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Women Political Activism and Public Spaces in Pashtun Society in Pakistan

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Abstract

In this research article I comprehend that how women in Pashtun society, even with limited entree to civic places, manage to join and contribute in numerous political undertakings, and how their role adds to growing communal and political spaces for women. For my research work I interviewed politically active women of Swabi from lower and middle class. I used the method of convenience sampling. Gulalai Ismail (a women's right activist from Swabi) facilitated me in conducting interviews. According to those women, it is reflected indecent in Pashtun society for women to be outside their homes in public. Due to less or no public spaces for women in Pashtun society women have limited involvement in political activities, economic happenings and structure of the society. The uneasy access of women outside their homes in Pashtun society restrict their access to economic activities as well. The purpose of this research article is to know the struggle of women from economically middle and lower class in Pashtun society.

Key Words: Public Spaces, Political Activism, Pashtun Society, Economic Resources

Introduction

According to Marxist feminist theory every discrimination on the bases of gender in different societies is because of the unequal distribution of economic resources and wealth. Economic inequality is the main reason behind discrimination with women (MacKinnon, C. A. 1982). Marxist Feminist theorists are of the view that economic inequality is the major source of women's oppression at family, societal, national and international level. Due to economic imbalance women are dependent politically, socially and economically on men (MacKinnon, C. A. 1982). Gender roles in society are determined by their wealth and economic resources. In the same way

women's role is being shaped through oppression and discrimination (Engels, F., & Morgan, L. H. 1972). Marxist feminists viewed that women struggle for equal rights, better life, and opportunities can bring improvements in women's life but until there is discrimination on the bases of economic resources it is difficult to change the status of women. The struggle of feminists may bring improvement in political and civil rights of women but it cannot change material conditions of women which is the source all those issues, feminists are addressing (Engels, F., & Morgan, L. H. 1972). Marx said that until and unless the discrimination based on resources and wealth is not abolished all other

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problems for women will exist in politics, society, education, and economy ([Engels, K. M. 1848](#)). Women participation in politics is also considered as a sign of their progress but most of the time their representation only benefits few women and in capitalist system it gives benefits to those women who are economically privileged not to the women from economically lower and middle class ([Donovan, J. 1991](#)). Foucault argued that understanding and experiences of oppressed is being dominated by the knowledge of oppressor and powerful ([Keenan, T. 1987](#)). Like in Pakistan the knowledge and experiences of politically active women from economically lower and middle class is being dominated by the opinion of either men or women from elite class here elite means those who have enough economic resources to be in politics. As men and women from economically elite class have access to different sorts of medias to channelize themselves. So, to understand the situation of women political activism it is better to have the point of view of women from lower middle-class of Pashtun society. The term “political activism” means any political ongoing like managing political meetings, castings votes, supporting any political ideology and even struggling for any political position. The meaning of public spaces in this article means any place outside their homes like marketplaces, civic hubs, academic institutions and workstations. My major source of information is politically active women from economically lower middle class of Swabi a district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Historical Background

During the period of Zia government through the policy of Islamization, gender roles were effectively altered. The emergence of new economic class of traders in 1970's and 80's creates more conservativeness towards women in politics. The assimilation of religion and culture in 1980's contracted spaces for women in public which effected their political participation as well. During and after the Zia era women especially from NGO's started to take their space back in public and politics like the role of Women's Action Forum in motivating women for claiming their rights and space in education, economy, society and politics

([Shahid, F. 2010](#)). In Musharraf era women got more space in political offices but most of that was for representation and quota filling purposes. Women political space which was created at that time was not having power in making policies or laws benefitting women across the country. Zia Islamization strategy left a long-lasting effect on public environment especially for women ([Jamal, A. 2005](#)). The disadvantage of women activism at that time was that, it was focused on women participation rather than women empowerment ([Zia, A. S. 2009](#)). Only giving representation was not (is not) enough to change the situation for women in politics but to give decision making authority can really have altered their role. In the later years' women from different societal backgrounds started working on different social issues like inheritance rights, marriage, education, employment, and law but to they do not share any collective platforms, which gives them authority in society. Having the effect of Zia government in Pakistan it has a strong effect over the life of women living in Pashtun dominated places. The biggest issue for women from Pashtun society is that in this age of advancement and development they are still hanging between private and public spheres. In fact, after the Zia Islamization, spaces were grasped by religious women more as compared to any segment of women in Pakistan. Using religious code of conduct outside the house for women were being adopted by women from different classes as it can be seen by the increasing tendency of using Hejab (covering face) outside home. After the incident of 9/11 the dynamics of Pakistani society became more religious ones towards women. Many young women, mostly from the lower-middle classes, took their space in religion by wearing and by carrying more religious outlook, rather than losing their spaces at all. Mixing of culture and religion in Pashtun society made the circumstances worse for women to claim their spaces in public and participate in political activities to get their legal rights and equality in society. The connection of culture with political activism of women in Pashtun society is very complex as cultural norms are one of the major reasons behind every barrier like illiteracy, unemployment in women, and lack of public spaces.

Women were being excluded from politics and governance in 1960's and 70's and ultimately home became the place for women for white middle class women. Slowly the idea of women being restricted to homes became a prevalent one specifically in economically middle class. The thousand years old Pashtunwali advocates a limited input of women in the politics in Pashtun society. In Pashtunwali code of conduct, Zar (gold), Zamaka (land) and Zan (Woman), are the major reasons of enmity in tribal fights (Shah, W. A. 1998). In such kind of patriarchal societal structure where woman is also objectified along with land and gold, it's difficult for women to access public spaces and participate in politics to claim their rights and address their issues. Culturally the space is already limited and the religious extremism shrunk it more. Not being able to move in the public spaces is the main hurdle for women political activism in Pashtun society. Despite societal, cultural and religious obstacles, still there are women in Pashtun society who managed to participate in politics and claim their spaces in public. Those obstacles are being broken by those women in Pashtun society. As mentioned by one of the politically active women of Swabi during my interviews they said that, they faced different kind of problems in the way of their political activism and their presence in public due societal approaches, culture norms and religious rules. One of the respondents said that even though politically active women are working for the rights of women in their society they are being discouraged even by the women in their society. Women economic empowerment plays central role in helping women to contribute in politics. Economic empowerment means, women access to education, to the market, access to the productivity, and access to work. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa due to culture and religious radicalism especially after Zia Islamization, women are more restricted to homes only. The integrity of Pashtun family is mostly connected with the activities of women. In current times change is occurring in Pashtun society as more girls are getting education and going for jobs, this means that the mobility of women has increased in everyday life, yet, politics is still not the business of women in Pashtun society in majority, because politics is considered disrespectful activity for women as it

includes too much interaction with men and most of those political activities are held in public.

Economic Empowerment and Public Spaces

People in Pashtun society most of time in their lifestyle follow their religion, cultures and traditions which are mostly conventional ones towards women and their rights and status in the society. The difference of ratio in political participation of women and men in Pashtun dominated areas is predominantly socio-cultural obstacles like less public spaces, veil (purdah), and religious and cultural norms (Bhattacharya, S. 2014). The leading source of law in Pakistan is Islam, but there is gap between law and its execution. According to the law of Pakistan there is no restriction on the mobility of women. In traditional Pashtun society law and religion are mixed up with culture which make circumstances more difficult for women to participate in politics and to claim their public spaces. In Pashtun society the concept of honor is tied up with women that's why they are not allowed to access public spaces as public spaces are occupied by men and interaction with unknown men (namehram) is not allowed according to cultural and religious concept of Pashtun society. As explained by one of the woman from Swabi even seeing of women by unknown men outside her home is considered as sin and shameful in Pashtun society even if the women is fully covered. The centuries old Pashtunwali code of conduct is still working in Pashtun society in Pakistan which blocks ways for women in Pashtun society to claim their part in public spaces (Bhattacharya, S. 2014). For political activism it is compulsory to have access to public spaces which is not available for women due to religion and culture in Pashtun society. Political involvement is important for Pashtun women because through politics women can have their share in mainstream political activities and they can raise their voices at governmental level for their rights and problems. One of the main reasons behind the less involvement of Pashtun women in politics is their inaccessibility to public spaces.

In current times involvement in political activities at any level whether at societal, national or international level resources are compulsory for it as it is clear from the political culture of even the

developed country like USA ([Malbin, M. J., & Glavin, B. 2018](#)). Foucault refers this as that human thinking is designed by their material and social life. One of the compulsory element for political activism is to have resources and capital whether it comes to contesting for any political office, political meetings even in case of voting as well, because government do not provide transportation in elections in Pakistan, so money and resources are compulsory for any kind of political activity. There are different sources of earning capital for the women of lower- and middle-class women like running small business, getting jobs if they have education, working as domestic workers etc. The other source of income can be their share in the family property. Unfortunately, both sources of income are inaccessible for women because for that women need to be present in public spaces. Like for education, governmental job, business and other domestic works she would access public space. But unfortunately, presence of women in public spaces is considered as a disreputable act in Pashtun society and most of the time women are not allowed to access public spaces by their family members. The other major source of income for women in Pashtun society can be their inherited property. Unfortunately, most of the time women are being denied of the rights of heritance in Pashtun society. If women inherit resources or property for that she needs to go out of home and to look after that property or resources to take advantage of it and as women are not accepted in public spaces in Pashtun society so it became more difficult for women in Pashtun society to earn and to be empowered economically. Due to dependency on men for basic life necessities women are obliged to obey and follow their men. When women are economically dependent on men in Pashtun society so due to that dependency, men have decision making power regarding women as she is dependent on him. That economic dependency creates more issues for women because mostly decisions are taken by men in Pashtun society. During my interview with Gulalai Ismail (a human/women right campaigner from Swabi) also stressed on the point that economic independence is compulsory to share the decision making authority with men in Pashtun society. She

even narrated that economic independence is more important than political consciousness or experience.

Societal Structure and Public Spaces

Individuality of women is not an accepted concept in Pashtun society. The concept of family honor is tied with women and any act by women which is not acceptable by society bring shame and disrespect for the whole family in Pashtun society. In such way women are denied of their basic legal rights like accessing public spaces. Even worse that, it is so difficult for women to access public space alone. The first and basic step for women to be involved in politics is to have freedom in accessing public spaces. Secondly capital and resources are very much important for political activism which is again connected with public spaces in the way that money or resources can be earned by being in public spaces whether for job, business, or trade etc. The barriers in the way of women political activism are shrunk public spaces, lack of economic resources, illiteracy, less understanding of politics, and family constraints. Due to societal, cultural, and religious hindrances women themselves are reluctant to participate in political activities. In Pashtun society women generally move in private spheres means in homes while politics is a public activity. The cause of different kinds of discrimination with women in Pashtun society is generally on the name of izzat (honor) as centuries old Pashtunwali code of conduct is still working which tied up women with family honor and integrity. The honor of women is being restricted to home called as chardivari and whenever she goes outside, she must be covered from head to toe. All these restrictions are not religious but most of them are from the culture of Pashtun society. The role of religious leaders is most prominent as they mix religion with the culture of land which put more limitations on women in Pashtun society. Those religious leaders have huge followers which make it difficult to counter them. In written constitution of Pakistan there is no restriction on women's participation in politics but, their presence on the ground is very insignificant especially of women from lower middle class of Pashtun society. Women in patriarchal societies are easy victims of aggressive religious socio-political

projects especially women from economically lower and middle class. There are various social handicaps which are underpinning women in politics in Pakistan. In Pashtun society local cultural customs are in different ways discouraging women to be politically active. In fact, the whole society came under these cultural barriers and cannot let their female members for political activism.

Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Pashtun Dominated Society

Mary Hope Schwoebel in her book "Women, Political Struggles and Gender Equality in South Asia" discusses the connection of communal and reserved spaces for Pashtun women who are involved in any kind of political activities. She elaborates the shrunk public spaces for women in Pashtun society as she conducted series of cross-border discussions (2010-2011) in the Pashtun dominated regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan for US Institute of Peace and there she observed the less participation of women in open sessions by not expressing their views ([Alston, M. 2014](#)). People from different sectors of Pashtun society including religious leaders, Maliks, Khans, businesspeople, local government officials and civil society leaders participated. Women who participated in those dialogues were mostly from NGOs or civil society as these sectors give more space to women somehow. Women in combined sessions were reluctant to participate or express their views because they were inexperienced. However, Mary Hope's direct collaboration with those women participants let her know about the experiences of women in Pashtun society regarding their public and private life. According to the author, she was astonished about the experiences and accomplishments of women on behalf of other women in their societies in such challenging cultural set up. Later, Mary Hope conducted research work on public space and political activism of women in Pashtun society. She interviewed 16 women, eight from Pakistan and eight from Afghanistan. Women from both the countries were active politically at societal, provincial and national level. From her research she concluded that in Pashtun culture women are considered as collective not as an individual; like the honor of women is the honor of

whole family and consequently their representation at public and political sphere decreased. In Pashtun society public spaces for women are all those areas outside of home, while the private sphere means home. If a woman is going outside of home for any activity, it means she is in public spaces even going to school or hospital. Here religious beliefs like strict purdah also confine women to four walls of home. Even women in Pashtun society who go to public spaces she must be accompanied by men of her family. In Pashtun society women can be seen by men outside her only in public spaces even if she is covered in burqa or veil and not interacting with men but still seeing by men outside of family is considered as disrespectful and shameful.

In Pashtun society women need permission from their male guardians in any kind of activity outside their homes. Those politically active women I interviewed in Swabi were of the view that they started their political career after getting permission from their father/brother/son/husband, and one of the major reasons behind that permission is their economic dependency. All the respondents to my interview pointed toward the lack of public spaces as a hurdle in the way of their political activism. One of the main reasons for unacceptance of women in public spaces is because of the issue of honor. Pashtun women who reach to public spaces must convince their family members (including women as well) to allow them in public spaces like for college, university and workplace and then she can move in public spaces. Such blockades contributed majorly to keeping women away from public spaces which also restrains their political activism as well. However, politics is not home-based activity and public interaction is necessary for political activism. In cities like Karachi, Islamabad and Lahore women have comparatively more access to public spaces as compared to other cities and villages of Pakistan ([Shah, H. A. 2018](#)). Women in Pashtun society can access public spaces after crossing barriers like family, social circle and neighborhood. Clearly for women to access public spaces, they must follow the directions and context defined by society, religion and culture. But then this tied up knot of public spaces and honor for women is different from low income families as they can't afford to stay at home as they need to work to make

both ends meet. It means that women from financially poor families must work outside their homes which make them disrespectful in the eyes of society they are living in. It means that access to public space differs with financial background and economic class in the society. Hurmat Ali Shah explained this issue in one of his article and according to him a larger portion of public spaces in Pakistan is occupied with the unwanted fragment of society. From unwanted section of society, he meant that men and women from economically lower class. Basically economically lower class in any society can't afford to follow culture or religion because all the class (including men and women) has to work outside their homes to make both ends meet so they are not abide by socio-cultural norms of the society. His statement illustrates that access of women to public spaces is disrespectful because public spaces are filled by "undesirable segments of society" and their undesirability is defined by caste, religion, income and class. Alike in big cities of India for the women the unwanted contact in public can be with the people from outcasts and Muslims and in Pakistan it is the contact with the men from different economic, cultural and social background. Similarly, in Pashtun society women access to public spaces is considered disrespectful because of their interaction or seen by men outside their family. Due to the various reasons mentioned above it is very difficult for women in Pashtun society to access public spaces for any purpose. The elimination of women from public spaces affects their basic right of quality of life like getting education or earning for themselves. According to Gulalai a human right activist from Swabi, she said that "in Pashtun majority areas it will be outrageous to see women outside their homes alone (unaccompanied). The presence of women in public spaces is not only threat to their "honor", but the risk of the women being seen by the men from economically lower class creates even more apprehension". It means that access of women in public spaces is not only challenge the societal, religious and cultural trends but it will also be perceived as a threat to the present political and power structure in Pashtun society. As women access to public spaces will enhance their level of education and earning opportunities which will enable them to struggle for

their equal share in every field of life. Increase of women in politics will also change the existing culture of power and politics at societal and national level in Pashtun society. Women by accessing public spaces and participating in politics enables them to reimagine their roles in society outside the four walls of their homes which has the potential to disturb the societal perception of men as a protector of women's integrity and respect. The insecurity of power sharing with half of the members (women) of society is also one of the aspect of restraining women to home. Power dynamics will change if equal presence will be given to women in public and political spaces. In Pashtun society there is a direct connection of women political activism and their access in public spaces because political activities are not possible without having approach to shared spaces. The only problem is not inaccessibility to public places but their unacceptance in public places as well. It is a time taking procedure because people will slowly accept the presence of women in public spaces. One of the important aspects of women accessibility to public spaces in Pashtun society so they can have access to economic resources which can help them in conducting their political activities.

Recent Upsurge of Pashtun Women in Politics

Women political input is compulsory for the development of a healthy society because it is impossible to develop a society without the input of half of the population. In Pashtun society women are sidelined politically and economically. Political inactiveness of women in Pashtun society is also because of the rate illiteracy in women and poverty and to eradicate both the hurdles women must access public spaces because that's how they can play parallel role to men in Pashtun society. Despite various difficulties, there is a small number of women from Pashtun society who are actively participating in political activities breaking the religious and cultural barriers in Pashtun society. It is malicious custom to confine half of population in homes on the name of religion and culture. Begum Nasim Wali was the first women from Pashtun society who won general elections in 1977. After a long gap in 2001 Bushra Gohar again represented women from Pashtun society in the parliament. She

became a source of inspiration for other women in Pashtun society who were struggling in politics. Currently, there are women from Pashtun society playing active role in social, political and humanist activities like Shazia Aurangzeb, Jamila Gillani, Shagufta Malik, Noreen Nasreen, Shaheen Zameer, Yaseem Zia and many more. Apart from the agenda of contesting for election for political offices, there are women from Pashtun society in social movements, and human rights movements such as Gulalai Ismail, Ismat Raza Shahjahan, and Sanna Ejaz. All those women are taking back their spaces in Pashtun society and claiming their participation in every matter of society whether its politics, human rights issue or any issue of concern. In current times those politically active women are bringing the idea of equal participation of women and men in every matter of life. Those women are in constant fight in breaking religious and social dogmas for women in Pashtun society. The most fascinating aspect in the current surge of women political activism in Pashtun society is that many of the activists are women from middle class background, means they are not from rich or elite families. They are getting acknowledgement for their work on merit base and not for their social status.

Conclusion

Pashtun society is a conservative one towards presence of women in public spaces leads to their less participation in political activities. Socially and traditionally women individuality is not a common concept in Pashtun society as the actions of women are linked with family integrity in Pashtun society restricting them to homes only. Due to religious and cultural norms activities outside home are not considered to be performed by women in Pashtun society. Despite of all the obstacles and problems women in Pashtun society in Pakistan still did not left their fight of claiming their space in public and politics. Unfortunately, the struggle of majority of women from lower and middle class of Pashtun

society is not studied and understood as opinion of powerful always subjugate the experiences and knowledge of oppressed and powerless. The elitist approach towards understanding the participation of women in politics, overshadow the struggle of women from economically lower middle class. The level of discrimination and inequality towards women in Pashtun society can be decreased by continuous struggle of women from every class (economically) in claiming their spaces in public. By getting space in public the ways for women in Pashtun society towards politics can be cleared from the cultural, religious and societal obstacles. By being independent financially and economically women in Pashtun society will be more empowered in making their decisions in every aspect of their life. Getting decision making positions at family, societal and national can create space for women in every field of life.

The perceptions and thinking of individual emerged by observing their society. The trends in Pashtun society towards women political activism is based on the culture and society of Pashtun areas. Those conservative approaches are changing as the women are taking up their space in society, politics, economy and education. The inaccessibility of women to public space curb women from education and economic resources as for that women must take back their space in public. For Political activism obtaining of knowledge and capital is obligatory. So, if women will not have experience, knowledge and capital they cannot take their part in political activities which ultimately left effects on their basic and legal rights. In Pashtun society presently decisions are made by men at family and societal level disregarding the views of women, which can change the end results. Women in Pashtun society are inexperienced in creating space for themselves but never left the ground empty. The circumstances for woman are changing in Pashtun society regarding her political and public space but it will take its time because change does not occur in days.

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