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Women's Social and Political Participation in the Post-FATA Merger Period: A Qualitative Case Study of North and South Waziristan

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Abstract

This study examines women's socio-political participation in the post-merger context of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), with a specific focus on North and South Waziristan. The merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa under the 25th Constitutional Amendment was a significant step toward political integration and the extension of fundamental rights. However, the extent to which these reforms have improved women's participation in socio-political processes remains an important question. Using a qualitative research design, the study employs purposive sampling and collects data from 25 respondents, including members of the academic community, political actors, women participants in elections, and subject experts. Data is analyzed through thematic analysis within an interpretivist framework to explore the underlying social, cultural, and economic dynamics influencing women's participation. The findings reveal that despite formal legal reforms, women's socio-political participation remains limited due to persistent patriarchal structures, cultural norms, restricted mobility, economic dependency, and lack of political awareness. The study also highlights weak implementation of women laws and the continued influence of traditional systems such as tribal authority and customary practices. While some gradual progress is observed, particularly through the emergence of female political actors, overall participation remains low. The study concludes that legal and institutional reforms alone are insufficient to ensure women's inclusion in political processes. It emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses socio-cultural barriers, promotes education and awareness, and strengthens institutional mechanisms. The research contributes to the existing literature by providing an in-depth qualitative understanding of the challenges and prospects of women's socio-political participation in post-merger tribal district

Keywords: Women's empowerment, Social and Political participation, Post-merger FATA, North Waziristan, South Waziristan

Introduction

Women's political participation in Pakistan, particularly in tribal areas, has traditionally been limited, getting little attention across various political, administrative, and financial spheres. The merger of Fata with Kpk under the 25th Amendment of 1973 Constitution has brought significant milestone in the history of Fata. However, there is a dire need of women socio-political participation in newly merged tribal district and also to make them a part of country politics. The Study on "*socio-political participation of women in Post Fata merger: Challenges and Prospects*" is important for several reasons firstly; Pakistan is Patriarchal society where women retrospectively been eliminated from taking part in politics. These

limitations show that tribal community has strict traditional norms and values which are the main obstacles for women to participate in social life. Secondly, the study has rationale based because North Waziristan and South Waziristan districts are the regions that has experienced much political and social turmoil in last few years, including military operations against militancy and also the influxes of the TDPs these incidents created new challenges for the women social and political participation in this area. Thirdly considering women political participation in tribal society provides insight to the factor that hinders women political participation. In the context of Pakistan tribal traditions norms and values and play essential role in decision making. Here the story of tribal women social and political rights is not subject to men's approval but all important matters are controlled by tribal traditional code of conduct which are practicing in this region.

Patriarchy, oppressive customs, significant gender disparity, women's financial dependence, limited political knowledge, and inadequate enforcement of pro-women laws all contribute to the challenges women face in engaging in politics. While Pakistan is generally patriarchal, these practices are even more entrenched in tribal areas, where oppressive traditions restrict women's social and political advancement and participation. Women's dependence on men further reduces their political opportunities, and limited education and political awareness hinder their involvement in decision-making (Hadi 2017).

Despite these barriers, women like Badam Zari and Naheed Afridi stand out as role models who have challenged patriarchy and fought for women's rights in tribal areas. Their efforts demonstrate that women's involvement in politics is not entirely absent. Political participation for women encompasses their right to pursue interests and engage in elections, and their involvement is a significant step towards promoting female empowerment (Ebrahim 2013).

Generally, women were excluded from politics in Fata there was no role of women in political process since independence of country. For the first time in history of Fata inhabitant of Fata were given right to cast vote through Adult Franchise Act (1997) by the President Farooq Ahmad Khan Leghari. In 1997 elections for the first time women voted in Fata but they voted under the instructions of male family members in order to defeat their rival candidate (Tierney, 2000).

However, the 25th amendment had addressed the issue of women political participation but the major blockade is the Patriarchal structure of tribal areas as the patriarchy in newly merged district prevent women to participate in political process the tribal elders also enforce restriction on women to participate in election (Zakir, Hamid 2018). Article 246 and 247 of the 1973 Constitution was related to Fata affairs. Article 247 clause (3), (4), (5) and (7) define the relationship between Fata and Federal govt as Fata was under the direct jurisdiction of President of Pakistan and there was no role of Supreme Court and Peshawar High Court both the courts has no Authority to legislate or enact any laws (Kaka Khel 2010). Moreover, Article 8-28 of the Constitution of 1973 concern with fundamental rights of the citizen but the people of Fata were unfortunately deprived from such rights as judiciary was not authorized to protect the right of tribal people from violation (Mehsud 2017). After merger of Fata with Kpk the first important step was the fundamental rights according to Article 184(3) and Article 199 now rights of Fata people will be guaranteed by the judiciary. In order to make this move more effective there is need of establishments of courts in Fata region as soon as possible (Shah 2019). women from EX-FATA had never been nominated for National Assembly or Senate, this shows the level of disempowerment of women in tribal regions during Musharraf regime in 2005 law was demanded for Fata Women political rights but no such attention were paid to these demands (Bari 2005).

Another step was taken by the President of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari in 2011 the extension of Political Parties Act to Fata allowing people of fata to participate in the electoral process. But no such participation

of women taken place in tribal areas (Ghauri, Irfan2011). To overcome these restrictions in 2013 an independent female candidate from Bajaur Agency Badam Zari was the first female to contest election for National Assembly seat. (Dawn 2013) According to election commission Act 2017 if women restricted from casting vote in polling stations so the election will be declared null and void. In 2018 election constituency of NA 48 North Waziristan total female vote casted was below 10% similarly in NA 42 of South Waziristan total female vote casted was also below 10% and both the constituency election result were stop due to low percentage vote casted by female. In 2024 general election the lowest vote casted was in South Waziristan NA 48 that was 16.2% (FAFEN2024). Moreover, there are various obstacle which tribal women facing while taking participation in electoral process in order to inter in political arena some major obstacles are gender discrimination, restriction on freely movement in society, dependency of men in decision making and importantly female illiteracy and unawareness regarding political participation (UN Women2020). Gender discrimination in tribal districts is one of the major issue that prevent women from entrance into politics. Gender discrimination against women is one of the prominent in developing countries but if we see specifically gender discrimination is one of the best example where women deprived from political rights (Khayyam and Tahir 2019). According to Article 25(2) of the constitution of Pakistan 1973 clearly negate discrimination on the basis of sex to participate in electoral process. Election Commission of Pakistan in Para No 24, Code of Conduct 2013, clearly mentioned that men and women should be given equality opportunity in order to participate in elections. (Amjad 2013). In tribal areas it is commonly believed that politics is associated with men not women but if women enter into political arena so firstly male politician criticized women's character (Thanikodi and Sugirtha 2007). Due to militancy in tribal areas the region remains backward in the context of women socio-political participation and women were forced to wear scarves while getting education or employment (Bashir 2021). Women mobility were restricted due to traditional cultural and norms women should be accompanied with male member while going to school or for working. Those men were targeted by militants who were promoted female education and political rights. (UN Women 2020) Patriarchy social norms and cultural constraints are the important barriers to women political participation in tribal districts (Bari 2005). Women economic dependency and lack of access to ownership of private property. Inheritance is the important factor of economic status but women in Fata deprive of such property rights (Naseer 2018). Merger of Fata doesn't bring any changes on economic status of tribal women government must take such initiative in development process like in education and health sectors in order to uplift their rights. Moreover, Pashtun code of conduct (Pukhtunwali) in this code of conduct there are certain traits which strongly discourage women political participation these traits are namely Tor (Stigma) and Peghor (satire). In Pashtuns society women must followed culture norms and cannot be deviated from such customs and norms which is incorporated in code of conduct. In this context Purdah (Veil) is one of the dominant norms and women who deviated herself from these norms can face many hurdles so these are the impediments which is facing by tribal women and have negative impact on socio-political participation of tribal women (Ibrahim 2012).

Research Questions

- What are the major hurdles to women socio-political participation in the post-merger Scenario?
- How compatible are the existing societal norms and newly introduced reforms in shape of Fata merger?
- What are the socio-economic hurdles that women faced in socio- political participation?

Hypothesis

Null Hypothesis: 1

- Women's socio-political participation in the North and South Waziristan is significantly higher in the post-merger period

Null Hypothesis: 2

- There is no significant difference in the level of women's socio-political participation in the North and South Waziristan after the Fata merger.

Research Objectives

This research study has two main objectives

- To analyze and assess the possible socio-political participation of women in Post FATA merger.
- To highlight the major hurdles in socio-political participation of women in Post FATA merger scenario in North and South Waziristan Tribal Districts.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Role Theory

Social Role theory, initially developed to explore the reasons behind sex differences and similarities in social behavior, provides a framework for understanding the behaviors expected from individuals based on their social roles (Eagly and Wood, 2012). This theory distinguishes between a status and a role, where a status is a position one holds, and a role consists of the behaviors expected from that position. For instance, when a woman becomes a mother, she not only takes on the status of motherhood but is also expected to fulfill the associated responsibilities, such as caring for and nurturing her children. Social norms and expectations tied to these roles can change over time and vary across cultures.

Social Role theory is particularly useful in understanding women's political participation. According to the theory, the differences in behavior, attitudes, and values between genders are largely shaped by societal expectations and conventions related to gender roles. In many societies, women are socialized to prioritize family duties and domestic work, which can limit their involvement in political activities. Additionally, societal expectations often discourage women from seeking leadership roles or participating in areas traditionally dominated by men, such as politics.

However, Social Role theory also suggests that gender roles are not fixed and can change over time. Efforts to increase women's political participation can challenge existing cultural norms and gender role expectations, thereby encouraging more women to engage in political life. As women become more politically active, they can challenge and redefine gender stereotypes, contributing to new societal norms that promote gender equality. In this way, Social Role theory offers a valuable perspective for understanding both the barriers to and opportunities for increasing women's political participation and advancing gender equality in the political arena.

LITRATURE REVIEW

The literature reveals that women's political participation is crucial for a vigorous democratic process, gender equality, and social justice. However, in tribal societies, especially within the Pashtun culture, women face significant barriers to political participation due to rigid cultural and religious norms that reinforce patriarchal gender roles. This literature review highlights deeply rooted patriarchy in Pashtun society that dis allows women's involvement in politics. This issue of gender inequality remains a significant challenge, particularly in developing countries.

Shad and Ahmad (2018) explore the political and administrative history of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), using the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) of 1901 as a key example. They discuss

how extremism and terrorism have impacted the region, citing the National Action Plan (NAP) and the FATA Reforms Package of December 2014 as government efforts to bring political and economic development to these underdeveloped areas. The repeal of the century-old FCR and its replacement with the FATA Interim Governance Regulation under the Thirty-first Constitutional Amendment Act of 2018 are noted as significant changes. However, the paper does not address the issue of women's political participation in tribal areas.

Wazir and Khan (2014) give a comprehensive analysis of FATA's legal framework, focusing on the FCR and various government regulations before and after Pakistan's independence. They criticize the lack of significant changes brought about by FCR amendments, which have failed to improve the political, social, or economic lives of the local population. They also highlight the special powers of the Political Agent, in 1997 "Adult Franchise Act" was the landmark event in FATA political and legal history. For the first time people of FATA were given right to cast vote before this act people of FATA were deprived from such right to contest election.

Imtiaz Ali 2018 in his book "Mainstreaming Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, in this work author examines pros and cons of FATA merger into KPK. He emphasis that merger of FATA with KPK is a kind of optimistic approach for the local people he also said that FATA merger will need comprehensive planning, Financial resources and strong security.

Rai (2011) discuss that a developed democracy can be measured by the voter turnout, emphasizing that legal and institutional reforms are essential for eliminating gender discrimination in politics. In Indian Constitution of 1952 also emphasis on promoting equality and justice, but still women's representation in national and state legislatures remains low due to patriarchal structures, political party dynamics, and discriminatory seat allocation practices.

Awan (2016) explains in a research study he stated that women's political participation is limited as they rely on men for financial support, lack of decision-making power, and societal barriers that prevent them from voting or holding office without male approval.

Akhlaq and Anwar (2017) discuss in their article "Femininity and women in Politics" discussed about women political participation in Pakistan, they discussed about the growing percentage of Female voters that has increasing over a time with more female got registered in order to take participation in electoral process. Furthermore, there are several hurdles for rural women in order to take participation in election in rural areas of Pakistan.

Xavier and Ghazala (2013) highlighted the multiple barriers which rural women faced in order to take participation in general elections and casting their votes freely. They also discuss the lack of awareness among rural women about their right to cast vote. Moreover, lack of convenience and proper polling related information are the reason that individuals unable to visit polling station and to cast vote.

Bari (2005) emphasizes that socio-political and economic factors are major hindrances to women's political participation. She argues that women's economic dependence and the lack of gender equality limit their ability to engage in political matters and the election process.

The National Commission on the Status of Women (2010) highlights the low political engagement of women in Pakistan, noting that while laws have been passed to improve women's representation, structural barriers like the patriarchal social order continue to prevent them from fully participating in politics. There is need of Holistic approach which ensure women can tale participation in electoral process.

Sarwet (2014) discusses various barriers to women political empowerment. Historically women in Pakistan were kept away from politics due to Socio-Cultural restrictions women were less motivated to

take participation in democratic process. Despite all this hurdles women political participation enhanced in legislation and policies formulation in order to ensure their political participation.

Tariq Mehmood and Mobeen Jafar Mir (2019) in their article "Understanding the post-merger Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) challenges and it's on national security" discuss the challenges faced by FATA after its merger with KPK, noticing that the reforms process is gradually change with national standards but still there is significant gaps remain in education, economic opportunities, justice, and healthcare.

Asgar Rehman examines the governing system of FATA before and after its integration with KPK. He notes that the region was previously governed by the FCR and every Agency is headed by the Political Agent, but after the merger, the governance structure has been reformed and is now regulated by government officials. After merger the Tribal districts is headed by Governmental Official Deputy Commissioner.

Jamal (2016) discusses the various obstacles faced by women in Pakistan's tribal regions in getting education, in order to back up his claims he mentioned works from both domestic and international sources. He notes that Pashtun women are often not treated as equals, and misunderstandings of religious teachings further hinder their educational opportunities. However, his work does not specifically address the political participation of women in tribal areas.

Khan (2012) examines the underdevelopment of ex-FATA, attributing it to factors such as international terrorism. However, the indifferent policies of the subsequent government hinder the unique geographical position. She criticizes the socio-cultural practices in tribal areas, such as matrimonial customs, calling them "humiliating and unacceptable" and "against the spirit of Islam" which subjugate women and undermine their ability to participate in political life. These customs also contribute to the tragic deaths of many women due to the rigid societal norms of honor (Tor).

Nawaz (2000) provides an important analysis of the tribal Jirga system in his work "Farangi Raj aur Ghairatmand Musalman." This book emphasis on historical perspective on Waziristan, focusing on the resistance against colonial powers. This book is valuable for understanding the tribal political culture and various practices which is associated with Jirga. Moreover, this book is helpful for scholars to know about the importance of Jirga system how this system was essential in terms of maintain peace and stability in the tribal region.

Naqvi and Khan (2018) mentioned socio-cultural and political factors, as well as agreements between political parties and religious leaders, as key obstacles to women's political participation in rural areas of Pakistan. They cited reports from the 2018 elections, which revealed that women in districts like Shangla were denied the right to vote due to cultural restrictions, despite legislation mandating a minimum number of women took participation in election in each district.

Raza (2018) in his article "Socio-Cultural and economic factors affecting women political participation in Dir Districts in KPK" discussed about women political empowerment in KPK, he explains in detail that how Socio-Cultural obstacles effected women political participation in KPK. Women are not just victimized due to unawareness about their rights but also victimized by socio- economic and cultural practices that leads to discrimination and gender in equality in society.

Asif (2017) presents a report on the Malakand district, where women were prevented from political participation and right to cast vote due to religious and cultural beliefs. His findings indicate that religious views often influence people's understanding of women's rights, including their right to vote. The women political rights were depending on religious beliefs. According to that area women engagement with politics is consider as against the Islamic Principles.

Ebrahimnejad (2011) review the socio-cultural obstacles Iranian women face in participating in society. They note that women in Iran lack self-confidence and decision-making power, which are further hindered by cultural beliefs and traditions. The Women in Iran lack awareness in terms of their rights there is widely participation of women in social life but still their status is very low due to patriarchal beliefs which is embodied in Iranian Women.

Bhasin (2007) discusses patriarchy in India, highlighting how it subjugates women and assigns them secondary status. She noted that tribal women in India face significant challenges, including illiteracy, limited social mobility, and discriminatory inheritance rights.

Yousafzai and Gohar (2005), in their book "Understanding Jirga," discussed about Pashtun cultural-political system. They explain the concept of Jirga, its mechanisms, forms, and significance in Pashtun life. This book is useful for comparing the modern local representative system with the traditional representative system in Pashtun society.

Iqbal (2013) discussed about the approach of rural people in Pakistan towards Female participation in social activities which have a great impact on female education but unfortunately in our rural areas the patriarchal and cultural attitudes forces the parents to use their daughter for household activities instead of getting education so due to these cultural restriction women in society are less participated in social as well as political activities particularly in rural areas.

Research Methodology

In this study Scholar emphasis on descriptive and qualitative research methodology. The selected area is relatively unexplored and innovative, in order to deeply analyze and evaluate societal and cultural factors qualitative methodology will be used. As a social science researcher, the exploratory method and interpretive paradigm are mostly prioritized to understand the existing literature, for more analysis strict guidelines aligned with the descriptive nature of the research will followed. Researcher decided to use a sample size of 50 different respondents. Ten from Education department, Ten from political administration, Ten from women who took part in elections, and Ten from Health department and Ten from local community elders of North and South Waziristan Tribal districts. This study used a purposive sampling method approach to obtain accurate information on Socio-political participation of women in FATA Post merger period, the sample type is purposive sample so in order to get actual data the researcher will interview from the expert's participants.

Data was analyzed through thematic analysis, which is common technique in Qualitative research, this method is used to analyze and gathered data, particularly the interviews. Throughout the data analysis process, thematic analysis and interpretivist will work together to provide a thorough understanding of the findings. The data collected was analyzed by using interpretivist and exploratory methodologies to reach findings, and conclusions. This approach provides a comprehensive framework for assessing the topic, conducting investigations, and arriving at conclusions.

Discussion

This study set out to examine women's socio-political participation in the post-merger context of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), with a specific focus on North and South Waziristan. The findings, interpreted through the lens of Social Role Theory, reveal a complex interaction between structural reforms introduced after the merger and deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms that continue to shape women's roles in society. The findings strongly indicate that patriarchal structures remain the most significant barrier to women's socio-political participation. Despite constitutional guarantees and legal reforms following the FATA merger, cultural norms rooted in Pashtunwali—particularly concepts such as *Tor* (stigma) and *Purdah* (veil)—continue to restrict women's mobility and public engagement. This supports earlier studies (Bari, 2005; Ibrahim, 2012) which argue that informal

institutions often override formal legal frameworks in tribal societies. From the perspective of Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012), women in these regions are still largely confined to domestic roles, with societal expectations discouraging their participation in public and political life. Even when opportunities exist, deviation from prescribed gender roles often leads to social sanctions, including character assassination and social exclusion. This reinforces the idea that legal reforms alone are insufficient without parallel cultural transformation.

The post-merger reforms, including the extension of constitutional rights, the Political Parties Act (2011), and electoral laws mandating minimum female voter turnout, represent significant institutional progress. However, the study finds a clear gap between *de jure* rights and *de facto* participation. For instance, female voter turnout in both North and South Waziristan remains critically low, despite legal provisions that invalidate elections with less than 10% female participation. This disconnect aligns with the observations of UN Women (2020) and FAFEN (2024), which highlight that structural and administrative reforms have not translated into meaningful participation on the ground. The persistence of informal agreements among male elders to restrict women's voting further undermines these legal safeguards (Naqvi & Khan, 2018).

Socio-economic factors emerged as another major constraint. High levels of female illiteracy, lack of political awareness, and economic dependency on male family members significantly limit women's agency. The study confirms the findings of Awan (2016) and Naseer (2018), who argue that economic empowerment is a prerequisite for political participation.

Women's lack of access to inheritance and property rights further marginalizes them economically, reducing their ability to engage independently in political activities. Additionally, limited access to education and healthcare services in the post-conflict setting of Waziristan exacerbates these challenges. The legacy of militancy and military operations in the region has had a profound impact on women's participation. Security concerns, displacement (TDPs), and targeted violence against proponents of female education and empowerment have created an environment of fear and uncertainty.

Despite these challenges, the study also identifies emerging signs of progress. The participation of women like Badam Zari and Naheed Afridi illustrates that resistance to patriarchal norms is possible. These cases serve as important examples of agency and resilience, supporting the argument that gender roles are dynamic and can evolve over time (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Moreover, the gradual increase in female voter turnout—from below 10% in 2018 to 16.2% in 2024 in some constituencies—indicates a slow but positive shift. Increased political awareness, media exposure, and civil society interventions are contributing to this change, albeit at a limited scale.

The findings validate the applicability of Social Role Theory in explaining gender disparities in political participation in tribal contexts. The theory effectively captures how socially constructed roles limit women's engagement in politics while also offering a framework for understanding change through shifting norms.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the nature and extent of women's socio-political participation in North and South Waziristan in the post-merger context of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). While the merger under the 25th Constitutional Amendment marked a historic transition by extending constitutional rights, legal protections, and political inclusion to the region, the findings of this research demonstrate that these reforms have not yet translated into meaningful or widespread participation of women in socio-political life.

The study reveals that deeply entrenched patriarchal structures, rigid socio-cultural norms, and traditional power systems continue to dominate the social fabric of tribal districts. These factors

significantly limit women's mobility, decision-making power, and access to political spaces. Cultural expectations, reinforced by practices rooted in local traditions, discourage women from engaging in public life and often confine them to domestic roles.

In addition to cultural barriers, structural challenges such as limited access to education, low political awareness, and economic dependency further constrain women's ability to participate effectively. Even where legal rights exist, a lack of awareness and resources prevents women from exercising those rights independently. The weak implementation of pro-women laws and electoral regulations further widens the gap between formal inclusion and practical reality.

The study also highlights that security concerns and the legacy of conflict in the region have reinforced conservative social attitudes and restricted women's engagement in public and political activities. These conditions have slowed the pace of change and limited the impact of post-merger reforms.

However, despite these challenges, the research identifies emerging signs of gradual transformation. The participation of a small number of women in elections and social activism indicates a slow but important shift in societal attitudes. These developments suggest that while progress is limited, it is not absent, and there exists potential for future improvement.

In light of the findings, the study concludes that both null hypotheses are not fully supported in practical terms. Women's socio-political participation has not significantly increased in the post-merger period, and there is no substantial difference between North and South Waziristan in this regard. This indicates that the impact of reforms has been largely uniform but limited across the region.

Ultimately, the study underscores that legal and constitutional reforms alone are insufficient to ensure women's empowerment. Meaningful change requires a comprehensive and sustained approach that addresses the underlying socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers. Efforts must focus on transforming societal attitudes, enhancing education and awareness, strengthening institutional mechanisms, and creating an enabling environment for women's active participation.

In conclusion, while the FATA merger represents a significant milestone in Pakistan's political and administrative history, the inclusion of women in socio-political processes remains an ongoing challenge. Achieving genuine gender equality in tribal districts will require long-term commitment, inclusive policies, and collective efforts from the state, civil society, and local communities to ensure that women are not only granted rights but are also empowered to exercise them fully

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