies at the union council, tehsil, and district levels - the largest such quota in Pakistan's history (Rubab, Mustafa, & Nawaz, 2020; Mirza & Ashraf, 2012).

The Malakand Division: Socio-political Context

The Malakand Division of KPK is composed of nine districts: Bajaur, Buner, Upper Chitral, Lower Chitral, Lower Dir, Upper Dir, Malakand, Shangla, and Swat. The region is characterized by a predominantly rural, tribal, and conservative social structure in which the Pakhtunwali code of conduct exercises profound influence over daily life, gender relations, and political participation. The region's recent history of Taliban insurgency and military operations further complicated women's access to public life and political activity (Kiran & Chawla, 2019).

The Pakhtunwali code is a customary law system that governs Pakhtun social life. It contains norms - such as Ghairat (honour), Badal (revenge), Jirga (informal council), and Hujra (communal guest house) - that are exclusively associated with male agency and authority. Under this code, women's mobility, social interaction, and engagement in public life are strictly governed by male kin (Naz, Ibrahim, & Ahmad, 2012). The concept of purdah (seclusion), combined with the gendered spatial division between public (male) and private (female) spheres, creates structural barriers to women's participation in any form of political activity - from voter registration and casting ballots to standing for election.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LIBERAL FEMINISM

This study is anchored in liberal feminist theory, which provides the analytical lens through which the relationship between legal reform, political access, and women's political participation is examined. Liberal feminism-also termed egalitarian feminism - emerged in Western political thought during the 17th and 18th centuries and has since been applied as a framework for analyzing gender inequality in developing country contexts (Wendell, 1987).

Liberal feminism holds that gender inequality is produced and reproduced through discriminatory laws, institutional structures, and socialized norms that restrict women's access to public life. Its core prescription is law reform: by revising discriminatory legislation and introducing affirmative measures - including reserved seats and gender quotas - the state can create the conditions for women's equal political participation. The theory rejects structural transformation in favor of working within existing institutions, advocating for expanded rights and reformed laws as the primary mechanism of change (Almeder, 1994; Lorber, 1997).

The relevance of liberal feminism to the KPK context lies in its focus on law as both the site of women's subordination and the potential instrument of their emancipation. Pakistan's legal architecture - from the Government of India Act, 1935, to the 2002 Legal Framework Order - has directly shaped the boundaries of women's political participation. Liberal feminist analysis reveals how formally gender-neutral constitutional guarantees can coexist with substantive gender exclusion when legal reforms are not accompanied by changes in socialization, economic empowerment, and enforcement mechanisms. The theory thus provides a coherent framework for evaluating both the achievements and the limitations of Pakistan's quota-based reform efforts.

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUES

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research methodology with a descriptive and analytical research design. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for this study because the research questions require interpretation of lived experiences, institutional dynamics, and the socio-cultural meanings that shape women's political behaviour-dimensions that are not adequately captured through quantitative measures alone (Gul, 2020).

Data Collection Tools

Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were gathered through open-ended and structured interviews conducted with female political representatives. The interview instrument was designed to elicit information about: (i) respondents' experiences of socio-cultural barriers to political participation; (ii) their assessment of the practical effects of the 2002 legal reforms; (iii) the challenges faced in performing elected duties; and (iv) their perceptions of changes in women's political representation over time. Interviews were conducted with female councillors at the union council, tehsil, and district levels, female members of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Provincial Assembly, and municipal and local government officials in the Malakand Division.

Secondary data sources included peer-reviewed academic articles, books, official government documents, legislative records, publications of international organizations (UNDP, UN Women, IDEA), newspaper reports, press statements, and social media content related to women's political participation in KPK and Pakistan more broadly. Archival material from the Election Commission of Pakistan and the Aurat Foundation was also utilized.

Population and Sampling

The study population comprised elected female political representatives of the provincial assembly and local government institutions in the Malakand Division. Random sampling was employed to select participants from the available pool of female representatives at provincial, district, and tehsil council levels. This sampling strategy was appropriate given the relatively small and accessible population of female elected representatives in the study area and the practical constraints of fieldwork in a conservative and security-sensitive region. The selection aimed to ensure representation across geographic sub-units (districts) and administrative levels (provincial, district, tehsil, and union council) within the Malakand Division.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Objective 1: Effect of Socio-Cultural Environment on Women's Political Participation in KPK

The socio-cultural environment of the Malakand Division constitutes one of the most significant structural barriers to women's political participation in Pakistan. The analysis of primary and secondary data reveals that this environment operates through multiple interrelated mechanisms.

The Pakhtunwali Code and Patriarchal Norms

The Pakhtunwali code of conduct is the foundational socio-normative system that governs life in the Malakand Division. Its core concepts - Ghairat (valour/honour), Badal (revenge), Jirga (informal council), and Hujra (communal guest house) - are constructed as exclusively masculine domains. Women are considered symbols of family honour and are therefore subject to strict controls over their public conduct and mobility (Naz, Ibrahim, & Ahmad, 2012). The concept of purdah - which requires women's seclusion from unrelated men - is interpreted broadly enough in the Malakand context to preclude participation in election campaigns, public meetings, and in many areas, voting itself.

The Jirga system, which is the primary institution of local governance and dispute resolution in Pakhtun society, is an exclusively male institution. Women have no formal standing within the Jirga and are accordingly excluded from the informal political networks through which electoral alliances are built, candidates are vetted, and political decisions are made (Saeed, Ullah, & Alam, 2019). This exclusion from informal political structures compounds women's exclusion from formal electoral politics.

The study's primary data reveal that female councillors and provincial assembly members in the Malakand Division frequently reported pressure from male family members and community elders to limit their political activities. Restrictions on independent mobility were cited as particularly debilitating: attending council meetings, travelling to district headquarters, and engaging in constituency activities were all activities for which women required male permission and escort, creating logistical barriers that effectively limited the time and energy women could devote to political work (Ullah, 2018).

Religious Extremism and Misinterpretation of Islamic Norms

Religious extremism has been a defining feature of the Malakand Division's recent history. The rise of the Tehrik-i-Nifaz-i-Shariat-i-Mohammadi (TNSM) and subsequent Taliban insurgency in the region directly targeted women's public activities. Female politicians and voters were subjected to threats,

intimidation, and violence. During local government elections in 2001 in Dir Upper, armed jihadi militants positioned themselves in courts and around the offices of returning officers to prevent women and their family members from filing nomination papers (Ahmad, 2014). The assassination of District Councillor Zubeide Begum in Dir Upper following the 2001 elections created a climate of fear that had measurable deterrent effects on women's electoral participation in subsequent cycles.

Beyond direct violence, religiously framed ideological opposition to women's political participation has been propagated through local mosques, religious schools, and political parties. Misinterpretations of Islamic law by influential local clerics have been deployed to cast women's outdoor activities - and especially their participation in politics - as religiously impermissible, despite the clear evidence within Islamic jurisprudence for women's political rights. These misinterpretations serve the interests of male politicians and community elders who benefit from restricting women's political agency (Kiran & Chawla, 2019).

Lack of Education and Economic Dependency

Education and economic empowerment are closely interrelated with political participation. In the tribal zones of the Malakand Division, women's literacy rates remain below 12%, compared to over 50% in other parts of KPK (Ahmad, Bibi's testimony, 2021). Without basic literacy, women are unable to understand their constitutional rights, register to vote, or engage meaningfully in political processes. Cultural attitudes regarding girls' education - including the widely held view that investing in a daughter's education is wasteful because she will eventually leave her natal home upon marriage - perpetuate this educational deficit across generations (Naz & Chaudhry, 2011).

Economic dependency reinforces political marginalization. In the Malakand Division, productive assets - land, livestock, and businesses - are overwhelmingly controlled by men under both the Pakhtunwali code and the feudal economic structures that characterize much of rural KPK. Women's economic dependency on male kin removes the financial independence necessary to contest elections (which require campaign expenditures), fund political activities, and resist family pressure against political involvement. The study's interviews confirm that women who successfully contested and won seats in local government elections were disproportionately from families that had already granted them some degree of economic autonomy or social status (Bilal, Ahmad, & Rehman, 2018).

Insecurity and Violence

Physical insecurity constitutes a pervasive deterrent to women's political participation in the Malakand Division. Cases of harassment, kidnapping, and targeted violence against female candidates and voters have been documented across multiple election cycles. The region's history of terrorism and armed conflict - particularly during the Taliban insurgency of 2007-2009 - created an environment in which many families refused to allow female members to leave the home for any purpose, including voting. Even after the military's clearance operations in Swat and other affected districts, social norms of female confinement persisted, often being rationalized in security rather than purely patriarchal terms. During the 2015 local government elections, cases of women being denied the right to vote were reported from at least 80 wards across 17 districts of KPK, with Swabi, Shangla, Lakki Marwat, and Upper Dir recording the highest number of incidents (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa local government election, 2015).

Structural Barriers within Political Parties

Women face additional barriers within political party structures. Parties are reluctant to nominate women for general (open) constituency seats, viewing women candidates as electoral risks in conservative constituencies. Party leadership structures in KPK are overwhelmingly male, and women who have achieved political office disproportionately come from established political families - suggesting that dynastic connections, rather than merit or mobilization capacity, are the primary route to women's political advancement (Ahmad & Anwar, 2018). The patronage-based nature of local

politics, in which male politicians control access to public resources, further marginalizes women who lack access to these networks.

Objective 2: Effect of Legal Reforms and the Quota System of 2002 on Women's Political Participation in Malakand Division

The 2002 political reforms and associated quota system represent the most significant legislative intervention in the history of women's political participation in Pakistan. The analysis of electoral data from 2001 to 2020 permits an assessment of both the quantitative impact of these reforms on women's representation and their qualitative effects on women's engagement in local governance.

The Quota System: Structure and Scale

The 2002 Legal Framework Order and Devolution of Power Plan established a multi-tiered quota system for women's political representation. At the national level, 60 seats (17 percent) in the National Assembly and 17 seats in the Senate were reserved for women. In the provincial assemblies, women received proportional representation: 66 out of 371 seats in the Punjab Assembly, 29 out of 168 in the Sindh Assembly, 22 out of 124 in the KPK Assembly, and 11 out of 65 in the Baluchistan Assembly (Rubab, Mustafa, & Nawaz, 2020). At the local government level, 33% of seats were reserved for women at the union council, tehsil/town, and district levels - representing by far the largest quota in Pakistan's history and the most significant entry point for women's political participation in the Malakand Division.

Women's Representation in Local Government Elections 2001 and 2005 in Malakand Division

The local government elections of 2001 and 2005 provide the most granular evidence of the reforms' impact in the Malakand Division. The data document significant variation across districts, reflecting the differential influence of local socio-cultural conditions on the implementation of the quota reforms.

In Dir Lower, the 2001 elections saw women filing for 156 seats across 52 Union Councils, with 132 elected and 24 seats vacant - a coverage rate of 84.6% for reserved seats. By 2005, coverage had improved substantially in most tehsils. However, the overall environment in Dir Lower remained constrained, with women's ability to vote publicly still contested in many areas (Ahmad, 2014).

The most adverse conditions were found in Dir Upper, where in 2001 armed jihadi militants actively prevented women and their families from filing nomination papers. Despite this, 42 women filed papers for 31 UCs against 186 reserved seats, with 41 ultimately nominated as councillors, representing a 21.8% coverage rate. By 2005, the situation had significantly improved: 124 women filed nomination papers, and 87 were elected, a coverage rate of 70%, representing a near-tripling of women's electoral participation between the two elections (Ahmad, 2014).

In Malakand district, the coverage rate for women's reserved seats was 92.0% in 2001 (103 women elected out of 112 available seats) and reached 100% in 2005. Also, in Chitral, the coverage rate was 98.6% in 2001 and 97.91% in 2005. In Buner, the coverage rate was 93.2% in 2001 and 88.88 percent in 2005. Swat showed 76.1 % coverage in 2001, improving to 90.76% in 2005. In Shangla, coverage was 77.1% in 2001 and 96.42% in 2005 (Ahmad, 2014).

These data suggest a broadly positive trajectory in women's formal representation in local government in the Malakand Division following the 2002 reforms, with notable improvements between the 2001 and 2005 election cycles. The districts where improvement was most pronounced - Swat, Shangla, and Dir Upper - were also those where the initial barriers had been most severe, suggesting that the quota framework created institutional momentum that, over time, gradually overcame entrenched resistance.

Women's Voter Turnout in General Elections 2002-2018

The trajectory of women's voter turnout in KPK general elections from 2002 to 2018 provides a complementary measure of the reforms' impact. In the 2002 general elections, 188 women contested general seats, with 39 winning - a historically unprecedented number reflecting the enhanced political environment created by the quota reforms (Awan, 2018). The 2008 elections, however, revealed the limits of formal legal change: conducted against the backdrop of Taliban insurgency and threats against women politicians, 478 polling stations across KPK recorded zero female voter turnout. In Swat, Buner, Charsadda, and other areas of the Malakand Division, some districts reported the highest proportions of polling stations with zero female participation (Gul & Sherazi, 2022).

The 2012-2013 national election awareness campaign, which specifically targeted constituencies with historically low or zero female voter turnout, produced a measurable improvement: the overall turnout in KPK rose from 34% in 2008 to 45% in 2013 (BiBi, 2020). The 2018 elections sustained this improvement, with an overall turnout of 45.52%, supported by the Elections Act of 2017, which nullified results in any constituency where female voter turnout fell below 10% and imposed legal penalties on individuals and groups preventing women from voting (Kausar & Mehboob, 2018; Gul & Sherazi, 2022).

The comparison of women's political participation across 2002, 2008, 2013, and 2018 general elections demonstrates a non-linear but ultimately positive trend. The 2002 reforms created structural opportunity; the security crisis of 2005-2009 interrupted progress; targeted policy interventions from 2012 onwards resumed the upward trajectory.

The 2013 KPK Local Government Act and 2015 Elections

The KPK Local Government Act of 2013 consolidated and extended the 2002 reforms by reaffirming the 33% quota for women in all local councils-district, tehsil, and village/neighbourhood - and granting elected women members substantive powers, including participation in standing, investment, monitoring, and dispute resolution committees, as well as the district accounts committee (Ali, Bibi, & Sardar, 2021). The 2015 KPK local government elections were the province's largest ever voting exercise, with 13,387,234 registered voters across 24 districts.

Women's political engagement improved significantly in 2015 compared to all previous local government systems in the province. Of the registered voters, 5,750,772 (43%) were women. For reserved seats, 7,681 women filed nomination papers for 6,678 available seats (Ali, Bibi, & Sardar, 2021). However, the elections also documented persistent structural barriers: at least one polling station in 80 of 462 wards reported incidents of structural or cultural impediments to women voting. Swabi recorded the highest number of such incidents (15), followed by Shangla (7), Mardan (7), and Upper Dir (9) (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa local government election, 2015). This evidence confirms that legal reform, while necessary, is insufficient without accompanying enforcement mechanisms and social change.

Women's Political Participation in 2021-2022 Local Elections

The most recent local government elections in KPK (2021-2022) document continued progress in women's political participation, including in areas historically most resistant to women's public roles. Over 550 women contested in the first phase of elections across 17 districts - including the former FATA areas of Khyber, Mohmand, and Bajaur, incorporated into KPK in 2018. This was the first time local elections had been held in these former tribal areas, and the participation of women - while still constrained by structural barriers - represented a historic departure from the near-total exclusion of women from public life that had characterized FATA (In a first, hundreds of women contest local council elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2021).

In Lower Dir specifically, 490 women filed nomination papers for village council seats, reflecting growing awareness of electoral rights and increased confidence among women to exercise them. Women candidates in Bajaur and Mohmand districts testified to running for office in order to advance girls' education, noting that female literacy in the tribal belt remained below 12 percent. The Election Commission of Pakistan's enforcement of the 10 percent female voter threshold, combined with increased security at polling stations, contributed to a generally peaceful election with strong turnout (Khan, 2022; Over 490 Lower Dir women file nominations for LG polls, 2022).

Limitations and Challenges of the Quota System

While quantitative data demonstrate improvements in women's formal representation, qualitative evidence from interviews underscores the limitations of quota-based representation. Several challenges have been documented. First, women elected on reserved seats are often nominated through indirect election by male councillors, creating a dependence relationship that limits their political autonomy and accountability to female constituents (BiBi & Islam, 2019). Second, women councillors frequently report exclusion from meaningful participation in council deliberations, as male counterparts treat their participation as symbolic rather than substantive. Third, the absence of reserved seats for women in the position of council chairperson - the most powerful role in local government - means that women retain a minority voice in executive decision-making. Fourth, inadequate capacity-building, training, and mentoring for women entering politics for the first time limits their effectiveness as political actors (Yazdani, 2004; Ali, Bibi, & Sardar, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the effect of the socio-cultural environment on women's political participation in KPK and the implications of the 2002 legal reforms and quota system on women's political participation in the Malakand Division. The findings confirm that women's political participation in the Malakand Division remains constrained by deeply rooted socio-cultural barriers-including the Pakhtunwali code, patriarchal family structures, religious misinterpretation, economic dependency, lack of education, and physical insecurity-that limit the transformative potential of legal reform.

At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that the 2002 political reforms and their successors have produced measurable, sustained improvements in women's formal political representation. The local government elections of 2001 and 2005 saw coverage rates of women's reserved seats rise from as low as 21.8% in Dir Upper in 2001 to 70.1% by 2005. Overall voter turnout in KPK grew from 34% in 2008 to 45.52% in 2018, supported by the targeted election awareness campaigns of 2012-2013 and the enforcement mechanisms of the Elections Act, 2017. The 2021-2022 local government elections extended women's electoral participation to former FATA districts for the first time in history.

The evidence supports the liberal feminist theoretical framework adopted by this study: legal reforms and quota systems are necessary but insufficient conditions for women's political empowerment. Substantive equality requires simultaneous investment in women's education, economic independence, and safety; reform of intra-party gender dynamics; enforcement of legal protections against voter suppression; and sustained civic education and awareness campaigns targeting both women and the male gatekeepers-family members, community elders, and religious figures - who shape the conditions of women's political participation.

The trajectory of women's political participation in the Malakand Division over the two decades under study is ultimately one of cautious optimism. The structural transformation required for genuine gender equality in Pakistani democracy remains incomplete. However, the empirical record documents real and cumulative progress, built through the combination of legal reform, institutional design, civil society advocacy, and the growing political agency of women across all levels of the Malakand Division's governance structures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Existing legal reforms must be rigorously enforced, and obstacles to women's political engagement in KPK must be systematically dismantled through targeted law enforcement and institutional accountability mechanisms.
- ii. Gender parity in policy-making must be treated as a precondition for women's empowerment - not merely as a metric of representation - requiring active measures to increase women's substantive influence in legislative committees and executive positions. Support for women through mentoring, capacity-building, network development, and exercise of political skills must be institutionalized.
- iii. Support for grassroots women's electoral organizations must be expanded, enabling women in the Malakand Division to become active agents in their own political representation rather than passive beneficiaries of reserved seats.
- iv. Women's voter registration must receive targeted attention, particularly in rural and tribal areas. Priority should be given to CNIC issuance, creation of safe and accessible voting environments, and female polling staff at all voting stations.
- v. Political parties must be required to treat women as equal counterparts, strengthen women's wings, grant women a minimum 33 percent quota in elected party committees, and address women's issues substantively in party manifestos.
- vi. Gender sensitization curricula must be integrated into training programmes at institutions such as the National School of Public Policy (NSPP) and the National Institute of Management (NIM), building the capacity of public servants to implement gender-responsive governance.
- vii. The provision of the Elections Act, 2017, nullifying results in constituencies where female voter turnout falls below 10 percent, must be consistently enforced as a deterrent against systematic voter suppression.
- viii. Women should comprise at least 20 percent of ministerial and advisory positions, and every legislature should elect a female Speaker or Deputy Speaker.
- ix. The government must substantially increase investment in girls' education across the Malakand Division, including targeted awareness campaigns, scholarships, and the establishment of girls' schools in underserved rural and tribal areas.

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