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Gender Disparities in Education, Health, and Political Participation: A Case Study of Women in District Swabi

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality in Pakistan is particularly apparent in areas such as political involvement, healthcare and education an extensive case study of women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where structural and cultural constraint nts combine to create notable gender disparities, is presented in this research. The research analyzes demographic shifts and the socio-economic status of women, utilizing data from the 2017 census of Pakistan along with health and education statistics from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The report from election commission of Pakistan (ECP) indicates that women in swabi have limited access to higher education. Their literacy rate is approximately 30% lower compared to that of men. Women's social vulnerability is further reinforced by the continued low health indices, especially maternal mortality and availability to female healthcare professionals. Even with constitutional protections, patriarchal mindsets, obstacles to movement, and limited access to national identity documents frequently hinder political involvement. In order to demonstrate how women's reliance on resources held by men perpetuates gender subordination, the study places these data into feminist theoretical frameworks, particularly Marxist and social exclusion frameworks. The study shows that gender disparity is a deeply ingrained socio-cultural reality rather than just a statistical problem by connecting Swabi's micro-level realities to more general national and regional trends. The debate also compares Swabi's gender statistics to those of other districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and to national averages to illustrate how local context impacts women's possibilities. According to the paper's conclusion, progress toward gender equality will continue to lag in the absence of focused interventions, such as funding for girls' education, hiring more women for teaching and healthcare positions, facilitating women's CNIC registration, and launching awareness campaigns with the help of community and religious leaders. It argues that, in addition to being a matter of justice, empowering women in Swabi is decisive to Pakistan's lasting social and economic advancement.

Keywords: District Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan; Women's Empowerment; Political Participation; Health; Education; Gender Disparities.

1. Introduction

Background and Rationale

It is widely acknowledged that gender equality is essential to sustainable development. Gender equality (SDG 5) is recognized by the UN through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a basic human right and as a requirement for accomplishing other developmental goals, including lowering poverty (SDG 1), guaranteeing high quality education (SDG 4), and

enhancing health outcomes (SDG 3). Although there has been progress in closing the gender gap globally, inequities are still particularly severe in poor nations where weak institutions, cultural norms, and structural injustices all contribute to women's marginalization (Nussbaum, 2000). Despite Pakistan's adherence to international treaties like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and constitutional guarantees of equality (Article 25), gender inequality is still pervasive in the country's politics, health, and educational systems. According to the 2017 Pakistan Census, women's literacy was 48% while men's was 70%. While women's labor force participation remains below 25%, making it one of the lowest in South Asia, maternal mortality rates continue to exceed regional norms. Despite being one of the first Muslim-majority countries to elect a female prime minister, Pakistan currently has low levels of female representation in legislatures and poor voter turnout, especially in traditional and rustic areas. (Rahim, 2021).

District-Level Inequalities

District-Level Inequalities Local inequalities are sometimes obscured by national statistics, despite the fact that they highlight structural disparities. Case studies at the district level offer vital information on how national patterns appear locally. Because of its size (1.6 million people in 2017), strict adherence to Pashtun cultural norms, and comparatively low levels of female participation in public life, District Swabi in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) is a significant case: (Census, 2017). In Swabi, women experience additional obstacles, such as restricted educational opportunities, subpar healthcare, and exclusion from political arenas. Little progress has been made in female literacy, voter registration, and engagement at the same time, offering an opportunity to assess both achievements and persistent challenges.

Gender Inequality in Education

Everyone acknowledges that a key component of empowerment is education. However, women's literacy in Swabi is still significantly lower than men's (44% vs. 73%). While primary school enrollment rates are more comparable, the disparity grows considerably at secondary and higher education levels, reflecting both sociocultural restrictions (purdah, preference for males' education) and institutional limitations (fewer schools for girls, lack of female teachers). These gaps restrict women's opportunities for jobs, involvement in decision-making, and knowledge of civic rights (Hussain, 2017).

Gender Inequality in Health

In the Swabi district, a stark disparity exists between the availability of healthcare services and the needs of its population, particularly when it comes to women's health. Despite having a number of health facilities at its disposal, including the reputable Bacha Khan Medical Complex and several rural health centers, the area struggles with a severe shortage of female medical professionals (KP, 2017). This lack is a serious issue since cultural norms frequently dissuade women from seeing male doctors for medical care, which forces them to put off treatment or depend on inexperienced birth attendants who might not have the skills needed to guarantee a safe delivery. (Khalid, 2020). Because many women still give birth at home rather than in a hospital or other medical institution, maternal mortality is still a major problem in the area. Financial limitations and poor transportation infrastructure exacerbate the situation, making rural women more isolated and vulnerable. These women confront major obstacles in obtaining medical help in the first place, in addition to being at risk of difficulties during childbirth due to restricted access to high-quality healthcare. Given how

these variables combine to form a perfect storm, health disparities in Swabi are a severe problem that needs immediate attention.

Gender Inequality in Political Participation

There is a glaring discrepancy in the region of Swabi between women's terrible reality and their vital democratic right to engage in politics. Even though the percentage of women who are registered to vote has gradually increased from 40.4% in 2008 to 43.6% in 2018, women are still disproportionately underrepresented in political processes due to a complicated web of barriers and prejudices. A cycle of systematic exclusion is perpetuated by women's limited mobility, lack of access to essential identifying documents like CNICs, and the frequently patriarchal dynamics that control family decision-making (ECP, 2018). Their opinions and voices are consequently marginalized, and their wants and worries go unmet in the very procedures that are supposed to represent and serve them.

A depressing reality has emerged in some areas as a result of a long-standing cultural practice: women's voices are routinely being excluded from the voting process. The idea that women's involvement in government is subordinate to men's is reinforced by the informal agreements made by male community leaders to deny women the right to vote. In addition to violating the core values outlined in the constitution, this heinous suppression undermines the foundation of democratic institutions, making them unconstitutional in the eyes of the disenfranchised (DAWN, 2008)

Theoretical Lens

A thorough theoretical framework that takes into account the complex interactions of sociological, institutional, and economic issues is necessary in order to fully understand the subtleties of gender inequality in Swabi. Feminist theory shows how deeply embedded patriarchal norms impact economic ties, organizational dynamics, and cultural values, all of which contribute to the continuation of inequality. Marxist feminist viewpoints, in particular, highlight how gender and economic inequality interact to make women dependent on male-dominated authority and resources. (Armstrong, 2020). The social exclusion hypothesis also sheds light on the systematic restriction of women's access to political, medical, and educational arenas, hence restricting their prospects and autonomy. Researchers may now remove the layers and identify the root causes of gender inequality—the ingrained structural and cultural problems that sustain unequal chances and treatment—by reorienting the focus from superficial measurements to these more reliable frameworks.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes significantly to the current discussion on Pakistan's long-standing gender inequality by bringing fresh insight into the predicament of women in rural areas like Swabi. Although there are many reports at the national level, there is a startling lack of studies looking at the particular difficulties faced by women in rural and culturally conservative areas. Through the integration of perspectives from politics, healthcare, and education, this paper presents a thorough analysis of women's marginalization in Swabi, exposing the complex network of disparities that connects these disparate fields. In addition to improving our knowledge of women's experiences, this study provides a much-needed framework for policymakers aiming to address the underlying causes of gender disparity in Pakistan by firmly establishing its conclusions in theoretical discussions and empirical data.

Research Questions

Three main questions form the basis of our study: First and foremost, we want to highlight and comprehend the considerable educational disparities that exist between men and women in District Swabi. What are the root causes of these disparities, and how do they impact the community? Secondly, we're examining the complex relationship between health, access to healthcare, and gender inequality in the region. How do existing health conditions and healthcare services exacerbate or alleviate the effects of gender-based disparities? Lastly, we're seeking to uncover the various socio-cultural, economic, and institutional obstacles that hinder women's participation in politics. What are the key barriers, and how can they be addressed to promote greater equality and representation? The research aims to shed light on the underlying gender dynamics in Swabi, providing valuable insights that can inform and enrich discussions around women's empowerment and policy-making.

2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

2.1 Global Perspectives on Gender Disparities

Across the globe, a stubborn obstacle has hindered human progress: the entrenched disparities of gender inequality. To shed light on this pervasive issue, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has developed the Gender Inequality Index (GII), which meticulously measures the gaps in reproductive health, women's empowerment, and workforce participation (World Bank, 2018). Unfortunately, countries in South Asia have consistently landed at the lower end of this ranking, underscoring a systemic failure to include women in the fabric of society. The consensus among experts is clear: access to education and quality healthcare are not just social safety nets, but crucial drivers of women's participation in politics and the economy, and thus, their overall well-being (Nussbaum, 2000). Higher female literacy is linked to lower fertility rates, better child health, and increased political involvement. The global perspective on education, health, and politics emphasizes their interdependence. The lack of education and healthcare in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia hinders women's political participation. The combined effect of these three forms of exclusion underscores the need for integrated solutions to address gender disparities.

2.2 Gender Inequality in South Asia

South Asia presents a contrasting picture of gender dynamics. While the region has produced prominent female leaders—including prime ministers in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India—women's representation in everyday politics, education, and employment remains limited. Patriarchal practices in India, including dowry and son preference, contribute to persistent gender inequalities in education and healthcare (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001). Bangladesh has made progress in improving female education and health, but challenges remain in addressing gender-based violence and political marginalization (Kabeer, 2005). Afghanistan, sharing cultural similarities with Pakistan's Pashtun belt, illustrates how conservative interpretations of religion intersect with culture to severely restrict women's mobility and participation (Kakar, 2020).

Economic growth may lessen gender inequalities, but cultural traditions continue to pose significant obstacles. While Bangladesh experiences economic progress and increased female workforce participation, women's political influence is still constrained by traditional notions of family honor and patriarchal norms (Hussain, 2017). The similarities between these

regional situations are essential for comprehending the difficulties women in Swabi encounter.

2.3 Gender Inequality in Pakistan

Gender inequality exists in various forms in Pakistan. The Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM) Survey consistently reveals disparities in literacy, school enrollment, healthcare access, and labor force participation. The literacy rate for females in the 2021 dataset was higher than that of males in the 48% dataset, while the 70% dataset showed a different trend (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The disparity between rural and urban areas intensifies, leaving rural women at a disadvantage.

Health disparities are a consequence of existing social inequalities. Maternal mortality remains a serious issue, with many deaths occurring during childbirth, particularly in rural areas where access to reproductive healthcare is limited. Even with constitutional rights, cultural barriers have often limited women's political participation. Pakistani election officials have reported instances of women facing voting barriers in certain regions, particularly in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab (National Institute of Population Studies, 2019). The disparities have been studied by scholars, focusing on the role of patriarchy. Critelli argues that women's lack of education and political involvement in Pakistan contributes to the prevalence of violence against them. Mumtaz and Salway contend that reproductive health is shaped by factors beyond just healthcare access, including women's autonomy within their families. Structural reforms are only effective when accompanied by changes in cultural beliefs.

2.4 Gender Inequality in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Pashtun Society

Pashtun women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa encounter specific obstacles in achieving gender equality. Pashtunwali, the customs and traditions of the Pashtun people, emphasizes honor, hospitality, and the seclusion of women. Cultural norms can hinder gender equality by reinforcing gender segregation and restricting women's participation in public life. Societal expectations regarding family honor and social status often impede women's educational opportunities in the context of KP (Ali, 2013).

Rahim (2021) argues that Pashtun culture discourages women's political participation, leading to their exclusion from power. Khan's research suggests that women's participation in elections doesn't always guarantee political power, as they may be acting on behalf of their male family members. The findings reflect the social environment of Swabi, where women's political engagement is shaped by cultural, religious, and institutional influences.

2.5 Feminist perspectives in theory

Liberal Feminism

According to liberal feminists, women ought to have equal access to political, economic, and educational possibilities. Systemic obstacles that prevent women from accessing healthcare, education, and political engagement are the root cause of the gender gap in Swabi. Liberal feminist principles include the advancement of women's political engagement, girls' education, and access to healthcare.

Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminism contends that the main cause of gender inequality is economic systems. The continuation of male economic dominance depends on the unpaid labor of women. In Swabi, women's economic disadvantage and marginalization are sustained by their lack of

formal employment options and property ownership. Marxist feminist theory emphasizes how cultural norms and economic disparity are linked to the upholding of social hierarchies.

Radical feminism

According to radical feminism, patriarchy affects women in every aspect of life and is engrained in society. In Swabi, customs like purdah, mobility restrictions, and cultural ideas of honor serve as examples of how patriarchy functions in social and political institutions in addition to households. Radical feminists contend that rather than only making little changes to existing laws, a fundamental reorganization of patriarchal structures is necessary to achieve true gender equality.

2.6 Empirical Gaps in Existing Literature

Even with the substantial amount of research on gender disparity in Pakistan, some topics still require more study. Research frequently ignores each district's distinct features. Usually, research ignores the intricate relationships between politics, health, and education in favor of concentrating on each topic independently. The way that institutional systems and cultural norms like Pashtunwali combine to impact women's prospects is not given enough attention. By providing a comprehensive examination of gender differences in Swabi at the district level, this study closes a knowledge gap.

2.7 Conceptual Framework for the Study

The idea of social exclusion and feminist theory are incorporated into this study's analysis. One important component of empowerment is the examination of the connections between political involvement, health, and education. Women face obstacles as a result of patriarchy, which are made worse by institutional and economic frameworks. Descriptive data can be replaced with a more sophisticated knowledge of the structural and cultural causes of gender disparity in Swabi according to this paradigm.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study examines the precise ways that gender affects political participation, health, and education in District Swabi using a qualitative case study. The case study provides a thorough analysis of a particular situation. Because of its sizable population, devotion to Pashtun traditions, and the disparities in social and political resources that now exist for women, Swabi was chosen as the main district. The results of the Swabi study provide insightful information that is applicable to other districts in Pakistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. For case studies, researchers use information from official publications, census data, and scholarly research. Using a multifaceted approach strengthens the study's conclusions.

3.2 Data Sources

The following is the primary collection of secondary information used in this investigation:

1. **Census Data:** The 2017 Pakistan Population and Housing Census offers data on population, literacy, age, and rural-urban demographics for Swabi. These figures are crucial for analyzing population trends.
2. **Government Reports:** Reports from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Department of Education (Annual School Census) and the Health Department (facility mapping, maternal health indicators) are used to analyze educational and health disparities. The Election Commission of Pakistan provides data on voter registration, election turnout, and gender-based electoral exclusion, using its documents.

3. **Academic Literature:** Scholarly works, such as journal articles, books, and policy papers, contribute to our understanding of gender inequality in Pakistan, South Asia, and Pashtun society.
4. **NGO and International Reports:** The work of organizations like UNDP, UNICEF, UN Women, and the World Bank helps to understand Swabi's place within global and regional trends.

3.3 Data Analysis

This study investigates how gender influences various indicators in education, health, and political engagement. Data trends are illustrated through the use of tables and figures. The research utilizes feminist theory and social exclusion concepts to analyze the data. This research delves deeper than just presenting descriptive statistics to explore the influence of structural, cultural, and institutional factors on disparities. Literacy data are analyzed to understand the influence of purdah and patriarchal norms on girls' education. This study examines voter registration data in the context of the challenges women encounter due to CNICs and cultural voting regulations.

3.4 Rationale for Selecting District Swabi

Several factors justify the selection of Swabi as the study site:

Demographic Significance: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Swabi district, home to a population exceeding 1.6 million, is one of the region's most populous areas (Census 2017). The province's understanding of gender dynamics has a ripple effect on the wider community.

Cultural Context: Pashtun culture, with its emphasis on Pashtunwali, strongly influences the gender dynamics in Swabi. Understanding Swabi's culture reveals the cultural factors that influence women's access to opportunities and the constraints they experience.

Educational and Political Trends: While literacy and voter registration have improved in Swabi, the region still faces significant challenges in achieving gender equality, highlighting the importance of ongoing research and analysis.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Despite using secondary data, ethical considerations remain important. Official government and international sources offer accurate and impartial information. Secondary data often falls short of capturing the full spectrum of women's lived experiences. To gain a deeper understanding, this research utilizes qualitative interviews and ethnographic studies from comparable settings.

3.6 Limitations of the Study

This study, like all research designs, has its limitations. Key limitations to consider are:

- 3 **Reliance on Secondary Data:** The lack of primary fieldwork prevents the study from gathering firsthand accounts from women in Swabi. Although secondary data can be reliable, they may not capture the full complexity of women's experiences, especially in regards to cultural and household factors.
- 4 **Generalizability:** Although Swabi provides valuable information, its unique cultural and demographic features make it unsuitable for generalizing findings to the entire country of Pakistan. The study's insights can be used to inform the practices of other districts facing similar socio-cultural challenges.
- 5 **Cultural Sensitivity:** Pashtun society's gender norms are complex and deeply ingrained, making it crucial to avoid reducing them solely to feminist perspectives. The study seeks

to reconcile theoretical understanding with cultural awareness by drawing on existing literature that reflects local perspectives.

- 6 **Data Gaps:** The lack of data on maternal mortality at the district level makes it difficult to analyze this important health statistic. It might be challenging to determine a province's average performance due to local variations.

Strengths of the Approach

Notwithstanding the limitations, the methodology has a number of noteworthy benefits.

- **Inclusive Coverage:** Through an analysis of the connections between politics, health, and education, this study provides a thorough knowledge of gender inequality.
- **Relevance to Policy:** The results of the research, which are presented in a fashion that links them to the district, provincial, and national levels, can be useful to policymakers, non-governmental organizations groups, and international organizations.
- **Theory-Driven Analysis:** By going beyond basic statistics to examine the underlying processes that sustain inequality, feminist and socially excluded theories provide a more thorough explanation of inequality.

4. Findings & Analysis

4.1 Education

Since education affects women's access to political participation, healthcare, and work, it is essential in advancing gender equality. With variations in rates of literacy, school enrollment, resource availability, and the proportion of female teachers, Swabi demonstrates gender inequality in education.

Literacy Rates

According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Swabi has a high overall literacy rate, although there is a noticeable gender disparity in literacy. The wide gap of 30 percentage points underscores the substantial barriers to female education. Swabi's female literacy rate lags slightly behind the national average, highlighting ongoing gender disparities in education.

Enrollment Ratios

The number of students enrolled in primary school is significant, with girls' enrollment rates showing a close match to boys'. The gap in educational access and opportunities grows larger as students move through middle, high, and higher secondary education. The data in Table 1 is derived from the KP Annual School Census Report (2021):

Table 1: Primary Level Gross Enrollment Ratio in Swabi

Institutions	Boys	Girls	Total
Government Schools	95,659	90533	186192
Private Schools	70,338	35862	106192
Deeni Madaris	1,949	620	2569
Govt. Private. Deeni	167,946	127,015	294,953
Population 5-9 years	150,778	140,555	291,333
Govt. Schools GER	63.44%	64.41%	63.91%
Private School GER	38.50%	20.95%	30.06%
Deeni Madaris	1.29%	0.44%	0.88%
Govt, Private & Deeni	111.39%	90.37%	101.25%

Source: (KP G. o., 2021)

The data reveal a significant challenge, while girls are well-enrolled in primary school, their dropout rates increase substantially as they progress to higher grades. The decline is influenced by societal factors like early marriage, limited mobility for girls, and the emphasis on boys' education.

Infrastructure and Availability of Schools

Swabi has five schools, with two for girls and three for boys. Girls face disadvantages in terms of access to institutions and facilities compared to boys at the middle and high school levels. The KP Education Department has identified a shortage of high schools for girls, with only 49 available compared to 74 for boys. The low number of girls' schools, particularly at secondary and higher education levels, is a key driver of the high dropout rates among girls.

Availability of Female Teachers

The shortage of female teachers creates a major hurdle. Swabi lacks female teachers at every educational level. High schools exhibit a gender imbalance in teaching staff, with a significantly fewer female teachers than male teachers. The cultural preference for female educators in conservative families restricts girls' educational opportunities.

Cultural and Social Barriers

Female education is hindered by cultural factors, even when infrastructure is readily available. Purdah, family honor, and patriarchal preferences for boys' education all contribute to the persistent gender gap. As cultural standards define their reputation, girls may be pulled out of school before they reach adulthood in order to keep themselves from communicating with men outside of their immediate family. Early marriage has a detrimental effect on girls' access to education.

Theoretical Interpretation

According to liberal feminism, the inequalities in Swabi are caused by institutional failures to provide equal chances. Marxist feminism contends that women's economic dependence on males is maintained by their lack of educational opportunities, which helps to uphold patriarchal power systems. According to the social exclusion paradigm, women are marginalized as a result of societal institutions, such as the dearth of suitable schools for females. Although primary education has improved, societal barriers still prevent women from advancing in higher education.

4.2 Healthcare link with Cultural variations

Ladies may face obstacles to retrieving healthcare owing to the need for consent from male family members, even when healthcare facilities are available. The prospects of culture influence women's healthcare involvements. Purdah practices limit access of women's to healthcare, creating it problematic for them to reach distant medical facilities. Rustic areas face larger complications in emergency care due to the lack of transport routes.

Financial Barriers

Financial restrictions are a main issue. Swabi's populaces depend on severely on cultivation and regular earnings, foremost to inadequate disposable profits for many families. The cost of healthcare, particularly for childbirth and pregnancy-related facilities, is a noteworthy obstacle. Gendered outlay shapes in families frequently line up male and boy's necessities over females'.

Theoretical explanation

From a feminist standpoint, the exclusion of women from healthcare in Swabi highlights the patriarchal control exerted over their bodies and freedom of movement. Marxist feminism explores how economic inequality, particularly its impact on women's economic status, limits their access to care. The lack of accessible, female-friendly healthcare services reflects the social exclusion framework, as institutional structures fall short in meeting the needs of women. The issue of health disparities in Swabi goes beyond simply lacking facilities; it's rooted in systemic, cultural, and economic obstacles that hinder women's healthcare access.

4.3 Citizens' Participation in Politics

Political involvement is a key sign of women's empowerment. While the constitution guarantees women's rights in Swabi, the reality on the ground reveals persistent barriers that prevent their full inclusion.

Understanding voter registration and its impact on election turnout

The Election Commission of Pakistan reveals that women in Swabi face lower voter registration and turnout rates compared to men. The data in Table 2 outlines the registration numbers for the past four general elections.

Table 2: Male and Female Registered Voters in Swabi (2002–2018)

Previous Elections	Registered Voters of Men	Registered Voters of Women	Total
2002	343,858	228,530	572,388
2008	3,32,703	2,38,555	5,71,258
2013	409,876	304,578	7,14,454
2018	514,651	398,028	9,12,679

(DAWN, 2008) (KP, 2007- 08) (ECP, 2018)

While more women are now voting, they still make up a smaller percentage of voters than men. Despite reforms boosting female voter participation in 2018, the gender gap in Swabi remained.

Barriers to Political Participation

Several factors explain women's limited participation:

- 3 **Collective Bans on Women Voting:** Male elders have imposed a ban on women's voting in some constituencies. Despite official condemnation, enforcement of these practices remains lax in KP and Swabi, as documented in 2008 and 2013.
- 4 **Cultural and Religious Norms:** The societal expectation of women's role within the family, often tied to purdah, hinders their participation in public political spaces. Some areas see male elders and religious leaders actively discouraging women from voting, citing the belief that politics is a male-dominated field.
- 5 **Lack of National Identity Cards (CNICs):** Elector registration requires a CNIC. Women involvement is strictly hindered by such limitations and limits as stopping them from having a photo on their CNICs. The deficiency of photos on women's computerized national identity Cards (CNICs) was another factor contributing their low turnout.
- 6 **Symbolic Demonstration:** Power of women nominated to reserved seats may be incomplete because they often prioritize the benefits of their male relatives. The occurrence of this phenomenon reinforces the perception that politics is a male-dominated field.

4.4 Socio-Economic Status & Empowerment

In Swabi, women face challenges in achieving economic independence due to limited access to resources, restricted opportunities in the formal workforce, and reliance on male family members for guidance.

Labor Force Participation

The number of women participating in formal labor in Swabi is low. Women are most commonly employed in professions like teaching, nursing, and healthcare, roles often viewed as socially acceptable. Many women work in agriculture and household tasks, often without compensation. The agricultural workforce in KP, with over a third of its workers being women, is largely excluded from policy discussions (Khalid, 2020).

Access to Property and Credit

Property ownership is a key factor in achieving empowerment. Inheritance practices in Swabi prioritize male relatives, resulting in limited land ownership for women. The absence of CNICs hinders access to financial credit, as many loans and government programs necessitate their presence. Despite the potential benefits of microcredit, women's limited control over their finances can undermine its positive impact.

Household Decision-Making

The power to make decisions within homes is largely in the hands of men. Men hold significant influence over key life choices for children, including education, healthcare, and finances. Cultural norms often restrict women's freedom by associating their behavior with family reputation. Women in Swabi are largely absent from community decision-making forums, despite the existence of these traditionally male-dominated spaces.

Social and Cultural Constraints

Swabi's family system perpetuates women's limited status. The traditional understanding of marriage emphasizes its social and religious significance, with women typically moving into their husband's home and facing the authority of their in-laws. Early marriage hinders girls' access to education and contributes to their economic dependence. Women's independence is often seen as a threat to the traditional family structure, leading to disapproval.

Empowerment Gaps

While progress has been made, significant gaps still exist in Swabi. The relationship between education and autonomy is more pronounced for women living in urban areas compared to rural women. The disparity in empowerment levels underscores the connection between class, geography, and gender.

5. Discussion

Connecting Research Results to Theoretical Concepts

The findings from Swabi show that gender disparities in education, health, political participation, and socio-economic empowerment are interconnected. Feminist studies highlight the societal structures and cultural norms that underpin gender disparities.

Liberal feminism points out that institutional obstacles, like the lack of girls' schools, female teachers, and women healthcare workers, limit women's access to essential services.

Marxist feminism Women's lack of property, paid work, and financial resources is a clear indication of their continued subordination to economic dependency, as demonstrated by Marxist feminism.

Radical feminism The interpretation of radical feminism involves practices like purdah, early marriage, and bans on women voting being used as symbols of patriarchy, which restrict the mobility and control of women.

social exclusion theory :Women are treated as second-class citizens due to systemic denial of access to schools, CNICs, healthcare, and political forums, as explained by social exclusion theory.

These frameworks demonstrate that gender inequality in Swabi is not solely caused by poverty or underdevelopment, but rather a product of patriarchal cultural and institutional structures.

5.2 Education as the Foundation of Empowerment

The largest area of disparity was now centered around education. Although Swabi has managed to maintain a relatively high number of students at the primary level, the steep drop in numbers at secondary and higher levels is indicative of cultural and structural barriers. The findings are echoed by both national and regional studies. Dropout rates in rural Punjab are comparable to those in other regions, influenced by early marriage and gendered household duties (sattar, 2012). The outcome is definite: without ongoing support for female education, gender equality will not be attained in other domains such as health, politics, and economy.'

5.3 Health Disparities and Cultural Control

Swabi's health outcomes reveal how cultural factors and institutional flaws work against women. Why? The absence of female professionals in hospitals and clinics, coupled with women's reluctance to see male doctors, results in inadequate or delayed medical care. The systemic deficiencies are evident in the indicators of maternal and child health.

This is consistent with Mumtaz and Salway's (2009) findings that reproductive health outcomes in Pakistan are more affected by women's lack of autonomy than by the availability of facilities. Maternal health has been positively impacted by the use of community midwives in Bangladesh, suggesting that localized solutions could be successful in Swabi. Radical feminism asserts that patriarchy places great importance on controlling women's reproductive health. The absence of a right to healthcare for women is indicative of wider systems where men are dominant. The interplay between cultural and economic inequalities is emphasized in Marxist feminism, which highlights the fragility of such relationships.

5.4 Political Participation: Formal Rights versus Social Realities

A paradox is shown by the examination of Swabi's election participation: although women's political rights are protected by the constitution and the law, cultural norms continue to limit actual participation. Voting is discouraged or downright prohibited for women, and even when they do get elected, they usually serve as stand-ins for male family members.

This represents the "patriarchal bargain," as defined by Kandiyoti (1988), according to which women's limited participation is only allowed when it does not jeopardize male power. Women's higher voter turnout in Swabi conceals more serious problems with agency and self-determination.

In contrast, women in Pakistan's metropolitan areas—Karachi and Lahore, for example—engage in politics more actively, demonstrating how urbanization, education, and exposure to a variety of cultural norms can lower obstacles. Swabi, on the other hand, reflects trends observed in rural India and Afghanistan, where patriarchal community structures still keep women out of political arenas.

5.5 Socio-Economic Dependence and Empowerment Gaps

5.5 Socio-Economic Dependence and Empowerment Gaps In Swabi, women's socioeconomic reliance on men perpetuates their marginalization in other spheres. Women continue to be financially reliant on male family members since they lack access to formal employment, credit, or property. Despite their considerable contributions to domestic work and agriculture, they go unappreciated and unpaid. This supports the claims made by Marxist feminists that women's subjugation is based on their unpaid labor. Since ownership over resources is a key factor in determining autonomy, denying women their property rights also weakens their negotiating power (Agarwal, 1994). Empowerment gaps are further shaped by location and class. In Swabi, middle-class urban women, particularly those with more education, have more freedom and job opportunities. On the other hand, patriarchal norms continue to severely limit rural women. Given this unequal distribution of empowerment, it is clear that addressing gender inequality requires addressing broader socioeconomic disparities as well.

5.6 Comparative Perspective: Swabi in the National and Regional Context

Swabi's gender indicators show both advancements and regressions when contrasted with national averages:

Education: While male literacy in Swabi is marginally greater than the national average, female literacy (44%) is lower than the national level (48%).

Health: Although maternal health results are not as good as in urban areas like Islamabad or Lahore, they are generally in line with KP averages.

Political participation: The fact that Swabi's female voter registration rate (43.6% in 2018) is lower than the national average (44.2%) underscores the continued existence of gender disparities.

Swabi's struggles are similar to those in Afghanistan and some rural areas of India, where patriarchal customs still limit women's freedom and independence. A helpful counter-example is provided by Bangladesh, where, in spite of comparable cultural restrictions, focused interventions like community health initiatives and stipends for girls' education have reduced gender disparities.

5.7 Implications for Gender Equality and Development

The findings carry several implications:

1. Interconnected Nature of Disparities

Political engagement, health, and education are closely related. Without education, women are unaware of their political power and health rights. Women's participation in politics and education is hindered when they are ill. Women cannot push for changes in health and education without political agency.

2: Cultural Barriers as Structural Obstacles

Cultural customs like purdah and group voting prohibitions are structural barriers to gender equality rather than merely customs. It is unlikely that policies that disregard these cultural factors will be successful.

3. Need for Context-Specific Interventions

Local realities must be taken into account while modifying national policies. For instance, cultural barriers to women's employment and movement must be addressed in order to recruit female teachers and health professionals in Swabi.

4. Role of Institutions

To guarantee women's access to CNICs, voting places, and community decision-making forums, organizations including the Election Commission, NADRA, and local government must work proactively.

6. Conclusion & Policy Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

Examining gender differences in political engagement, health, and education in District Swabi, this study placed its findings within frameworks of social exclusion and feminism. The data shows that women still experience severe disadvantages in every area of life, even in the face of slow progress.

With high secondary and higher school dropout rates, female literacy rates in education continue to lag behind male literacy by around 30 percentage points. Women's educational possibilities are severely limited by the lack of female teachers and girls' schools as well as cultural norms.

Due to cultural constraints on women's mobility, a lack of female healthcare providers, and inadequate facilities in rural regions, maternal and child health outcomes continue to be low. Swabi has a number of clinics and hospitals, however women are unable to efficiently utilize them due to structural obstacles.

Women's voter registration has increased, but their participation in politics is still below average. Women are prevented from exercising their democratic rights by cultural customs including purdah, collective prohibitions on women voting, and the absence of CNICs. Women frequently serve as stand-ins for male relatives, even when they occupy reserved seats, which restrict true empowerment.

Last but not least, socioeconomically, women's dependence on men remains firmly established. Lack of property ownership, a lack of employment opportunities, and a lack of involvement in local decision-making processes all contribute to subordination. These patterns demonstrate how gender inequality in Swabi, which extends beyond underdevelopment, is sustained by structural patriarchy and cultural values such as Pashtunwali.

The findings show how disparities are linked: illiteracy limits health outcomes and political awareness, while poor health limits women's ability to participate in politics and education. Without political agency, women cannot advocate for improvements in healthcare and education. Therefore, to address gender disparity, multi-sectoral, integrated programs are required.

6.2 Policy Recommendations

Based on the analysis, several recommendations emerge:

1. Education Reforms

- **Expand Girls' Schools** :In remote areas, expand the number of middle and high schools for girls while making sure that post-primary educational possibilities do not diminish.
- **Recruit Female Teachers** :In order to draw and keep female teachers in Swabi, particularly in remote areas, offer incentives like housing, transportation, and increased pay.

- **Community Engagement** To emphasize the value of girls' education, launch awareness campaigns with parents and local authorities. Assure safe school environments to allay worries about safety and honor.
- **Scholarship Programs** To lower dropout rates, provide targeted stipends for girls in secondary and higher education, modeling this after successful models in Bangladesh.

2. Health Reforms

- **Increase Female Health Professionals:** Increase the number of female physicians, nurses, and midwives trained and assigned to rural health centers.
- **Maternal Health Programs:** By assisting woman health workers and trained midwives, community-based maternal health care can be strengthened.
- **Subsidized Healthcare :** To lower financial obstacles, offer free or heavily discounted maternity and pediatric healthcare services.
- **Improve Transportation:** Provide remote pregnant women with emergency transport services to guarantee prompt access to medical facilities.

3. Political Participation

- **Facilitate CNIC Registration:** In remote areas, NADRA should run mobile registration drives to make sure women get identity cards, which are necessary to cast a ballot.
- **Enforce Electoral Laws:** Laws prohibiting collective bans on women's voting must be strictly enforced by the Election Commission. It is important to make polling places more accessible and gender-neutral.
- **Strengthen Local Representation:** By giving them tools to improve their agency and leadership training, you can empower women elected to local government and reserved seats.

4. Socio-Economic Empowerment

- **Property Rights Enforcement:** As required by Pakistani and Islamic law, strengthen the procedures to guarantee that women inherit property. Women should be assisted by legal aid providers when they seek inheritance claims.
- **Microfinance and Credit:** Increase women's access to microfinance programs while making sure they maintain control over the money instead of male family members.
- **Skill Development Programs:** To increase job diversity, offer women vocational training in fields including handicrafts, IT, and tailoring.
- **Women's Cooperatives:** To increase collective bargaining power, encourage the formation of women-led cooperatives in small companies and agriculture.

Cultural Change and Awareness

- **Engage Religious Leaders:** Work together with regional imams and religious experts to highlight Islamic values of equality and education while opposing cultural customs that limit women's rights.
- **Role Models and Media Campaigns:** In order to motivate communities and legitimize women's involvement in public life, media campaigns should highlight accomplished women from Pakistan and KP.
- **Youth Engagement:** Since generational change is necessary for long-term reform, include both young men and women in awareness campaigns to advance gender equality.

6.3 Pathways to Change

It will need a combination of institutional action, policy reform, and cultural shifts to achieve gender equality in Swabi. Local communities, NGOs, and civil society organizations must all be actively involved, even while government initiatives are crucial. International organizations can help by sharing successful examples from other South Asian contexts and providing funds for health and education initiatives.

Challenging patriarchal conventions that keep women in the private sphere is essential to long-term reform. The key to this change will be education, especially for boys and girls. Women will be in a better position to bargain for their rights in families and communities as more of them acquire political awareness, healthcare access, and education.

6.4 Final Reflection

The Swabi case serves as an example of how gender inequality still exists in Pakistan at the district level. Women are still excluded from politics, healthcare, education, and the economy due to structural and cultural impediments, even in the face of governmental promises and infrastructure advancements. In order to address these discrepancies, it is necessary to change the societal norms that uphold patriarchy in addition to increasing opportunities.

In Swabi, empowering women is essential to sustainable development and goes beyond equity. The progress of a society is impossible if half of its members are not allowed to participate fully. Pakistan may make a significant move toward a more equitable and affluent future by giving gender equality top priority in governance, healthcare, and education.

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