Journal of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences (JHSMS)
eISSN: 2788-4791 (online)
https://ideapublishers.org/index.php/jhsms
Vol. 5, No. 1 (January-June), 2024, pp. 191-207
https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.jhsms/5.1.11
Research Article | Original Research

Women agency and provincial autonomy: a study of post-18th Amendment local government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

Abida Bano*[1, 2] | Aisha Alam[3]

1. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Peshawar, Peshawar, Pakistan.
2. Institute of Asian and African Studies (IAAW), Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany.
3. Department of Gender Studies, University of Peshawar, Peshawar, Pakistan.

*Corresponding Author Emails: abidabano@uop.edu.pk | abida.bano@hu-berlin.de

Article History

Received:
08-Aug-2023

Revised:
09-May-2024

Re-revised:
18-Jun-2024

Accepted:
19-June-2024

Published:
30-Jun-2024

Abstract:

The 18th Amendment to the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan, a significant milestone in the country's political landscape, granted the provinces certain political and fiscal powers. This included the right to pass local government legislation and hold local government elections. In the 2015 local government elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a remarkable number of women were elected to local councils on gender quota seats (33%). This was a clear testament to the empowering potential of the 18th Amendment. However, despite this progress, the underrepresentation of women in decision-making processes remains a pressing issue. This paper aims to answer how provincial autonomy has contributed to the autonomy and agency of women councillors in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The study collected data from purposively selected districts, Nowshera, Haripur, and Kohat, through individual interviews using qualitative approaches. The paper strongly advocates that the participation of women councillors in local government necessitates more stringent policy reforms to make the local councils more inclusive towards women as representatives. This stance is crucial and imperative for women's political autonomy and empowerment.

Keywords: Political participation, Women empowerment, Informal rules, Patriarchal society, 18th Amendment, Devolution of power, Local government, Political power.

How to Cite:
Bano, A. & Alam, A. (2024). Women agency and provincial autonomy: a study of post-18th Amendment local government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *Journal of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences (JHSMS)*, *5*(1), 191-207. https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.jhsms/5.1.11

1. Introduction

Following the passage of the 18th Amendment, the federal-level Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development was dissolved, and provincial governments were tasked with devolving powers to local government elected representatives. This transition, while empowering, also presented numerous hurdles for women. Consequently, all provinces were required to enact their local government acts and conduct local government elections. In 2013, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) passed its Local Government Act (KPLGA), amended and reenacted in 2019. In line with KPLGA 2013, the KP government held local elections across the province in 2015. The total number of women seats in the local councils in KP was 7,342, but only 6,678 women were elected as local council members for four years in 2015. Some seats remained vacant due to the absence of women candidates, or the perceived risks associated with contesting local elections (Bano, 2017). This stark reality underscores the immediate and comprehensive need to support and empower women in local government.

The local government system in Pakistan has a fractured political history. Its roots can be traced back to the British Raj in India during the colonial era. However, despite being inherited from the British, the local government system has never been implemented smoothly in Pakistan. The system has undergone various reforms and amendments over the years; it has yet to be practised effectively. Thus, this paper provides an in-depth analysis of the local government system and its impact on women in Pakistan, focusing on the barriers women face in decision-making. This paper examines women's representation in the local government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, post-18th amendment to the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan. This paper focuses on the first term of local government (2015-2019). It aims to identify the barriers women councillors face in performing their roles to promote women's rights in the local councils and government system. It also assesses the local government system's effectiveness in encouraging women's political participation.

Women's political autonomy and agency extend beyond merely choosing to participate in the elections or become part of the decision-making process. The participation of women in national and provincial politics is hindered by challenges related to participation, representation, and empowerment. In 2015, a historic moment occurred when numerous women joined the local government in Pakistan. The Village and Neighbourhood Council (VC/NC) is credited with enabling women to participate in politics at the lowest level of governance. The KPLGA 2013 mandates that two women out of fifteen members be appointed as councillors on reserved seats (gender quotas) in every village and neighbourhood council, ensuring that women's issues are appropriately represented, and their perspectives are integrated into the local government system.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section introduces local government in Pakistan and focuses on the plight of women in integrating women into Pakistani politics. The second section includes the research question, methodology, and theoretical framework. The third and final section discusses significant findings and concludes the paper's results.

1.1. Local government in Pakistan: historical trajectory

Historically, it is evident that military governments played a vital role in reforming local government policies compared to democratic governments dominated by various political

parties. The local government model in Pakistan is inherited from the British colonial power, which focused on establishing "a loyal native class" rather than an independent local government body. The system introduced by General Ayub Khan through the Basic Democracy Ordinance (BDO) in 1959 and the Municipal Administration Ordinance (MAO) in 1960 consisted of four tiers of local government but was criticised for being more of a controlling authority than a true democracy.

When the PPP came into power, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's government introduced the People's Local Government Ordinance. Later, the constitution of 1973 declared local government a non-binding issue. However, after the 18th constitutional amendment, the local government system was given more autonomy and authority to carry out its functions effectively. It will also assess the system's effectiveness in promoting women's participation and highlight the historical context of the local government system in Pakistan. After Bhutto, General Zia-ul-Haq[1] introduced the Local Government Ordinance (LGO) in 1979. Zia's version of the LG system incorporates a three-tier system consisting of the union council (village/ward level), the council/sub-district level, and the district council. The political history of Pakistan from 1988 to 1999 was considered a merry-go-round of two leading political parties,[2] PPP and PMLN (Saigol, 2016). During these years, PPP's two terms elected local government bodies were dismissed, and only one local government election was held in PMLN's two governments. This shows that an apparent disconnect was witnessed in the local government policies and reforms during the civil governments of Pakistan (Jabeen, 2019; Sumra, 2017; Khan et al., 2022).

Later, General Pervaiz Musharaf3 the Devolution of Power Plan was instituted in 2000 to establish his martial law regime there. He gave his 5D model, which encompasses devolution of political power, decentralization of administrative authority, de-centration of management functions, distribution of resources to districts, and diffusion of power authority (Malik, 2019). Musharraf's devolution plan brought a paradigm shift in development; it was more all-inclusive and integrative towards people, and for the first time, local governance parlance was used instead of local government (Jabeen & Umm-e- Farwa, 2018). Women were involved in politics by being granted 33 per cent reserved seats in all three tiers of local government. Forty thousand women entered politics after the first elections in 2001. Furthermore, through his Legal Framework Order to amend the Constitution, Musharraf granted 17 per cent reserved seats for women in the National Assembly and Senate, with a 17.6 per cent quota for the provincial assemblies (Cheema et al., 2005; Zia, 2005; Hussain et al., 2012).

After the dismissal of Musharraf's government in 2008, the Pakistan People's Party, under the leadership of Zardari, introduced the 18th Amendment of the Constitution passed by the National Assembly of Pakistan on April 8, 2010, which states, "each province shall, by law, establish a local government system and devolve political, financial, and administrative responsibility and authority to the elected representatives of the local government". As a result, Balochistan was the first province to enact the Local Government Act 2010 (amended in 2013); Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's provincial governments passed the Local Government Act in 2013. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the first elections were held in 2015 for four years. The government of PTI, Imran Khan, dismantled the existing system and introduced a new one. The new Local Government Act 2019 was introduced in Punjab, and the Local Government (Amendment) Act 2019 was made functional in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by their respective provincial assemblies. The provinces of Sindh and Balochistan have not yet approved their new local government acts.

1.3. Women's agency, autonomy and empowerment in local government

Women's agency, autonomy, and empowerment are distinct, yet related concepts often used interchangeably. While all three concepts are interrelated and juxtapose women's ability to make their choices and decisions, their focus and scope differ. Women's agency refers to their capacity to make choices within societal structures (Molyneux (1985). However, autonomy is defined as women's ability to make free and independent decisions – free from coercion and external influence. It requires women to have information, resources, and support from various actors to make informed decisions about their lives and those they represent (in the case of women representatives). A woman councillor must know her role and social position in the local council to efficiently work in the system and incorporate gender concerns into her decision-making. Being fully engaged and functional in local councils needs a deeper understanding of women's issues in their community and a commitment to address them through policy and practice. In the context of local government and participation in local councils, this involves providing women councillors access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, enabling them to become self-sufficient and independent.

Broadly defined, empowerment enables women to take control of their lives and participate fully in society (Kabeer, 2005). It also entails advancing social justice and gender equality, breaking down obstacles that keep women from accessing opportunities and resources. In the local government's context, this means that policies and programs promoting women's rights and addressing their issues, including gender-based violence, should be made and implemented. Overall, women's agency, autonomy, and empowerment are interrelated concepts used interchangeably and should be enforced and promoted by local governments to ensure women can fully participate in the local councils and work to improve their constituency.

According to Giddens (1983), the agency cannot be taken alone without structure; humans depend on structure, and structures depend on humans. Human beings live in structures; within these structures, they can make choices and take responsibility for their actions. Autonomy is more formal than the agency in the Local government system; women are autonomous because they are entitled to vote, contest elections, and hold public office. The inconsistency between de facto and de jure in women's political agency and autonomy depends on the influence of patriarchal power and control. Empowerment, particularly the politics of women's empowerment, can only be gauged when the structure of patriarchy is theorized by accommodating the concerns of both men and women equally (Walby, 1991).

The political structure of Pakistan and, categorically, the political landscape of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are patriarchal. Women's political agency and autonomy seem to be a far-fetched reality; the patriarchal cultural (informal) and institutional (formal) practices create hurdles to women's empowerment. Politics is always about power; men have always been socialized to hold and exercise control. Politics, as one of the integral formal institutions, has always been patriarchal, with the underlying notion that women are compliant to power they cannot exercise or influence. Patriarchy has changed its form over the years; earlier, women could not come into politics, but now women can, but they have been marginalized within the formal structure. Tabassum (2011) describes that women in formal politics are still segregated to lower ranks at the VC/NC level. They deal with soft issues (like women, health, and education) instead of matters like finance and authority, where decision-making brings real change.

2. Theoretical framework

This paper analyses the impact of patriarchy on women's political participation. It examines how the patriarchy theory can help us understand the challenges and opportunities for women's empowerment and gender equality in the local government system in Pakistan. This paper uses the "theory of patriarchy" proposed by feminist scholar Sylvia Walby (1991) to understand the hazards the patriarchal structure presents to women councillors while exercising their agency in the local councils. Walby asserts that patriarchy – a complex system of social structures and practices, reinforces and perpetuates male domination of women's oppression in society. Scholars, including Hartmann (1976) and Nancy Fraser (1997), support Sylvia Walby's patriarchy theory and underscore its multi-dimensional and intersectional nature with other forms of oppression.

Heidi Hartmann and Nancy Fraser support Sylvia Walby's theorizing of patriarchy and illuminate its complexity and intersectionality with other forms of oppression. According to Heidi Hartman (1976), various forms of patriarchal oppression are intersectional and interconnected. Moreover, there are various manifestations of patriarchy, including the gender wage gap, gender-based violence, and gender-biased policies. Hartman (1981) acknowledges Walby's contribution in explaining the patriarchal structures and manifestations in various social settings that cause women's oppression. Another prominent feminist theorist, Fraser (1997), engaging Walby's theory of patriarchy, studies the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism and the intersections between various systems of oppression.

Furthermore, the theorizing of "Feminizing Politics" by Sarah Childs and Joni Lovenduski, which comprehensively analyses women's challenges in local politics, also informs this study (2013). The book's central thesis asserts that women's substantive and effective political representation is hampered by the gendered norms and practices rooted in patriarchal structures. These gendered norms include expectations around leadership styles and gendered and limited access to power networks within political institutions, which impede women's political participation (Childs & Lovenduski, 2013). Childs and Lovenduski stress addressing patriarchy to promote gender equality in political institutions.

Taking cues from Hartmann (1979), Fraser (1997), and Childs and Lovenduski (2013), this paper argues that patriarchal structures continue to prevail in the local government, reinforcing gender inequalities and creating hazards in women in women's representation by imposing gendered patterns in accessing influential networks, among others. These revelations underscore the salience of tackling patriarchy to discourage gender discrimination and achieve gender equality within the political institutions in Pakistan.

3. Research methodology

This paper engages qualitative approaches and uses individual interviews and observations as primary data collection methods. Qualitative methods enable researchers to collect in-depth details through interviews, observation, and surveys (Cresswel & Poth, 2018). Additionally, qualitative methods are best for exploring the issues in-depth and studying contextual details (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Context (social, political, and economic) is critical in determining power dynamics in social and gender relationships. Three selected districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, namely Kohat, Haripur, and Nowshera, are chosen on diverse cases with the

same outcome model through purposive sampling to show maximum variation in the dependent variable (women councillors' agency in local govt).

A total of 30 individual in-depth interviews were conducted, with a breakup of 10 from each district based on the convenience sampling method. The respondents' ages span from 25 to 55 and have varying levels of education. The sample size includes entirely uneducated students up to the middle standard of education. The research participants included both male and female councillors elected to each district's local councils of each district. After collecting data, a thematic analysis was performed to give an overarching view of women's role in politics as councillors. The study explored how women councillors faced many challenges as local councillors. Provincial autonomy does not necessarily guarantee the active participation of women councillors in local government, especially when patriarchal structures and rules prevail.

4. Finding and analysis

In the following section, various themes are derived from the collected data and analysed. The study's findings show a noticeable difference in the understanding of the local government system between two groups of women in the selected districts. The familiarity of women councillors with the functioning of local government varies across the cases. Several factors are responsible for this variation, which are discussed in the thematic analysis. The following section analyses several themes drawn from the collected data. The study findings demonstrate a marked variation in the understanding of the local government system between two distinct categories of women in the selected districts of this study. The level of familiarity of women councillors with the functioning of local government also varies across the cases in Pakistan. This variation can be attributed to several factors, which are explored in the thematic analysis that follows.

4.1. The Politics of women's political participation

The women councillors' narratives demonstrate how they became part of politics but more in paper than reality. Women's agency and autonomy to participate in politics had no meaning because men held the power of decision-making. Generally, male councillors dominated local councils, while women barely participated in deliberations and decision-making. Males' social hierarchy has made them internalise the idea that "men make (better) decisions."[4] Hanmer and Klugman (2016) argue that women's agency is intrinsically hard to measure because it sees the outcome of people's actions instead of what they want to do in terms of their choice. In the context of LG and Pashtun society, women's political participation has many undertones. Council members give importance to women when their presence is needed, but women's input is completely sidelined regarding decision-making. Women's participation in the local council's deliberations is constrained by informal rules in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Ahmad et al., 2017). The paradoxical situation forces women to adopt a passive approach to decision-making, resulting in their exclusion despite being previously included.

Most councillors were between 45 and 55 years old and had varying levels of education, from being entirely uneducated to holding a middle school certificate. Due to the cultural context, no young and a few middle-aged women served as councillors. Older women are perceived to have more relaxation when interacting and conversing with men than younger women, but

older women are just members instead of productive members. Ahmad and Bano (2019) supported the same argument that women's participation in the public domain in the patriarchal society of Pakistan is considered "dishonourable". A respondent expressed, *''People, particularly men, look down upon and are judgmental to women who become part of politics, no matter how trivial the power or position she holds*."

It was found that the local councillors of selected districts' urban or suburban areas were relatively vocal compared to the councils in rural areas in raising their concerns as well as the concerns of the community. The variation in women councillors' active participation across the rural-urban divide is consistent with the findings of the study by Bano (2017) conducted in the Pashtun districts of Mardan, Peshawar and Swat. Furthermore, Bari (2015) conducted a study on women parliamentarians on quota seats and highlighted that "party leadership does not like vocal women…they lack political vision". It is essential to understand that it does not matter on which level a woman is politically participating, but she is made to feel less by her male counterparts (Hanif et al., 2009; Khattak, 2010).

Moreover, many women needed to know their councillors' roles and responsibilities. "*I do not know anything about the area's problems; Nazim asked me to become a councillor because there was no other lady. My son brings me here for the meeting.*" Additionally, most women councillors had never heard of terms like Village Council Development Plan (VCDP), Annual Development Plan (ADP), or Right to Information Act (RTI). Other council members were informed about it but did not share this information with women. Thus, women are structurally excluded because they have limited power in the council and are denied access to information. Walby (1990) argues that when public and private patriarchy is applied to women in politics, it shows that merely adding women into politics is like superficial empowerment. They are puppets, and the marionette, the patriarch, controls their strings. Having no power and control over authority, men take women for granted at private and public levels.

4.2. Impediments faced by women councillors in LG

The empirical evidence highlights that the opinions of female councillors significantly differed depending on Nazim's presence or absence. When Nazim was present, the councillors expressed positive sentiments such as *"the council is highly cooperative and actively addresses community issues."* However, in Nazim's absence, their views shifted to *"we bring community problems to them, and after acknowledging the issues, they fail to take the initiative, and the problems persist for months."*

Female councillors also highlighted that corruption is rampant within the local government. One councillor stated, *"My Nazim used to own a bicycle, but now he owns a large hujra. No one can question him about its origin. Women in my area believe I am also involved in financial embezzlement."* The public forms of patriarchy affect women and directly impact their social reputation and decision-making abilities. Walby (1990) differentiates between public and private patriarchy and how it influences and restricts women's social, cultural, economic, and political status. According to her, public patriarchy manifests itself in structures other than the household, and masculine norms have always dominated that. Here, the power is not exercised by men individually to suppress women; instead, it is done collectively. It is not the case that women are not allowed to be a part of the public, yet patriarchal shekels subjugate women's abilities and capabilities. This kind is usually 'segregationist' in nature.

Another respondent, a widow, recounted instances where the Nazim had treated her harshly, causing her to feel insulted, but she later apologized. A female councillor's status can influence others' attitudes towards her, especially if she is married, as members may be cautious when communicating with her. According to Walby (1991), the private patriarchy is based on household production, where a patriarch, usually a father or a husband, controls women individually, and women are subordinated due to the male power within the limited sphere. This kind is mostly 'exclusionary' in nature. In the mentioned scenario, public patriarchal structures accommodate private patriarchy by treating married women differently due to their relationships with men in the community.

Furthermore, the data informs that no single penny is available in local government funds for women's needs. As councillors, they have occasionally raised the matter of women's needs in meetings, but Nazim always asked them to find some other funding source for women's needs. Women councillors stated, *"Rural women thought that our work is like Benazir income support programmed, or we give microfinance to women, or they expect us to give sewing machines."* We must explain to them that local government can only do construction-related development work.

The distribution of funds among council members was another significant finding from the data that affected the performance of female councillors. Funds or development schemes are typically distributed and considered a landmark of council members' performance. After distribution, each member receives slightly over one hundred thousand, an insignificant amount for any substantial development project. It was also discovered that some members had constructed water bores within their homes. A female councillor recounted a woman's comment, *"Do you call yourself a member? What have you done for us?"* Hearing such remarks would bother her initially, but now she feels helpless. The Nazim of the VC admitted that *"once we received fewer funds, it was unanimously decided not to give funds to female councillors."* Thus, these findings show that women councillors could not resolve community problems because the council is gender blind towards women's needs and prioritizes general welfare over women's issues.

4.3. Integrating women's issues in local government- a policy lacuna

Female councillors' ignorance was a common feature of the targeted population, but in each district, both completely ignorant and slightly informed councillors coexisted. Ignorance of women councillors leads to ignorance of community women, and informed councillors empower women through information. One of the findings revealed that women councillors admitted they could not perform up to the expectations of the area's womenfolk.

> *"I have not done anything substantial for women in the past four years because no fund was available for women-focused activities. Men and women councillors have done development work. Namely, water bore or street pavement. Women in my area have asked me numerous times about vocational centres and facilities at BHU, and most often, I feel embarrassed about not meeting their rightful demands."*

These findings highlight that it is a significant policy lacuna that funds can be spent on the construction and maintenance of sidewalks. Another councillor also stressed that *"women have*

requested vocational centres time and again for young girls because girls are dropped out from school after the middle. I feel helpless knowing they can be economically empowered because of their unique embroidery skills." The above data shows that the local government act does not cater to the needs of women-specific initiatives. The involvement of women in local government is meant to engage women in the political process at the grass-roots level as both the voters and members of VC/NC. A village council secretary said, *"We have one million rupees lying useless in our account, but we do not have the authority and power to spend on women's issues."*

It was also found that no capacity-building programs were arranged for the women councillors to know their roles and responsibilities. Jadoon et al. (2015) explained that many civil society organizations trained and developed manuals for women councillors after the devolution plan. They were helpful to women, but they faced many issues regarding mobility and severe issues about staying away from home and time duration, which indicates patriarchal norms. More than 80 per cent of elected women councillors from the local government elections of 2000-2001 were given training under the Women's Political Participation Project by *Aurat* Foundation (Saigol, 2016).

4.4. Women's agency and autonomy versus patriarchy

Women were not actively involved in local government, and male village/neighbourhood council members primarily provided information about them. It was revealed that women were not self-motivated to take up these positions; instead, they were asked by their male family members or council members to do so. One respondent mentioned that her husband urged her to become a councillor because of his interest in politics, but he could not participate directly due to his government job. The village council Nazim stated that during elections, they approached people to nominate a female for the reserved seat, but cultural barriers resulted in people rejecting their request. Pashtun culture considers it disgraceful for a man if his woman participates in the public domain (Ahmed and Bano, 2019). These cultural standards fuel gender inequalities and reinforce patriarchy, hindering formal institutions like local government. Walby (1991) argues that patriarchy is a pervasive social system that remains deeply entrenched in our society. While it may appear to loosen its grip in some areas, it inevitably tightens it in others, perpetuating gender inequality in all its forms. Walby's analysis highlights the issue's complexity and underscores the need for a multifaceted approach to dismantling patriarchy. Only by addressing its various manifestations can we hope to achieve true gender equality and justice for all.

In District Kohat, many female councillors were represented by male family members, particularly fathers or husbands. One husband of a woman councillor even admitted that he attends meetings on behalf of his wife because he believes she lacks knowledge about local government matters. However, studies have shown that men can only partially represent women's experiences and perspectives (Osborn, 2012; Piscopo, 2011; Young, 2017). Scholars have noted that women's experiences differ from men's, and therefore, men cannot adequately represent women's issues (Bari, 2005; Ahmed & Nawaz, 2017). Women's cultural conditioning to stay within the domestic sphere has also hindered their political participation and capability (Ahmad et al., 2017; Ullah & Ahmad 2020). This cultural expectation reduces women to their gender roles as mothers or wives in the patriarchal system rather than recognizing them as citizens with political agency.

In District Nowshera, women councillors attend meetings, but unfortunately, their presence is often only symbolic. Some councillors have shared that they feel obligated to adhere to cultural norms of modesty and decorum known as *'purdah'*. As a result, they sit quietly in the corner of the meeting room, rarely speaking up or expressing their views openly. Even when disagreeing with other council members, they often remain silent and do not voice their dissent. The entrenched patriarchy undermines the value of women's opinions and perpetuates a culture of silence and marginalization. Bari (2005) has discussed that male domination prevails in formal political structures, which trickles down to political parties, and at every level of the political environment, it affects women's political participation. Segregation in local government perpetuated by purdah among different caste and categories affects women's decision-making power in rural areas more than in urban populations (Surie & Zerah, 2017). Most of the councillors belonged to low-income families and received remuneration when they came for the meeting. The amount is significantly less, but it is worth the pain for them. According to a councillor, *my son brings me here for the meeting, and they give me Rs. 200 (which makes less than $ 1)."*

Per the act, the VC/NC has been empowered to resolve disputes through a panel of conciliator members, providing an alternative forum for amicable settlement outside the court system. However, it has been observed that the council primarily handles property issues of men, theft, and robbery cases, while matters related to women are neglected. Men often dissuade women from seeking the council's help by citing concerns of bringing shame to their families. Women are, therefore, left to resolve their problems with the assistance of family and relatives, conforming to patriarchal expectations. The slogan in Second-wave feminism, 'personal is political,' underscores the idea that individual experiences shape social and political structures. In this case, strict boundaries between public and private spheres reinforce patriarchy and perpetuate violence against women (Tabassum, 2011).

4.5. Community perception of the role of women councillors

The implementation of local government reforms has introduced new institutional structures to create a more inclusive environment for the community. Unfortunately, women have been left out of the process, and their genuine concerns and aspirations must be adequately considered during the consultation process, resulting in a male-dominated approach. According to one councillor, she regularly visits the community, and community women also come to her seeking assistance. She cited an example of constructing a street near her house, and if anyone asked about her accomplishments, she would mention the street. Many councillors expressed concerns about community women's complaints regarding daily life issues such as inadequate healthcare facilities, especially for maternal health, the absence of a high secondary school for girls, teacher absenteeism, prolonged power outages, and water scarcity. One respondent noted that *"most women marry young and either die during childbirth due to the unavailability of proper and timely healthcare facilities or experience severe medical complications."* In District Haripur, maternal health was a significant concern due to the challenging mountainous terrain, making access to health facilities more complex than in the other two districts.

Additionally, women community members have never experienced a visit from their women councillors or received any inquiries about their problems. As a result, they tend to rely on self-help to resolve their issues. The girls' secondary school principal expressed her disappointment, saying, *"I have repeatedly invited the woman councillor to visit our school and take an interest*

in our activities, but she seems disinterested, and she is too old." Despite the proximity of the VC's office, they still need to show interest in learning about the school's issues.

A recent study has uncovered significant insights into the representation of female councillors in local government (Hussain et al., 2017). The study suggests that female councillors may not have had enough chances to address community concerns effectively. This is not due to any lack of willingness to assist but rather because their representation in local government is often more symbolic than tactical and decision maker in policy formulation. Furthermore, many female councillors only serve one term in office, limiting their ability to impact their respective communities positively.

Additionally, research shows that female politicians face various obstacles in presenting women's issues at higher levels of government. These barriers include a lack of resources, support, and sometimes even ability. However, the empirical evidence shows that female politicians remain committed to promoting women's rights and achieving gender equality in decision-making and other fields. Similarly, this paper highlights the necessity of providing more opportunities and resources to women councillors to overcome these challenges and ensure that their voices are heard and that their contributions are fruitful. Participating in local councils actively prepares them for more responsible roles in national politics. A study found that 22% of parliamentarians attributed their current positions to their local government experience (Khan & Naqvi, 2018).

5. Conclusion

Although there has been an increase in the number of women in politics, their representation is merely symbolic. The Local Government Act does not outline the duties and responsibilities of women councillors, and there are no designated funds to address the developmental needs of women. Additionally, women councillors were excluded from capacity-building programs after the 18th Amendment. Women councillors need opportunities to share their experiences or success stories to inspire others. The concept of empowerment was unfamiliar to women because men purposely excluded them from decision-making and financial matters, telling them, 'It is too difficult for them to understand or simply not their concern.'

The dominance of patriarchy in both public and private spheres has transformed politics into a patriarchal institution, making it challenging for women to work as councillors. Even though female community members rely on their women councillors to resolve their issues, these councillors often lack the power to do so. They can only communicate community concerns to the Nazim, and achieving a resolution is rare. As noted by Walby (1991), the influence of patriarchy is such that it never indeed weakens or disappears but instead shifts its grip from one area to another. This vital consideration merits attention when discussing gender equality and related issues. Her theorizing of patriarchy explains how women face restrictions at home and in public spaces where their position is equally vulnerable. Patriarchy segregates and subjugates women despite the state formally ensuring their autonomy by providing them with political representation. However, the increase in women's representation on paper only masks the fact that formal institutions run counter to women's concerns, perspectives, and mobility due to patriarchal policies made by men. Walby also points out that a glass ceiling and the limited representation of women in paid activities make it difficult for them to rise to the top. Despite being capable of holding the position of District Nazim, no woman has been appointed

to that administrative role, and patriarchal limitations continue to restrict women to lower-level privileged positions.

In a nutshell, the provincial government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa must priorities women's agency, autonomy, and empowerment after gaining provincial autonomy. Moreover, policymakers must priorities gender concerns and sensitize council members to take women's roles in the local councils seriously because they represent women's issues and interests. Furthermore, women councillors should claim their political space and negotiate their role and status alongside male councillors to improve their political lot and that of the constituency – women in their area. Although women's political participation was an affirmative action measure, it must be taken more seriously and politically to empower both genders. Women's active role in decision-making will make them more independent and capable of assuming responsible positions in local and national politics.

The study results and analysis put forth some recommendations that could help priorities women's agency, autonomy, and empowerment:

a. Gender-sensitive policies: The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government must adopt policies that address women's needs and issues, including education, health, employment, and other areas that directly or indirectly affect women's lives.

b. **Sensitization of council members:** Training workshops should be conducted to sensitize the male council members to take women's roles and experiences seriously because they represent women's interests. More training programmers and awareness sessions on gender issues and the significance of women's participation in decision-making can improve the role of women representatives in councils. Both government and civil society could work together to conduct the sensitization workshops and sessions.

c. Measures to encourage women's political participation: To achieve the intended goal of women's participation in political processes locally and nationally, more actions encouraging women's political participation, including gender quotas, campaign funding, and running for office, are needed.

d. Women's political empowerment: More women in decision-making contributes to long-lasting policies that yield better outcomes, make women independent, and build their capacity for assuming more responsible roles in national and local politics.

e. Monitoring the effectiveness of gender-sensitive initiatives: It is crucial to constantly monitor and measure the effectiveness of gender-sensitive policies to improve the quality of these programmers and achieve the desired goals of vibrant women decision-makers.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest(s) with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCiD ID

Abida Bano https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3918-5981

Aisha Alam https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7860-8790

Publisher's Note

IDEA PUBLISHERS (IDEA Publishers Group) stands neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in the published maps and institutional affiliations.

References

Ahmad, N., Bano, A., & Rehman, A. (2017). Impact of the informal institutional forces on the local government Elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ), 1*(1), 62–70. https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/1.1.7

Ahmad, A., & Nawaz, H. N. A. (2018). Femininity and women's political participation in Pakistan. *Journal of Applied Environmental and Biological Sciences, 8*(5), 56–61. https://uog.edu.pk/downloads/journal/PJSI_73-84.pdf

Ahmad, N., & Bano, A. (2019). Women's Political Empowerment through Local Government in the Patriarchal Society of Pakistan. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ), 3*(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/3.1.1

Bano, A. (2017). Women's representation in local democracy: formal and informal institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *Unpublished PhD dissertation, Western Michigan University, USA.*

Bari, F. (2015). Bridging the fault lines? Rethinking the gender quota approach in Pakistan. *Policy Brief, Publication Series: Reviewing Gender Quotas in Afghanistan and Pakistan.* https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/bridging_the_fault_lines_rethinking_the_gender_quota_approach_in_pakistan.pdf

Bari, F. (2005). Women's political participation: issues and challenges. *United Nations division for the advancement of women expert group meeting: enhancing participation of women in development through an enabling environment for achieving gender equality and the advancement of women* (pp. 393). Bangkok. https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/enabling-environment2005/docs/EGM-WPD-EE-2005-EP.12%20%20draft%20F.pdf

Cheema, A., Khwaja, A. I., & Khan, A. (2005). Decentralisation in Pakistan: context, content and causes. *Working Paper Series rwp05-034, Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government.* https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/decentralization-pakistan-context-content-and-causes

Childs, S., & Lovenduski, J. (2013). *Feminizing politics.* Polity Press.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.* Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2018). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research.* Sage.

Fraser, N. (1997). Heterosexism, misrecognition, and capitalism: a response to Judith Butler. *Social Text*, (52/53), pp. 279–289. https://doi.org/10.2307/466745

Giddens, A. (1983). Comments on the theory of Structuration. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 13*(1), 75–80. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-5914.1983.tb00463.x

Hanif, S., Farida, S., Warraich, S., & Zia, A. (2009). Women in politics: participation and Representation in Pakistan. *Lahore: Shirkat Gah.* https://shirkatgah.org/shirkat/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Women-in-Politics-SB-English.pdf

Hanmer, L., & Klugman, J. (2016). Exploring women's agency and empowerment in developing countries: Where do we stand? *Feminist Economics, 22*(1), 237–263. https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2015.1091087

Hartmann, H. (1976). Capitalism, patriarchy, and job segregation by sex. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *1*(3, Part 2), pp. 137–169. https://doi.org/10.1086/493283

Hartmann, H. I. (1979). The unhappy marriage of Marxism and Feminism: towards a more progressive union. *Capital & Class*, *3*(2), 1–33. https://doi.org/10.1177/030981687900800102

Hussain, S., Ahmed, W., Khan, A., & Ullah, F. (2017). Factors affecting women's participation in local bodies' election in Pakistan. *Journal of Gender and Social Issues, 16*(1), 91. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A541405632/AONE?u=anon~692f9ea2&sid=googleScholar&xid=3b3a4500

Hussain, M., & Kokab, R. U. (2012). Eighteenth amendment in the constitution of Pakistan: success and controversies. *Asian Social Science, 8*(1). https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v8n1p8

Jabeen, M. (2019). The local government system of Pakistan: participation, representation and empowerment of women. *Pakistan Perspectives, 24*(1). https://ssrn.com/abstract=3549138

Jabeen, M., & Umm-e-Farwa, M. (2018). Gender and local governance in Pakistan. In *women in governing institutions in South Asia: Parliament, Civil Service and Local Government* (pp. 285–304). https://doi.org 10.1007/978-3-319-57475-2

Jadoon, M. A., Israr, M., Jan, D., Ahmad, N., Malik, S. M., & Swati, J. K. (2015). Effectiveness of women councillors in local government system. *The Journal of Asian Studies, 4*(4), 35–44.

Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal 1. *Gender & Development*, *13*(1), 13–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070512331332273

Khan, A., & Naqvi, S. (2018). Women in politics: Gaining ground for progressive outcomes in Pakistan. *IDS.*

https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/14155/Wp519_Online.pdf?sequence=1

Khan, H. U., Yiling, C., & Kerui, W. (2022). The role of local governments in the political and socio-economic development of Pakistan. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)*, *6*(1), 307–320. https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/6.1.19

Khattak, S. G. (2010). Women in local government: The Pakistan experience. *IDS Bulletin, 41*(5), 52–61. https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/7857/IDSB_41_5_10.1111-j.1759-5436.2010.00166.x.pdf?sequence=1

Malik, N., & Rana, A. (2019). The history of local governance in Pakistan: what lessons to learn? *Journal of International Politics, 1*(3), 26–35. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335319273_The_History_of_Local_Governance_in_Pakistan_What_Lessons_to_Learn

Molyneux, M. (1985). Mobilisation without emancipation? Women's interests, the state, and revolution in Nicaragua. *Feminist Studies, 11*(2), 227–254. https://doi.org/10.2307/3177922

Osborn, T. L. (2011). *How women represent women: Political parties, gender, and representation in the state legislatures.* Oxford University.

Piscopo, J. M. (2011). Do women represent women? Gender and policy in Argentina and Mexico. *San Diego: the University of California and San Diego.*

Saigol, R. (2016). Feminism and the women's movement in Pakistan: actors, debates, and strategies. *Islamabad: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.* https://library.fes.de/pdffiles/bueros/pakistan/12453.pdf

Sumra, K. (2017). 18th Amendment and the problem of cohabitation between bureaucracy and elected representatives in the local government of Pakistan. *FWU Journal of Social Sciences, 11*(4), 20–33. https://www.proquest.com/docview/2155004718?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true

Surie, A., & Zérah, M.-H. (2017). Purdah and politics: women's participation in local governance. In *Subaltern Urbanisation in India: an introduction to the dynamics of ordinary towns* (pp. 397–420). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-81-322-3616-0_15

Tabassum, N. (2011). Towards unlockıng patriarchy: women's participation in local politics in Pakistan. *PhD thesis, Middle East Technical University.* file:///C:/Users/Work/Downloads/index.pdf

Ullah, L., & Ahmad, K. (2020). Women's Substantive Role in Local Government Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: Challenges and Opportunities. *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies, 20*(1), 73–88. https://doi.org/10.46568/pjgs.v20i1.66

Walby, S. (1991). *Theorising patriarchy*. Blackwell.

Young, I. M. (2017). Gender as Seriality: Thinking about women as a social collective. *Intersecting voices*, pp. 12–37. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691216355-003

Zia, S. (2005). Political and legislative participation of women in Pakistan. *Islamabad: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).* https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/pk/3c6082ca4c054889968d2aaed78c5aed8ed3dbc48f37a061bea2c051616b1c57.pdf

Notes:

[1] The Second martial law regime in Pakistan is governed by General Zia ul Haq (1977-88).

[2] Two leading political parties, PPP and PMLN, ruled the country: the PPP (Benazir Bhutto) (1988–90 and 1993–6) and the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) (Nawaz Sharif) (1990–3 and 1997–9).

[3] The third martial law regime in Pakistan is governed by General Pervaiz Musharraf (1999-2008).

[4] Emphasis added.