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Socio-cultural barriers that impact women's political participation in

Gilgit Baltistan

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Abstract

An essential component of democratic societies is women's political engagement, which reflects the diversity and equality of a country's decision-making processes. In 2009, Gilgit Baltistan received authority to establish its legislative assembly. Three periods of elections have passed, and not one of them saw the election of a female representative for a general seat. The only female representatives who have made their way into the assembly have been appointed to the six female assembly seats that have been reserved for women. Also, the gender gap in registered voters in Gilgit increased from 7 to 9 percent in 2020. In recent years, female education in Gilgit Baltistan has seen a boost. In this thriving educational region, the underrepresentation of women in politics is concerning. Therefore, the focus of this study is to investigate the social and cultural barriers that limit women from participating in the field of politics along with the facilitators that pave their way. Qualitative research methodology is utilized. Nine in-depth interviews were conducted with past and present female electoral members of Gilgit Baltistan who were sampled purposively. Data is analyzed using thematic analysis. Major thematic findings of the study highlight gender discrimination, economic limitations, and structural issues as the main barriers faced by female politicians. The political party and one's family were considered as sources of support. The findings emphasize the need for increased participation of women in politics in the province and the preparation of female political role models for the women of Gilgit Baltistan.

Introduction

Female involvement in politics is a fundamental pillar of every democratic society. It serves as a demonstration of the equality and diversity of a country's decision-making process. However, in an area named Gilgit Baltistan, which is renowned because of its rich traditional heritage as well as societies with multiculturalism (Sökefeld, 2014) the political landscape allows a different picture. Despite considerable progress in various sectors, such as education and employment, women remain significantly underrepresented in the political sphere (Uhlener, 2015; Pande & Ford, 2012).

Gilgit Baltistan's unique context with high literacy among females demands a nuanced examination of the challenges that women face when attempting to enter the political arena. The prevalence of male dominance in this field underscores the need to unravel the complexities that perpetuate this disparity. This study, therefore, aims to comprehensively examine these barriers. By understanding the multifaceted nature of these impediments, we can lay the groundwork for informed and targeted interventions, as well as policy changes that are essential for promoting greater gender equity.

This research is not simply an exploration of the challenges but also a mission to identify potential opportunities. It seeks to uncover ways to pull down these barriers and develop an environment where women's voices and perspectives can flourish in the political discourse of Gilgit Baltistan. By shedding light on both the obstacles and the prospects for change, this study hopes to inspire a transformation that will enable women to play a full and meaningful role in shaping the political destiny of this region.

This research represents a critical step toward realizing the democratic principles of inclusivity and diversity in Gilgit Baltistan. It is a request for action, an appeal for change, and a commitment to promoting a society where women's participation in politics is not only possible but also encouraged and celebrated. Ultimately, it is a demonstration of the belief that a truly democratic society is one where every voice, regardless of gender, can contribute to the method of determining choices.

Research Objective

To understand the perspectives of women electoral candidates on the barriers and enablers of political participation in Gilgit Baltistan.

Research Questions

1. What are the barriers that hinder women's participation in politics as electoral representatives?
2. What are the expectations of the societies from females as politicians?
3. How willing are females to challenge the cultural norms and traditions to step their feet into politics?
4. Which facilitators play a role in supporting women electoral candidates in running for office?

Significance of Research

According to (Khan & Naqvi 2018), there have been three phases of elections since GB formed its own legislative assembly there hasn't been a single female candidate elected for a general seat. In addition, according to the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) (2020), the male versus female disparity among Gilgit's registered voters grew from 7% to 9%. The minority

of women in politics is concerning in this dynamic academic area. In this regard, the goal of this study is to investigate the cultural and social limitations that hinder women from joining the political sphere. By being aware of these barriers, we may make policy adjustments and provide a foundation for knowledgeable measures that advance equality between the sexes and allow women to take an active role in shaping Gilgit Baltistan's political future.

Operationalization of key research terms

Political Participation

Political participation refers to the active involvement of individuals or groups in the political process, including activities like voting, activism, volunteering, and running for office (Conway, 2001). It's essential for democracy, allowing people to influence government decisions and policies. (Uhlener, 2015). In the present study, political participation would be strictly limited to “running for office” or “being an elected representative”.

Barriers

Hurdles are defined as limitations or worries that develop from dissimilarities in social & cultural factors and can make it more difficult to comprehend and communicate, relationships among people or organizations of diverse experiences (Asante & Attom, 2022).

Literature Review

From ancient Greece, where the concept of democracy originated, to the modern era, women's political participation has been hindered by deeply rooted norms and structures. Even as societies have changed, these historical biases have persisted, making it challenging for women to break free from the limits of their traditional roles and access political power (Robinson, 2008). It's evident from historical and contemporary perspectives that women have often faced exclusion and challenges when it comes to political participation (Cheema et al., 2019). This exclusion can be attributed to a complex interplay of structural, functional, and personal factors, which vary across different societies and cultures. Despite the variation of these factors, there are predominant issues that contribute to women's limited political participation, irrespective of specific national or local contexts. One significant aspect is the broader framework of national and international politics and the development of liberal democracy. While democracy is intended to represent the will of the people and ensure equal participation, women have historically been underrepresented and marginalized within these systems (Kassa, 2015; Kelly 2009; Rauf, 2022). This can be traced back to traditional gender roles and societal norms that have spread male dominance in political spheres.

Moreover, the study conducted by Bari (2005) emphasizes that; the public-private separation has played a critical role in excluding women from politics, particularly in open-minded democracies. Historically, women were limited to the private sphere, often associated with domestic roles and responsibilities. This separation between public and private realms limited their opportunities to engage in political activities, contributing to their exclusion from citizenship rights and decision-making processes.

The decision for a woman to step into the empire of politics is a formidable one, with complexities. It demands overcoming internal hurdles before she can even embark on the journey. Once determined, she must then navigate the challenge of preparing her family, including her husband and children, for the path she is embarking upon. These initial challenges, however, are merely the beginning. As she takes the bold step to seek political participation in these domestic obstacles, she encounters opposition from male candidates who produce various gossip to dull her reputation. Even after overcoming these hardships and officially applying for submission, her name often encounters unwillingness from party leaders who fear losing a contested seat (Choudhary, 2018).

There are several obstacles to women's participation in politics such as; illiteracy, work and family, lack of political networks, private-public divide, lack of financial support, and societal and cultural norms. Laura Grenfell (2004) addresses how women are treated in the public, political, and cultural sectors of the Afghan community. She notes that although women didn't have a particularly important role in Afghan society, women spoke loudly and contributed to the nation's advancement and rehabilitation. In the most recent presidential election, Palwasha Kakar (2014), a social activist, promoted Afghan women to run for office. To preserve and defend the rights of women, she also tried to involve traditional and cultural officials. Kakar's conclusion essentially suggests that by forging partnerships with religious leaders and working collaboratively with them, there is a higher likelihood of making meaningful progress in the struggle to improve and protect the rights of women in Afghanistan. This approach recognizes the importance of respecting and leveraging cultural and religious norms to effect positive change for women, thereby promoting a more inclusive and sustainable path toward gender equality and women's empowerment in Afghan society.

Oxfam's (2011) short report, explains the Afghan women's situation during the rule of the Taliban. She highlights laws and approaches that protect females from discrimination when it comes to the socio-political field as they limit the basic freedoms they have as citizens of a country (Ibrahim, 2014).

Female political participation in Pakistan

When Benazir Bhutto – led power in (1993–96), not her first but was her second time in history to take the power in hand. She could act on her goals again openly with strong support for women's rights, as seen by her remarks and her political scheme. Nevertheless, there was not enough desire or perhaps enough people in her government to address the change of discrimination (Khan & Naqvi, 2018). On the other hand, there was not enough desire or perhaps enough people in her government to address the change of discrimination. rules from Zia's time that are unreasonable to women. The three previous UN Conferences that took place in an international setting preserved Bhutto. Throughout her term in office, she joined CEDAW, dedicated Pakistan to participating in these platforms, and led representatives from Pakistan to each of them. During this time, women were neglected in political office and the government, and there were no seats for them However, since there was strong political will behind these global conferences, government officials actively promoted their objectives (Khan & Naqvi, 2018).

The third significant period for women's politics in Pakistan (2008) was established on three primary policies that were added under the government of Musharraf and the controlled democracy that followed. These areas included the restoration and expansion of reserved seats for women in all elected bodies, adjustments and renovation as well as certain religions the of appointed positions in all elected organizations for women, and establishment of the National Commission the Position of Women. The time of glory was led during free and fair voting that

resulted in the regaining of complete civilian authority, and an opposition government with an intense devotion to the equality of women took leadership. (Khan & Naqvi, 2018). During this period of transitional democracy, ongoing women's civil society activism was matched by the strong showing of women's representation in legislative assemblies. Women formed the first-ever Parliamentary Women's Assembly in the National Assembly, which helped the legislative reform agenda to gain steps, addressing both doctrinal and non-doctrinal reforms in equal measure. Although both donor support and high-level political commitment waned during the next government's tenure (2013–18), devolution allowed for provinces to pursue their legislative reform, and political backing at the provincial level pushed for progress. The development of Provincial Commissions on the Status of Women during this period gave further support to policy reform, in some contexts supporting or replacing the role of encouragement NGOs (Khan & Naqvi, 2018)

Kazemi (2022) mentions that, in recent years, the topic of women's political engagement has gained international attention, and Pakistan is no exception. Since Pakistan's independence, party leaders have regularly found it difficult to motivate female political participation. To ensure that women have political suffrage, the Pakistani government has implemented several reforms over time. As part of these reforms, women were given 17% of the reserved seats in parliament, a 33% quota in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's local administration, and new rules were passed to prevent harassment of women (Bilal & Ahmad, 2018). To ensure the empowerment of women, all of these reforms are being put into place at different times. Political parties as institutions are constructed on a male-controlled structure that forbids women from formally participating in politics. The social and political climate that Pakistani women experience within political parties is unsupportive, and this has a direct impact on the decision-making of party leaders when it comes

to choosing possible candidates for party positions. The researchers also emphasize the significant influence that traditions, gender norms, and religious beliefs have on women's spaces, social roles, prospects for further education, and access to jobs and legal protections. These qualities may prevent women from entering politics.

Gaps Identified that the present study would address

This study explores the gap of such politically oriented studies in the areas of communities that reside in Northern Pakistan. Minorities living in Gilgit Baltistan and Hunza are often excluded from the political regimes and active participation, the situations further get worse when it comes to women's participation in politics (Ahmed et al., 2023; Mehmood, 2020). Moreover, no such study has been done on the concerned geographical area, especially that is related to women and their political activities. This study aims to fill this gap and contribute to the knowledge gap and bring awareness as well as provide the elaborated situation of women's political participation so that future possibilities may open for them.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural Theory

A diverse societal claim revolves around the time limitations created by female-typical responsibilities as mothers and wives, as well as the consistent lack of domestic support for women who seek employment outside the home, much less enter public office.

Due to societal conventions and expectations regarding roles, women have been forced into household responsibilities or certain professions like employees secretaries, nurses, or educators. The majority of women were unable to gain the knowledge and assets required to run successfully for public office due to limitations in society and a lack of educational and job opportunities.

Voters must be willing to support women candidates even if women may possess the qualifications and work experience needed to hold office. Helpful public attitudes are also important. Gaining those abilities necessary for a profession in politics through participation in nonpolitical occupations is beneficial (Conway, 2001).

Methodology

Research Design

For this study, I have chosen a qualitative research design, primarily relying on semi-structured interviews. Interviews with some structure offer the flexibility to explore participants' perspectives and experiences while allowing for a degree of standardization in the interview process. A semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A) was used with open-ended questions to encourage in-depth responses from participants, enabling me to gain a comprehensive understanding of their views on women's political participation in Gilgit Baltistan.

Sampling Design

For this study on political participation, I focused on women who have actively engaged in politics by running for political office and later served as members of the assembly. Both past and present female members of the assembly were sampled.

Exclusion Criteria

Women who are not members of the assembly were not considered in this study. Political participation was operationalized as “being an electoral representative” only and therefore other forms of political participation were excluded.

Inclusion Criteria

Women who are currently part of the assembly and those who were members of the previous assembly were included in the research.

Research Site(s)

This study was conducted in Gilgit Baltistan which is the hometown of the researcher. Data was collected in the offices held by the female politicians.

Ethical Considerations

In this research, obtaining the informed consent of the candidates was a fundamental ethical requirement. Before conducting interviews, candidates were approached and provided with particulars concerning the goal of the study, methodology, and potential implications. It was emphasized that their participation is entirely voluntary.

Furthermore, to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the candidates, their identities were kept strictly confidential.

Data Collection

The geographical focus of this research will encompass two districts of Gilgit Baltistan: District Hunza and District Gilgit.

Data Analysis

In this study, I employed a thematic approach for data analysis. Thematic analysis includes finding, evaluating, and expressing findings in an organized manner recurring patterns or points in the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interviews were transcribed and coded, allowing themes and patterns to emerge from the participants' responses.

Findings

Theme 1: The Value of Women's Involvement in Politics

Recognizing Women's Concerns

Some participants talked about troubles they were having that they hadn't discussed with men directly because they felt uncomfortable talking about their concerns.

Whatever the platform, women can be represented. Being personally involved in them, women possess a deeper understanding of women's concerns than anyone else. (Participant 1)

To be successful, female leaders need to be present in various fields and capable of taking on a variety of initiatives. This was mentioned by one of the participants who said, "We could propose projects for women and easily secure funds." (Participant 5)

Women need to enter politics because once they are, they can speak up for their rights and raise concerns that affect them more easily and without delay.

"Because a woman is incapable of resolving her issues, women must enter politics. She will find it simpler to deal with her problems if she is in a party." Participant 6

One participant discussed the political system in the assembly, stating that because males predominate in the legislature and female members have reserved seats, so male members do not behave like engaged party members. Male participants disregarded women's contributions to society and their involvement in politics.

"Women's hard work is disregarded when their voices are not heard. For this reason, it is crucial that women participate in active politics." Participant # 7

According to some participants, women's participation is crucial because they carry out their roles more skillfully than male participants. Male members simply disregarded women's issues because they didn't want female politicians in that position. They are less concerned with women's issues. Our community will advance when female politicians act on public issues.

"Their participation in politics is even more crucial for them to effectively contribute to the growth of our community as well." Participant # 3

Participation and Promotion

During the interview, a participant mentioned that women are eligible to compete in general elections in addition to reserved seats and that they can win at least five seats. Women have the power to oppose the male-dominated culture, and they can run for office from diverse districts if our policy structure is changed.

“Except for the allocated seats, at least five or six women may run in the general elections. Gilgit-Baltistan must therefore implement this policy for our women to be able to vote and for there to be a major change if ten women from ten districts run for office.” Participant # 3

According to one respondent, there will be no progress or things to happen if women's representation is ignored in society or on another platform because women are capable of making wise decisions and playing an authentic role in all areas of life, including assembly, handling public issues, and making decisions as mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law.

"No society can advance effectively without the representation and participation of women. Women's roles are vital in forming society as a whole." Participant # 2

Taking on Male Dominance

There is a male supremacy structure in assemblies, according to an active party member. Men have all the power together. They believe that women have no place in politics and only men do. Their attitude is that women in politics are unworthy of respect. Problems including mistreatment, bullying, and abuse, as well as demands made in an improper manner, hinder the abilities and achievements of women in politics.

“Whether in the parliament, the assembly, or any other area in Gilgit Baltistan, men continue to hold positions of authority and dominate the group. Women are frequently taught that they are incapable of performing specific tasks or working.” Participant #3

Because men predominate in every community, there is no acceptance of women in politics, according to a respondent. They do not express any favorable opinions about women entering the

political arena. Women's engagement is restricted since they have a poor status and are unable to work together.

“Women's participation would never be guaranteed by a change that our male-dominated culture would gladly embrace.” Participant # 3

Some participants, who are currently serving or were serving in the parliament, stated that Gilgit-Baltistan does not accept women in leadership roles. This is the primary issue that affects women in general. We are held in the highest regard by the men who rule our society. Working with women in senior positions is not possible.

"It is evident that women are not accepted in leadership roles in our society, which is dominated by men." Participant # 4

Equality and Representation

Female representation holds great significance in all roles and workplaces. A respondent related a brief account of her political experience, stating that she had spoken up in the assembly for women's rights and was later treated disrespectfully by the parliament for her advocacy of those rights. Because the male participants in the group did not acknowledge women's rights and opportunities, nothing will be done to advance women's rights or equalize their opportunities while there is no female representative in the assembly.

“It’s critical that women are represented. If there are no women present, it resembles a restaurant's women's area, but as soon as someone else walks in, attention is drawn to them. Since all of those items and all of the jobs are for men and there won't be anything for women, she can move towards women's empowerment if representation is lacking in their offices.” Participant # 1

One of the respondents expressed concern about how things would be done well and how progress be made in a location where half of the population ignores the situation. Women are required to be present in parliamentary institutions, particularly as party members or candidates. Women perform better than males in assembly line work.

"No task in any sector can be done more effectively if we disregard half of the population. Women's involvement is a decision-making institution, particularly in politics. Decisions must be made by your assembly.” Participant # 4

Regarding Gilgit-Baltistan, a participant stated that since elections are held at the local government level, there are reserved seats for women who are not on the elected base. There are just 5% of female members considered in the assembly. Women in this system do not have the same opportunities.

“Five percent of women are taken into consideration when tickets are given out for general elections. That being said, one thing has changed significantly over time in our society.” Participant # 1

A participant mentioned that, although they are interested in opportunities in the political arena.

They encourage their daughters to pursue careers in politics.

“Prioritizing daughters' values and making sure that their relevance is acknowledged are vital. They are too important to be disregarded. Rather, all areas should be explored by them, and they should be assisted in doing so.” Participant # 2

There are still limitations on women's access to education and independence in my community, according to a very young participant who is involved in politics. Because of the predominantly conservative and religious mindset of the inhabitants in this area, women are still neglected.

“Men seem to pay less attention because, quite plainly, this is a male-dominated society, particularly when we consider Gilgit, which is a civilization heavily influenced by men. Certain neighborhoods are so archaic that women are hardly heard at all.” Participant # 1

Numerous participants in the conversation expressed that there are still unfavorable perceptions regarding women's involvement in politics. Some parents want their daughters to pursue interests in other industries. Their women weren't allowed to enter politics.

“In a society where men predominate, politics is not seen favorably, especially by women. This is not a field that is viewed favorably because most families prefer their girls to become teachers or doctors.” Participant # 1

Respondents mentioned that, because local government plays a different role in our region than it does in other assemblies, women have less chance in our legislative system. Women should have equal rights and opportunities when it comes to crafting policy.

“To guarantee women's equal opportunities, legislative efforts are required.” Participant # 5

Theme 2: Obstacles Female Politicians Facing

Social Pressure

A few respondents relate their experiences of facing numerous challenges when entering the political arena. The public does not desire more women in elected office. A family's daughter or sister in politics puts pressure on the entire family in any given circle.

"It has a greater impact on you and affects me more when you are criticized, the target of personal attacks, or even threatened with death." Participant # 1

A participant stated that while people in society have diverse mindsets, their perceptions also differ, such as the belief that women should not serve in politics. Some communities still adhere to traditional beliefs and have not educated their daughters or sisters. In today's globalized society, parents are beginning to educate their daughters. People are accepting of women in politics, and concepts are changing.

"I've arrived in this field. I'm under pressure at home. I have two kids and am married. I'm under pressure at home. How is this going to happen if you are heading there? Women are under pressure. You can pursue any field if you possess the courage to withstand pressure. Women's participation in public affairs has been limited by societal conventions since they are weak themselves and cannot withstand pressure. But as knowledge and education have grown, women are now progressively making their way into politics. This change is encouraging, and more women will vote in the future." (Participant #4)

Gender Discrimination

A participant stated that women's rights in politics are limited. It is not as valuable as the men. Women are not uplifting; they do not have equal access to opportunities in parliament. Stereotype bias prevents women from entering politics and doesn't offer them the opportunity to do so.

"Women are treated unfairly and are occasionally expected to just back male candidates. Women's achievements are underappreciated despite our best attempts." Participant #5

As said by the participant, equality is the most significant factor. How we contribute to society is affected when there is inequality. What makes a society function well? It is not progressing that this situation is still occurring in certain regions.

“Gender discrimination is a genuine thing, and there is a dearth of equality. In particular, it's abundant in several places.” (Participant 1)

Men control both the assembly and the parliamentary process because they are more dominant. Women are unable to participate fully in decision-making. Many participants expressed similar concerns.

“Whether in the parliament, the assembly, or any other area in Gilgit Baltistan, men continue to hold positions of authority and dominate the group. Women are frequently taught that they are incapable of performing specific tasks or working.” Participant # 3

Economic limitations

Due to their reliance on family, our women are still not financially independent. Similar to those women who, due to male rule, worked but did not spend their money without their husband's or another's consent. They lack the resources to take part in the election on their own, including money.

“Due to their lack of financial resources, women are unable to vote and lack financial freedom. Secondly, women are not allowed to run for office in our patriarchal society. Men have not collaborated with women thus far.” Participant # 4

Women don't have enough money to run for office, participants claimed. Due to the various procedures involved in running an election, such as visiting remote areas, it costs a lot of money to participate. A lot of money is needed to cover these costs, such as various meetings to inspire individuals.

"Money is required for you. You require a large sum of money. Our women lack the financial resources to support their political initiatives. They will need to rely on a parent, a husband, a guy, or another income source." Participant # 7

Structural Issues

Since Gilgit Baltistan's election system is governed by the federal government, the winner there also controls the Gilgit administration. Different parties have different problems because of this framework. The participant was dissatisfied with this system.

"Unfortunately, elections in Gilgit-Baltistan are conducted under a federal system. Therefore, the government in question is automatically formed at the federal level by whichever administration takes over. As a result, Gilgit-Baltistan's government is modeled after the federal party's government." Participant # 3

The main issue is that, as the participant noted throughout the conversation, Gilgit-Baltistan does not have the status of a province. Perhaps we could compete for our area's improvement if there is an authentic mechanism in place for this location. After that, we can base policy decisions on the needs of the region.

"This regrettable circumstance results in the continued practice of selectively selecting individuals from various groups based on their alignment with the federal government." Perhaps we could have capable people with vision who could step forward and create plans and programs for the improvement of Gilgit-Baltistan if elections were held separately for the region." Participant # 3

According to a party member, who was the first female candidate in Gilgit Baltistan's general election, although she was participating properly, she was unhappy with the procedure and the policy because there were only a few designated seats for women in the assembly. Assembling this system is not conducive. This policy should have been changed by our legislators to increase the percentage of seats set aside for women.

"It is a historical fact that, up to this point, no one from Gilgit Baltistan has ever taken part in a general election. And ever since I made a legal entry into politics, I have been running for general office. Regrettably, there are instances in which women are assigned to reserved seats without their will, and preferred candidates are chosen to fill these seats rather than competent female candidates who could successfully serve their communities. This practice erodes democracy's

fundamental principles and denies competent women the chance to fully engage in and contribute to decision-making processes.” Participant # 3

Theme 3: Techniques to Boost Female Engagement

Education and Awareness

According to one participant, our norms, beliefs, and habits differ from those of other societies. People with traditional mindsets don't react to or believe in the job done by women. As a result, this idea undermines women's aptitude. Women's education and political consciousness are essential to this success so that they can run for office or take on other roles, including electoral participation.

“Social conventions have limited the participation of women in public life. But as knowledge and education have grown, women are now progressively making their way into politics. This change is encouraging, and more women will vote in the future.” Participant # 4

One respondent expressed admiration for her civic activity and suggested that their representative in the assembly arrange several sessions. Additionally, gathers political data. The political path will become accessible to our youngsters when female candidates are fully engaged in the political process. The respondent stated that, due to a lack of awareness, she was unaware of the steps and procedures of the rules when she worked in the education department.

"We have been holding seminars and conferences on political awareness and issues linked to the current election, and we will keep hosting these kinds of activities. Additionally, we host forums like the "Jazba Forum," in which our women take an active part. Additionally, elections will soon take place, especially local municipal elections.” Participant # 3

Learning the Political Process

One of the respondents stated that political education is essential for politicians because, during sessions or seminars, they address various subjects or engage in public discourse. As such,

political education is deemed necessary for politicians. Women should be required to vote in local elections. Union council participation is crucial for participation in national elections as well. Political education needs to begin in the learning environment. Following that, our young people can enter politics, explain its significance to them, and begin basic political education.

"Women will stand up in municipal elections. Women do not always reach the provincial level. The union council is open to women. In schools and universities, women are welcome to join unions. Election participation is allowed for women. This is a grassroots conflict. That is a procedure. It could serve as your training, in a sense. After joining a student union, you can run for union councils. After that, you compete at the provincial level." Participant # 7

Allocated quotas

One of the respondents stated that each party should have equal representation of women in our assembly. Only 5% of seats are reserved for reservists, which is very low, and each party should allocate 5% of seats in general elections. As long as these commitments are upheld in the assembly, our political system will function well.

"All political parties were required to provide women in their respective parties with five percent of the tickets for general seats." Hence, this is still a small percentage—just 5%. That ought to be raised, I believe." Participant # 2

One of the participants expressed a desire to make an effort to support women's rights so that there should be equal representation for men and women in the assembly. Women's rights should be granted to them, and their representation is also crucial.

"Women should be given a position in all parties, including local decision-making bodies, and efforts should be taken to make sure that your voice is heard. Similarly, I would like to see a 50–50% representation of women in all parties, and I would do all in my power to make that happen." Participant # 2

Sensitizing Men

Men must understand the importance of women's engagement in politics. The understanding that arises from organizing various seminars and conferences causes a natural shift in thinking.

“People need to be aware that women can work too if you raise general awareness and demonstrate to them that a woman is capable of working and doing a decent job. They are capable of doing well. They possess the ability to make wise choices. They can function well. There should be opportunities for us, in my opinion. We must, however, start this trend. This is still a developing trend.” Participant # 4

Participants highlighted that men must also be taught to accept the presence of proactive female politicians who take on public challenges and skillfully resolve them because women make good laws and decisions.

"Sensitizing men and empowering women." It is of utmost importance. Other than that, women can play a significant role in the future if political awareness is raised at all levels and among many stakeholders to push women forward. What is possible and what is not possible? What other outcomes are possible? We can use love a little in our patriarchal, or man-dominated, culture if we so choose. This is how you can raise men's awareness.” Participant #5

A participant mentioned that they host workshops in several parts of Gilgit-Baltistan. In one week, a team should be assigned to sensitize men about what is better to do and how to do things in a better way. When women's demands are met for the benefit of both genders, negative perceptions will inevitably change.

“In actuality, a significant role has been played in the development of Gilgit-Baltistan. Gender-sensitive workshops have been conducted everywhere. It is not what they have done for our people. I propose that they hold a session to raise awareness among guys as well.” Participant #5

Ensuring law enforcement for gender equality within politics

Due to the lack of acceptance of women with leadership abilities in our male-dominated culture, women have empowered themselves and gained confidence at every level. A strong policy and legislation should be created for all genders in assemblies. Wherein the disparity in assembly does

not catch up. Women should have more rights and a higher percentage of the population. The participant said, "We can run in the general election if they agree because our politicians didn't want women to be in politics. This made me laugh when they discussed tickets for general seats. Another participant mentioned.

“Women themselves must be empowered in order to boost women's engagement. Any shift of this kind would be resisted by our male-dominated culture. One of the most important things you can do to guarantee women's involvement is to pass legislation that will apply to all parties and require that women receive at least 5% of the tickets. In Gilgit-Baltistan, this policy must also be upheld, even if it isn't currently in effect there.” Participant # 3

Female Role Models

Establishing role models in all fields is crucial since individuals are motivated by these models before entering the industry and applying for those positions. An active participant shared a brief account of her political journey, saying,

"Everywhere I go, especially in my area where I visit as often, the children in school say that in the future we want to become you; they don't know my profession even if they don't know my work; they just remember me as a role model. I'm well-known everywhere I go, especially in schools." When asked, "What will you become when you grow up?" they respond by saying my name." Unfortunately, they are unaware of my accomplishments and what I do.!!!" Participant # 1

Women in politics continue to lack awareness and confidence because they are afraid to speak up for their rights and feel uneasy doing so, which leads to instability. The respondent stated that individuals should look up to role models in politics who motivate them to pursue careers in the sector. Promote women's involvement in politics increasingly.

"More women need to be encouraged to pursue this sector because there is a deficiency in awareness. It is important to showcase accomplished women as positive role models.” Participant #5

Theme 4: Significance of Political Education

To prepare Future leaders

Political education should be taught in schools at the grassroots level, as this will promote positive ideas for the future. The participant explained that this means that when we instill a leadership mindset in our kids at an early age, they grow up with it. This is necessary for us to become the best leaders possible and benefit our society as a whole in the future.

“Politics education at the secondary and higher education levels can, in fact, contribute to the rise of knowledgeable and capable grassroots leaders who are able to transform society for the better.”
(Participant #4)

Understanding of Political structure

The majority of the participants emphasized the importance of education stating that nothing is possible without education. Learning is essential since knowledge is derived from education. Despite their lack of education, some politicians have extensive experience in this profession due to their lengthy service. Political education needs to be held accountable.

“My perspective on politics has been widened by education. Our political system has many difficulties, particularly locally, where there are a lot of opaque political groups. Parties with a solid educational background and those without do, in fact, differ significantly from one another. But we also have to recognize and honor those legislators who serve their constituents with a strong commitment to service, even though they may not have received much formal education.”
(Participant #2)

“You need to have a basic understanding of politics to work in the field. So you have a background in this area. You need to be able to manage the adjustments” remarked a participant.

"Political education consists of fundamental knowledge about politics. Experience, I believe, comes next. Your background is very important. Since I wasn't a political worker when we arrived, even though I had completed my master's degree in political science, I mean, I wasn't even affiliated with the party. I simply came here after thinking and studying.” (Participant #4)

To reduce gender discrimination

One participant claimed that gender discrimination in Gilgit is at its most severe. Women are neglected in political spheres. Since youngsters are instructed on the fundamental goals and rights of both genders, we hold grassroots education sessions at educational institutions to lessen this issue.

"In fact, political education at the secondary and higher education levels is crucial. Two important points that I want to highlight are gender equality and gender discrimination. To address these difficulties, there should be regular workshops or awareness initiatives included in the curriculum, ideally once a week. This is significant because these ideas are ingrained in children's minds from an early age as they get older. Teaching political awareness in schools, colleges, and even universities is vital." (Participant #2)

A participant stated that as there are many opportunities for women in this sector, females should have pursued their success in it as well as being safe to do so. Perhaps there has been a mistake made by women in the history of politics, and women's perceptions of politics are not positive, but I disagree. Women have to continue to be strong in their roles; they deserve to have grown up in this industry. Because of the unfairness of our political system, women have not entered the political sphere.

"These days, politics is prominent. Some facts are known. I want to involve the younger generation in this as well. I would particularly like to see more girls enter this industry and make a name for them. They ought to establish themselves and live up to their reputation. To ensure that no one can undermine them, they should prove themselves deserving of this position." (Participant #4)

To solve social issues

As a member of a political party or assembly, members may make decisions regarding various public affairs issues and solve them. They need to be educated in all of these. These days, education is regarded as life's oxygen. Since the public may readily discuss their difficulties, politicians need

soft skills to tackle social issues. To address these issues, they need to be knowledgeable because there are various approaches to solving the main causes of assembly.

"Education is the key to solving the problems in PND, which are public problems. It's as vital to your politics as oxygen is to life. Not only that, but education also teaches you to be merciful, compassionate, and soft-hearted." (Participant #4)

Theme 5: Support Mechanism for Women in Politics

Support from Political structure

Support from the party is critical when a member joins a party. They should be committed to the process of working on public affairs and responsibilities under the leadership, but support from the party is very important because there are different processes in which to travel, meetings, sources of assistance, etc.; all expenses should come from the party. Each party should support their participant in assembly or on another platform. When a member of a party wants to participate in a general election, the party should have to support her to win. They gather the people and motivate them to cast a vote for party members. I hope there will be positive vibes in the future for our youth.

"Support for political endeavors might originate from different places. It frequently depends on how much you adhere to the beliefs and ideals of a specific political party or ideology and how closely you are aligned with them. Your devotion to and stance on the party's leadership and ideology determine how you stand with them, and it has a big impact on how much support you get from other members of that political organization." (Participant #2)

As an example, a participant shared that the PPP is the first party in the region to establish a women's wing. The fact that the PPP is the party that supports women the best surprised the participants. The first in Gilgit to arrange for women to have seats in assemblies was Bhutto. The fact that I am a member of the PPP and that our party is highly supportive on all platforms makes me proud.

“The PPP party is frequently given credit for women's participation as they established the first women's wing. In Gilgit Baltistan, a political wing dedicated to women was founded, and I was proposed for president. After that, in 2016, I was assigned to the position of information secretary for the party's primary mother wing.” (Participant #3)

Support from Family

Family support is crucial in politics because when you have the encouragement of your family, nothing can stop you from succeeding. One participant mentioned how supportive her family had been of her political career.

"My father's influence on my decision to pursue politics has put the entire family in this predicament. My father was the most affected when I entered politics at his request; behind him, the rest of the family, and the Diamer region as a whole offered criticism. (Participant # 1)

One participant mentioned that having the support of every family member gives them an enormous amount of trust in a person like their father, who is always there to stand by them. Thus, a participant's requirement for familial support is vital.

"My father was my pillar of strength. My relatives helped me out; they were quite helpful. I am where I am today because of them. My father and relatives have supported me along the way. (Participant # 1)

Discussion

Women's involvement in politics is fundamental because their presence in this field ensures a more inclusive democratic society. One of the research questions of the study was regarding the barriers that hinder women's participation in politics as an electoral representative. The findings highlight that there is social pressure, economic limitations, gender discrimination, and structural issues within the government. These findings are congruent with Umer and colleagues (2016) who emphasize the role of male dominance in hindering women's empowerment in Balochistan. The same patriarchal pattern is identified by the participants of the present study. Economic dependency, cultural norms, and gender discrimination have been the most prominent hurdles facing women in the political sphere (Begum, 2023). These are the obstacles that our female politicians must overcome. As a few of the participants discussed, the federal government still indirectly influences the hold of political power in GB. These governmental structural issues also influence women's political participation in the region (Begum, 2023; Mehmood, 2020).

The second research question of the study aimed to highlight the expectations of the societies from a female Politician. Many respondents discussed that, as female politicians, there are different expectations imposed on them by different segments of society. The women of the region expect to recognize women's concerns and believe that women's problems should be solved by female politicians. Pakistani female politicians especially those elected on reserved seats do bear the burden of speaking up for women's rights (Dutoya, 2013). As the participants have highlighted, the male counterparts of the female politicians expect them to remain submissive and docile and not take center-stage in the decision-making process. Ahmad and Anwar (2018)

highlight that female political representatives are expected to only play a supporting role for the male political members of the party and feel obliged that they were granted tickets by them.

The third research question of the study was focused on the willingness of women to challenge cultural norms and traditions to step their feet into politics. The findings paint an optimistic picture of female politicians of Gilgit Baltistan determined to break the barriers and move forward to be role models for future generations aspiring to join politics.

Lastly, the study aimed to shed light on the facilitators that play a role in supporting women electoral candidates in running for office. Based on the findings different facilitators have a part in helping female candidates run for public office. Family support has been recognized as an important enabler for women in the Pakistani political landscape and the lack of it has been highlighted as a significant barrier (Hassan & Keyani, 2015). Though few participants of the present study highlighted that adherence to the political party's ideology helps you gather support from within the political party, the literature suggests that the political leadership is hardly supportive of female politicians (Zakar et al., 2018).

The present study highlights the significance of political education for women and the techniques to help boost the political participation of women. Education has been identified as one of the key factors by the participants to improve awareness and political representation. Participants also highlighted the need for sensitizing men to prepare them for a diverse and inclusive political landscape.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to highlight the significance of women's involvement in politics. The study has uncovered several obstacles that women face in this field. To build a more inclusive political environment, it is necessary that these issues be addressed, especially in cultures where men predominate. It is clear that there are still obstacles and difficulties that women must overcome to participate in politics, and these problems require attention. Increased female participation in politics can be facilitated by policies like reserving general seats for women or requiring political parties to provide tickets to female candidates in general elections. In the end, these policies can help create a more inclusive and representative democracy by giving women greater chances to rise to positions of influence and power within the political system.

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Appendix A (Interview Guide)

Demographic Questions:

Age

Education

Marital Status

Political Status

1. How important is women's political participation according to you?
2. Do you think it is important for women to be in assemblies or public offices?
3. Why do you think women don't run for election as much as in GB/ Hunza?
4. What in your opinion can be done to increase female participation in election politics?
5. What challenges did you face in your political journey as a woman?
6. How has education influenced your view about politics?
7. Do you think political education for women is important at secondary and higher education levels?
8. What in your experience have been the sources of support in your political journey?
9. Can you throw some light on your experience of navigating the different stages of the electoral process as a woman?
10. In your experience as a political representative what are some of the things you would want changed in the political structure of Gilgit Baltistan?

Appendix B: Demographic Information

Participants	Age	Education	Marital Status	Political Career Status
Respondent 1	34 years	Journalism	Unmarried	Previous member of the assembly
Respondent 2	28 years	M.A in English	Unmarried	Politically Active in Assembly
Respondent 3	46 years	Intermediate	Married	Active Member of Political Party
Respondent 4	30+ years	Masters Social work	married	Politically Active
Respondent 5	32 years	M.A in English	Married	Politically Active
Respondent 6	50+ years	Unspecified	Married	Politically Active
Respondent 7	45+ years	Political Science	Married	Politically Active in Assembly
Respondent 8	40+ years	Unspecified	Widowed	Politically Active in Assembly
Respondent 9	55+ years	Unspecified	Married	Engaged in political party

Appendix C: Thematic Analysis Table

Themes	Codes	Quotations
The Value of Women's Involvement in Politics	Recognizing Women's Concerns	<p>“Women can be represented on any platform. Women understand women's issues more than anyone else; they know them directly.” (Participant 1)</p> <p>“Their inclusion in politics is even more essential so that they can play an effective role in the development of our community as well. “ (Participant 3)</p> <p>“We could easily secure funds and propose projects for women.” (Participant 5)</p> <p>“Women must come into politics because a woman cannot solve her problems by herself. If she is a part of a party, it will be easier for her to address her issues.” Participant 6</p> <p>“When women's voices are not included, their work is also ignored. That is why it is very important that women be part of active politics.” Participant # 7</p>
	Participation and Promotion	<p>“Without women's representation and participation, no society can progress effectively. The role of women is crucial in shaping the entire society.” Participant # 2</p> <p>at least 5 or 6 women can run in the general elections, besides the reserved seats. Thus, it's necessary to ensure this policy within Gilgit-Baltistan so that if 10 women contest elections from 10 districts, it would bring about significant change and our women could participate in elections Participant # 3</p>
	Taking on Male Dominance	<p>Men hold power and dominate the assembly, this dynamic continues whether it's within the parliament, the assembly, or any field in Gilgit Baltistan. Women are often told that they can't do certain things or that they can't work. Participant # 3</p> <p>Our male-dominated society would never willingly welcome such a change to ensure women's participation, Participant # 3</p> <p>It is clear that in a male-dominated society, our people do not accept women in leadership positions. Participant # 4</p>
	Equality and Representation	<p>Women's representation is very important. If there are no women, it's like a women's section in a restaurant, but when someone else enters, they are immediately noticed. So she can move towards women's empowerment if representation is not there in their offices, so all those things and all the work are for men, and there won't be much for women. Participant # 1</p>

		<p>Giving tickets in general elections; also, five percent of women are considered. So, there is one thing: in our society, there has been quite a difference over time. Participant # 1</p> <p>“It is critical to prioritize the importance of daughters and ensure that their significance is recognized. No one should deny their importance. Instead, they should be encouraged to explore all fields, and they should be supported in doing so.” Participant # 2</p> <p>At least 5 or 6 women can run in the general elections, besides the reserved seats. Thus, it's necessary to ensure this policy within Gilgit-Baltistan so that if 10 women contest elections from 10 districts, it would bring about significant change and our women could participate in elections. Participant # 3</p> <p>If we ignore 50% of the population, then no work can be done in any field in a better way. Especially in politics, women's participation is a decision-making institution. You have to make decisions in your assembly. Participant # 4</p> <p>Legislative efforts are necessary to ensure equal opportunities for women. Participant # 5</p> <p>“Males have less focus because obviously, this is a male-dominated society here, especially when we look at it in the context of Gilgit, which is a very male-dominated society. there are some districts that are so backward that women are greatly marginalized.” Participant # 1</p> <p>a male-dominated society, Politics, especially for women, is not considered positive. Most families want their daughters to become doctors or teachers, so this field is not considered favorable. Participant # 1</p>
<p>Obstacles Female Politicians Facing</p>	<p>Social Pressure</p>	<p>“When you are criticized and subjected to personal attacks or even threats to your life, it has a greater impact on you which affects me more.” Participant # 1</p> <p>I have come to this field. I have pressure from home. I am married, and I have two children. I have pressure from home. If you are going there, how will this happen? There is pressure on women. If you have the courage to bear the pressure, then you can go to any field. If you are weak yourself, you cannot bear any pressure. (Participant # 4) , societal norms have restricted women's involvement in public affairs. However, with increasing education and awareness, women are now gradually entering politics. This shift is promising, and with time, more women will participate in elections.</p> <p>“My family has faced criticism from the beginning that daughters should not be educated; they should be married off early. It means parents have been hearing it since we grew up a bit. When it comes to politics, when I was involved in it, there was so much criticism that it even reached the point of death threats, and the girls from Diamer could not come out like this; there was a lot of criticism, all negative. So I have been facing it since day one since I entered politics. Participant # 2</p>

	<p>Gender Discrimination</p>	<p>“There is a shortage of equality, and gender discrimination really exists. And especially, there is a lot of it in some areas.” (Participant # 1)</p> <p>“Women encounter unequal treatment and are sometimes expected to merely support male candidates. Despite our efforts, women's contributions are undervalued.” Participant # 5</p> <p>“Men hold power and dominate the assembly, this dynamic continues whether it's within the parliament, the assembly, or any field in Gilgit Baltistan. Women are often told that they can't do certain things or that they can't work.” Participant # 3</p>
	<p>economic limitations</p>	<p>Women do not have financial independence; they cannot participate in elections because they do not have money. Secondly, our male-dominated society does not accept women participating in elections. So far, men have not cooperated with women. Participant # 4</p> <p>“You need finances. You need a lot of money. Our women are not financially strong enough to fund their election campaigns. They will have to rely on a man, a husband, a father, or some other source of money.” Participant # 7</p>
	<p>Structural Issues</p>	<p>“Our misfortune is that elections for Gilgit-Baltistan are held under a federal arrangement. So, whichever government comes into power at the federal level, they automatically form the government there. Consequently, the government in Gilgit-Baltistan is formed based on the federal party's government.” Participant # 3</p> <p>This unfortunate situation leads to the same old practice where they pick and choose people from here and there if it aligns with the federal government. If elections were held independently for Gilgit-Baltistan, then perhaps we could have competent individuals with a vision who could come forward and formulate policies and plans for the betterment of Gilgit-Baltistan.” Participant # 3</p> <p>“It is a historical fact that no one from Gilgit Baltistan has ever participated in a general election until today. And since I entered politics in a proper manner, I have been contesting in general elections since then. It is unfortunate that sometimes women are placed on reserved seats without their own desire or choice, and preferred individuals are selected for these reserved seats instead of considering capable women who could effectively represent their constituencies. This practice undermines the true essence of democracy and deprives qualified women of the opportunity to actively participate and contribute to decision-making processes.” Participant # 3</p>
<p>Techniques to Boost Female Engagement</p>	<p>Education and Awareness</p>	<p>Societal norms have restricted women's involvement in public affairs. However, with increasing education and awareness, women are now gradually entering politics. This shift is promising, and with time, more women will participate in elections. Participant # 4</p> <p>“We continue to organize such sessions and have been conducting seminars and conferences regarding political awareness and recent election-related matters. We are also organizing forums like the 'Jazba Forum,' where our women actively participate. And now, upcoming elections will be held, particularly regarding local municipal elections.” Participant # 3</p>
	<p>Learning Political Process</p>	<p>“When elections are held at the local level, women will come forward. It is not necessary that women come to the provincial level. Women can come to the union</p>

		council. Women can participate in the unions held in schools and colleges. Women can participate in the elections. This is a grassroots struggle. It is a process. In a way, it can be your training. When you become a part of the unions at the student level, then you contest in the union councils. Then you contest at the provincial level.”Participant # 7
	Allocated quotas	It was ensured that all political parties allocate 5% of their general seats' tickets to women within their respective parties. So, this is only 5%, which is still low. I understand that it should be increased. Participant # 2 “In all parties, including even the local decision-making bodies, women should be given a position, and efforts should be made to ensure that your voice is heard. Similarly, within all parties, my complete effort and desire would be to achieve a 50–50% representation of women.” Participant # 2
	Sensitizing Men	“If you spread a general awareness, if you tell people that a woman can work and do a good job, then people need to be aware that women can work too. They can do a good job. They can make good decisions. They can work in a good way. I think there will be opportunities for us. But we need to set this trend. This trend has not been set yet.” Participant # 4 “Empowering women and sensitizing men. It is very important. Other than that, for political awareness at different levels, with different stakeholders, to bring women forward, they can play a big role in the future. What can happen and what cannot happen? What else can happen? In our patriarchal society or man-dominating society, if we want, we can do a little with love. Through this, you can make people aware. You can make men aware.” Participant # 5 “Actually, in the development of Gilgit-Baltistan, there has been a big role. They have done gender-sensitive workshops everywhere. They have not done it for our people. I suggest that they do a workshop to sensitize men as well.” Participant # 5
	Ensuring Law enforcement for gender equality within politics	“To increase women's participation, women themselves need to be empowered. Our male-dominated society would never willingly welcome such a change. To ensure women's participation, one crucial aspect is to enact a law applicable to all parties, mandating that at least 5% of tickets must be given to women. This policy, although not enforced in Gilgit-Baltistan yet, needs to be ensured there as well.” Participant # 3 “At least 5 or 6 women can run in the general elections, besides the reserved seats. Thus, it's necessary to ensure this policy within Gilgit-Baltistan so that if 10 women contest elections from 10 districts, it would bring about significant change and our women could participate in elections.” Participant # 3
	Female Role Models	“There is a lack of awareness, and there is a need to encourage more women to enter this field. They should be shown successful women as role models with good examples.” Participant # 5 “Wherever I go, many people recognize me, especially in schools. They are asked, What will you become when you grow up?, and they reply, Surriya Zaman. But they don't know what I do or what I have achieved. !!!!!!!” Participant # 1
Significance of Political Education	To prepare Future leaders	“Education about politics at higher and secondary levels can indeed lead to the emergence of grassroots leaders who are well-informed and empowered to bring about positive change in society.” (Participant # 4)

	Understanding of Political structure	<p>“Education has broadened my perspective on politics. We see numerous challenges in our politics, especially at the local level, where many political parties lack transparency and accountability. Indeed, there is a notable difference between parties with a strong educational background and those without. However, we must also acknowledge and respect those representatives who may not have had extensive formal education but are still dedicated to serving their constituents “(Participant # 2).</p> <p>“Political education, the basic things you know about politics. After that, I think, experience. Your experience matters a lot. Because when we came here, I had done my Masters in Political Science, but I was not a political worker. I mean, I had no affiliation with the political party. I just thought, studied, and came here.” (Participant # 4)</p>
	To reduce gender discrimination	<p>“It is indeed essential to have political education at the higher and secondary levels. I would like to emphasize two key aspects: gender discrimination and gender equality. There should be regular sessions or awareness programs included in the curriculum to address these issues, perhaps at least once a week. This is important because, as a child grows up, these concepts become deeply rooted in their minds from an early age. It's essential to provide political awareness at the school, college, and even university levels.” (Participant # 2)</p> <p>“Politics is infamous now. There are some facts. I would like our young generation to be included in this. I would especially like girls to come into this field and earn their name. They should earn their name and strengthen themselves. They should make themselves worthy of this position so that no one can bring them down” (Participant # 4)</p>
	To solve social issues	<p>“the problems in PND, which are your problems, you can solve those problems through education, education is as important in your politics as oxygen is needed to breathe in life, education is just as important in politics, and along with that, not only education, apart from that, you should be compassionate, you should have mercy in your heart, you should have a soft heart, education teaches you all these things,” (Participant # 4)</p>
Support mechanism for women in Politics	Support from Political structure	<p>“On political journeys, support can come from various sources. It often depends on how closely united you are with a particular political party or ideology and how committed you are to its principles and perspectives. This position and commitment determine how you stand with the party's leadership and its ideology, and it greatly influences the level of support you receive from within that political organization.” (Participant # 2)</p> <p>“The credit for women's participation is often attributed to the PPP party because they laid the foundation for the first women's wing. A political wing was established in Gilgit Baltistan specifically for women, and I was nominated as the president. After that, in 2016, I was given the responsibility of being the information secretary for the main mother wing of the party.” (Participant # 3)</p>
	Support from Family	<p>“The whole family is in this situation because I entered politics because of my father. When I entered politics at my father's behest, my father faced the most, then I did, and then the whole family, and there were criticisms from the entire Diamer region because our society is very conservative. “ (Participant # 1)</p> <p>“My support system was my father. I received support from my family; they were very supportive. It's because of them that I stand where I am today. My father and family have been helpful in my journey.” (Participant # 1)</p>

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