WOMEN'S POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA, PAKISTAN: A CASE STUDY OF SOCIO-POLITICAL CHALLENGES FACED BY FEMALE CANDIDATES WITHIN PTI (2013-2023)

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the obstacles experienced by women in the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, emphasising the socio-political and institutional impediments that restrict their full engagement in the political arena. This study uses thematic analysis of secondary data from academic sources, political papers, and reports to show how gendered gatekeeping practices, cultural resistance, and patriarchal norms in PTI make it harder for women to get into important political positions. The study examines the influence of male-dominated decision-making, insufficient money for gender-focused programs, and inadequate support for female candidates all of which contribute to the marginalization of women inside the party. The study also examines how PTI's dependence on conservative political coalitions and its failure to enact significant structural changes further constrain women's political agency. The results emphasise the need for PTI to go beyond symbolic gestures and achieve substantive reforms that prioritise women's involvement and leadership within the party.

Keywords: *Pakistan Tehreek-i-insaaf, Gender Equality, Political Empowerment, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Gendered Gatekeeping, Patriarchy.*

INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment refers to the mechanisms and structures that empower women to exercise greater control over their lives, ensuring equal rights, opportunities, and societal participation (Dahlum et al., 2022). Empowerment extends beyond economic and social spheres to political dimensions, involving women's active participation and representation in decision-making and policy formulation processes (Yerramilli, 2025). Women's presence in political institutions is crucial for their ability to influence decisions, champion women's rights, and advocate for gender-responsive legislation (Haoucha, 2024).

Political empowerment is crucial as it promotes societal transformation towards gender equity

(Brechenmacher et al., 2024). International frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly Goal 5, emphasise women's political empowerment globally, aiming for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (United Nations, 2022). The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) emphasised women's political participation in gender equality (UNSDG, 2025), yet global disparities persist in leadership and policymaking positions.

Deeply ingrained socio-cultural norms and systemic patriarchal structures in Pakistan impede women's political empowerment (Rauf, 2022). Historically, Pakistan has made progress in

women's political representation, with initiatives like the reservation of seats in national and provincial legislatures under the Legal Framework Order of 2002 (Gupta, 2020). Political empowerment of women in Pakistan is limited, often resulting in symbolic representation rather than substantive representation, highlighting persistent gender disparities and minimal participation in senior political roles (Naseer et al., 2023). Pakistan's gender parity score, as per the World Economic Forum (2023), is 0.575, indicating a significant under-representation of women in political leadership and governance positions (World Economic Forum, 2023).

The socio-political dynamics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) significantly impact women's political empowerment (Hameed, 2024). The province, characterised by traditional and patriarchal social norms, is grappling with significant challenges promoting women's political participation (Saadia & Kalhoro, 2019). Cultural attitudes, patriarchal practices, and sociopolitical barriers hinder women's mobility, visibility, and political agency, leading to gendered violence, stigmatisation, and institutional bias (Khan, 2024). That is why political parties significantly influence women's political participation, acting as gatekeepers and promoting or hindering their empowerment. In deep-rooted regions like KPK, internal structures of political parties often reflect societal biases, limiting women's substantive political participation despite formal commitments to gender equality. These parties are critical in determining the quality and extent of women's political representation within Pakistan's political framework (Hussain, 2022).

Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf (PTI, Pakistan Justice Movement), founded by Imran Khan, a prominent political party in Pakistan, has been promoting progressive policies, focusing on women's empowerment, particularly during its first two tenures in KPK (Haleeemi & Shah, 2024). The party aimed to promote inclusivity, transparency, and participatory governance, garnering significant support from young and female voters (Hussain, 2022). But PTI's efforts to advance women's political empowerment show a disconnect between party rhetoric and practical implementation results.

Patriarchal gatekeeping and cultural resistance within party ranks limit genuine empowerment, despite dedicated women's wings and formal quotas. Internal candidate selection often favours elite or influential women, marginalising grassroots female activists and reinforcing tokenism rather than promoting substantive representation (Hussain, 2022). The party's efforts to improve gender inclusivity were hindered by internal structural limitations and ineffective implementation of empowerment policies.

PTI faced significant socio-political resistance in KPK, including opposition from traditional power structures and religious groups, which discouraged women's public political engagement, and cultural attitudes limiting their visibility and political mobility (Sayed & O'Donnell, 2014). Security concerns, economic dependence, and systemic inequality are significant constraints limiting the effectiveness and meaningful engagement of female political candidates in electoral processes (Naz & Chaudhry, 2012).

This research examines the socio-political challenges faced by female PTI candidates in KPK between 2013 and 2023, focusing on how patriarchal norms, political gatekeeping practices, and internal party structures influenced the party's goals for women's empowerment. The rationale for choosing a 10-year tenure is that it covers two general elections (the 2013 and 2023 general elections). The study aims to provide insights into the complexities and limitations faced by conservative political parties in pursuing gender-inclusive policies and effective representation for women, contributing to the academic discourse.

2. Literature Review

The literature review examines women's representation in KPK, with a particular focus on female PTI candidates between 2013 and 2023. Although constitutional provisions for gender equality exist, significant gaps remain between policy and its practical implementation. The review explores three main dimensions: the institutional mechanisms within PTI's party structure, socio-cultural constraints limiting women's candidacy, and the effectiveness of gender quotas and reserved seats in promoting meaningful representation for women in KPK legislative bodies.

Madiha Hussain (2022) and Farooq Khan (2024) underscore the challenges faced by women in KPK, including financial constraints, patriarchal norms, harassment, and domestic duties. Political kinship and elite social ties further exacerbate these issues, granting political representation mainly to

privileged women. Khan criticises structural barriers like limited educational opportunities, economic dependence, and a lack of political networks; he also highlights entrenched gender biases within political parties that necessitate targeted policy interventions and reforms.

In the same vein, Naseer et al. (2023) focus on the persistent structural and cultural barriers that hinder women's political participation in KPK, arguing that gender quotas, while intended to improve representation, often result in symbolic participation. The patriarchal attitudes within political parties, biased candidate selection, and systemic discrimination limit women's agency. Similarly, Irum Naz (2022) explores the socio-cultural barriers affecting women's empowerment in Orakzai district, where patriarchal traditions, rigid gender roles, and socio-economic constraints restrict women's mobility, education, and participation in decision-making.

Building on this understanding, Kiramat Shah (2024) adds to the research by talking about the systemic barriers that keep women from being politically active. She says that weak enforcement of legal frameworks and male-dominated political structures still make it hard for women to have an impact, even though there are many laws that protect their rights.

In line with these findings, Sarwat Rauf (2022) explores the paradox of women's empowerment in Pakistan, where societal and institutional resistance to gender-sensitive policies consistently undermines their potential impact, especially in KPK, where a reinforced patriarchal mindset persists, creating a ceiling for women. This complexity is further illustrated by Gul et al. (2023), who investigate the barriers within political parties like PTI, citing male-dominated structures, lack of social acceptance, and systemic challenges that prevent women from assuming leadership roles. Even with gender quotas, their participation often remains largely symbolic due to entrenched patriarchal norms and unbalanced party hierarchies.

Sheraz and Shah (2023) continue this line of research and find that weak enforcement of laws, inefficient institutions, and cultural norms are still big problems when it comes to empowering women in KPK. Corruption, a lack of resources, and weak enforcement mechanisms also make it harder for gender equality policies to have an effect. Similarly, Alizai et al. (2020) explore how sociocultural and economic factors hinder women's political empowerment, particularly in KPK, where systemic barriers like low literacy rates, financial dependence, and male-dominated frameworks continue to marginalise women.

This issue is echoed by Shabana Akhtar (2018) and Socorro L. Reyes (2002), who focus on the limitations of women's empowerment, highlighting that socio-cultural norms and patriarchal structures restrict female politicians' autonomy, thereby limiting their influence. Reyes critiques the quota system, arguing that it often leads to limited empowerment due to structural weaknesses and indirect election mechanisms. She advocates for comprehensive electoral reforms, such as direct elections for reserved seats and intraparty democratisation to ensure genuine female political participation.

Extending this critique, Ayesha Khan and Sana Naqvi (2020) and Madhia ur Rehman (2023) also argue that quotas alone cannot guarantee political empowerment, as women's roles remain constrained within party hierarchies. Rehman identifies patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, and limited access to political networks as key barriers to women's full engagement in politics. Sumera Farid (2022), Mahgul Ghafoor, and Kamal Haider (2018) contribute to this discussion by analysing the challenges women face in Pakistan's political landscape. Farid points out that reserved seats offer women access to legislative processes but often result in superficial influence due to nepotistic nominations and exclusion from decision-making positions. Ghafoor and Haider emphasise that substantial empowerment requires structural reforms and gender-inclusive policies to dismantle institutional biases.

Tabassum (2011) highlights the interplay between patriarchal structures and political inclusion, showing that women often navigate these structures to maintain political legitimacy, thereby reinforcing male-dominated systems. Khalid Chauhan's (2014) study on gender inequality in Pakistan's public sector reveals that gender mainstreaming efforts often fail to address systemic inequalities, instead offering superficial solutions that do not challenge deeply rooted patriarchal structures.

The literature on women's political representation in KPK, particularly within the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), reveals significant socio-cultural and institutional barriers. These include patriarchal

norms, limited economic resources, harassment, and restricted mobility. Critics have pointed out that biased candidate selection and entrenched patriarchal structures result in symbolic representation through gender quotas and reserved seats. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the evolution of PTI's internal mechanisms, their impact on female candidates, and the impact of gender-specific policies on women's representation in KPK legislative bodies. This research aims to fill this gap by exploring PTI's institutional structure, socio-political dynamics, and the real-world impact of gender policies on women candidates in KPK.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study uses Anne Phillips' descriptive representation, Joan Acker's gendered organisation theory, and Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski's supply-and-demand model to examine the sociopolitical barriers faced by female candidates from Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Phillips emphasises the importance of women's presence in political institutions, as their participation challenges male dominance and ensures that previously excluded groups are heard and involved in shaping policies. The absence of marginalised individuals from decision-making bodies leads to systemic inequalities (Phillips, 1998). This theoretical perspective is applicable to KPK, where women are significantly under-represented in the political sphere. The absence of women from key decision-making roles in PTI has resulted in the exclusion of gender-specific concerns from the policymaking agenda, such as gender-based violence, maternal healthcare, and economic opportunities for women. Even when women enter political spaces, their voices are often sidelined by male-dominated structures, highlighting the need for transformative representation beyond mere numbers.

Joan Acker's gendered organisational theory states that organisations are not neutral but are constructed around gendered distinctions that privilege male leadership and authority while marginalising women (Acker, 1990). This theory is evident in the internal structure of political parties, such as PTI, where male dominance in decision-making roles is maintained, while women are relegated to symbolic positions. Male leadership privileges men, while women are excluded from key decision-making processes, leadership roles,

and resource distribution. Even when women contest elections, they receive limited support, further entrenching their marginalisation. Acker's argument is that organisational structures reinforce gendered hierarchies, making it harder for women to gain political power (Acker, 1990). At PTI, patriarchal norms heavily influence internal mechanisms, such as candidate selection and resource distribution, which prioritise men's political careers and limit women's opportunities for substantive political involvement.

Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski's supply-and-demand model of political recruitment highlights the challenges women face in entering politics, particularly in KPK. They argue that political recruitment is a two-sided process, with the supply of female candidates and the demand exerted by political parties and gatekeepers influencing women's political representation (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). In KPK, patriarchal cultural norms, family pressures, societal stigma, and personal safety concerns limit women's political participation. Even when women express interest, male party gatekeepers often perceive them as "unelectable" due to societal perceptions. Demand-side bias, influenced by PTI's predominantly male leadership, favours male candidates for general seats and relegates women to reserved seats. The supply of candidates depends on socialisation processes and access to resources, which women often lack (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). PTI's male gatekeepers justify the exclusion of women from general electoral seats, reinforcing the self-fulfilling cycle where women are seen as unsuitable candidates.

This theoretical framework reveals a cycle of exclusion, with patriarchal norms and gendered gatekeeping practices limiting the supply of women candidates in KPK and PTI. Phillips' descriptive representation theory suggests that women's political presence is insufficient without substantive roles that allow them to shape policy. Acker's gendered organisation theory reveals that the PTI's internal structures favour male leadership, while Norris and Lovenduski's supply-and-demand model explains how societal biases and party gatekeeping create barriers for women to secure meaningful political roles.

4. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative case study design, focusing on the socio-political challenges faced by

female PTI candidates in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). The research uses secondary data sources, including academic articles, government reports, and media coverage, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers these women encounter. By analyzing these sources, the study aims to highlight systemic issues that hinder their political participation and propose recommendations for fostering a more inclusive political environment. The study employs e-books, government reports, political party documents, and news reports to analyse the structural and societal barriers that hinder women's political participation. Thematic analysis is employed to ensure reliability and rigor by identifying, analyzing, and reporting recurring patterns in textual data. Thematic analysis involves familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, refining themes, and defining and naming themes. This methodological approach ensures well-substantiated insights while maintaining the reliability of secondary data. The process of thematic analysis includes getting to know the data by reading reports, articles, and political documents; figuring out what the main ideas are that have to do with gendered gatekeeping, patriarchal norms, and institutional biases; putting codes into larger themes; making sure that themes are consistent and make sense across different sources; and coming up with a story that connects themes to theoretical frameworks. This approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of structural and societal barriers affecting women's political participation in Pakistan.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Socio-political Context Under PTI (2013-2023)

The *Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf (PTI)* government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) from 2013 to 2023 created a confusing social and political situation for women, with progressive changes to the law standing in contrast to strong resistance from men. Initially, PTI's manifesto promised to dismantle patriarchal barriers and push for women's political, economic, and social inclusion, an idea aligned with Imran Khan's vision of a "*Naya Pakistan*" (New Pakistan) (Javaid, 2018). The government took action with the Women Empowerment Policy Framework, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Enforcement of Women's Property Rights Act

(2019), and the Zainab Alert Response and Recovery Act. These measures were designed to combat gender-based violence and empower women economically. Despite these reforms, PTI's implementation faced significant challenges. The Anti-Rape Act, though crucial, was criticised for being vague, heavily reliant on the prime minister's discretion, and requiring substantial budgetary allocations that were not adequately addressed. Moreover, PTI failed to pass key laws, such as the ICT Domestic Violence Bill, and resisted raising the marriageable age for girls, revealing the party's limitations in confronting gender-based violence and early marriages (Jatoi, 2022).

At the grassroots level, women candidates like Tehmina Faheem, Shakeela Rabbani, Sanaya Sabeel, and Momina Basit took bold steps to contest elections in the conservative districts of KPK, facing death threats and cultural taboos. These women, often viewed as challengers of traditional gender roles, fought for issues such as child marriage and gender-based violence but were met with intense societal opposition. In regions like Upper Dir and Lower Dir, where women were barred from voting in the 2013 general elections, this opposition underscored the deeply ingrained patriarchal norms that PTI was unable or unwilling to challenge fully (Aurat Foundation, 2013). PTI's narrative on women, unfortunately, reinforced these traditional roles, with Imran Khan's comments on Western feminism, women's clothing, and pardah further perpetuating a restrictive view of women's roles in society.

The PTI's real policies were sometimes incongruous with its verbal commitment to women's rights. The disparity between PTI's aspirational objectives and its real administration was brought to light by the party's dependence on male-dominated patronage networks and its inability to alter systems like the jirga system, which often excluded women (Hussain, 2022). On paper, the party promoted women's emancipation, but in practice, patriarchal structures that governed social mobility and political engagement continued to impact women's lives in KPK. As a result, even PTI women, such as Shandana Gulzar Khan, who ran for NA-30 Peshawar III, had to deal with party structures that continued to favour male leadership. PTI's gendered gatekeeping and the intense social pressure to fit with conventional gender norms often hindered women's attempts to question the existing quo policy improvements,

but they often fell short of overcoming the deeply ingrained gender prejudices and misogyny in the party and KPK society at large.

Therefore, even though PTI made significant policy reforms during its first two tenures in office, these adjustments often fell short of eradicating the party's and KPK society's ingrained sexism and gender prejudices. During 2013-18, women's political engagement turned into a battlefield between social realities and policy goals, exposing the conflict between societal institutions that supported gendered discrimination and legal changes. The disparity between PTI's conservative policies and progressive rhetoric highlights how difficult it is to bring about significant change in the KPK's sociopolitical environment and the need for more extensive institutional changes as well as a shift in public perceptions in order to fully empower women.

5.2 Challenges Faced by Female Candidates within PTI

Female candidates in Pakistan's Tehreek-e-Insaf face challenges due to cultural resistance, gendered gatekeeping, and institutional limitations (Ayesha et al., 2020). These barriers stifle women's political empowerment, as seen in prominent figures like Ayesha Gulalai, who highlight systemic contradictions between progressive rhetoric and patriarchal practices.

5.2.1 Cultural Resistance and Patriarchal Attitudes

Implicit masculine norms often influence political parties like PTI by prioritizing men's dominance and treating women's participation as unconventional. In KPK, patriarchal values, deeply rooted in *Pakhtunwali* tribal codes, prescribe women's roles to the domestic sphere (Hussain, 2022). Female candidates like Ayesha Gulalai, who challenged these norms, faced significant cultural backlash. Gulalai's accusations of harassment within PTI in 2017 illustrate how women in politics are often subjected to character assassination for defying gender expectations. These cultural barriers extend beyond individual hostility; women face family pressure to abandon political careers to preserve family honors. Gulalai's resignation highlights the professional annihilation women face when challenging patriarchal political systems (Hayat, 2017).

5.2.2 Barriers to Electoral Opportunities for Women

Gendered gatekeeping practices within PTI significantly limit women's access to electoral opportunities, suppressing their political ambition. Many female candidates lack familial support, financial resources, and mentorship networks, and societal expectations limit their ability to campaign independently. One aspirant explains that her brother handles her campaign (Ayesha et al., 2020). PTI's nomination processes are controlled by male-dominated provincial executive committees, which prioritize candidates perceived as "electable," often conflating electability with male identity in conservative constituencies (Hussain, 2022). In the 2018 elections, PTI fielded only 7% female candidates for general seats in KPK, relegating most women to reserved seats. This exclusion highlights the gendered nature of PTI's nomination process, as demonstrated by Gulalai's ostracism after criticizing PTI's leadership, which led her to form her own political party.

5.2.3 Institutional Gaps and Limited Support

PTI's gender equality frameworks are inadequate due to lack of enforceability and limited resources. The party's compliance with the 5% gender quota mandated by the Elections Act (2017) is superficial, with women appointed to reserved seats often sidelined in policy discussions. Additionally, PTI's accountability mechanisms have failed to effectively address harassment or discrimination, with allegations of harassment dismissed without investigation, indicating a lack of institutional apathy towards women's protection (Hayat, 2017). PTI's women's wing, aimed at empowering women, is underfunded and excluded from key decision-making processes. Former coordinators disclosed that the party ignored proposals for training programmes and legal aid, and allocated less funding to female candidates compared to their male counterparts (Hussain, 2022). The lack of mentorship and patronage networks benefiting male candidates further restricts women's advancement within the party structure. Gulalai's resignation highlights these institutional gaps, underscoring PTI's failure to address gendered discrimination and its commitment to women's empowerment (Rehman & Kamran, 2017).

5.3 Effectiveness of Quotas and Representation Mechanisms

The effectiveness of gender quotas, particularly reserved seats, in Pakistan, especially within the PTI in KPK, reveals a tension between tokenistic inclusion and meaningful representation. The Elections Act 2017 mandates 5% of general election tickets and 17% of parliamentary seats for women, but their practical impact is constrained by systemic barriers, reflecting the gap between policy intent and patriarchal realities.

5.3.1 Reserved Seats: Structural Limitations and Tokenism

Conservative areas like KPK established reserved seats to overcome cultural barriers to women's voting participation (Bari, 2015). However, their execution often perpetuates tokenism. Women elected via reserved seats are sometimes seen as surrogates for male relatives or party insiders rather than independent lawmakers. For example, PTI's reserved seat representatives in KPK have indicated that they are marginalised in legislative discussions, with their male counterparts trivialising their contributions as "symbolic" or "uninformed." This corresponds with gendered organisational theory, which asserts that institutions perpetuate male dominance by relegating women to marginal positions (Acker, 1990). Rarely do significant committees (such as finance or security) appoint representatives with reserved seats, thereby limiting their ability to influence policy. Instead, they allocate them to "soft" portfolios such as women's welfare, thereby perpetuating gendered preconceptions (Ayesha et al., 2020).

Furthermore, because party lists rather than direct elections select these MPs, reserved seats lack accountability to constituents. This undermines their validity and diminishes motivation to champion grassroots women's causes. A 2020 survey revealed that 68% of reserved seat holders in KPK refrained from confronting party leadership on gender-sensitive policies, apprehensive of being replaced in the subsequent election cycle (Khan, 2020). This relationship reinforces tokenism, as women choose party allegiance above meaningful campaigning.

5.3.2 Tokenism vs. Meaningful Representation

The difference between tokenism and meaningful representation depends on whether quotas result in substantial impact. Tokenism transpires when the inclusion of women just aims to meet quotas without reallocating power. The absence of reserved seat MPs from candidate selection procedures and budget deliberations is evident in PTI, despite their official membership in legislatures (Ayesha et al., 2020). For instance, PTI's 2021 provincial budget designated under 1% for gender-specific programs, despite requests from reserved seat holders for augmented funding for women's health.

Conversely, substantial participation requires institutional backing so women can capitalise on their roles. In exceptional instances, reserved seat holders have instigated reform, such as the modification of the KPK domestic abuse statute in 2020, yet these achievements rely on collaborations with male counterparts and civil society. In the absence of systemic changes, such triumphs remain anomalies. The supply-and-demand paradigm elucidates this disparity: whereas quotas augment the supply of women in politics, patriarchal gatekeepers on the demand side constrain their influence (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). PTI's mostly male nominating committees prioritise allegiance above competence in the selection of women for reserved seats, thereby reinforcing party hierarchy.

5.4 Comparison of Women's Political Empowerment in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Other Provinces

KPK's conservative Pashtun culture and institutionalised patriarchal norms distinguish it from Punjab, Sindh, and Balochistan in terms of women's political empowerment. While all areas face gendered gatekeeping and cultural opposition, KPK tribal backgrounds and the PTI's contradictory gender reforms during its decade-long rule (2013–2023) compound its problems.

5.4.1 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab

Political parties in Pakistan are commonly accused of being family-owned businesses, with members of a powerful family or tribe gaining blocks of seats to gain power. Urbanisation, civil society movements, and political dynasties have improved women's participation in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous and politically significant province. Maryam Nawaz and Hina Rabbani Khar, daughters of powerful families, have been fielded by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan People Party (PPP) to avoid conventional gatekeeping. Punjab's

reserved seat holders may create political capital with constituency development grants and other institutional help. Despite campaigning for gender parity, KPK PTI administration reduced women to token positions, especially in rural regions where *Pakhtunwali* customs limit female mobility (Ayesha et al., 2020). Punjab's major cities, like Lahore, normalize women's public engagement, while KPK's urban-rural gap remains strong, with Peshawar's female candidates scrutinized for "cultural appropriateness."

5.4.2 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh

Sindh's terrain is varied. Karachi's multicultural electorate has chosen independent women leaders like Shehla Raza, typically supported by secular parties like the *Muttahida Qaumi Movement*. Rural Sindh, like in KPK, is conservative, with feudal systems and *Waderas* (landlords) controlling political appointments. Sindh's PPP-led government has executed gender quotas better than KPK, assigning women to important health and education positions (Shoukat & Awan, 2025). Both Sindh and KPK depend on symbolic representation: reserved seat holders seldom influence policy choices. PTI's gender reforms had less impact on Sindh, whereas KPK's policy demonstrated a conflict between progressive rhetoric and oppressive actions. Women's rights laws in Sindh and KPK differ greatly, especially under PTI. A good example is Sindh's 2013 domestic violence law, followed by Balochistan's 2014 and Punjab's 2016. Despite national momentum for women's rights legislation, the PTI-led KPK government failed to approve this crucial measure. PTI explained its procrastination by forwarding the measure to the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) for consensus-building, which was seen as giving conservative groups room over women's safety. This delay in legal safeguards showed PTI's hesitation to tackle religious hardliners, whereas Sindh's PPP government adopted a proactive legislative approach on gender-based violence.

Sindh also led institutional women's safeguards. The first province to designate a workplace harassment ombudsperson in 2012, it enforced anti-harassment regulations. Under PTI, KPK took almost six years to reach a comparable position. PTI's lack of mobilisation for women's political engagement in KPK led to five seats with female vote turnouts below 10%, whereas Sindh had better rates.

5.4.3 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan

Tribal rules limit women's political agency in Balochistan and KPK. Security problems and acute underdevelopment in Balochistan further marginalise women, with literacy rates as low as 25% (S. A. Ghafoor et al., 2023). Political parties, including PTI, seldom nominate women for reserved seats, typically using male proxies. In KPK, PTI at least seemed to follow quotas, but in Balochistan, patriarchal gatekeeping is more obvious (Zafar, 2017). Both provinces had militarized disputes, but KPK's relative stability under PTI restricted female activity, which the party regularly co-opted. KPK is unique in its compromise between PTI's reformist image and tribal conservatism. Punjab and Sindh had stronger feminist movements and progressive laws (e.g., the Sindh Domestic Violence Act), while KPK's PTI administration avoided confronting jirga institutions or altering regressive rituals like *swara*. KPK women politicians, like Ayesha Gulalai, were criticised for opposing tribal patriarchs, whereas Punjab and Sindh women are more likely to traverse elite political networks.

6. Conclusion

PTI, a prominent political party in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, has indeed made significant strides in empowering women, particularly through its policy reforms and efforts to include women in governance. However, despite these positive steps, its internal dynamics continue to perpetuate gendered inequalities, effectively stifling the political empowerment of women within the party. These challenges are deeply rooted in cultural resistance and patriarchal norms, which shape the party's structures and its approach to female political participation. More specifically, gendered gatekeeping practices within PTI act as significant barriers, limiting women's access to key political roles and decision-making positions. Furthermore, institutional inertia within the party, evident in the lack of accountability mechanisms, the underfunding of gender wings, and inadequate support for female candidates, reinforces the systemic exclusion of women from meaningful political participation.

For women's empowerment within PTI to be realised, it is essential that the party moves beyond

symbolic gestures and embraces tangible structural changes in its internal operations. Key reforms should include the introduction of transparent and inclusive nomination processes, where gender biases are eliminated and both male and female candidates have equal access to contested seats. Additionally, PTI must create stronger support systems for female candidates, such as mentoring programs, financial support, and opportunities for professional development. This would provide women with the tools and resources needed to overcome barriers that traditionally limit their involvement in political campaigns. More importantly, PTI must initiate a cultural shift within the party one that actively values women's contributions and recognises their leadership potential. This transformation is crucial to ensuring that women are not only included in the party's ranks but are also genuinely engaged in shaping the party's policies and strategic direction. The empowerment of women in PTI cannot be realised through mere rhetoric or token representation. It requires a fundamental transformation of the party's culture and structure, where gender equality becomes an essential pillar of PTI's mission. This transformation must be seen, not just in policy statements but also in the party's daily practices and organisational dynamics. To achieve this, PTI must prioritise a long-term commitment to gender inclusivity, ensuring that women are empowered not just within party structures but also in their political engagement in the KPK and beyond.

In order to better understand the challenges faced by female candidates, future research should consider employing intersectional frameworks that explore how class, ethnicity, and rural-urban divides intersect with gendered barriers in PTI's political ecosystem. Understanding how economic disparities and patriarchal norms shape women's political participation will provide critical insights into the systemic obstacles that still prevent women from fully entering and thriving in the political arena. Furthermore, researchers should examine how PTI's political alliances, particularly its reliance on religious-conservative allies, shape the party's stance on gender-related policies. This would offer a deeper understanding of how coalition dynamics influence gendered agendas within PTI and other political institutions.

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