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Gendered Barriers to Women's Political Leadership in Azad Jammu and Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

We explored the gendered barriers to women's political participation using a qualitative research design and an exploratory approach. Purposive sampling was used to select 12 women engaged in political activities across different political parties. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using an interview guide and analysed through thematic analysis. The findings revealed that women's political participation in AJK is constrained by patriarchal norms, family honour, social surveillance, mobility restrictions, and domestic responsibilities. Women often require family approval and face criticism when engaging publicly in politics. Despite these barriers, many negotiate support, build community networks, and gradually expand their political roles. Institutional exclusion further limits their leadership, as male-dominated party structures, limited finances, weak networks, and opaque candidate-selection processes restrict access to decision-making. Meaningful inclusion requires equitable resources, transparent party processes, and women's substantive participation in political decision-making.

Keywords: Women, political institution, gender, barriers, patriarchy, leadership

Introduction

Women's political participation is a fundamental dimension of democratic governance, gender equality, and inclusive social development (Kiamba, 2009; Norris & Inglehart, 2000). Similarly, O'Neil (2016) argued that meaningful participation extends beyond voting in elections—including involvement in political parties, electoral campaigning, community mobilization, local government, policymaking, and leadership positions. Fox and Lawless (2011) asserted that although women's political representation has received increasing attention globally, however their access to political power is shaped by gendered social structures, cultural expectations, economic inequalities, and institutional practices. In rural and remote communities, Liu (2019) and Singh (2024) maintained that women encounter additional barriers—arising from restricted mobility, limited access to political networks, unequal educational and economic opportunities, and deeply rooted patriarchal norms.

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Sumbas (2020) contained, these constraints influence not only women's political participation but also the extent to which they exercise political agency, express their interests, and influence public decisions. Thus, understanding women's political leadership requires examining both formal opportunities for participation and the everyday social relations through which political power is distributed, negotiated, and maintained.

Chowdhury (2024) highlighted women's political participation—particularly in societies where traditional gender roles are assigned to men with greater authority in public affairs—positioning women within domestic and caregiving responsibilities. He along with Ehrhart (2023) maintained that these gendered expectations establish politics as a predominantly masculine domain in which leadership, public speaking, mobility, and political decision-making are associated with men. They unanimously added that women entering in political spaces face—expectations to balance political commitments with domestic responsibilities while Monopoli (2009) contended that women demonstrate conformity to prevailing standards of family respect and honour. Di Meco (2017) also agreed that such circumstances create a tension between women's political aspirations and social expectations—governing their everyday lives.

Context: Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) provides a significant context for examining these dynamics. It is characterized by diverse social, economic, and geographical circumstances that shape women's access to political institutions and leadership opportunities. Here, family relationships, kinship networks, community reputation, and traditional gender expectations influence public life, women's political participation depend partly on the approval and support of male relatives and other influential community members. Family networks further provide access to political contacts, campaign resources, and electoral support; however, they may also restrict women's autonomy by influencing their political preferences, public visibility, and decisions to contest elections. The interaction between family authority and political institution is, therefore, central to understanding how women enter political life and whether they can exercise independent leadership. Due to lack of research and scarcity of literature, we conducted this study to explore the barriers women face in political sphere.

Literature Review

Women's political leadership in developing countries like Pakistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJ&K) encounters several gendered barriers that impede their full participation. Historical, cultural, and structural factors contribute to the underrepresentation of women in political positions, making it essential to examine these obstacles comprehensively (McLean & Maalsen, 2017). Patriarchal norms within society often diminish women's authority and social standing, presenting a major hurdle in their political engagement (Wittmer & Bouché, 2013). Traditional beliefs dictate gender roles, often relegating women to domestic duties, thereby limiting their opportunities for leadership and involvement in public affairs (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). Institutional frameworks also pose significant challenges to women aspiring for political leadership (Ellinas et al., 2019). Political parties often lack strategies to promote gender parity—leading to inadequate representation of women in decision-making processes (Edris & Hassan, 2026).

Thelma and Ngulube (2024) argued that mechanisms of quotas exist, but the effectiveness of these initiatives is often limited by the lack of support for women's candidacies. Furthermore, Woodward and Lyon (2000) asserted that the internal dynamics of political parties frequently prioritize loyalty and connections over competence and merit—disadvantaging women who may lack extensive networks in a patriarchal political landscape. Additionally, Vlase and Băluță (2023) identified issues of violence and intimidation—significantly affect women's political participation. Many women face threats or actual violence when they attempt to engage in politics—deterring them from vying for leadership roles (Diehl & Dzubinski,

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2016). Reporting mechanisms for harassment are often inadequate—cultural stigmas discourage victims from coming forward (Olivier, 2023). Consequently, the political environment remains hostile, which further serves to silence women and prevents their active contributions.

Hazarika (2008) spotlighted gradually changing social attitudes towards women empowerment, but progress remains uneven. Educational initiatives—raising awareness about gender equality and women's rights are gaining traction, yet societal biases persist (Fleck, Hegarty, & Neergaard, 2011). This creates a paradox where women are increasingly educated and qualified, but societal resistance to their leadership remains strong (Johansson & Bergström, 2015). Promoting female political leaders requires sustained public campaigns—challenging entrenched stereotypes—emphasizing benefits of diversity in governance (Richards, Litchfield, & Osborne, 2020). Significant barriers related to cultural norms, institutional frameworks, and violence remain persistent—presenting ongoing challenges (Matloob, Shabbir, & Saher, 2021). Initiatives aimed at empowering women in politics demonstrate potential but require consistent support and reassessment to achieve meaningful change. Continued research and engagement are essential in addressing these barriers—fostering a conducive environment to women's political leadership (Saher, Matloob, & Ali, 2014).

Institutional arrangements and political party practices also play a significant role in shaping women's opportunities for political leadership (Abdullah, Matloob, & Malik, 2024). Although formal provisions and reserved seats can improve women's descriptive representation, they do not automatically ensure equal access to decision-making authority (Matloob & Saher, 2025). Political parties often function as gatekeepers by controlling candidate selection, campaign resources, party positions, and access to influential political networks (Saher, Matloob, Tahreen, Ali, & Al Sulim, 2013). Research on women's political representation in AJK highlights the significance of sociocultural practices and informal party-level processes in shaping women's political opportunities (Saher et al., 2014; Saher et al., 2013). These findings suggest that women's political exclusion cannot be understood solely through individual circumstances; it must also be examined in relation to institutional practices and the unequal distribution of political resources. This study focused the following objectives.

1. To explore women's lived experiences of political participation and the socio-cultural factors shaping their involvement in political activities in AJK.
2. To examine how women negotiate patriarchal norms, family expectations, and institutional barriers in pursuing political participation and leadership.

Methodology

We employed a qualitative research design and an exploratory research method to investigate gendered barriers to women's political leadership in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). The qualitative design was appropriate for understanding women's lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of political participation within their sociocultural and institutional contexts. A sample of 12 women participants were selected through purposive sampling—a non-probability sampling technique was used to recruit women with relevant experiences and knowledge of political participation. Participants were selected based on their involvement in political activities, including voting, election campaigning, political party membership, community mobilization, local governance, or political leadership. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by questions addressing women's political experiences, sociocultural expectations, family authority, patriarchal norms, and institutional barriers to leadership. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was maintained by using participant codes or pseudonyms to protect identities. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun

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and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, developing initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes. The analysis involved repeated reading of transcripts, identifying meaningful patterns, organizing related codes, and developing themes aligned with the research objectives. Particular attention was given to sociocultural constraints on political participation, family power and patriarchal negotiations, and institutional exclusion from political leadership. Ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and secure data management, guided the research process.

Demographic profile of women political participants (N = 12)

The following table presents the demographic characteristics of 12 women participants aged between 24 and 47 years, representing different educational backgrounds and political party affiliations.

Table 1

Demographic information of women political activists.

Participant	Age (Years)	Education Level	Political Party Affiliation
P1	24	Graduate (BS)	Pakistan Muslim League-N
P2	27	Postgraduate (MA)	Pakistan Peoples Party
P3	29	Graduate (BS)	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf
P4	31	Postgraduate (MPhil)	Pakistan Muslim League-N
P5	33	Postgraduate (MA)	Pakistan Peoples Party
P6	35	Graduate (BA)	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf
P7	37	Postgraduate (MSc)	Jamaat-e-Islami
P8	39	Graduate (BS)	Pakistan Muslim League-N
P9	41	Postgraduate (MPhil)	Pakistan Peoples Party
P10	43	Graduate (BA)	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf
P11	45	Postgraduate (MA)	Jamaat-e-Islami
P12	47	Postgraduate (MSc)	Pakistan Muslim League-N

Key Findings

This section presents findings organized into three major themes emerged from the participants' narratives. Relevant excerpts are included to illustrate their lived experiences—providing deeper insights into the research objectives.

Sociocultural norms and gendered constraints on women's political participation

Sociocultural norms emerged as a significant dimension shaping women's political participation in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). All the women participants argued that women's involvement in political activities was influenced by patriarchal values, traditional gender roles, family honour, community expectations, and socially defined boundaries of respectable femininity. In these settings, political participation was not necessarily regarded as an individual right but was often negotiated within family and community relationships. They encounter resistance when expressing political opinions, attending public meetings, campaigning for candidates, or seeking leadership positions. One participant illustrated, "In our community, people believe that politics is a man's responsibility. If a woman attends political meetings regularly, people begin questioning why she is going outside and whether she is fulfilling her responsibilities at home or not" (Participant 1). This illustrates how

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gendered expectations are associated to women's public engagement with social scrutiny, potentially discouraging their political involvement. Restrictions on mobility further complicated women's participation, particularly where political gatherings required travelling to neighbouring villages or attending meetings after working hours. Another participant added, "Even when I wanted to attend a political meeting, I had to consider who would accompany me and what my family would say. Sometimes, I decided not to go because I did not want unnecessary discussion in the community" (Participant 2). Such experiences demonstrate how anticipated criticism and the need for family approval constrain women's political choices without necessarily involving explicit prohibition.

Majority of the women viewed that family honour and community reputation shape acceptability of women's political engagement. Women are expected to maintain socially approved standards of behaviour, appearance, and interaction, while experience fewer restrictions in performing similar political activities. One woman shared, "Men visit different places, meet political workers, and speak openly, but women are expected to explain where they are going and whom they are meeting. The same political activity is judged differently when a woman performs it" (Participant 3). This contrast highlights the gendered regulation of public visibility and political conduct. Moreover, domestic responsibilities, including childcare, household management, and caring for older family members, also limit the time and flexibility women devote to political activities. Nevertheless, sociocultural constraints do not necessarily eliminate women's political agency. Some women rely on supportive relatives, participate through community networks, mobilize other women, or engage in political activities considered socially acceptable. As one of the participants stated, "I started by discussing community problems with other women and encouraging them to participate in local decisions. Gradually, I became more confident in expressing my political views" (Participant 4).

Based on the above findings, we assert that women's political participation in AJK is shaped by the interaction of patriarchal expectations, social surveillance, mobility restrictions, and domestic responsibilities. At the same time, women's experiences reveal possibilities for negotiating gender norms and expanding their political presence.

Family power, patriarchal negotiations, and women's political agency

Family power and patriarchal negotiations emerged as important dimensions for understanding women's political participation and leadership in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). Majority of the women agreed that their political engagement was shaped not only by their personal aspirations but also by family authority, domestic responsibilities, and the influence of husbands, fathers, brothers, and other male relatives. Similarly, many others viewed that family relationships function simultaneously as sources of support and mechanisms of control, determining whether women attend political meetings, interact with political workers, participate in election campaigns, or pursue leadership positions. In some circumstances, women's political involvement required negotiating permission and demonstrating that their activities would not undermine family responsibilities or social respectability. One participant said, "I wanted to participate in local politics, but my family initially believed that politics was unsuitable for women. I had to explain that I wanted to work for the community and that my political activities would not mean neglecting my household" (Participant 5). This example illustrates how women justify their political aspirations through socially acceptable roles and community-oriented objectives to secure family approval. Domestic responsibilities further complicated these negotiations because women are often expected to maintain their caregiving and household duties alongside political commitments. One participant remarked, "Before attending a meeting, I had to arrange everything at home. My male relatives leave whenever they wanted, but I had to

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make sure that the children and household were taken care of first" (Participant 6). Such experiences indicate that women's political participation involve an additional burden of managing domestic expectations that are not equally imposed on men.

Interestingly, women's responses to patriarchal authority were not limited to compliance. Majority of them exercise political agency through negotiation, persuasion, relationship-building, and gradual expansion of their public roles. Some women might seek support from influential relatives, demonstrate their political competence through community service, or begin with less controversial activities before pursuing more visible leadership positions. Another woman shared, "At first, I participated only in community discussions. When my family saw that people respected my work while I was helping to address local problems, they gradually became more supportive of my political involvement" (Participant 7). This reflects how women use community recognition to strengthen their legitimacy within family and social networks. Nevertheless, such strategies involve compromises, as women's political choices remain dependent on family consent or approval. One participant maintained, "My family supports my participation, but they still expect me to follow their advice about which candidates I should support. I have gained some freedom, although making independent political decisions remains difficult" (Participant 8). Sociologically, these experiences demonstrate that women's political agency operates within unequal power relations rather than outside them. Women may challenge restrictions, accommodate expectations, and strategically negotiate support while attempting to preserve family relationships and social acceptance.

Above findings enabled us to highlight the contradictory role of family structures in women's political lives: they may provide essential resources and legitimacy while simultaneously limiting autonomy.

Institutional exclusion and unequal access to political leadership

Institutional exclusion and unequal access to political leadership represent significant dimensions of women's political experiences in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). Majority of the women participate in voting, election campaigns, and community mobilization, their transition into influential leadership positions is constrained by political party structures, candidate selection practices, financial limitations, and male-dominated decision-making networks. They viewed that men in political parties often serve as gatekeepers to electoral opportunities, determining who receives party tickets, campaign resources, organizational support, and access to influential political figures. While women are less likely to be included in decision-making process. When these processes are dominated by established male networks, women find it difficult to demonstrate their political capabilities or secure positions from which they influence decisions. One woman reflected, "Women are invited to participate in election campaigns and bring people to political gatherings, but decisions are made about candidates and party positions, men usually sit together and decide who will be given an opportunity" (Participant 9). This highlights the distinction between women's participation in political activities and their access to decision-making authority. Many women argued that financial constraints further intensify these inequalities because electoral campaigns require resources for transportation, public meetings, communication, and mobilizing supporters. Women lacking independent income or access to financial networks may become dependent on family members or influential political actors. Another participant illustrated, "I wanted to contest an election, but campaigning required money and contacts that I did not have. Without financial support and connections with influential people, it was difficult to convince others that I could become a serious candidate" (Participant 10). Such circumstances suggest that political leadership depends not only on individual ambition but also on access to material and social resources.

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Majority of the participants said that limited political networks create additional disadvantages for women in geographically remote communities, where distance and transportation difficulties restrict regular interaction with party leadership and political organizations. Male politicians benefit from established networks developed through public meetings, professional relationships, and community activities, whereas women have fewer opportunities to establish similar connections. Nevertheless, women may develop alternative strategies to navigate institutional exclusion. These include forming alliances with other women, building community-based support, participating in local development initiatives, and demonstrating leadership through addressing public concerns. One woman shared, "Since senior party members did not take my concerns seriously, I began working with women in my community. Their support helped me to raise local issues and gradually became more visible in political discussions" (Participant 11). However, greater visibility does not necessarily guarantee substantive influence if women remain excluded from important decisions. Another participant remarked, "Having a position is important, but it is not enough. Women should also be included when decisions are made about development projects, public resources, and political priorities" (Participant 12).

On the basis of above findings, we conclude that institutional barriers restrict women's access to political leadership even when they are actively involved in political processes. Meaningful inclusion requires transparent candidate selection, equitable access to campaign resources, stronger political networks, and women's participation in substantive decision-making.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that women's political participation in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) is constrained by intersecting sociocultural, familial, and institutional barriers. Patriarchal values, traditional gender roles, family honour, and community surveillance restrict women's mobility, public visibility, and ability to express political opinions freely. Women are often expected to prioritize household responsibilities and seek family approval before attending political meetings, campaigning, or pursuing leadership roles. Although these restrictions may not always involve explicit prohibition, they operate through anticipated criticism, social judgment, and unequal expectations of women's behaviour. Nevertheless, women are not entirely passive; many negotiate family permission, seek support from relatives and community networks, and begin with socially acceptable activities before gradually expanding their political roles. Their agency therefore emerges within unequal power relations, as they balance political aspirations with domestic obligations and the need to maintain social respectability. Institutional barriers further limit women's advancement. While women may participate in voting, campaigning, and community mobilization, male-dominated party structures, restricted access to campaign finances, weak political networks, and opaque candidate-selection processes prevent them from obtaining influential leadership positions. Women are frequently included in mobilization activities but excluded from decisions regarding candidates, party positions, and public resources. Financial dependence and limited access to influential contacts intensify these inequalities, particularly in remote areas where transportation and networking opportunities are scarce. Despite these challenges, women develop alternative strategies, including collective mobilization, community-based support, and participation in local development initiatives. Women's experiences in AJK thus reflect both constraint and resistance, showing that patriarchal norms and institutional inequalities continue to limit their influence while collective action and strategic negotiation create possibilities for expanding women's political presence.

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